

Expert group joint opinion

Evaluation Procedure: Assessment of Study Field

Higher Education Institution: Riga Institute of Theology (under the Pontifical Lateran University)

Study field: Religion and Theology

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Summary of the Assessment of the Study Field and the Relevant Study Programmes

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BSP – Bachelor study programme

LSAGS – Latvian Inter-Diocesan Higher Spiritual Seminary

PLU – Pontifical Lateran University in Rome

QA – quality assurance

RARZI – Riga Higher Institute of Religious Sciences

RTI – Riga Institute of Theology

SAR – Self-assessment report

Strategy – RTI Strategy for 2023–2027

Riga Institute of Theology (RTI) is a branch of the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome. It was established following an agreement between the Republic of Latvia and the Holy See to provide education and training, and spiritual formation opportunities for Catholic priests, so it functions at once as an educational institution and a seminary for priesthood candidates. RTI has one study field with a single academic study programme, “Religion and Theology” with a Bachelor’s degree of Humanities in Religion and Theology (43221), which is a full-time in-person study programme that lasts 5 years and is implemented in Latvian. The duration of the study programme implementation is justified by the rules of the Vatican Congregation for Education (since 2020) which prescribes that the duration of studies should be a five-year cycle with 300 ECTS (200 CP).

RTI has a partially successful quality assurance system that theoretically fulfils all responsibilities to ensure student satisfaction. The effectiveness is debatable. The quality policy is clearly defined and available publicly. Mechanisms are established to gather data from relevant stakeholders. There are established criteria for evaluation of students’ results. Information related to learning outcomes, including assessment, is contained in study course descriptions, the preparation and updating of which are stipulated in a study course development and updating procedure. RTI Statutes govern the recruitment and employment of staff, including advertisement of vacancies and election procedures. For the evaluation of qualifications and performance of students, there is a standardised procedure. A variety of methods are in place to monitor, collect, and analyse data. Survey responses from students and their evaluations of study courses are the most significant markers of quality, along with employer and other surveys. Concerns regard the quality assurance system's potential impact on the study field due to its inadequately defined structure.

RTI has a funding strategy that entirely supports its single study programme, including donations from Latvian believers, contractual support from LSAGS, and external project funds. All resources are allocated for one purpose. The staff salary includes a component for research, which is part of their contractual obligation, however, opportunities for extra motivation are low. There are sufficient resources for infrastructure, technology, materials, information and other needs. RTI has established mechanisms for improving its resources, based on various sources of feedback and recommendations from internal and external stakeholders. Staff have professional development opportunities and see benefits from collaborating and sharing their experiences. The workload is balanced, though some staff face challenges in combining their academic and pastoral roles. Students receive ample support, as they are very involved and in constant communication due to their mode of study and spiritual formation.

The Strategy and study field are partially aligned with RTI's scientific research path. International cooperation lacks better linkages to establish larger scientific partnerships. There is a lack of strategic planning, which would split responsibility for individual goals, and there are no annual reports to monitor the goals. The new Strategic Plan (2023–2027) has addressed the issue partially. Scientific research and the teaching process are only partially linked, especially regarding the

scientific efforts of students and staff. Theoretically, all the requirements are in place, but there is unfulfilled international cooperation potential.

Affiliation with PLU has a positive effect on internationalization and provides opportunities to integrate foreign experiences into studies. The cooperation of RTI and Riga Higher Institute of Religious Sciences is well established. Collaborative research is implemented through applied research projects, but more would be needed to enhance the academic level. Cooperation is also good with the main employers' organizations in Latvia. There is no plan for outgoing or incoming mobility of the staff. Cooperation with the media to popularize Christian theology is successful. The cooperation implemented within the study field ensures the achievement of the aims of the study field, but the implementation of research projects is not well developed.

The structure and content of the studies have been shaped following the current trends in religious studies and the labour market, and are compliant with national regulations. The study process is student-centred, and the study implementation methods contribute to the learning outcomes of the study courses. Examples of bachelor's theses demonstrated relevance to the study field. The study process is based on in-person classes, and printed learning materials are provided. The library has a rich collection of books and periodicals in different languages, as well as access to the EBSCO database and other electronic resources. The library aims to develop as a specialized repository of religious and theological knowledge. The material and technical provision consists of information technology equipment, such as computers, wireless internet access, projectors, screens, sound devices, interactive whiteboards, microphones, speakers and web cameras. A project is in place to equip one of the rooms with fixed IT equipment for conferences. The financial provision is mainly based on the funds of the Catholic Church in Latvia and the funds of foreign Catholic foundations. They have all base resources and can provide sufficient study provisions for the achievement of their learning outcomes.

The staff is qualified for the study programme. The staff composition during this accreditation period is mostly unchanged, concerns arise about the inadequate publication practices demonstrated by more than 30% of the teaching staff. To meet the requirement entirely, RTI must significantly boost the number of scientific articles, especially those published in prominent international databases, despite the teaching staff and guest lecturers' already elevated qualifications.

All requirements regarding compliance with the Law on Higher Education Institutions and other regulatory enactments have been formally complied with although some garner comments on their execution, e.g. the formulation for compensation of losses.

I - Assessment of the Study Field

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1.1 Management of the Study Field

Analysis

1.1.1. The cornerstone of Riga Institute of Theology (hereinafter – RTI) education lies in the tradition of Christian philosophical and theological anthropology, providing a comprehensive understanding of the human person and society. This foundation unveils fundamental values crucial for realising the potential of human nature. The curriculum at RTI is structured around various human sciences, such as theology, philosophy, ethics, psychology, pedagogy, and cultural and religious history, all subordinated to this anthropological orientation. The overarching goal is to facilitate a dialogue between the Church and culture, fostering a blend of ethical and cultural values within society.

The objectives of the "Religion and Theology" study programme at RTI are strategically aligned with this orientation, aiming to confer an academic bachelor's degree grounded in the Catholic tradition. While emphasising an ecumenical approach, the study programme also underscores the importance of addressing the evolving needs of society by producing professionals capable of contributing to

both the Church and broader societal demands [SAR, p. 11].

The student-centred study process at RTI actively involves both students and academic staff in scientific research, interpretation of Catholic doctrine, and exploration of the Church's role in society. This approach ensures alignment with the objectives of the Pontifical University Branch Prospective Development Plan, emphasising effective cooperation and involvement in strengthening religious and theological research [SAR, p. 11].

Graduates of the "Religion and Theology" study programme at RTI have diverse career paths available, including becoming Catholic priests or pursuing further studies at the master's level in other higher education institutions. This holistic approach to education not only equips students with theological knowledge but also prepares them to meet the evolving challenges of the Church and society.

1.1.2. RTI routinely updates its SWOT analysis as part of its self-evaluation process to gauge changes in the internal and external environment [SAR, p. 12]. The purpose is to assess strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, aligning with the objectives outlined in the RTI Strategy for 2023–2027 (hereinafter – Strategy) [RTI Strategy of Development] and develop the study field in light of this [Annex 3].

Concerning internal factors, it has as a strength its profile in training Catholic priests and theologians in Latvia, offering an internationally recognized diploma from Pontifical Lateran University in Rome (hereinafter – PLU) alongside a diploma of Latvia [SAR, p. 13]. The connection to PLU was also mentioned during the visit as making it possible to continue studies on a doctoral level abroad [on-site visit; SAR, p. 19]. The ecumenical learning environment and strong links with various churches foster spiritual and human growth. The study environment is friendly, personal, and student-centred. Adequate mental and psychological support is available.

Among internal weaknesses, there is being a niche product with limited demand, lacking state support, and having a small student body. The small student body is also seen as an expression of a crisis in society, not just Latvia [on-site visit; SAR, p. 22]. The heavy workload of priest-lecturers and insufficient funding for research pose additional challenges. The anonymized peer-reviewed journal's absence from Scopus or Web of Science is a drawback, and the merger with the Riga Higher Institute of Religious Science (hereinafter – RARZI) introduces administrative challenges [SAR, p. 13]. The inclusion of the journal, *Terra Mariana*, in leading international databases is regarded as being under the RARZI supervision [on-site visit; SAR, p. 22].

Concerning external factors, some of the opportunities include collaboration with the PLU and the possibility to develop academic staff competencies and research activities. Merging with RARZI expands the study offering, and partnerships with PLU broaden the resource base [on-site visit, p. 23]. Attracting international students, implementing anti-plagiarism systems, and digitising the study process are identified opportunities [SAR, p. 13].

Among the threats the following can be mentioned: The demographic decline in potential students, a crisis in priestly vocation, and a waning popularity of the Catholic Church. Some of these challenges are also observed by the RTI graduates [on-site visit, p. 28]. Economic conditions impact donations, and the rise of religious fundamentalism and populism hinders the effective implementation of the study content. The administrative bureaucratization consumes resources that could otherwise enhance the study programme's quality [SAR, p. 13].

Concerning internal factors, RTI's strengths in human resources include a gender-balanced teaching staff and a positive psychological microclimate. However, a low student enrollment, though not due to dissatisfaction, remains a challenge. Efforts to strengthen research, including publishing in *Terra Mariana*, are recognized. Internationalisation is a strategic priority, enhancing diversity and integration into global networks. Concerning external factors, emphasis on human resource development centres on enhancing academic staff competencies through collaborations. The critical threat lies in the declining number of students, linked to Latvia's demographic challenges. Financial

stability through donations faces risks, also due to the demographic crisis. Rising religious fundamentalism and bureaucratic hurdles affect competitiveness [SAR, p. 14].

1.1.3. RTI operates within a specialised field of study, with governance and activities centred on its implementation. Oversight at the highest echelons is led by the Grand Chancellor of PLU, the Rector of PLU, and the Dean of the Faculty of Theology at PLU [SAR, p. 15; Annex 4]. This responsibility extends to the RTI, where the moderator, a representative of the Bishops' Conference of Latvia, ensures coherence between the Bishops' Conference and the institute.

Quality assurance (hereinafter – QA) is managed by the RTI Council, led by the moderator, overseeing study quality. The RTI Director holds responsibility for the study field's quality and its study programmes, fostering effective collaboration between decision-making bodies and study programme implementers.

The RTI Director, acting as the Head of the Study Area, oversees lecturer management and study area development. Approval for the Director comes from the RTI Moderator, with accountability to the Dean of the Faculty of Theology, the Moderator, and the RTI Council [SAR, p. 15].

The RTI Board, comprising the Director, two lecturers, and the Secretary, provides executive direction. The RTI Council, a collegial governing body, ensures evaluation and strategic development, featuring professors, associate professors, student self-government representatives, and employer representatives. Periodic reviews of the Director's report by the Faculty of Theology of PLU inform recommendations for further development.

The student self-government actively engages in quality monitoring, offering recommendations to the Director, while individual students can personally submit suggestions and complaints. Employers, predominantly Catholic Church leaders, contribute to quality monitoring through feedback analysis, maintaining a vital link with RTI management.

1.1.4. The admission process at RTI is governed by the RTI Admission Rules, only available in Latvian. These regulations align with the Law on Higher Education Institutions, the Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 846 of 10 October 2006 ("Regulations on Requirements, Criteria and Procedure for Admission to Study Programmes"), the Vatican Congregation for Education Instruction of 28 June 2008 on Higher Institutes of Religious Studies, and the Statutes of RTI. Oversight of admissions falls under the purview of the Admissions Committee [SAR, p. 16].

Applicants with foreign educational credentials, whether in higher or secondary education, must undergo a process of assimilation. Furthermore, RTI extends the opportunity to recognize specific social sciences or humanities study courses completed at other local or international higher education institutions.

The recognition of prior formal and non-formal education within the study field adheres to the RTI Regulations on the Recognition of Learning Outcomes. This process is outlined in Cabinet Regulations No. 505 of 14 August 2018, titled "Regulations on recognition of competencies acquired outside formal education or in professional experience and study results achieved in previous education." The regulations specify that resuming interrupted studies allows for the acknowledgement of prior educational achievements, backed by supporting documents such as certificates, employer statements, references, project outcomes, job descriptions, etc. These comprehensive procedures ensure a transparent and equitable approach to admissions at RTI, facilitating the inclusion of diverse educational backgrounds [SAR, p. 16].

1.1.5. The evaluation of students at RTI is guided by a comprehensive set of regulations outlined in the "Rules of Student Evaluation at the Lateran Pontifical University Branch 'Riga Theological Institute'" and the "Regulations and Methodological Instructions for Student Research Papers." These standards align with the Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No 240 of 13.05.2014, emphasizing principles such as openness, the possibility of revision, obligatory assessment, variety of assessment

types, and relevance of assessment.

The assessment process spans mid-term examinations and final examinations, with a diverse range of assessment methods, including control work, presentations, essays, and reports. Examinations can be written, oral, or a combination, as specified in the study course description provided to students at the commencement of their studies [SAR, p. 17].

The evaluation employs a 10-point scale, as per the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No 240 "Regulations on the State Standard of Academic Education", with descriptors ranging from "excellent" to "very, very weak." Successful completion of a study course requires obtaining a grade not lower than "4" in both mid-term and final examinations. The evaluation process does not conclude with individual study courses but extends to the overall study programme outcomes. At the end of each study course, instructors analyze results within the context of the study programme's objectives and compare outcomes across multiple years. This ongoing evaluation informs potential revisions to study courses, ensuring alignment with planned study outcomes [SAR, p. 17].

Notably, the final thesis evaluation follows a distinct process. Methodological guidelines are provided to students at the onset, outlining assessment stages and procedures. A committee, approved by the Directorate Board, evaluates final theses, considering content, relevance, integrity, use of references, presentation, and the student's ability to defend and discuss their work. The final evaluation, conducted on a 10-point scale, involves closed-session committee deliberations, taking into account the supervisor's and reviewer's opinions. In cases of dissent within the committee, an open vote is conducted, ensuring a transparent evaluation process [SAR, p. 18].

1.1.6. Academic integrity at RTI is meticulously defined by the RTI Code of Ethics, only available in Latvian. This code articulates ethical principles for faculty, students, and staff, outlining procedures for addressing breaches. Faculty members are explicitly bound to uphold academic integrity, refraining from plagiarism, unauthorised use of intellectual property, and other violations [SAR, p. 19].

Students are similarly guided by the RTI Code of Ethics, committing to academic honesty in studies and research. Prohibited actions include unauthorised aids, plagiarism, copying, falsification of data, and fraudulent conduct in the study process. RTI is actively enhancing its defences against plagiarism by exploring a collaborative agreement for a computerised plagiarism control system.

Research theses, accessible in print at the RTI Library, undergo development in collaboration with supervisors. Despite a small student population, no plagiarism cases have been detected at RTI. The Faculty of Theology at the PLU collaborates in monitoring academic integrity and scientific quality.

Plagiarism triggers a robust response. Suspected cases are reported to the Director, and the RTI Ethics Committee, comprising the Director, the Head of the Department of Studies, and a faculty representative, reviews misconduct. The Committee formulates rules of procedure, examines applications and complaints, analyses plagiarism texts, and determines appropriate actions. In the event of confirmed plagiarism, students are barred from defending their work and face expulsion. They can, however, submit a new work with a changed topic after one academic year [SAR, p. 19].

Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses

The management of the study field of RTI has been found clearly defined. It has a consistent aim and objective for its management formed around its profile within Christian philosophical and theological anthropology. There is a strategic alignment between this profile and its study programme with both students and academic staff involved in research. There is a well-developed awareness of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the study field. The management structure of RTI is complicated due to the status of being a branch of the PLU and the responsibilities for decisions are closely tied to this institution. The admission procedures are both transparent and

fair. The procedures for assessment of the student's achievements are clear and well-defined. The principles of academic integrity and mechanisms for their observance are well-defined.

Strengths:

1. RTI has a clearly defined and consistent aim and objective for its management and its study programme. The objectives are strategically aligned with the aim of RTI.
2. The strength of RTI lies in its uniqueness in training Catholic priests and theologians as well as seeking to combine this with an ecumenical approach.
3. RTI has a well-governed procedure for the admission of students with a transparent and equitable approach to admissions.
4. The methods, principles and procedures for assessing the achievements of students are well-defined and transparent.
5. The principles of academic integrity and mechanisms for their observance follow a transparent and clear procedure.

Weaknesses:

1. RTI has a weakness in being a niche product with limited demand and lacking state support. Also, RTI has a small student body. This challenge is further intensified by a low student enrollment.
2. The management structure of RTI and the study field is complicated due to its affiliation with PLU. The responsibility for decisions regarding RTI and the study programme is not as close to the institution itself as one could hope for.

1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System

Analysis

1.2.1. The quality policy of RTI is established following both domestic and international standards. The documents governing the quality of higher education in the Republic of Latvia, the standards established by the Dicastery for Culture and Education of the Holy See, and ESG standards, are incorporated into its framework, and it is publicly available in Latvian on www.garigais.lv. At the end of each academic year, RTI provides the PLU Faculty of Theology with a comprehensive report on the previous year. Another report is provided to the Moderator, the Dean of the Faculty of Theology at PLU, and the Dicastery for Catholic Education and Culture every five years [SAR, p. 20]. It is evident that RTI also cares about the methodical and didactic training of its teachers. To enhance the proficiency of RTI teachers in the domain of didactics, RTI, in collaboration with Riga Stradiņš University, designed and implemented didactics courses for teachers [SAR, p. 20]. RTI also managed well during the recent pandemic. Online training for teachers, a partial replacement of computer equipment, and student surveys were implemented to identify and rectify deficiencies to preserve the standard of education amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. RTI expeditiously reorganised its previous in-person mode of operation and transitioned to distance learning through the implementation of the Google Meet platform. Renovation and refurbishment efforts, as well as the complete modernization and refurbishment of classroom equipment, lighting, and furniture, contributed significantly to the enhancement of the study environment during the accreditation period [SAR, p. 20; on-site visit]. RTI lacks a clear comprehension of the core mechanisms behind the internal QA system. These procedures encompass collaborating with both internal and external stakeholders of the institute, as well as gathering and integrating their feedback about quality. The lack of insight in the submitted analysis is evident [SAR, Annex, P 8 ENG.docx]. The analysis described above merely identifies the stakeholders. This analysis is not at all serious. A limited number of graduates and students is not a good reason to ignore their views. On the contrary, it can present a chance for a more comprehensive and effective individual approach, which could ultimately lead to an even higher quality of the institute. The efficacy of the QA and monitoring system is compromised by its

dependence on the individual, as evidenced by the present implementation of the RTI approach. Without a doubt, it was observed during the meeting with the director of RTI that he possesses an understanding of the significance of the QA system. However, the efficacy of this system is very dubious in the absence of any improvements. Regarding internal QA, RTI has an internal management and decision-making level, but the institution's executive and supervisory (advisory) levels are in doubt. Regarding the fusion of two institutes, it is crucial to highlight that not all legal arguments in favour of merging RARZI and RTI constitute a unified institution. Therefore, both institutes must collaborate immediately on this [on-site visit]. At the same time, this strategy is required as the sole secure way of improving the internal monitoring and QA system.

1.2.2. RTI's QA system is founded on Deming's [SAR, p. 21] cycle of continuous improvement. The study programme undergoes routine quality assessment and improvement measures following the RTI Study Direction and Study Management Regulations. These activities are conducted to ensure that the study programme adheres to the quality requirements and meets the demands of the stakeholders. These may necessitate substantial modifications to the structure or content of the study programme, in addition to updating study courses, making individual content enhancements, streamlining processes, and introducing innovations. The PLU Faculty of Theology, the Moderator, the RTI Council, the RTI Director, or the students may initiate modifications to the academic curricula [SAR, p. 21–22]. As previously noted in the analysis of the previous criterion, there is a lack of adequate concrete feedback from students, graduates, and employers. An optimal framework would require a methodical examination on an annual basis. It is noteworthy that RTI demonstrates an understanding of the significance of this matter, as evidenced by the presence of talks on quality improvement. However, it is recommended that the minutes of these meetings be documented, together with concrete conclusions, to establish a solid foundation for future efforts in enhancing quality. Evidence of the existence of this awareness of the importance of the monitoring and insurance system, but also of concrete evidence of meeting this criterion was provided, including instances of visible modifications that occurred as a result of talks, such as study course adjustments within the curriculum [AIC annexes, Question 2]. Experts consider this as a positive sign that RTI understands where it needs to go in terms of quality improvement.

1.2.3. The procedure outlines the prescribed methods by which students may individually or collectively submit proposals and complaints, either in written or electronic format. Additionally, it specifies the process by which these submissions will be reviewed and evaluated. Students have the option to send suggestions and complaints to the RTI Director, the Board, or the Moderator. The process for reporting complaints from students and proposals is delineated in the document titled Regulations for the Assessment of Student Accomplishments at the Riga Higher Institute of Religious Sciences, an affiliate of the Pontifical Lateran University [Studējošo priekšlikumu un sūdzību iesniegšanas un izskatīšanas kārtība Laterāna Pontifikālās Universitātes filiālē "Rīgas Teoloģijas institūts" 28.11.2022.]. The on-site visit made it apparent that students possess a solid knowledge of this method. The observation is supported by examples provided in the report, which demonstrate that the procedure is being strictly adhered to. Since the students receive feedback in the conclusion regarding all of the actions taken in response to their complaints and suggestions, it appears like the entire system has been thoughtfully developed. [SAR, p. 22].

1.2.4. Since the academic community is small, individual talks and consultations are how statistical data is gathered. The director writes a report after the institution's academic year detailing the study programme and activities conducted within the study field. A summary and analysis of the statistical data are included in this report. The data gathered is utilised to assess and enhance the operations within the research field. It is submitted to the PLU as well as the RTI Council. The report includes various statistical figures, including the number of students enrolled in the study

programme, the count of graduates, the drop-out rate, the count of outgoing and incoming students, student and intern mobility, and the results of the teachers [SAR, p. 22–23]. As the analysis of the preceding criterion demonstrates, it is good that RTI's management understands the requirements for assessing and enhancing the quality of a higher education institution. However, a challenge arises in terms of execution. The reports supplied to the PLU have not been reviewed by experts, and the annex, which is expected to demonstrate regularity and seriousness in data gathering for monitoring and quality assurance purposes, does not fulfil this need [SAR, Annex 8].

1.2.5. The website <https://garigais.lv/> provides information regarding RTI. The person holding the position of Director at RTI assumes responsibility for the data presented on the organisation's website, as well as ensuring that the data aligns with the information included inside the official registers. The website provides content in the Latvian language. The webpage consists of the essential elements that ought to be incorporated on the website of a higher education institution [SAR, p. 34–35]. Based on the gathered information from meetings with stakeholders and reports, it has been observed that RTI lacks a well-defined public information policy and fails to effectively utilise various communication channels facilitated by contemporary technology, however, it was revealed that RTI uses radio technology, specifically Radio Marija, as a means of communication. Additionally, it was noted that the institute mostly relies on word-of-mouth and previous students to disseminate information. The usage of several methods for disseminating information, such as promotion and marketing, is crucial and advantageous. In the current digital world, higher education institutions must establish a clearly defined information policy and proficiently utilise all available communication channels, including those utilised by potential students [on-site visit]. The information published on the website [<https://garigais.lv/>] about the study programme of the study field corresponds to the information available in the official registers.

Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses

RTI has a well-defined, transparent quality policy that is founded on national and international standards. The contribution of stakeholder feedback to the study process is evident from the SAR. The significance of integrating internal and external stakeholders into the quality monitoring and assurance system is well understood. Subsequently, specific modifications are being implemented to the study curriculum. Nevertheless, the absence of regular evaluation mechanisms is an unintended consequence of a more profound issue concealed within RTI's obscure internal QA system, which lacks proper organisational structure. An individual is incapable of simultaneously advising, dispensing decisions, or carrying out tasks. These responsibilities necessitate allocation across multiple entities. It is a positive thing that RTI has a good mechanism through which students are permitted to submit their complaints and suggestions. The RTI website satisfies the bare minimum criteria and provides valuable information for future and current students.

Strengths:

1. The quality policy is aligned with the standards and regulations set forth by the EU
2. A systematic procedure for complaints from students and proposal submission
3. Investing in fundamental infrastructural capacities

Weaknesses:

1. Due to the system's absence of all the elements that a monitoring and QA system at a higher education institution ought to contain, its efficacy is called into question.
2. The absence of a defined policy for the dissemination of information has been observed.

Assessment of the requirement [1]

- 1 R1 - Pursuant to Section 5, Paragraph 2.1 of the Law on Higher Education Institutions, the higher education institution/ college shall ensure continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field whilst implementing its internal quality assurance system:

Assessment of compliance: Partially compliant

In part, RTI has been successful in establishing a QA system that in theory fulfils all of its responsibilities concerning students and their satisfaction. The effectiveness of the system established by RTI is debatable.

- 2 1.1 - The higher education institution/ college has established a policy and procedures for assuring the quality of higher education.

Assessment of compliance: Partially compliant

The quality policy is clearly defined and publicly available. The issue emerges in the execution of the procedure due to the absence of concrete evidence regarding the regularity of its implementation. Furthermore, there is a lack of defined conditions for its implementation, as the responsibility for quality assurance mainly rests on a single individual.

- 3 1.2 - A mechanism for the development and internal approval of the study programmes of the higher education institution/ college, as well as the supervision of their performance and periodic inspection thereof has been developed.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

There is evidence that the study programme is being revised in response to stakeholder feedback. This demonstrates that there are acts in place to improve the study programme [AIC annexes, Question 2].

- 4 1.3 - The criteria, conditions, and procedures for the evaluation of students' results, which enable reassurance of the achievement of the intended learning outcomes, have been developed and published.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

RTI has established criteria to follow for the evaluation of students' results according to Cabinet Regulations Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No 240 of 13.05.2014 "Regulations Regarding the State Standard for the Academic Education" [SAR, p. 17]. Information related to learning outcomes, including assessment, is contained in study course descriptions, the preparation and updating of which, as well as the rules for their publication, are stipulated in the RTI study course development and updating procedure [BSP Annex, Descriptions of study courses/modules]

- 5 1.4 - Internal procedures and mechanisms for assuring the qualifications of the academic staff and the work quality have been developed.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

The RTI Statutes govern the recruitment and employment of teaching staff, including the advertisement of vacancies and election procedures. For the evaluation of the qualifications and academic performance of students, RTI has established a standardised procedure. A similar procedure is outlined in the RTI Statutes.

- 6 1.5 - The higher education institution/ college ensures the collection and analysis of the information on the study achievements of the students, employment of the graduates, satisfaction of the students with the study programme, efficiency of the work of the academic staff, the study funds available and the disbursements thereof, as well as the key performance indicators of the higher education institution/ college.

Assessment of compliance: Partially compliant

Monitoring and quality assurance methods for data gathering from various stakeholders work based on talks. Some of the outcomes of those discussions can be seen in the context of improving the study programme, but these processes have not been completely developed due to a lack of clear time frames and the responsibility of the structures that should implement them. Furthermore, there are no clearly defined structures [more detailed information is outlined in the SAR, Annex 8].

- 7 1.6 - The higher education institution/ college ensures continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field whilst implementing its quality assurance systems.

Assessment of compliance: Partially compliant

Concerns arise regarding the QA system's potential impact on the study field due to its inadequately defined structure.

1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field

Analysis

1.3.1. RTI is financially supported by donations from Latvian believers, who contribute three times a year in all Latvian Catholic parishes [SAR, p. 14]. RTI also receives financial support from the Latvian Inter-Diocesan Higher Spiritual Seminary (hereinafter – LSAGS) on a contractual basis. The costs of the infrastructure (including maintenance, utilities and improvements) necessary for the study programme are fully covered by the Catholic Church in Latvia.

RTI charges €800 per year from students who do not wish to become Catholic priests, while students who commit to becoming priests study for free [SAR, p. 25]; this is a new practice, as previously students who do not wish to become priests have not had an opportunity to study here – this may provide additional income. From 2019 to 2022 external sources of funding have fluctuated, especially suffering from the global pandemic in 2021, and have not recovered since. From 300–350 thousand EUR in donations, it has fallen to 85–110 thousand, but there is a growing trend, so possibly this may improve in the future. The amount of funding available for studies and research has also suffered, at the maximum in 2020 with 78 127 EUR, and now in 2022 with 66 345 EUR, and so far this trend has not recovered and is falling [SAR, p. 26].

RTI research is a component of the employment contract and is funded from external sources, mainly donations and project funds [SAR p. 25]. RTI uses only minimal funds to finance activities that involve staff in scientific research, such as publishing, presenting papers or participating in international projects. RTI collaborates with the RARZI Book Office and Vox Ecclesiae, which attract international funding for projects to develop high-quality annotated scientific translations of theological works and Church magisterium documents [SAR, p. 33].

RTI has a clear plan to attract more external funding for modernising the study environment and increasing its contribution to research. However, RTI depends heavily on donations collected from Latvian Catholic parishes, which are affected by the demographic crisis and the global pandemic situation. RTI also faces challenges in providing lecturers with decent salaries and motivating their research activities. Therefore, it may be wise to diversify RTI's sources of income and seek more collaborations with other institutions.

There is a cooperation with RARZI to share premises and resources. RARZI manages projects for the development of scientific translations of theological works and attracts international funding for them. RTI benefits from RARZI's experience in writing projects and modernising IT equipment.

1.3.2. RTI has six well-equipped classrooms with information technology, such as projectors, screens, computers and wireless internet. One of the rooms will be equipped with fixed

videoconferencing equipment in 2023. RTI also has a comfortable lounge and administrative spaces. RTI does not have suitable infrastructure for people with disabilities, but there are opportunities to develop and expand access to infrastructure in the future [SAR, chapter 2.3.2.].

There is access to 20 computers with MS Office 365 applications, such as Outlook, Word, Excel and PowerPoint, for students and staff on the RTI premises. They can also use their laptops to connect to the wireless internet. The study programme utilises various multimedia facilities for preparing and presenting teaching materials and data visualisation, such as projectors, screens, sound devices, interactive whiteboards, microphones, speakers and web cameras. Two portable projectors and two laptops are available for flexible use [SAR, chapter 2.3.4.].

The Development Plan for the Study Area [SAR, Annex 3] includes plans to attract more external funding for the improvement of the study environment by the end of 2024, and implementing several new systems (anti-plagiarism, e-study environment). One of RTI's strategic objectives is institutional development, which includes ensuring infrastructure modernisation and digitalization of the library resources [SAR, Annex 1, RTI Affiliated to PLU Strategy 2023-2027]. The Head of the Study Area is directly responsible for implementing development and improvement activities [SAR, Annex 1, RTI Affiliated to PLU Rules Governing the Field of Study] and thusly gathers input and organises or approves all requisitions for new material, methodological, informative and other resources. It can be seen that improvements are strategically planned and their implementation integrated in all levels of planning at RTI, and procedures are in place for the provision of various resources.

1.3.3. The library supports the study field with a large and diverse collection of books and periodicals, mostly in theology and foreign languages. Some of the books are donations from abroad. The RTI library is being moved into ALISE, an electronic catalogue system that will make it easier to find books. The topics of final works are also available online and numbered, and can be found in print format in the RARZI library by their number. Students can also buy books from the library, or visit other libraries in Latvia independently [on-site visit].

The library occupies two buildings on Katoļu Street, with a total area of 339,6 m². A weakness is that it is divided into two sectors until RTI and RARZI merge [SAR, chapter 2.3.3.; on-site visit]. The RTI library part is open 24 hours a day, every day, while the RARZI parts are available at times that suit the students and lecturers from August to June. The librarian can also arrange individual appointments for students. The library offers various services, such as loans, copying, scanning, and ordering literature from other libraries. The reading room has reference books, computers, and Internet access, and has been renovated recently in the last accreditation period [SAR, chapter 2.3.3., 2.2.1, 3.3.1.].

The library subscribes to the EBSCO database, which provides online publications in philosophy, theology, psychology, pedagogy, and social sciences. The library updates its collection according to the RTI development strategy and the needs of the study courses. The library resources are selected and updated by a group of professors and the librarian, based on the study course descriptions, the field of study, and the Educational and Cultural Directory of the Catholic Church. The RTI Director and the Moderator approve the selection [SAR, chapter 2.3.3.]. New materials are also sought out by recommendation of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, as it often emphasises what specific areas of learning may need more attention at any given time in society. Additionally, it may depend on the needs of the students for their theses. When their topics are known, the library offers support to help find relevant literature [on-site visit]. There is a varied, but clear pathway to the regular improvement of methodological and informative provision.

1.3.4. The study process prioritises face-to-face classes, as they foster both intellectual and spiritual formation in religion and theology. The study programme also facilitates interaction and dialogue between students and lecturers. Zoom and Google Meet platforms are employed for distance

learning when absolutely necessary (like the pandemic), but otherwise avoided as the Pope Francis' Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties emphasises in-person learning above all else. The study programme mainly uses printed materials for teaching, so no e-study platform is used either. The assessment results are individually recorded in a grade book and communicated to the students. Information technology is altogether limited, but in case of emergency, the auditorium does have computers equipped with microphones, speakers and web cameras [SAR, p. 28]. Insufficient use of digital learning resources is observed for the study process itself; there are opportunities for modernisation and expansion of teaching methods. For the needs of the study programme, and considering the religious doctrine (even modern, as Pope Francis), the technological solutions are sufficient.

1.3.5. The RTI advertises vacancies through the Catholic Church's public information systems and contacts potential candidates individually. The candidates must submit their documents to the RTI office and the RTI Council for evaluation, and must also meet the common criteria for education, experience, skills, and compliance with the LPU Faculty of Theology's requirements. The candidates for lecturers in Catholic Theology need the approval of the LPU Faculty of Theology, which can give an opinion, a "no objection" (*nulla osta*), or a rejection. The Moderator (Archbishop) appoints the candidates after receiving a *nulla osta* from the Faculty [SAR, p. 29].

Due to the open nature of the Catholic Church and its public information channels, the Church stakeholders are well aware of the proceedings [on-site visit].

1.3.6. The academic staff at RTI has developmental support available to them, and are obligated to participate in didactic courses every 6 years. Other than this, staff can access various training and courses that enhance their student-centred approach and methodologies, such as the sixty-hour continuing education course "Student-centred Teaching and Learning in Higher Education" led by Riga Stradiņš University Pedagogical Development Centre lecturers, which the staff recently took part in. They can also receive individual assistance in working with information resources, the Google Meet online work platform and other issues. They can also attend conferences organised by the PLU and present to their colleagues the Church's documents and guidelines for further development of the institute (8 staff members have used this opportunity in the reporting period) [SAR, p. 20, 30].

As of this accreditation, they may enjoy a more open and dynamic learning environment now that they may give lectures to both groups of students (seminarians and laypeople) at once, instead of having separate classes [on-site visit; SAR, p. 39]. This is an experience that many seminaries are experiencing these days and it is commendable of them to progress in this direction.

The staff can also participate in the Erasmus programme, which allows them to teach and learn at other institutions abroad. This is not without its challenges and difficulties, such as balancing their mobility with their parishes and other responsibilities or adapting to the online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they can also benefit from the involvement of visiting professors who may share their experience in quality assurance, projects and assemblies [SAR, chapter 2.3.6.; on-site visit]. They may also share the results of their work and get to know other viewpoints through public lectures, conferences, and publications, organising spiritual formation events, and speaking at churches and parishes [SAR, p. 30]

There are frequent meetings among the teaching staff to discuss their overall newest findings and how to make their study process more cohesive, consult each other and work closely with staff from different fields, such as philosophy, theology, and psychology. During these meetings, student feedback is also discussed, such as is received through student surveying [SAR, p. 30]. This showcases a level of evaluation that comes from the student body, their peers in the staff, and management, which experts recognise as effective.

Although some formal procedures, systems and programmes (surveys, meetings, mobility

opportunities) are in place for the professional and didactic development of the teaching staff, no unified policy is in place to ensure or report that all staff are at some stage of development procedures for their pedagogical ability.

1.3.7. The workload of the staff is not too heavy, as they do not have a full teaching load. They would have enough time to conduct research and popularize their studies, however, some of the staff members face challenges in balancing their academic and pastoral duties, as they are also involved in parishes across Latvia. They cannot take part in exchange opportunities or live a full academic life, as their primary service is to serve the people in their congregation and parish. This is especially true for the number of priests who teach at RTI [on-site visit; SAR, p. 13].

Administratively, all permanent teaching staff is a part of the RTI Council, along with two representatives of non-permanent lecturers [SAR, p. 8]. Overall, the Council oversees study quality. Within the Council, their tasks are to approve and monitor the implementation of RTI Strategy and development plans, as well as suggest amendments if necessary [SAR, p. 15].

A potentially concerning workload is for the Director of RTI, who is at the same time Head of the study field and study programme. They are not only in charge of the implementation of four study courses as a professor, but also responsible for quality assurance, cooperation with stakeholders, the PLU, Ministry of Education and Science and internship providers, strategic management, planning the overall study process and managing the teaching staff, developing regulatory documentation, reviewing plagiarism cases and complaints, admissions interviews, and all other sorts of coordination of RTI activities, along with apparently daily meetings with students to hear out their feedback [SAR, p. 8-9, 15, 23-24]. Experts would suggest reviewing if all administrative functions must be implemented by the same person or if there is a possibility to split them among the RTI Council or appoint assisting administrative roles.

Overall the teaching staff workload is balanced.

1.3.8. Students at RTI have access to various facilities and opportunities that enrich their academic and spiritual lives. The ones aiming to become priests live in shared quarters with other students, while lay people studying here can also stay overnight at Bētlems nams, a nearby house that offers accommodation for students from far parts of Latvia.

Students can participate in various activities that foster their artistic and pastoral development. They can join one of the three church choirs, youth or adults (or help supervise the children's choir), and sing at the masses for the parishes. They can also take singing lessons to improve their skills and overcome their internal blocks, as singing is an integral part of their life's work. There are yearly football tournaments with other seminarians from Lithuania.

Their premises include the public Roman Catholic Church of St. Francis, which holds masses twice a day. The seminarians participate in the masses as well. The Parish house has a large meeting hall [on-site visit].

Due to the small number of students, it is very easy for the staff of RTI to interact with the students and gather everyday feedback that helps identify their needs and interests. Even the Director of RTI meets students daily to talk about their experiences, problems and successes, and students at the on-site visit echoed their close collaboration and everyday communication with staff members [SAR, p. 9, on-site visit]. Students can also submit complaints anonymously [SAR, p. 16], although again, due to the number of students, true anonymity is dubious. However, experts surmise that there is sufficient support for the students and all opportunities to improve the conditions concerning them, if necessary.

Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses

RTI has a funding strategy that entirely supports its single study programme, including donations

from Latvian believers, contractual support from LSAGS, and external project funds. The staff salary includes a component for research, which is part of their contractual obligation. The study programme has sufficient resources for its infrastructure, technology, materials, information and other needs. The institution has established mechanisms for improving its resources, based on various sources of feedback and recommendations from internal and external stakeholders. The institution follows a transparent and effective procedure for attracting and hiring new staff and disseminates the information through relevant channels. RTI staff have regular opportunities for professional development and benefit from implementing their study programme and sharing their experiences. The staff workload is balanced, though some staff face challenges in combining their academic and pastoral roles. The students receive ample support from the institution, as they are very involved and in constant communication with it due to their mode of study and spiritual formation.

Strengths:

1. RTI has a funding strategy that entirely supports its single study programme, including donations from Latvian believers, contractual support from LSAGS, and external project funds. All resources are allocated for one purpose.
2. RTI collaborates with RARZI Book Office and Vox Ecclesiae, which attract international funding for projects on developing high-quality annotated scientific translations of theological works and Church magisterium documents.
3. RTI has a clear plan to attract more external funding for modernizing the study environment and increasing its contribution to research.
4. RTI cooperates with RARZI, another Catholic institution, to share premises and resources.
5. The library part of RTI is open 24 hours a day, every day.
6. The academic staff can receive individual assistance in working with information resources, the Google Meet online work platform and other issues.
7. Students have access to various facilities and opportunities that enrich their academic and spiritual lives.

Weaknesses:

1. RTI depends heavily on donations collected from Latvian Catholic parishes, which are affected by the demographic crisis and the global pandemic situation. They may need to diversify sources of income and seek more collaborations with other institutions for financial sustainability and academic development.
2. RTI uses only minimal funds to finance activities that involve staff in research, such as publishing, presenting papers or participating in international projects.
3. RTI does not have a suitable infrastructure for people with disabilities.
4. The assessment results are individually recorded in the grade book and communicated to the students, which may not be very efficient or transparent.
5. Some of the staff members face challenges in balancing their academic and pastoral duties, as they are also involved in parishes across Latvia, which also excludes them from the possibility of participating in international exchanges.
6. The Director of RTI has a very high workload in addition to being a professor of four study courses. This may impact study quality and development capacity.
7. Insufficient use of digital learning resources is observed.

1.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation

Analysis

- 1.4.1. Establishing a strong offer of studies in religion and theology, grounded in the Catholic

tradition, open to extended ecumenical dialogue, inclusive of the specific needs of society, and actively participating in shaping public opinion and promoting well-being are some of the ways that the RTI is fundamentally collaborative. The scientific efforts undertaken by the academics and researchers working in the study field bear this out [SAR, Annex 10]. The RTI Mission Statement defines Christian humanism, which serves as the foundation for multidisciplinary research. Thus, the goal of the research and study is in line with the fundamental goal of the Strategy, which is to initiate communication between the Church and society [SAR, p. 32]. Research at RTI is conducted in two categories: fundamental and applied. Scientific research themes are current, pertinent to the main lines of inquiry, and offer the thematic scope required to carry out the study procedure. Theological works and documents of the Church's Magisterium have been translated into high-quality annotated scientific translations by RTI (in collaboration with RARZI), primarily advancing the fields of religion and theology and the development of scientific terminology. These publications also represent a significant contribution to the field of Latvian humanities and social sciences [SAR, p. 32]. There are no annual reports on the implementation of the past strategic plan. Experts believe that this problem will be overcome with the new plan for the development of the study field 2023-2027 [SAR, Annex 3]. It is challenging to determine, however, to what degree scientific research aligns with the institute's and the study field's development goals in light of the absence of these annual reports. SAR by itself is insufficient evidence of this.

1.4.2. SAR states that there is a logical and reasonable relationship between the study process and the scientific research conducted in the study field [SAR, p. 32-33]. The Institute recognises this relationship in its publishing work, which consists mostly of teaching-related translations of Church publications. Furthermore, in the majority of study courses, RTI teachers expose students to scholarly publications related to the topic. Study courses on research techniques, professional literature selection and analysis, data processing, interpretation, and presentation are all covered in the bachelor's degree curriculum [SAR, p. 34]. To meet this need, RTI views students' attendance at conferences as an integral component of their learning process. It is possible to single out several conferences in this context: "Ecology of the Spirit", "Fides et Ratio", "Fragility of Human Nature," "Christ is alive! He is our hope and the most beautiful youth in this world", "One day is as a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years as one day, My Immaculate Heart will be your refuge and the way that will lead you to God. The call of the laity to be missionaries of God's mercy in the world in Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*. Students and mentors work closely together to prepare their theses. There is no student participation in research projects [AIC Annexes, Question 6]. Experts think that the relationship between scientific research and RTI's study process is not as clear as it should be when it comes to curricular changes, specifically concerning individual study courses. RTI cites only one piece of evidence: in consultation with experts from the crisis centre Dardedze, as well as in collaboration with the RARZI and Gottfried Ugolini, an international expert in trauma psychology and crisis intervention who lectures at the Pontifical Gregorian University's Child Protection Institute, RTI developed a study course on prevention [AIC Annexes, Question 4]. To conclude that this criterion is met, the outcomes of the scientific research conducted by the teachers should unquestionably be much more strongly integrated into the study process.

1.4.3. RTI maintains scientific partnerships with several Catholic universities in Rome, including the PLU, Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, and the Pontifical University of St. Gregory. The connections established with pontifical universities significantly contribute to the education and advancement of scientific research among the current group of RTI academics. RTI is fostering international collaboration with the institutions mentioned above. As an illustration, teachers from the RTI actively engage in conferences that are hosted by PLU. The connections established with pontifical universities play a significant role in the education and advancement of the following generation of teachers in the field of religious and theological studies, both in terms of their

academic formation and their contributions to scientific research. These connections ought to be implemented in a minimum of one substantial research project. It is apparent from the outset, based on the on-site visit, that no such efforts are being made. The teachers at RTI have received some national and international honours, which have significantly bolstered the institution's standing and visibility on a global scale. Particularly concerning various forms of collaboration, this fact should undoubtedly be utilised [AIC Annexes, Question 5; on-site visit]. In other words, experts believe that RTI's international potential is underutilised and that there is much potential for improvement.

1.4.4. There is evidence of diverse manifestations of teaching staff involvement in scientific activities [SAR, Annex Summary of quantitative data on scientific _ENG.docx], although there is a dearth of clearly defined approaches to promote such participation. Teaching staff at RTI annually publish articles, deliver presentations at conferences, and engage in some international projects. However, during the meeting with the teachers, the experts were able to persuade themselves that there are no clearly defined financial mechanisms via which RTI would more strongly support its teachers' scientific engagement. As an illustration of the mechanisms by which RTI supports its teachers, the following are mentioned: promotion of academic career development through doctoral studies, participation in scientific conferences, as well as professional development and exchange of experience [SAR, p. 35]. Merely relying on these forms of support is inadequate. However, the scientific engagement of certain percentages of the teachers is evident across multiple domains. Nevertheless, an additional group of staff seems to be inactive, potentially attributable to the absence of mechanisms designed to assess and enhance their scientific involvement. RTI will inevitably confront this deficiency head-on in the future.

1.4.5. RTI ensures and facilitates student participation in scientific research primarily through the writing of bachelor's theses, seminars, reports, and presentations during study courses, student participation in scientific conferences, and student engagement in RTI-implemented projects [SAR, p. 36]. While these modes of student engagement in scientific efforts are crucial, they are not enough. The document that was subsequently attached in response to the expert team's request [AIC Annexes, Question 6] just confirms this. Significant room for development remains. As much as possible, students should collaborate with their teachers on research projects and write scientific papers; RTI should maintain a record of this. It is expected that a higher level of student involvement in scientific research, including activities such as writing scientific papers and contributing to joint projects, will be noticed due to the small number of students that teachers can dedicate their time to. The beneficial teacher-student ratio presents a valuable opportunity wherein students can collaborate with their teachers in creating scientific papers for publication in the institute's journal. Additionally, students might take the initiative to launch their journal where they would publish professional and scientific papers. At the same time, this good ratio serves as a significant prerequisite for initiating projects in which teachers can engage the most exceptional students. The aforementioned ratio facilitates the optimisation of each student's potential.

1.4.6. At RTI, a variety of innovative techniques are used to support the development of spiritual resources and the modernization of the learning environment. An important point to take into account is participation in the Summer Academy for Liturgical Music. With Radio Marija, RTI's faculty and students have developed a productive working relationship that involves them actively participating in radio programmes, interviews, and the production of original broadcasts. While all of these efforts are praiseworthy, RTI necessitates the creation of digital learning resources—which are essentially the cornerstone of modern education—as well as a more thorough promotion strategy [SAR, p. 36–37].

Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses

In the absence of annual reports, it is difficult to discern to what extent scientific research corresponds with the institute's and the study field's development goals. International cooperation networks lack better linkages for establishing larger scientific partnerships. Furthermore, there is a lack of defined strategic planning, which would split responsibility for implementing individual goals. The link between scientific research and the teaching process is also only partially obvious, with inadequate data to support it. This is especially noticeable when it comes to the scientific efforts of students and teachers, which appear to be deficient. Innovations that could have a positive impact on the research process can also be improved.

Strengths:

1. The opportunity to encourage high-quality international collaboration by affiliating with a reputable international university.
2. A favourable teacher-student ratio is a necessary condition for successfully fostering student participation in scientific research activities.

Weaknesses:

1. The absence of annual reports that would verify the scientific research strategy's implementation
2. The absence of significant research projects
3. Inadequate student participation in scientific research processes
4. Lack of mechanisms influencing teacher scientific involvement

Assessment of the requirement [2]

- 1 R2 - Compliance of scientific research and artistic creation with the level of development of scientific research and artistic creation (if applicable)

Assessment of compliance: Partially compliant

The analysis of criteria 1.4.1. and 1.4.4. demonstrates that at RTI they know what needs to be done when it comes to scientific research and that they are partially working on it.

Nevertheless, activating the mechanisms that will efficiently activate increased momentum in scientific research is crucial for satisfying this requirement in its entirety.

1.5. Cooperation and Internationalisation

Analysis

1.5.1. The network for cooperation is developed based on common interests in the study field of religion and theology, and it contributes to the achievement of the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme. The criteria for selecting the cooperation partners are explained at a detailed level and are convincingly connected with the relevant goals of the study field. In the SAR [p. 37], the RTI has reported cooperation with the institutions in Latvia based on a clear criterion for collaboration: 1) common interest in the humanistic and ethical ideals of European culture; 2) a desire to strengthen the spiritual and ethical foundations of Latvian society; 3) common research interests; 4) employment and career opportunities for graduates of the study programmes. To sustain close contact with cooperation partners two forms are used: cooperation through formalised agreements with all dioceses of the Catholic Church in Latvia: Riga, Liepaja, Jelgava, Rzekne-Aglona [SAR, p. 37], and cooperation within the framework of various activities, e.g., seminars, guest lectures, conferences and other networking opportunities [SAR, p. 37].

Because of belonging to the Roman Catholic Church, the closest collaboration has been developed with RARZI: study courses in theology were delivered at RTI by the teaching staff of RARZI. This cooperation was so successful that it resulted in a plan to merge these two higher education

institutions shortly. According to SAR [p. 37], successful cooperation is established with Radio Marija: teaching staff and students participate in broadcasts, interviews and produce broadcasts. In collaboration with the Luther Academy, the international ecumenical conference "Ecology of the Spirit" was organised (2023); RTI collaborates with the Embassy of Latvia to the Holy See and the University of Latvia [SAR, p. 32].

The collaborative research is implemented through cooperation in applied research projects between RTI and RARZI, mainly in the development of theological terminology in Latvian, production of translations and academic comments of the documents of the Magisterium of the Church. In collaboration with RARZI the collection of academic papers Terra Mariana is published.

The mechanism of cooperation between the RTI and employers is well established: the RTI has signed cooperation agreements with all dioceses of the Catholic Church in Latvia, the major employers of graduates. Cooperation with employers takes place at several levels, for example, the Bishops' Conference of Latvia gives the RTI its tasks and supervises their implementation, and employers' representatives and/or proxies take part in admission interviews and bachelor thesis defense committees [SAR, p. 37].

There is significant cooperation between RTI and the media (LTV1 and Radio Marija): the teaching staff and students participate in broadcasts, interviews or produce a programme themselves [SAR, p. 37].

Within the framework of the study field, RTI collaborates with the institutions in Latvia: higher education institutions (RARZI, the Luther Academy, the University of Latvia), employers' organisations (dioceses of the Catholic Church in Latvia: Riga, Liepaja, Jelgava, Rezekne-Aglona), and mass media (Radio Marija). This cooperation strongly contributes to the achievement of the aims and learning outcomes of the study field and the study programme. The criteria for selecting the cooperation partners are explained at a detailed level, and they are connected with the relevant aims of the study field and the study programme.

1.5.2. The cooperation with the PLU contributes to achieving the aim of the study field, i.e., to provide theological studies, grounded in the Catholic tradition, open to an expanded ecumenical dialogue and inclusive of the specific needs of society [SAR, p. 6]. The study field enjoys the benefits of affiliation with the PLU: it allows integration of the experience of other countries into the study programme and activities of RTI. The affiliation to the PLU gives extensive opportunities for fostering outreach within European regions, transnational higher education and mobility.

The cooperation with the PLU in the provision of the study process contributes to achieving learning outcomes in the study programme [Annex no. 22]. The management of RTI takes place in close collaboration with PLU. Aside from supervising and controlling the academic quality of studies and their conformity to the Magisterium of the Church and the Catholic academic tradition, the PLU contributes to the study process, for example, the representatives of the PLU participate in the defence of bachelor theses [SAR, p. 38].

According to SAR [p. 38], foreign cooperation partners include several higher education institutions, for example, the Pontifical Gregorian University (Rome, Italy), and the Institute of St. Anselm (Rome, Italy). Since the main goal of the RTI is to provide theological and spiritual education for Catholic priests, RTI collaborates closely with the Vilnius Theological Seminary. Students could continue their studies at the Vilnius Theological Seminary in case the study programme had to be closed at the RTI. The cooperation partners have been chosen according to the aims of the study field [SAR, p. 6] and the learning outcomes of the study programme [Annex 22].

1.5.3. The expert group was not able to gather evidence of active involvement in Erasmus+ programme mobility because the candidates for priesthood spend their time of formation in a seminary with a strong emphasis on silence, studies and prayer, as it is strictly regulated by seminary rules, conceptually based on an apostolic exhortation "Pastores dabo vobis" (I Will Give

You Shepherds) released in 1992 by Pope John Paul II [SAR, p. 39]. However, during the on-site visit, students expressed their willingness to take part actively in outgoing mobility. As for the teaching staff, the on-site visit revealed that most of the teaching staff are priests and have a service aside from their work at RTI as one of the main reasons why the possibilities for outgoing mobility were not intensively used.

The RTI has developed a system and procedures for the attraction of teaching staff from abroad within the field of religion and theology. This system includes procedures for monitoring the teaching staff from abroad elaborated by the Faculty of Theology of PLU in collaboration with the Dicastery for Catholic Education and Culture of the Holy See. The principles formulated by the PLU state that only lecturers from Catholic universities may be invited and recruited to teach study courses related to Catholic theology. According to Annex 23, two foreigners have joined the academic staff and are teaching at RTI currently. Since the studies are implemented in Latvian, the main obstacle in attracting foreign lecturers is knowledge of the Latvian language.

The RTI has started to develop a system and procedures for the attraction of students from abroad within the field of religion and theology. The recruitment of foreign students is done through the bishops of the Catholic Church in other countries, in contact with the Moderator [SAR, p. 38]. During the on-site visit, the graduates stressed the high demand for Catholic priests in Latvia and explained that the main obstacle to the attraction of foreign students is the multi-ethnic composition of the Catholics in Latvia. To serve in a parish, not only knowledge of the Latvian language is required, but also Latgalian, Polish, and Russian.

Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses

The system of cooperation is effective in intradisciplinary collaboration. RTI affiliation with the PLU contributes to internationalization and allows the integration of the experience of other countries into the study programme. Collaboration across organizational and cultural boundaries has a positive effect on the quality of studies. The real added value of this cooperation is the use of the expertise of other international partners affiliated with the PLU worldwide in the implementation of the study process. The cooperation of RTI with RARZI is well-established and closely linked to the study programme. The collaborative research is implemented through cooperation in applied research projects between RTI and RARZI. Cooperation works very well with all the main employers' organizations in Latvia. A systematic plan for both outgoing and incoming mobility of the teaching staff has not been developed. The cooperation projects in research would be needed to enhance the academic level of the research and the study programme in RTI. The cooperation with the media to popularize Christian theology to a wider audience is successful.

Strengths:

1. Strong cooperation with the Pontifical Lateran University that contributes to the development of the study field.
2. Well-established cooperation with the employers' organizations in Latvia.
3. Dynamic cooperation in applied research projects to find a solution for immediate problems facing the field of theology.

Weaknesses:

1. Cooperation in the implementation of research projects is not developed.
2. A systematic plan for both outgoing and incoming mobility of the teaching staff is not provided.

Assessment of the requirement [3]

- 1 R3 - The cooperation implemented within the study field with various Latvian and foreign organizations ensures the achievement of the aims of the study field.

Assessment of compliance: Partially compliant

Cooperation and internationalization activities are systematically developed with the higher education institutions representing the Catholic academic tradition. The cooperation implemented within the study field with Latvian and foreign organizations ensures the achievement of the aims of the study field. Cooperation in the implementation of research projects is not developed.

1.6. Implementation of the Recommendations Received During the Previous Assessment Procedures

Analysis

1.6.1. During the previous study field accreditation in 2011, the expert group concluded that the study programme of the education of Catholic priests is a solid high-quality study programme fulfilling its purpose and is sustainable. They also identified areas for improvement, which were taken into account in further strengthening and development of the RTI study programme. An identified weakness was that the University is financially dependent on the economic situation of the Latvian Catholic Church. RTI responded to this, saying that the institute has a strong bond with the Catholic Church and its mission of training priests in Latvia. They rely on the people's trust and donations as the core of their faith. They have not changed their economic model, but they share their Institute with RARZI, who use their resources. They benefit from RARZI's project funding to upgrade their IT equipment and participate in RARZI's scientific conferences using RTI resources.

This expert team finds that even if RTI is a local branch of PLU and provides specific education that is needed for a Catholic priest (whose minimum formation time is 6 years, of which 5 years are spent within this study programme), the total number of students (at the SAR writing time 10) and graduates (1 graduate per year) is far too small to be sustainable and financial stability and development will be difficult to attain.

As RTI is a private institution, they do not request state money to realise the study programme. All expenses (including the cost of living) are covered by the Catholic Church in Latvia. RTI understands that to save all resources and in the situation where there are 2 branches of PLU – RTI and RARZI – in one country, it is better in the future to merge into one. Additional funding could be attracted in the future as RTI will begin accepting lay people into their study programme for a study fee.

Experts in 2011 also noted that traditional education practices may need to change in the future. RTI responded by saying that their Institute's mission and essence is to train Catholic priests after the example of Christ himself. They uphold their conservative, traditional and apostolic faith and do not compromise on their classical theological and philosophical education. However, they also adapt to the changing world and the Church's guidance, offering new study courses on environmental, social and child protection

During this study field assessment, experts find that RTI graduates during the study process do more than necessary for the bachelor's – instead of the basic 3 years, they study 5 years. During the study period, they have the opportunity to learn 6 languages (Greek, Latin, Polish, Latgalian, English and Hebrew) [BSP Annex 23].

According to SAR [p. 49] all RTI graduates are 100% employed by the Catholic Church in Latvia. Their next employer, realising the actual topic of the particular period in time, organises specific training for them.

Another weakness noted in 2011 is that the seminarians have no contact with other higher education institutions. RTI responded to this, explaining that their institute is both an educational institution and a seminary for future Catholic priests. They live and study in the same building, following a strict regulation based on Pope John Paul II's "Pastores dabo vobis" (The Shepherds I Give You). They focus on silence, work and prayer, as well as theology, philosophy, liturgy and other

subjects for priests. They leave the world temporarily to return ready for their mission. They have little contact with other students, but they collaborate with other seminaries in Lithuania and Belarus, as well as RARZI.

The experts' group during this on-site visit saw a lot of different sports cups and found out that regular inter-scholar competitions with other religious education institutions happen annually. Experts also understand that the Church documents are more important for their practice than the regular practices at other higher education institutions (e.g. in regard to the number of years spent in studies, amount of languages and study topics), but thankfully, RTI is also opening their Institute to laypeople who want to learn Catholic theology, following Pope Francis' 2019 call to open Catholic seminaries to the public in "Veritatis Gaudium", which will both expand the number of students and their interconnection.

Overall, comments from previous evaluations have been reviewed and taken into consideration, although not much action has been taken. Experts find that there is a discrepancy between the standards set by the traditional higher education fields and the specificity of education needed in the case of seminary and priesthood candidates, which has to be taken into account when setting future expectations for the institution.

Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses

Comments from previous evaluations have been reviewed and taken into consideration, although not much action has been taken. Experts find that there is a discrepancy between the standards set by the traditional higher education fields and the specificity of education needed in the case of seminary and priesthood candidates, which has to be taken into account when setting future expectations for the institution.

Strengths:

1. Recommendations have been reviewed and responded to accordingly.

Weaknesses:

1. Not many actions have been taken regarding previous recommendations, mostly changes have been made according to regulatory requirements instead of planned development steps.

Assessment of the requirement [4]

- 1 R4 - Elimination of deficiencies and shortcomings identified in the previous assessment of the study field, if any, or implementation of the recommendations provided.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Experts consider the criteria to be fully compliant as far as the recommendations could be considered, they have been reviewed and some changes have been implemented.

1.7. Recommendations for the Study Field

Short-term recommendations

Within 2 years, RTI should seek to make the management structure and the line of responsibility for decisions regarding the study field clearer concerning the affiliation with PLU.

Within 2 years, the institute should establish an internal QA system with three levels: management and decision-making (in the case of RTI, this is the director), supervisory (or advisory, such as the office for quality assurance), and executive (such as the committee for QA that organises, coordinates, implements internal evaluation procedures, and develops institutional mechanisms to ensure quality).

Within 2 years, start with the implementation of an earmarked funding mechanism for scientific activities, wherein a predetermined annual allocation of financial resources will be used to promote teachers' engagement in scientific activities. These activities encompass the publication of papers in esteemed international databases, participation in academic conferences, authoring books, and other scientifically beneficial pursuits as determined by the institute's management.

Within 2 years, create a policy for rewarding the best teachers and frequently track their national and international successes.

Publish annual reports on the Strategy plan's implementation.

Systematically (each year) engage students in scientific activities through collaborative publication of scientific articles and active participation in research projects and keep regular records of this.

Within 2 years, develop a systematic plan for both outgoing and incoming mobility.

Review the opportunity to split the administrative duties of the Director of RTI among other staff members or the RTI Council, or appoint assisting administrative roles to improve development capacity and study quality.

Long-term recommendations

Within 3 years, RTI should consider integrating greater flexibility into its study programme offerings by utilising innovative approaches in design, development, and delivery. This could involve incorporating distance learning and e-learning methods, allowing the institute to promptly adapt to dynamic shifts in market demand, student funding, and stakeholder requirements.

Within 3 years, it is essential to establish a solid public information policy and a committee to supervise the auditing of the institute's websites, with clearly defined responsibilities.

Within 3 years, create a plan and launch activities to establish an international network to include or launch at least one significant research project.

Within 6 years, RTI should actively seek to attract more students and develop a higher student enrollment.

II - "Religion and Theology" ASSESSMENT

II - "Religion and Theology" ASSESSMENT

2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme

Analysis

2.1.1. The indicators, i.e. the curriculum, methods of teaching, and student performance, presented in the SAR demonstrate that the academic bachelor's study programme "Religion and Theology" (code 43221) complies with the study field of Religion and Theology. The RTI provides conditions for the successful completion of studies in the field. The admission criteria, i.e. prior secondary

education and an admission interview on the motivation for the choice of studies [SAR, p. 47], leave no doubt about the compliance of the study programme with the study field. The period of the implementation of the study programme in full time, which is 5 years, is evaluated as adequate for acquiring the necessary skills in the study field and competencies to enter the labour market.

2.1.2. The expert group verified that the title, code and degree to be obtained of the study programme, aims, objectives, learning outcomes and admission requirements are interrelated. According to the SAR [p. 44], the title of the study programme is "Religion and Theology" in the study field of Religion and Theology with education classification code 43221 with the last 3 numbers (221) standing for religion and theology according to Regulations on classification of Latvian education (cf.: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/291524-noteikumi-par-latvijas-izglitiba-klasifikaciju>). The degree to be awarded to the graduates of the study programme is a Bachelor's degree of Humanities in Religion and Theology. The study programme follows Cabinet of Ministers Regulations no. 240 of 13.05.2014 "Regulations on the state standard of the academic education" (cf. <https://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=266187>) and Cabinet of Ministers Regulations no. 322 of 15.06.2017 "Regulations on classification of the Latvian education" (cf. <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/291524-noteikumi-par-latvijas-izglitiba-klasifikaciju>). There is no qualification given after graduating as it is an academic bachelor study programme. According to the information provided in the SAR [p. 44], the study programme aims to prepare competent theologians for Latvian society and the Catholic Church, who can use their knowledge in leading or assisting the Church. The aim is based on the requirements of the Vatican Congregation for Education. The admission requirements of this study programme are secondary education and an interview on the motivation for the choice of studies [SAR, p. 47]. The SAR does not explain that an interview is determined as an additional admission requirement after coordination with the Council of Higher Education (cf. Law on Higher Education Institutions, Section 46: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/37967>). It is noted that a request for negotiation in the admission process is submitted to the Council of Higher Education [SAR, p. 48]. According to the SAR [p. 47-48], the study programme is a full-time study programme with 200 CP to be covered during the study process of 5 years. The duration of the study programme implementation is justified by the rules of the Vatican Congregation for Education (since 2020) which prescribes that the duration of studies should be a five-year cycle with 300 ECTS (200 CP). The chosen way of implementation of the study programme, i.e. full-time studies, is reasonable and justified to reach the aim of the study programme. The study programme is implemented in Latvian thus no proof of proficiency in the English language is necessary. The implementation of the study programme in Latvian complies with the guidelines of language policy of the Republic of Latvia.

2.1.3. According to SAR [p. 46], several changes have been made in the parameters of the reported study programme. The title of the study programme has been changed from "Theology" to "Religion and Theology". To open studies to laypeople, the type of study programme has been changed from a professional to an academic bachelor's study programme. Therefore, the degree to be awarded to the graduates of the study programme is a Bachelor's degree of Humanities in Religion and Theology, not a previously obtainable professional bachelor's degree in theology and the qualification of priest. These changes are justified by plans to adapt the study programme to accommodate those who do not wish to become priests after graduation. The SAR [p. 46] explains that changing professional qualifications to academic qualifications does not change the employability of graduates who decide to become priests. The changes made are noteworthy and supported by the expert group.

2.1.4. The bachelor's study programme (hereinafter – BSP) prepares graduates for various careers in the Church and society. They can work in fields such as religious research and analysis (universities,

institutes, media), administration (public administration, religious organizations) and practice (churches and other religious organizations), as well as in religious education and social work (non-governmental organizations). They can also contribute to the development of the Latvian humanities in the Church parishes [BSP SAR, ch. 3.1.3.].

Every year, one future priest graduates from RTI. In 2023/2024, three priests are expected. They are assigned to the Latvian diocesan bishops after graduation [BSP SAR, ch. 3.1.4.].

The study programme has 10 students, all male, with an average age of 32. Three of them are in their final year. The number of students has decreased over the accreditation period, with only two students admitted per year since 2019. One student leaves the study programme each year, either voluntarily or involuntarily. The interest in studying at RTI depends on the activity of the Latvian Catholic Churches and the society's maturity [BSP SAR, ch. 3.1.4.]. The study programme is carried out even if there is only one student who wants to become a priest, or at least 10 lay students, as the Catholic Church is interested in the education of priests [BSP SAR, ch. 3.3.3.].

When people start their studies but do not finish them, they still stay in the Church and look for ways to learn and serve. RTI tries to help them find their path, either back to studying or to other forms of service. Sometimes they go abroad to finish their studies and come back with a unique perspective. A few of them lose their faith and leave the Church. One of the goals of the institution is to help the students recognize if they truly have the Calling. If they do not have the qualities of Christ, they may not have the true Calling. In that case, they stop their service and studies, either by themselves or by being expelled [on-site visit].

2.1.5. Not applicable.

Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses

All the indicators of the study programme comply with the existing preconditions of the implementation of the study programme. The study programme "Religion and Theology" complies with the study field indicators, conditions and criteria. In the opinion of the experts, the title, code, degree to be obtained of the study programme, aims, objectives, learning outcomes and admission requirements are interrelated. The duration and aim of the study programme implementation are justified. The implementation of the study programme in Latvia complies with the guidelines of language policy of the Republic of Latvia. The goals, objectives, and learning outcomes are in line and compliance. The study programme is in demand, and the graduates give a contribution to the development of the humanities in Latvia. The changes from a professional to an academic bachelor's study programme are supported by the expert group.

Strengths:

1. The study programme is well set up and complies with the study field.
2. The study programme is unique in Latvia in that it offers the opportunity to acquire in-depth knowledge in Catholic theology and get a bachelor's degree of Humanities in Religion and Theology.
3. The study programme offers both an internationally recognized diploma from the PLU and a state diploma of Latvia, which can enhance the graduates' academic and professional opportunities.
4. The graduates of the study programme are demanded in the labour market.

Weaknesses:

1. In the study programme management, the constant necessity to find a balance between the requirements of the Vatican Congregation for Education and the regulations of the Republic of Latvia.

2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof

Analysis

2.2.1. The expert group based on the provided documents, i.e. the study programme curriculum and study course descriptions, verified that the Academic BSP “Religion and Theology” is designed following the current trends in the development characterizing the religious studies and theology and the labour market. Referring to SAR [p. 50], the content of study courses has been updated to include current documents of the Catholic Church and Papal Encyclicals, focusing on issues related to contemporary society.

The study programme is conceptually well-developed, well-structured and balanced in terms of the compulsory, limited elective and free elective study courses. The study programme consists of 200 CP and is composed of section A of compulsory study courses (106 CP), section B of limited elective study courses (82 CP), and section C of free elective study courses (12 CP). The value of a bachelor's thesis and final examination is 12 CP. The content of the study programme is interrelated and comprehensive, it has been developed according to the best Catholic academic tradition practices in teaching and reflects the recent developments. It involves a primary focus on philosophy and spiritual formation and a regular introduction to theological studies. In this way, the study programme provides students with necessary field-related theoretical knowledge and spiritual insights, as well as ensures the development of necessary theological and pastoral skills and competencies required in the labour market. The learning outcomes are closely related to the objectives and the content of the study programme. The expert group approves that the compulsory and the limited elective section of the study programme includes all the guidelines, principles and methodology of the relevant study field, as well as the history and the current advance of religious studies and theology. The study programme complies with the national academic education standard set by Cabinet of Ministers Regulations no. 240 of 13.05.2014 “Regulations on the State Standard of Academic Education”.

2.2.2. Not applicable.

2.2.3. The academic BSP “Religion and Theology” is implemented using student-centred learning and teaching principles. Student-centred learning is easily achieved due to the small number of the students. Students receive strong support from the teaching staff. During the on-site visit, the interviews with students and graduates revealed that a variety of approaches are used to create a student-centred learning environment. As shown in the descriptions of the study courses, the teaching staff encourages independent studies by asking students to read study literature, prepare presentations, implement group work and do research on the study field-related topics. The students pursue their independent research projects which result in a thesis. When doing their independent research students meet regularly with a mentor who provides advice and encouragement [SAR, p. 34].

Workshops, seminars, individual and group work, discussions and project development are widely used. The methods that encourage active participation, critical thinking and reflection of students are of particular importance. Based on the results of interviews with students, graduates and the academic staff, the experts concluded that the academic staff is motivated to apply innovative learning and teaching methods and to regularly update the content of study courses. The teaching approach is closely related to the content and specificity of the study courses and ensures the achievement of the expected learning outcomes. The analysis of the curriculum shows that the learning outcomes are formulated properly.

The SAR [p. 53] reveals that the development and implementation of an e-learning platform was planned for the academic year 2023/2024. However, the expert group was not able to gather evidence of e-learning, except practice during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lectures and classes were held remotely using Google Meet and other online tools.

2.2.4. Not applicable.

2.2.5. Not applicable.

2.2.6. The study programme envisages writing and defending the bachelor's thesis. According to SAR [p. 54], the aim of the bachelor thesis is to apply, systematize and extend the theoretical knowledge and practical skills acquired during the studies, to use them in carrying out independent scientific or practically significant applied research, as well as to summarize and analyze the obtained results, draw conclusions and formulate recommendations for further work. Throughout the thesis development process, the student's independent research work involves close collaboration with the supervisor. To contribute to conducting high-quality research, the seminar in theological methodology is included in the study programme [SAR, p. 54]. The topics of students' bachelor's theses are relevant to the field of religion and theology and correspond to the study programme. As experts were able to see during the on-site visit, most of the bachelor's theses are dedicated to the topics of Catholic theology.

Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses

The structure and the content of the study programme have been shaped following the current trends in the development characterising religious studies and theology and the labour market, as well as in compliance with national regulations. The study process is student-centred. The content of the study courses corresponds to the main goals of the study programme. The study implementation methods contribute to the achievement of the aims and learning outcomes of the study courses and the study programme. The examples of bachelor's thesis demonstrated their relevance to the study field and study programme.

Strengths:

1. The study programme is conceptually well-developed, well-structured and balanced in terms of the compulsory, limited elective and free elective study courses.
2. The study programme is relevant and demanded in the labour market.
3. The study courses are in good interconnection with each other and embrace the most important directions in theology.
4. The interrelations between students and teaching staff are particularly good.
5. Opportunity of an individual approach to every student.

Weaknesses:

1. The e-study environment is not established.
2. The number of free elective study courses is very limited.

Assessment of the requirement [5] (applicable only to master's or doctoral study programmes)

- 1 R5 - The study programme for obtaining a master's or doctoral degree is based on the achievements and findings of the respective field of science or field of artistic creation.

Assessment of compliance: Not relevant

2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme

Analysis

2.3.1. As RTI only runs one study programme, the information in the study field evaluation also applies to this chapter. Overall, the provisions are sufficient to implement the study programme, and

the possibility to focus on a single study programme ensures that all available resources further its development.

The study programme is based on face-to-face classes in suitable classrooms, with Zoom platforms for distance learning when needed. Teaching materials are mainly printed, and grades are given individually [SAR, p. 28]. The library has a rich collection of books and periodicals in different languages, as well as access to the EBSCO database and other electronic resources. The library's opening hours are flexible and the librarian can be contacted for individual appointments [SAR, p. 27]. The information technology equipment includes computers, wireless internet, projectors, screens, sound devices, interactive whiteboards, microphones, speakers and web cameras. A project has been approved to equip one of the rooms with the fixed information technology equipment needed for conferences/video conferences in 2023. Google Meet and Zoom platforms are used for distance learning, but no electronic study platform has been used [SAR, p. 28, 53, on-site visit]. The financial provision is mainly from the Catholic Church in Latvia and foreign Catholic foundations, and there is a plan to attract more external funding by the end of 2024. RTI does not receive public funding [SAR, p. 25-26].

The provisions indicate the possibility of ensuring a high-quality study process, as they provide the necessary infrastructure, resources and support for the students and lecturers. However, some areas could be improved, such as using an electronic study platform to facilitate communication and collaboration, diversifying the teaching materials and methods, and securing more stable and sustainable sources of funding.

2.3.2. Not applicable.

2.3.3. The funding available for the study programme comes from 4 sources:

- 1) donations from Latvian believers, collected three times a year in all Latvian Catholic parishes;
- 2) contractual support from the LSAGS;
- 3) external fundraising in the form of projects, mainly from international sources;
- 4) tuition fees for students who do not aim to become Catholic priests.

The study programme has a low and declining enrolment rate, with a total of 10 students at the time of SAR creation, all male, with a mean age of 32. The attrition rate is approximately 10%, as one student drops out annually for various reasons [BSP SAR, ch. 3.1.4.]. The graduation rate is also low, with only three students expected to complete the study programme this academic year. The admission rate has been reduced to two students per year since 2019, due to the low demand and limited resources [BSP SAR, ch. 3.3.3.]. The study programme is sustained by the Catholic Church, which provides the minimum funding regardless of the number of students, as long as there is at least one candidate for the priesthood or 10 lay students, which could be considered the minimum number of students for the implementation of the study programme [BSP SAR, ch. 3.3.3.]. The cost of one study place is 5528,75 EUR, while the planned study fee for a layperson is 800 EUR per year [SAR, p. 25].

Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses

The study process is based on face-to-face classes, with Zoom and Google Meet platforms for distance learning when needed. Teaching materials are mainly provided in printed form. The library has a rich collection of books and periodicals in different languages, as well as access to the EBSCO database and other electronic resources. The library aims to develop as a specialized repository of religious and theological knowledge. The material and technical provision consists of information technology equipment, such as computers, wireless internet access, projectors, screens, sound devices, interactive whiteboards, microphones, speakers and web cameras. A project has been

developed to equip one of the rooms with fixed information technology equipment for conferences/videoconferences in 2023. The financial provision is mainly based on the funds of the Catholic Church in Latvia and the funds of foreign Catholic foundations. RTI does not receive public funding. There is a plan to attract more external funding for the modernization of the study environment by the end of 2024.

Strengths:

1. The study programme has well-equipped classrooms and spacious lecture rooms, as well as access to information technology equipment, multimedia facilities, wireless internet access, and platforms for distance learning.
2. The study programme has a library with a rich collection of books and periodicals in different languages, as well as access to the EBSCO database and other electronic resources. The library aims to develop as a specialized repository of religious and theological knowledge.

Weaknesses:

1. No e-study platform is available.
2. There is a low and declining enrolment rate, attrition rate, and graduation rate, which threaten its sustainability and viability.
3. The study programme does not receive public funding and relies mainly on the funds of the Catholic Church in Latvia and the funds of foreign Catholic foundations, which are not stable and sufficient to support its development and modernization.
4. The study programme has limited administrative staff and resources, which may affect its efficiency and quality management.

Assessment of the requirement [6]

- 1 R6 - Compliance of the study provision, science provision (if applicable), informative provision (including library), material and technical provision and financial provision with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

The study programme has all the resources necessary for its base implementation, and can provide sufficient study provisions for the achievement of its learning outcomes. Despite the low number of students, the Catholic church is interested in the preparation of priests and will provide for their education even if the number of students is unsustainable by the institution itself.

2.4. Teaching Staff

Analysis

2.4.1. The report states that the teaching staff's qualifications are strengthened by their involvement in the academic and scientific efforts of other higher education institutions in addition to their fulfilment of numerous institutional duties. Teachers who are highly qualified and skilled are in charge of the study programme. All teaching staff members involved in the study programme have a master's degree in a relevant study topic. Furthermore, all of the study programme's teaching staff members are highly experienced in their respective professions and have specialist expertise in the specific study course [SAR, p. 56; on-site visit]. In this context, there is also a clearly defined canonical procedure that significantly helps to achieve this criterion [SAR, p. 29]. It is evident that the teaching staff's qualifications are commensurate with the needs of the study programme's execution and allow for the attainment of the study programme's goals and learning outcomes.

2.4.2. The teaching staff was largely steady during the self-analysis period, with a few small staff changes that were generally related to generational shifts [SAR, p. 56–57]. An illustration of this is how RTI expeditiously secured a substitute teacher in 2013 following the death of one. Additionally, RTI is forward-thinking by promptly pursuing postgraduate studies with its most promising students to identify a suitable candidate for retiring teachers in the future. In this context, it is apparent that the implementation of RTI ensures that any possible negative impacts on the study programme are mitigated and that all relevant legal requirements are adhered to.

2.4.3. Not applicable.

2.4.4. RTI should place a higher priority on initiatives aimed at encouraging teachers to publish their research articles in journals that are included in the Web of Science and Scopus databases, among other prestigious scientific databases. The most prevalent types of published articles are those found in different proceedings [Annex 13], which, of course, is not enough if we know that publishing in journals with prestigious international bases is much more demanding, which guarantees a higher quality of papers. The data that is currently available indicates that more than one-third of teachers either lack data or have no published scientific literature. This problem poses several difficulties. Undoubtedly, a significant obstacle associated with this approach pertains to the conceptualization of HEI in which a considerable proportion of teachers do not participate in (serious) research projects.

2.4.5. To discuss and improve quality issues in the study programme, the institute has established effective formal and informal meetings among colleagues [SAR, p. 57–58]. During a visit to the institute, experts were able to witness the high quality of interpersonal relations. The institute fosters a familial atmosphere, which is effectively utilised by RTI to achieve the objectives of the study programme and promote the interconnectedness of study courses within the study programme.

Conclusions on this set of criteria, by indicating strengths and weaknesses

The teaching staff is appropriately qualified to carry out the study programme in compliance with all of its standards. Because the staff composition is mostly unchanged, fewer substantial changes could hurt the study programme directly or indirectly. The matter under consideration concerns the inadequate publication practices demonstrated by a significant segment of the teaching staff, with more than 30% of teachers being included in this group. The institute is unique in that every stakeholder concerned works together well, providing a vital safety net for stability and attempts to improve the quality of the study programme.

Strengths:

1. Expertise, consistency, and qualification of the teachers.
2. Excellent cooperation between every stakeholder involved.

Weaknesses:

1. Weak presence of scientific papers in prestigious international databases.

Assessment of the requirement [7]

- 1 R7 - Compliance of the qualification of the academic staff and visiting professors, visiting associate professors, visiting docents, visiting lecturers and visiting assistants with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and the requirements set out in the respective regulatory enactments.

Assessment of compliance: Partially compliant

To meet the requirement in its entirety, it is important to significantly boost the number of scientific articles, specifically those published on prominent international bases, despite the teaching staff and guest teachers' already elevated qualifications [analysis of criteria 2.4.4].

2.5. Assessment of the Compliance

Requirements

- 1 - The study programme complies with the State Academic Education Standard or the Professional Higher Education Standard

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

RTI provides a certification of compliance with the National Standard for Academic Education as described in the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations Nr. 240 (13.05.2014.) "Regulations for Academic Education State Standard" [Annex 21]. Experts' analysis concludes that the study programme complies with the regulations.

- 2 - The study programme complies with a valid professional standard or the requirements for the professional qualification (if there is no professional standard required for the relevant occupation) provided if the completion of the study programme leads to a professional qualification (if applicable)

Assessment of compliance: Not relevant

- 3 - The descriptions of the study courses and the study materials have been prepared in all languages in which the study programme is implemented, and they comply with the requirements set forth in Section 561 , Paragraph two and Section 562 , Paragraph two of the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

The descriptions of the study courses [Annex 24] have been prepared accordingly, complying with the relevant requirements and they comply with the requirements outlined in Section 561 Paragraph 2 of the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

- 4 - The sample of the diploma to be issued for the acquisition of the study programme complies with the procedure according to which state recognised documents of higher education are issued.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

The sample of the diploma [Annex 19] to be issued for the acquisition of the study programme complies with 16.04.2013. Regulation No 202 of Cabinet of Ministers Regulations "Procedures for Issuing State-Recognized Higher Education Documents".

- 5 - The academic staff of the academic study programme complies with the requirements set forth in Section 55, Paragraph one, Clause 3 of the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

The provided biographies [Annex 10] of the staff certify that the qualifications of the teaching staff meet the requirements for the implementation of the study programme. 7 elected professors or associate professors are involved in the implementation of the compulsory and limited elective part of the programme. Another 5 guest professors are also involved.

- 6 6 - Academic study programmes provided for less than 250 full-time students may be implemented and less than five professors and associated professors of the higher education institution may be involved in the implementation of the mandatory and limited elective part of these study programmes provided that the relevant opinion of the Council for Higher Education has been received in accordance with Section 55, Paragraph two of the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

Assessment of compliance: Not relevant

- 7 7 - At least five teaching staff members with a doctoral degree are among the academic staff of an academic doctoral study programme, at least three of which are experts approved by the Latvian Science Council in the respective field of science. At least five teaching staff members with a doctoral degree are among the academic staff of a professional doctoral study programme in arts (if applicable).

Assessment of compliance: Not relevant

- 8 8 - The teaching staff members involved in the implementation of the study programme are proficient in the official language in accordance with the regulations on the level of the official language knowledge and the procedures for testing official language proficiency for performing professional duties and office duties.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

The Confirmation No.4/23 18.03.2023. [Annex 11] certifies that the staff meet the language requirements for the implementation of the study programme and professional and office duties. This is additionally supplemented by the provided biographies [Annex 10].

- 9 9 - The teaching staff members to be involved in the implementation of the study programme have at least B2-level knowledge of a related foreign language, if the study programme or any part thereof is to be implemented in a foreign language (if applicable).

Assessment of compliance: Not relevant

- 10 10 - The sample of the study agreement complies with the mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

The sample of the study agreement [Annex 7] corresponds to the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No. 70 "Terms that must be included in the study contract" (23.01.2007).

- 11 11 - The higher education institution / college has provided confirmation that students will be provided with opportunities to continue their education in another study programme or another higher education institution or college (agreement with another accredited higher education institution or college) if the implementation of the study programme is terminated.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

RTI will provide the opportunity to continue bachelor's studies at the Theological Institute Vilnius St. Joseph Seminary or the Riga Higher Institute of Religious Studies according to a cooperation agreement [included in Annex 5].

- 12 12 - The higher education institution / college has provided confirmation that students are guaranteed compensation for losses if the study programme is not accredited or the study programme's license is revoked due to the actions (actions or omissions) of the higher education institution or college and the student does not wish to continue studies in another study programme.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

RTI will provide compensation for students' losses in the amount of tuition fees paid as confirmed by the Confirmation 27.05.2023. [Annex 6]. It is unusual to define the amount of compensation in the amount of tuition fees paid, as the student will have invested more valuable time and money in the study process and materials needed for it.

- 13 13 - The joint study programmes comply with the requirements prescribed in Section 55.(1), Paragraphs one, two, and seven of the Law on Higher Education Institutions (if applicable)

Assessment of compliance: Not relevant

- 14 14 - Compliance with the requirements specified in other regulatory enactments that apply to the study programme being assessed (if applicable)

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

The study programme is in compliance with the requirements set forth regarding education in the Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Latvia.

Assessment of the requirement [8]

- 1 R8 - Compliance of the study programme with the requirements set forth in the Law on Higher Education Institutions and other regulatory enactments.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

All requirements have been formally complied with although some garner comments on their execution, e.g. compensation of losses.

General conclusions about the study programme, indicating the most important strengths and weaknesses of the study programme

The content, structure, learning and teaching methods implemented in the study programme comply with national legislation and the PLU regulations and fully comply with the study programme assessment criteria. The changes from a professional to an academic bachelor's study programme are supported by the expert group. The study programme has all the resources necessary for its base implementation and can provide sufficient study provisions for the achievement of its learning outcomes. To meet the requirement of staff qualifications in its entirety, it is important to significantly boost the number of scientific articles, specifically those published on prominent international bases, despite the teaching staff and guest teachers' already elevated qualifications. All requirements outlined in the Law on Higher Education Institutions and other regulatory enactments have been formally complied with although some garner comments on their execution, e.g. compensation of losses. Overall no such deficiencies were identified that cannot be eliminated in a 2-year accreditation period. Experts look forward to the development of the study programme after the merger with RARZI to see positive changes with increased resource capacity.

The most important strengths:

- The study programme is conceptually well-developed, it offers opportunities for pursuing students' academic interests in Catholic theology.
- The study programme provides access to the labour market: graduates are in high demand in the labour market.
- An effective and positive learning environment: the interrelations between students and teaching staff are particularly good, it allows an individual approach to every student.

The most important weaknesses:

- The e-study environment is not established.

- Declining student enrolment.
- Weak performance of research activities and its outcomes: research projects and publications in peer-reviewed journals.

Evaluation of the study programme "Religion and Theology"

Evaluation of the study programme:

Good

2.6. Recommendations for the Study Programme "Religion and Theology"

Short-term recommendations

Include information about the compensation for losses and ensuring continued higher education (in case of the study programme closing) in the student agreements

Define specific study programmes at other HEIs that students would be able to continue their studies at in the case of the study programme closing – have the specific study programmes defined in cooperation agreements with HEIs and include this information in the student agreements.

Develop an e-study platform.

Long-term recommendations

Develop initiatives to increase the enrolment of students.

Improve research performance and its outcomes.

Continue the conversations with the Ministry of Education and Science in order to reach an agreement on public funding.

III - Assessment of the Requirements for the Study Field and the Relevant Study Programmes

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Assessment of the Requirements for the Study Field

Requirements	Requirement Evaluation		Comment
R1 - Pursuant to Section 5, Paragraph 2.1 of the Law on Higher Education Institutions, the higher education institution/ college shall ensure continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field whilst implementing its internal quality assurance system:		Partially compliant	In part, RTI has been successful in establishing a QA system that in theory fulfils all of its responsibilities concerning students and their satisfaction. The effectiveness of the system established by RTI is debatable.
R2 - Compliance of scientific research and artistic creation with the level of development of scientific research and artistic creation (if applicable)		Partially compliant	The analysis of criteria 1.4.1. and 1.4.4. demonstrates that at RTI they know what needs to be done when it comes to scientific research and that they are partially working on it. Nevertheless, activating the mechanisms that will efficiently activate increased momentum in scientific research is crucial for satisfying this requirement in its entirety.
R3 - The cooperation implemented within the study field with various Latvian and foreign organizations ensures the achievement of the aims of the study field.		Partially compliant	Cooperation and internationalization activities are systematically developed with the higher education institutions representing the Catholic academic tradition. The cooperation implemented within the study field with Latvian and foreign organizations ensures the achievement of the aims of the study field. Cooperation in the implementation of research projects is not developed.
R4 - Elimination of deficiencies and shortcomings identified in the previous assessment of the study field, if any, or implementation of the recommendations provided.	Fully compliant		Experts consider the criteria to be fully compliant as far as the recommendations could be considered, they have been reviewed and some changes have been implemented.

Assessment of the Requirements for the Relevant Study Programmes of the Study Field

No.	Study programme	R5	R6	R7	R8	Evaluation of the study programme (excellent, good, average, poor)
1	Religion and Theology (43221)	Not relevant	Fully compliant	Partially compliant	Fully compliant	Good

The Dissenting Opinions of the Experts

No dissenting opinions