Expert group joint opinion

Evaluation Procedure: Assessment of Study Field

Higher Education Institution: Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences

Study field: Information and Communication Sciences

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Summary Assessment of the Study Field

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Experts received from the Quality Agency for Higher Education access to the Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences (hereinafter – ViA) the self-assessment report (hereinafter – SAR), including the information related to the "Information and Communication Sciences" (ICS) study field as well as information related to the four study programmes: two professional bachelor's programmes – "Media Studies and Journalism" (MSJ), "Communication and Public Relations" (CPR); two academic master's programmes – "Media and Information Literacy" (MIL), "Strategic Communication and Governance" (SCG). The experts visited ViA on January 27-28, 2021 and met with the relevant groups – management of higher education institution (HEI), members of the group responsible for the preparation of SAR, the director of the study field (responsible also for study programmes), the academic staff, the employers, the students, the alumni, others. Based on the received information and on the discussions from the meetings, below is the summary of the essential points that experts observed. The detailed arguments are provided in the report.

Experts observed the following positive aspects of the study field:
ViA has established effective working relationships with local, regional and national organisations to provide internships and research opportunities for faculty and students. Good relationships are being developed with universities in adjacent countries and within Europe to provide mobility opportunities, as well as to recruit faculty and students to ViA. These relationships support the commitment of the study field to prepare students for continued success in their future careers and to continue to evolve the study field and study programmes to reflect the changing nature of communication practice and enable students to learn about emerging trends.

ViA maintains a somewhat strong quality assurance system based on structured management, the inclusion of stakeholders, insurance of the alignment of the learning outcomes, aims, curriculum, collection and provision of feedback, analyses of gathered data and implementation of necessary changes, adherence to the majority of the ESG Part 1.

ViA has managed to establish a rather good - developing resource base taking into account their financial capacity for the study field which tries to provide the necessary study materials, technical equipment and literature in need for a successful study process. It is mostly done in cooperation with local libraries if the literature is not available in their own library or databases. The teaching staff is active in participation in various research projects and outgoing mobility that enriches and develops their experience. During Covid - 19 ViA has managed to provide a continuous study process through the WebEx platform and Moodle. In case there is a need for support either academic or psychological, ViA is open and helpful. It was noticeable that both the students and staff have acquired good English level knowledge which is needed.

Directions of scientific research in the study field are compliant with the strategy and goals of ViA. Sufficient parts of the programmes in the study field are devoted to the research methodology, ethics, academic writing, and development of the final Thesis. The ICS study field's teaching staff are involved in relevant research and professional organizations and support students in and provide internship opportunities. Internships are an integral part of ViA study programmes. All of the cooperation, whether with academic, governmental, or professional institutions are based on strong academic and scientific background. During the visit both students and experts confirmed that feedback is collected, discussions are organized and necessary changes in the programmes of the study field are made on a regular basis.

ViA has thoroughly followed-up with the previous recommendation implementation activities. There are currently a few key areas where further efforts are suggested - a more clear marketing strategy and activation, and challenges with the revenue structure of ViA (decrease in income from tuition fees, increasing dependency on state budget funding), at the same time ViA is successful and

efficient in attracting project-based funding. The development of the library and the information base of the study field's programmes is challenging due to the limited resources available. However, ViA uses a flexible approach combining project-based funding, as well as partnerships with other institutions, libraries to ensure access to the necessary information resources.

Experts have observed the following negative aspects of the study field:
ViA has many advantages which are recognised by stakeholders in the region, but these advantages should be recognised by stakeholders across Latvia and beyond if ViA is to achieve its objectives for growth and contribution to society.
Lack of the continuation of institutional strategy may have a negative impact on its overall quality. Emphasis is primarily put on the study field and study programme development, not so much consolidation. A more complex and collaborative approach should be implemented to engage stakeholder participation at the same and not the separate times as well as better empowerment of the graduate network should be ensured. A clearer strategy should be available on the management of decreasing student enrolment and increasing drop-out rates. Emphasis should be put on the adherence to Standard 1.6 of the ESG. In addition, it must be ensured that all of the necessary study documents are provided in both Latvian and English. Surveys do not assess the quality of usage of Moodle.
As for the ViA as a regional HEI, its one of the main funding financial sources are research projects thus it is crucial to participate in them, while in recent years it has become noticeable as teaching staff has to manage to provide lectures and yet participate in research projects. In a longer period of time, it may result in a significant disbalance as it has already started to develop in such a tendency. Although it has been indicated by the ViA to work on solutions to this question it is still currently seen as a weakness that may in a long run have an impact on many aspects of the study process. It is of importance for the HEI to raise awareness of it as a great HEI to study in and the number of students for the study programmes of the study field of ICS which currently lacks.
An important issue is the overload of individual lecturers in teaching courses. Some people are involved in teaching all four programmes and courses at both levels. This workload poses several risks. Firstly, teaching so many diverse courses creates an overload for lecturers; secondly, it creates risks for basing these courses on current research. It obliges lecturers to get involved in research on several different topics at the same time. Third, the teaching of several thematically and substantively similar courses in two-level programmes poses a risk of non-separation. There are no significant doubts about the lecturers' qualifications and quality; however, in the medium and long term, these problems typically become more and more pressing.
There are some systemic challenges, linked with the small size and limited resources of ViA (both financial and human resources), which limit the ability of ViA to fully implement recommendations related to the academic staff capacity (workload) or the development of library and information base of the study field's programmes.

Experts observed the following essential aspects related to the study programmes:
• ViA ensures a very strong individual approach and student-centred teaching and learning techniques.
• ViA emphasizes the research-based strategy, which can be observed in the study programme content.
• A great balance between academic and professional (theory and practice) course is offered.
• Study programme director and teachers ensure very good cooperation with local businesses, organizations.
• Study programme graduates are very much satisfied with the received higher education.
• Impressive resources are used for teaching and learning.
• As ViA's strategy is based on research, it should think about more strategic inclusion of professors

into the programmes.
• Graduates could be used more as the ambassadors of the programmes.
• A very strong strategy should be implemented for student attraction and retention to manage enrolment and drop-out rates.
• The undergraduate programmes have quite a few overlapping courses. Thus, the consolidation goal should be applied more here. Perhaps one broad undergraduate programme could be offered in this case, or a programme with two specializations: a) journalism; b) public relations.
• The content of the graduate programmes should be carefully reviewed to eliminate overlapping courses, to eliminate those courses which are more appropriate for the undergraduate level and to make the programmes more unique.
• A very strong marketing strategy should be used to market each programme as a strong separate and unique product.
• Alumni and employers should be engaged more as necessary consulting bodies.
• Necessary content (e.g., study documents, processes, etc.) should be available in English as well.
• More stress should be put on content related to data analytics, artificial intelligence, digitalization.
• Teaching staff should be more diverse between the programmes and between the undergraduate and graduate levels.
• Overall, the stakeholders in the study programmes displayed exemplary motivation, energy, enthusiasm.

1. Management of the Study Field

Analysis

1.1 The goal for the implementation of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences (ViA) study programmes of the Information and Communication Sciences (ICS) study field complies with the strategic goals defined in ViA Development Strategy for 2016-2020, and especially with the goal under the priority "Education": to ensure a modern and qualitative education offer based on research results that comply with the labour market demand and forecasts, as well as with good international practice. Implementation of the study programmes of the study field ensures implementation of ViA's mission: to promote sustainable development of the knowledge society at the regional and national level, providing a private and public sector with high-level professionals, as well as conducting research to solve related public problems. These study programmes also support the achievement of other strategic goals, such as providing high-quality lifelong learning opportunities for all and contributing to the personal and professional development of each individual.

Three priorities (Education, Research, Knowledge Transfer) are defined for the development of the ICS study field in accordance with the ViA Development Strategy for 2016-2020, which specified the strategic goal and direction of activities for each priority.

According to evidence presented by ViA in their self-assessment report (hereinafter - SAR) and during meetings with management and academic staff, the central rationale for all study programmes of the ICS study field is based on the fact that the quality of media environment, media professionalism, as well as strategically planned and implemented communication in private organizations and public administration are of enormous importance in strengthening the security of the state, information space, ensuring the sustainability of society and democratic processes. This rationale is reflected in the curriculum for each study programme, research related to the implementation of the study programmes, attraction of external funding and comments from employers, graduates and current students.

Two of the study field programmes are professional undergraduate programmes - the Communication and Public Relations programme and the Media Studies and Journalism programme.

In general, students and graduates of both study programmes easily and successfully enter the labour market, as they make good contacts in the field within the framework of their internships.

Two academic study programmes at the Master's level have been added to the study field relatively recently - the Media and Information Literacy (2018) programme and the Strategic Communication and Governance programme (2020). Both of these programmes were developed in accordance with the study programme consolidation process started by ViA, which is financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) Operational Programme "Growth and Employment" within the framework of the specific support objective (SAM) 8.2.1 to reduce fragmentation of the study programmes and to strengthen sharing of resources. The programmes have been implemented in accordance with the ViA study programme development and consolidation plan approved by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2018.

The four programmes implemented within the ICS study field are based on the principle of additionality and continuity within both the study field and the higher education establishment as an institution. Synergies are created across ViA programmes by teaching joint study courses and implementing common practical tasks, as well as through applied and fundamental research projects carried out jointly by students and lecturers.

Substantiation of the development of the study field and the study programmes implemented in it from the point of view of Latvia's interests is based on several national and regional documents, including the National Development Plan for 2014-2020, Media Policy Guidelines for 2016-2020, Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia until 2030, Research on Vidzeme Planning Region Smart Specialization Opportunities (2014).

The evidence provided indicates that the aims of the study field are clearly defined and attainable and the relevant study programmes comply with the main directions of the strategic development of the institution and meet the needs and the development trends of the society and national economy.

1.2. Based on material provided in the SAR and from meetings with HEI and study field leaders, it is apparent that the structure of the management of the study field and the study programmes is clear, well-organised and oriented towards the development of the study field. At ViA, the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty Council have proven to be effective in overseeing the study field and in making decisions about the programmes and staff to ensure the study field is effective and supporting the focus of the study field. Faculty, students and other stakeholders provide input and review the study field through regular meetings with the director of the study field who has responsibility for direct supervision and operational management of the study field and its study programmes. During the meeting with the expert panel, the director commented that the study field was well supported in its development by faculty, staff, students, graduates and employers who provide input regularly through meetings and other forms of engagement, such as serving on the study field council, giving guest lectures and providing internships. The efficiency of the existing management structure has proved itself in the process of promoting and maintaining the quality of study programmes implemented in the ICS study field, promoting international cooperation, as well as ensuring cooperation links with the industry. These links were particularly important in the development of the two new master's programmes, which required close cooperation among all the parties involved. It has been noted that the scientific research activities widely implemented in the ICS study field would not be possible without the administrative support of other structural units of ViA, communicative support, provision of various resources and other types of involvement according to the responsibilities of each structural unit.

During the evaluation visit, clear evidence was obtained that, to fulfil the aims and results of the study field, the director of the study field cooperates effectively with academics, staff, students and ViA's administration in managing all aspects of the study field. The study field has regular collaborations with other regional, national and foreign universities, employers, professional associations, and non-governmental organisations (NGO), which are involved in supporting the

development and implementation of the study field and its programmes.

The development plan of the ICS study field takes into account the findings of the SWOT analysis. This plan is reviewed annually and the director of the study field, in cooperation with the SAR development working group, performs an analysis of the plan's implementation. The SWOT mentions several strengths which provide evidence of the quality of the study field and create opportunities for development. Weaknesses and threats are also identified for action, including the small number of elected lecturers in the ICS study field; increased workload; attracting students from adjacent countries; insufficient funds to pay for the professional development of staff; difficulties in attracting guest lecturers from abroad, and the need to upgrade equipment on a regular basis. Additional threats identified include insufficient funding for higher education; consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic; the changing demographic situation in Latvia with the number of secondary school graduates decreasing each year. These issues will place additional pressure on ViA and the study field to achieve goals and maintain the high quality of their study programmes.

1.3. A search of ViA's website (www.va.lv) provides information about admissions, study fields and study programmes which is easily accessible and updated regularly by ViA's Administrative Department (Marketing Group and Study Administration Group) who are responsible for publishing and updating the information which is available in Latvian and English.

In meetings with ViA management, the admission process was reviewed and found to be consistent with the explanation provided in the SAR. Admission criteria to ViA study programmes are approved by the ViA Senate, which, in accordance with the Law on Higher Education Institutions of the Republic of Latvia, approves admission requirements to ViA undergraduate and postgraduate programmes by November 1 each year.

Admission requirements are clearly explained and available for applicants from several sources, including the ViA website, the director of the study field and study programme leaders. Full details of the admission requirements for all programmes and the application process are explained in Section II, 1.5 of the SAR submitted by ViA.

Based on the evidence provided in the SAR, the study field is in compliance with the Cabinet Regulations No.505 which states that every person has the right to submit an application to ViA for recognition of knowledge, skills and competences acquired in previous education or professional experience in the study programme implemented by the HEI or part thereof. The study results achieved by a person while studying (the student has been matriculated) in the study programme are recognised in accordance with the Cabinet Regulation No. 932 of 16 November 2004 "Procedure for Starting Studies in Later Study Stages". The decision on the recognition of knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education or acquired in professional experience, as well as on the recognition of study results achieved in previous education, is made by the Study Results Recognition Commission established by ViA. In accordance with the Regulations on the Recognition of Competences Acquired Outside Formal Education or Professional Experience and Learning Outcomes Achieved in Previous Education, a person must submit an application for recognition of knowledge, skills and competences. The procedure for the recognition of study results is described in the above-mentioned regulations.

The implementation of the students' assessment procedure is described in Section II. 1.6 of the SAR. Student assessment takes place within the framework of the study courses, defence of internships, annual projects, and Bachelor's and Master's theses. During the visit of the expert panel, evidence was provided to confirm that the description of each study course includes information on the assessment criteria and forms. At the beginning of the course, the lecturer discusses the terms of assessment with the students. It is obligatory for the lecturer to prepare and give the students a full description of the course (electronically or in printed form) at the beginning of the course, to discuss the course plan and content, as well as the requirements and deadlines for individual or group work. Importantly, students receive feedback on assessments which assures their future learning while feedback to lecturers assures that assessments are regularly reviewed and reflect the content of the

study course and the study programme.

Assessment criteria of research papers (annual projects, Bachelor's theses, Master's theses) are defined and available to students on ViA e-environment. The teaching staff is responsible for providing public accessibility of the assessment criteria to the students, while the director of the study field provides general supervision. Terms regarding student absenteeism, sickness, and other justified circumstances are included in the course descriptions. These measures ensure that students are informed on the assessment strategy, examinations and other assessment techniques that will be used, what they will be expected to do, and which criteria will be used to assess their performance. It is the responsibility of the lecturer to provide students with feedback and substantiate assessments received during the course. In case of doubt, students consult with the teaching staff of the particular study courses or with the director of the study field. These measures ensure that assessments serve as an opportunity for students to assess both their academic progress and opportunities for further growth and improvement of their skills or knowledge.

1.4. Section II, 1.7 of the SAR provides details of the academic integrity principles and mechanisms at ViA. In summary, ViA has been very efficient in making certain that academic integrity is understood by faculty, staff and students and that policies are implemented to detect any infringements. Specific actions include approval of the Regulations of Ethics in 2017, the establishment of an Academic Ethics Commission to prevent violations of academic integrity in line with Via's Regulations on Academic Ethics. Students are provided with details of the Code of Ethics in their studies and ethics are included in several courses within the study field. ViA is a participant in the use of the Unified Computerized Plagiarism Control System (UCPCS) which includes 27 Latvia HEIs. This system is used to review course papers and annual projects.

1.5. Information about ViA study fields and offered study programmes is published on the ViA website www.va.lv, which contains content in both Latvian and English. Information about study fields and study programmes, admissions requirements and procedures, ViA facilities and other useful information is easily available. The content on the website is monitored and updated by the ViA Administrative Department's Marketing Group and Study Administration Group.

Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses

ViA is a regional HEI that offers study programmes with a good balance between theory and practice. As evidenced with the ICS study field, programmes are regularly updated and adapted to the needs of society and changes in the labour market.

The quality of studies is assured by experienced and professional teaching staff, advanced forms of study, and integrated research and academic work. ViA has a clear strategy for programme development and the study field is well-managed and oriented towards growth, although there is a general decline in the number of students. There is good cooperation with other HEIs within Latvia and abroad, with employers and with professional bodies. Programme development actively involves management, staff, students, and partners. Through its efficient management structure, ViA develops and reviews strategic documents and makes decisions to support its goals as an institution of higher education and a provider of research and lifelong learning to its community and the nation. Mechanisms are in place for admission of students and for academic integrity. All relevant information for interested parties is available through the ViA website and other communications channels.

STRENGTHS:

1. Innovative study programmes at the undergraduate and graduate levels in Latvia are being implemented which contribute to strengthening public safety and sustainability at the national and international levels.

2. There is a clear intention to develop the study field.

3. There is an effective system in place to control the quality of studies and student assessments.

4. The structure of the management (administration) of the study field and the relevant study programmes is clear and is oriented towards the development of the study field.

5. Decision-making is efficient and involves all relevant parties.

6. Student admission requirements and systems are efficient and available through the ViA website.

7. The strategic goals of ViA are being progressed.

8. Plagiarism detection tools are effective and included in information provided to students by lecturers for each course and included in course materials.

9. ViA has clear ethical and academic integrity codes as evidenced by their Regulations of Ethics and Regulation of Academic Ethics policies.

10. The information published on the website of the higher education institution is published in Latvian and English and there is a high quality and efficient system for updating its content.

WEAKNESSES:
No weaknesses detected.

2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System

Analysis

2.1. ViA has established the Study Quality Assurance Policy of ViA (SAR, Part II, Chapter 2.1.), which is publicly available on the ViA website. The quality assurance is also included in the ViA Strategy 2016 - 2020, which is approved by the Senate and the operation and application of which has been prolonged by the same Senate due to the external reasons. The Study Regulations document defines the core processes for the implementation of studies. Overall, the key stakeholders participate in the quality assurance process, which is managed in a timely, measurable, action-based approach. There is a specific control system exercised by the Faculty of Social Science, which raises relevant questions and organizes monthly meetings of the Faculty Council (SAR, Part II, Chapter 2.1.) to discuss urgent matters. This relates to the assurance of quality of the ICS study field. The annual ICS study field SAR is approved by the Faculty Council. This Council also approves necessary changes, vacancies, and candidates. The development of the study field is also discussed at the Faculty and ViA Senate levels. However, during the visit at ViA, while meeting with the director of the study field and of the study programmes, it was explained that while ViA aims at both - developing and consolidating the study programmes (or rather the study programme portfolio), still the emphasis of the ICS study field, has been to develop and not so much to consolidate. Lack of attention put on consolidation raises some questions, especially in light of decreasing student enrolment, increasing drop-out rates, and the fact that the programmes already overlap to some extent and are implemented while groups of students from different programmes have the same subjects. Perhaps ViA could / will utilize the benefits of the European University alliance in various areas, as well as in attracting and retaining more students. Moreover, there is already a great collaboration with the "Cyber-security Engineering" Master's study programme. The students have positive comments in regards to this collaboration. However, based on the economic reasoning, ViA might think more about the consolidation aim and not just development. Moreover, during the visit it was mentioned that the council, which oversees the development of the study field as well as of the study programmes, consists of the elected staff-members (teachers). It was explained that the consulting bodies from industry were planned, but this did not work out, since it was too hard to get everyone (teachers, industry, students) together. Thus, the meetings are conducted separately. It must be mentioned that mutual, collaborative meetings between all stakeholders at the same time, while they can hear one another and discuss, are crucial. Returning to the question on how to make this work, is crucial. Nonetheless, as is written in the SAR and was heard during the visit, the quality assurance is conducted in a structural, coherent manner, systemically contributing to the

achievement of the aims and learning outcomes of the study field and the relevant study programmes. In addition, ViA has set study quality indicators.

2.2. According to SAR, Part II, Chapter 2.2., all stakeholders participate in the development and review of the ICS study field and study programmes. The feedback is available and shared on the regular basis during the meetings. External stakeholders participate in the creation and development processes in order to make sure that the content of the study programmes aligns with the needs of the labor market as well as that the defined learning outcomes are sufficient. As has been mentioned above, it is important that the stakeholders meet all together, but not separately. During the visit it occurred that the ViA community maintains close, quite in-formal practice of communication, where necessary procedures, possible questions and challenges are rather discussed and resolved in quite simple manners, not necessarily engaging in formal processes. It was made clear that in such a way problems are fixed faster and more efficiently. ViA maintains various means of communication channels (e.g., the website, electronic correspondence, etc.), from which the Facebook channel is one of the means to maintain contact with the graduates. During the meeting it was mentioned that various information is provided on this page, but that it seems more as a one-way communication. Thus, an idea would be to have a more structured way to manage the graduate network. At the student level, each group selects a group leader who becomes a liaison between students and a director of the ICS field and of the study programmes. This ensures sufficient two-way communication. On the other hand, surveys of graduates are conducted after one year of completing one's studies. Its goal is to assess how soon the graduates enter the labor market. As is mentioned by ViA itself, a more dynamic approach should be implemented to assess feedback further into the future in order to be able to see tendencies. As is mentioned in the SAR, communication and provision of feedback take place on social media and during various events.

2.3. ViA collects and analyses various information (statistics) on the ICS field study programmes (SAR, Part II, Chapter 2.4.): regular student surveys are conducted for students (unfortunately student surveys are only in Latvian and international students might not be able to provide feedback), meetings and discussions are held with the elected group leaders, urgent and relevant matters are discussed at the Faculty Council level, necessary changes are implemented and communicated back to the students. Regular graduate surveys are conducted to assess how ViA meets the labor market's demand for certain information and communication competencies. Regular meetings are held with stakeholders and teachers are always welcome to approach necessary staff members with problems and challenges. Moreover, statistics on student enrollment and drop-out rates are collected, with more detailed analyses of the data. During the meeting with the Academic Pro-rector it was observed that ViA aims at working with the first year students, because the drop-out rate is at the highest levels during the first year of studies. Moreover, ICS students have a possibility to submit proposals as well as complaints (SAR, Part II, Chapter 2.2.). ViA uses modern applications and communication channels for this (e.g., whatsapp). This has been especially helpful while managing the challenges related to the COVID-19 situation. In some instances it is mentioned that usually the meetings with the students, in order to collect data, are conducted at the end of the semester. The suggestion might be to conduct intermediate meetings during the semester, so that changes are made automatically. In addition, during the exhibition of the Moodle system, it became clear that there is no question in student surveys on how a teacher uses the Moodle system. Especially in an online setting, any type of an online learning environment becomes highly important and, thus, relevant questions should be included in the surveys.

2.4. ViA adheres to Part 1 of the ESG and provides an in-depth analysis of each standard / guideline (SAR, Part II, Chapter 2.5.). Moreover, ViA knows its own challenges very well. For instance the situation with the lack of access to necessary data-bases. Since the ViA's Strategy has a significant ambition to excel in research, the challenge of data-bases has to be dealt with very seriously. Thus, Standard 1.6 "Learning resources and student support" should be prioritized.

Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses

The lack of the new Strategy of ViA certainly might have some limitations on the quality of the institutional operations. Overall, the Internal Study Quality Assurance System is efficient. The system is structured, coherent, logical. It encompasses the participation of the necessary stakeholders and implements feedback and data collection, it also ensures that necessary changes are made. There is a clear alignment among study field and study programme quality and how it contributes to the execution of the learning outcomes, aims, program curriculum. ICS field and programmes adhere to the ESG Part 1, with only Standard 1.6. which needs to be seriously approached. ViA seems to have developed an enthusiastic, energetic and motivated academic community, the willingness of which, when paired with a strong strategy and management, should ensure tackling such challenges as decreasing student enrollment, increasing drop-out rates, lack of programme consolidation, stronger management of the graduate network, etc.

STRENGTHS:
1. Overall, the structure and coherence of the quality assurance system is effective, guaranteeing the contribution to the quality and achievement of the necessary learning outcomes of both the study field and the study programmes.
2. As it was noticed during the visit, all of the stakeholders maintain high levels of motivation, energy, ambitions. This is key to overcoming existing obstacles.
3. Complex approach is applied in the collection of feedback as well as in the implementation of necessary changes.
4. The institution has a goal to investigate the first year students more in order to better manage the drop-out rates, since they are at the highest levels during the first years of studies.
5. ViA has set and follows concrete Study Quality Indicators (e.g., academic staff mobility, language skills, professional development, etc.).
6. Collection of feedback is complex, structured, regular, conducted with the help of various means and channels. Data are analyzed and necessary changes are implemented.
7. Belonging to the European University alliance and planning various mutual initiatives.

WEAKNESSES:
1. Lack of clearer strategy on the management of decreasing student enrolment and increasing drop-out rates.
2. Lack of the participation of the consulting bodies, who would meet with the teachers and the students at the same time to discuss relevant ICS field matters.
3. The graduate network is not empowered enough.
4. Lack of adherence to the ESG Standard 1.6 "Learning resources and student support". ViA should approach the lack of access to necessary data-bases more strategically and seriously.
5. Some study documents (e.g., surveys) are only in Latvian.
6. No question on the usage of the Moodle system is included in the surveys.

3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field

Analysis

3.1. ViA has developed a system to determine the financial resources required for the implementation of the study field and the relevant study programmes. As it has been stated within the SAR starting with page 37 Table 3 to page 41 Table 6 as well it has been outlined within the information gathered during the on site visit the financial base for the study field is sufficient for the implementation of the study programmes, taking into account the fact that the costs for the implementation of the study programmes are covered from various financial sources: project

funding, the State budget funds, ViA's own income. ViA has also attracted significant funding from the EU structural funds to modernize its multimedia laboratory and renovate several lecture-rooms which were also visited by the experts. The modernized rooms included broadcasting studio, light board, sound absorbing lamps that can allow students to have creative ways of approaching course tasks and lecturers providing such ones. The quality and equipment provided was very good and rather impressive. Experts believe that such advanced technologies and study tools only can benefit the study process and quality of studies and its outcomes.

There is a system for financing the scientific research and/or artistic creation activities in place, and this system is efficient. It has been indicated within the SAR pages 47,48,49 and also observed and identified during the visit, ViA personnel, teaching staff are active participants in various scientific projects and interested in their personal development. The main financial provider for such activities is Erasmus+ programme as well as since 2018, ESF project "Development of Academic Staff and Human Resources of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences" is being implemented providing training in the following areas: English language, digital technology, academic leadership.

3.2. ViA has identified the infrastructure resources and the material and technical provision required for the implementation of the study field, and they are available for them. It has been stated within the SAR in pages 45-46. Also outlined by both groups - the students and the teaching staff, they have the access to the necessary resources. Students have access to the ViA e-learning environment which ensures fast communication with the lecturers and academic staff if needed, providing efficient document exchange both submitting and receiving documents. For the purpose of a more efficient and easier study process, especially which helps during online learning right now due to Covid -19, ViA has implemented Moodle learning environment (since 2017). To ensure lectures online, ViA has a license to use the WebEX video conferencing platform for the purpose of distance learning during pandemic. In order to ensure successful use of technical tools provided for distance learning, ViA ensures trainings of the teaching staff on this matter - how to record lectures and edit them afterwards. Despite this, one of the students did not indicate the name of the lecturer, but outlined that the process of studying was harmed due to lecturers lack of knowledge how to navigate and use online studying platforms.

As indicated during the on site visit and outlined by the students, the technical equipment for the purpose of trainings and creating multimedia content are various kind and high in quality as photo and video cameras, dictaphones, multimedia laboratory, recording studio - none of which currently can be used due to the Covid -19 situation.

For the purpose of educating the students of the data bases, electronic catalogue, library and its services, information search, ViA provides the first year students 15 introductory lectures on these questions which as indicated by the students is a good way of how to be introduced with the accessible tools of where and how to find the necessary information and materials for the study processes. Students also outlined that they prefer to use databases more than libraries themselves. The key databases that are being provided by the university are - EBSCO, ScienceDirect, Scopus, Web of Science, Travelnews.lv, Lursoft. Other databases are being provided in cooperation with Valmiera Library. As it has been stated by the students and teaching staff - the accessible materials are enough to ensure a good study process. Experts team agree with this statement, with one comment. A large part of the resources are not in place in the HEI's library but being provided by Valmiera Library or any other domestic library near Valmiera. It is not considered to be a disadvantage but more of a specificity of a regional HEI.

There is a common system and procedures for the improvement and purchase of the material, technical, methodological, and informative provision in place. The system is established in cooperation with Valmiera library where books are being purchased in small quantities each month. Although, the HEI can be glad that they also receive donations by private persons and staff of the ViA who donate books to the library. In case of need, ViA library also purchases books at a request by the academic staff if needed.

3.3. As outlined within the SAR Section 3.4. Page 47 and Annex 12, ViA implements and complies with the procedures for attracting highly skilled teaching staff. ViA has developed the Regulations "On Elections to Academic and Scientific Positions at Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences", which define the procedure for announcing vacancies, assessing candidates and deciding on approval for academic or scientific positions. Vacancies are advertised by announcing a competition on the official website of "Latvijas Vēstnesis", as well as by publishing information on the ViA website. When it comes to the academic and research workload of the teaching staff it is seen to be in most cases balanced with some exceptions. It has been indicated by all of the members of the academic staff which was present during the on site visit meeting that there academic and research workload is balanced but during the visit the experts team found inconsistencies of it. As for example, some of the lecturers are having an extensive amount of courses in parallel with research projects. The SAR shows that the academic and research workload and the intensity is reasonable, although, the academic workload for lecturers with a doctoral degree has increased during the last two years. ViA has pointed out itself that they are working on finding solutions to the issue of burnout and imbalanced work. Their possible offered solution is an approach for the issue is re-planning the workload of lecturers and purposeful attraction of new teaching staff in order to avoid overloading and burnout of elected academic staff.

The teaching staff members of ViA are seen as very active participants of outgoing mobility, which brings added value to the implementation of the study process and the study quality. During the visit it came clear that almost everyone of them have participated in some form of mobility and the provided opportunities by the HEI. Although, it has to be noted that their experiences took place quite some time ago and as it has been outlined by the SAR, it is due to the rise of the teaching workload for the lecturers.

When it comes to financial provision Erasmus+ is the most important source of funding for a long-term support of lecturer mobility. Lecturer mobility is funded also by other financial sources – Nordplus and various international projects.

It has to be outlined that the teaching staff and the students have a very good knowledge of English language. It clearly shows that mobility experiences, studies in English have a large impact on language development as well.

As clarified during the on site visit, there are a number of lecturers who come to lecture to ViA as well with the provision of foreign funding mostly Erasmus + or Fulbright which provides students with lecturers from various countries inside and outside the EU (Ukraine, the United States, Estonia).

3.4. For the purpose of support for the students, ViA provides career consultations and career planning guidance for students in case of need as well as psychologist support, especially for the first year students who may face difficulties from transitioning from high school to HEI. If students face some special, individual difficulties, ViA is forthcoming and offers a specifically developed study plan.

Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses

Overall, ViA has established a well-functioning and developed resource base and provision system. It complies with all the existing parameters with minor shortcomings. The teaching staff and students are satisfied with the resources provided.

STRENGTHS:
1. As observed during the on-site visit, ViA has modernized equipment and technologies used for the study process – multimedia laboratory, sound-absorbing lamps, broadcast studio.
2. ViA has active teaching staff in scientific research projects and mobility programmes.
3. One of the great strengths of ViA is the provision of fast communication and exchange of materials in the Moodle e- environment.

4. Great strength that ViA has is lessons for both teaching staff and students on how to use certain technical tools, databases.
5. Incoming lecturers from various HEIs and backgrounds is helpful in broadening the study experience for the students.
6. Good English language skills for both - the staff and students.

WEAKNESSES:
1.As noticed during the on-site visit and indicated also in the SAR, there is an existing dis-balance of teaching and research workload in the latest years due to the increase of teaching which may result in overloading and burnout of the lecturers.

4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation

Analysis

4.1. The directions of scientific research are fully compliant with the strategy and goals of ViA, programmes in the ICS study field are based on up-to-date contexts, actual research and represent a healthy interdisciplinary approach. The study programmes and research behind them are developed in cooperation with international and domestic partners representing both scientific and professional backgrounds.
The professional programmes at the ICS adhere to the standards and have a clear and significant academic quality. The academic programmes of the study field altogether with a strong scientific base have various practical tools and cooperations. During the Experts' visit, the active and former students praised the interrelation between theory and practice, the quality and validity of internships, and a personalized and practical approach to writing the final thesis.
A sufficient part of the programmes in the ICS study field is devoted to the research methodology, ethics, academic writing, and development of the final Thesis. The programmes offer both quantitative and qualitative research methods, supported through the individual approach of the thesis supervisor and programme director in relevant subjects for the quality of the final thesis. The final theses are evaluated by the professionals from the relevant industries who are annually included in the Bachelor's/Master's thesis defense commission by the decision of the Faculty Council and should compile more than 50% of the commission members of the graduation thesis assessment commission.

4.2. The study process is organized by combining the research-based approach with the orientation towards developments in labor markets, and stakeholder expectations. The quality of the process is demonstrated by the collection of final Thesis available at the faculty. They also combine explicit theoretical knowledge and perspective, practical involvement, skills demonstrated by empirical analyses, and respect for the ethics of research. The increase of the average grade for the final theses during the recent period showcases the improvement in the general quality of theses submitted and defended in the study field. The inclusion of the course on "Entrepreneurship in Creative Industries" recommended for the study field by experts and stakeholders was praised by the students during the Experts' visit to the institution.
There is strong cooperation in a place with several institutions from geographically, culturally, and institutionally diverse backgrounds, for example, NATO Strategic Communication Excellency Centre, Latvia State Chancery, or center for analytic journalism Re:Baltica). The internship provides students from both undergraduate and graduate programmes with an opportunity to check their theoretical knowledge and newly acquired skills against employers and the labor market's demands.
Internship ensures that learning outcomes in the form of theoretical knowledge and practical skills are tested during the learning process. Internship experience and feedback received is also used by students and through the responses of students and employers, also by the study director to make

the adjustments to the content and the sequence of the program. The programmes of the study field follow a coherent and smooth process, which is helpful for the students and also praised by the students as it helps to prepare the final thesis in high quality and on time.

In graduate study programmes, several lecturers teach thematically and content-like courses similar to undergraduate programmes. Typically, such practices are problematic and can be considered a short-term solution. These courses' detailed content is difficult to judge due to the graduate programme's non-detailed course descriptions. Master's programme's course descriptions give a limited opportunity to get acquainted with the course study plan. In individual courses, this plan is divided into a few (for example, four) blocks. Each block is described in one, sometimes short, sentence. This does not allow to judge the course's implementation fully; it is necessary to rely on what the lecturers say when answering the questions. If thematic and content-like courses are really needed in the programmes at both levels, then in this perspective, the easiest solution would be to entrust their reading to different teaching staff.

As already mentioned, a more vital organization and use of a graduate network might be of help, including the feedback collection from graduates and analysis to improve the quality of research undertaken by teachers and students. Students interviewed during the visit indicated that they admire the diversity of methods to combine theoretical knowledge with practical experience, especially working in the studio and creating their own content, and the opportunity to engage in the process of research with their tutors.

4.3. Partnerships with domestic and international institutions are among the main priorities of ViA (SAR, Section II, Part 5). During the implementation of both Master's programmes those partnerships were further strengthened and widened as new partnerships were established (Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA) and Tbilisi State University (TSU), both in Georgia and Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (KMA) in Ukraine. The cooperation was further developed in research, governmental, international, national, and regional collaboration.

During the recent academic years, ViA's ICS study field has hosted visiting lecturers from Mohil Academy School of Journalism in Ukraine and a professor from the University of Tartu, Estonia. Cooperation with foreign institutions should improve the enrolment of international students in the ICS study field. According to the Experts' interviews with institutions Marketing manager, ViA implies international marketing efforts to extend international students' geography.

ViA has multiple partnerships, around 80 cooperation agreements with geographically and culturally diverse fields of the international institutions of higher education. According to SAR in the development of the ICS study field, ViA also follows the content and the guidance provided by international organizations, including UNESCO, European Commission, and EAVI. Moreover, the cooperation has been implemented in the organization of the annual summer schools in collaboration with the Riga Stradiņš University (Latvia), University of Tartu (Estonia), University of Minnesota (USA).

Most of the teaching staff that participated in the interviews with experts had experience in mobility provided by ViA. Although, it seems that the scope of these mobilities has diminished recently. According to SAR, this is explained by a rise in the workload, especially teaching workload among the ICS field lecturers. It is emphasized in SAR and also was acknowledged during the Experts' interviews that ViA, especially at the graduate level, benchmark relevant international programs in Denmark, Estonia, and the UK. ViA's ICS study field annually invites foreign lecturers using various sources of funding (Erasmus, Fulbright). The interaction between the institutions also takes place on the basis of cooperation.

ViA has entered double degree cooperation with Kiel University in Germany (undergraduate programme) and with Tbilisi State University in Georgia (graduate programme). At the end of 2020, an initiative with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia was created, and five scholarships were established for Belarusian students to study in Latvia in the ICS study field in the

programme SCG. ViA International students are provided with the opportunity to learn and explore the Latvian language and with the opportunity to perform the internship either via the Erasmus+ programme or by the international partners of local cooperating institutions.

4.4. Insufficient base funding for higher education and in the field is identified in several parts of SAR. Thus, attracting project-based funding is among ViA's main priorities. The institution is oriented towards success and efficiency in enabling the teaching staff to take advantage of the new research and technological opportunities. As indicated by the SAR, ViA strongly complies to attract skilled academic staff, has developed and complied with Regulations "On Elections to Academic and Scientific Positions at Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences".

The regulation defines a straightforward procedure for announcing vacancies, assessing the candidates, and a general approval process for scientific and teaching staff positions. Available vacancies are advertised on the ViA website and published on the official "Latvijas Vēstnesis". Since 2018 ViA has been implementing the ESF project "Development of Academic Staff and Human Resources of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences" (No.8.2.2.0/18/A/012). According to SAR, the funding of the project has been used to strengthen the research potential of the academic staff and to implement various technological tools in the study process.

The academic staff members of the ICS study field have a long and successful history active in outgoing mobility. There are a number of incoming lecturers mostly using Erasmus + or, at times, Fulbright funding and provide the ICS study field with lecturers from several foreign countries and different cultures both inside and outside the EU. During mobility, the knowledge and skills acquired are an added value to improve the research directions, study programme development, and study quality. The cooperation includes, but is not limited to the quality assessment from the partnering institutions, jointly organized research, guest study courses, lectures and seminars, student, lecturer, and experience exchange programs.

According to SAR, teaching, research, and administrative workload, and the intensity are generally reasonable. The exception is some academic staff members who either have a significant overload on some of the areas, e. g. teaching, administration, or research or even in multiple of those fields. For some members of academic staff, the specific or general workload has increased in recent years. During the Experts' visit, it was notified that both the staff members and the responsible ViA's administration are informed about the problem and are working on solutions to the disbalances in the workloads, and are aware of possible burnout. The typical solution lies in two areas: re-planning the dissemination of workload among actual staff members, thus relieving the overloaded employees and purposefully attracting new members of either teacher, research, and administrative staff.

4.5. Both the undergraduate and graduate students are involved in scientific research and have the possibility to engage in the research activities with their teachers. There is a strong emphasis on academic and research ethics throughout the programme implemented in study courses and regulations. Since 2017, ViA is in an agreement with the University of Latvia and 27 Latvian HEIs in total on the use of the Unified Computerized Plagiarism Control System (UCPCS). It is the primary anti-plagiarism tool in use. The sense of research and academic ethics is implemented not only by the control and detection program but also in the study courses. Detailed information on academic and research ethics is prominent in the descriptions of the study courses.

During the Experts' visit, it was indicated that students have positive feedback both about the implementation of research in the studies, especially mentioning courses developed for successful preparation of the thesis and the support of teaching staff in the process of writing the final thesis. The students also seemed to enjoy the balance between implementation of research and the practical side of the study programme in several scientific and experimental projects, and through the internships as well. The programme curriculum also indicates a strong emphasis on the research

and preparation of the final thesis.

International cooperation is among the priorities of the study field. A healthy student-centered approach is observed mainly due to small group sizes and student numbers, especially in graduate programs. This helps to monitor the student's success, to identify the potential scientific interests and strength and potential for implementing research in collaboration with the tutors on the basis of personal relationships, and to engage in research activities.

4.6. Innovative solutions are an integral part of the study process. The international cooperation, the relatively small group sizes, the project-based funding, and the feedback regularly collected from the stakeholders are the main reasons for innovative solutions which are at the core of the ICS study field at the ViA.

Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses

The teaching staff actively participates in the scientific research proposals and carries out research projects and mobility programmes. The concept of the newly established programmes targets the relevant groups and in compliance with governmental and non-governmental as well as international, national, and regional partners strengthen the national security and information literacy and aid to safety, wellbeing, and development of the country and society, etc. Thus, the unveiling of the programmes comes with strong collaboration, reacts to contemporary needs, and is based on research.

STRENGTHS:
1. Diversity of methods used to combine theoretical knowledge with practical experience.
2. Strong interrelation between theory and practice is represented by the quality and validity of internships and a personalized and practical approach to writing the final thesis.
3. Cooperation with several institutions from geographically, culturally, and institutionally diverse backgrounds is based on scientific research and principles.
4. The quality of the study and research process is demonstrated by the collection of the final thesis available at the faculty.
5. Research project-based funding is the cornerstone of study field development and among institutions' main priorities.
6. Strong and multidirectional involvement in the research activities demonstrated in the study field.
7. Research activities are based on cooperation, mobility, and interdisciplinarity.
8. Individual approach in the teaching staff's work with the students and support for student initiatives results in a strong student-centered emphasis in the study field.

WEAKNESSES:
1. In graduate study programmes, several lecturers teach thematically and content-like courses similar to undergraduate programmes.
2. Related information about the study programmes and relevant literature is not always available in both languages: Latvian and English.
3. The mechanisms of involvement of the students in scientific research is rather based on initiatives of the academic staff than systematic.

5. Cooperation and Internationalisation

Analysis

5.1 Section II, Part 5 of the SAR provides detailed information about specific activities to create and improve cooperation with institutions and stakeholders in Latvia and ViA's efforts to work with

institutions in additional countries in order to improve the content and provide opportunities for mobility for both students and faculty.

During the evaluation visit, the director of the study field provided strong evidence of the level of cooperation that has been established to support the study field and its study programmes. ICS lecturers have developed good cooperation with the administration of Vidzeme Planning Region where information is exchanged, involvement in research is ensured, and internships are provided on a regular basis. Good cooperation has also been established with several municipalities in Vidzeme, in which students have conducted research on issues important for local governments and completed internships. In general, several local newspapers in Vidzeme, as well as newspapers in other regions of Latvia and monthly and weekly magazines, provide regular media internship possibilities. In the sector of TV and radio, cooperation within the framework of internships involves several regional and national broadcast and news services. Opportunities for internships have also been established with leading public relations departments and agencies. Since autumn 2016, active cooperation in the ICS study field has existed with the Baltic Media Centre of Excellence, NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence in Riga, the Ministry of Culture, and with several other organisations and well-known Latvian communication experts. Collaboration is a vital component in strengthening graduate and undergraduate programmes. Representatives of professional bodies are involved in the study process as guest lecturers or members of the State Examination Commission. Lecturers in the study field are involved in professional bodies which support students in participating in their events and provide internship opportunities. In total, ViA has entered into more than 40 internship umbrella agreements with governmental, non-governmental organizations and business enterprises throughout Latvia. Study Advisory Councils have been established in the ICS study field – one in the field of media, the other in the field of communication and public relations, and industry professionals are involved in both councils.

During conversations with students, graduates and employers during the evaluation visit, it became apparent that the ICS study field has actively cooperated with various domestic and international partners since its establishment. The development of the Master's programmes created further opportunities for cooperation with universities in Ukraine and Georgia and additional partnerships are being developed with universities in Europe. In general, ViA provides opportunities for cooperation abroad: student and staff mobility within the framework of Erasmus, inter-university cooperation within the existing cooperation agreements (outside Erasmus), cooperation within the international organizations/partner networks, and cooperation with foreign companies, municipalities, governmental and non-governmental organisations.

5.2 According to the information given in the SAR Section II, 5.2, ViA has been actively working to attract international students as a member of the Latvian Education Export Association. Several incoming and outgoing student mobility opportunities are available and are promoted through study portals, digital marketing and exhibitions to attract international students. During the evaluation visit, students who had taken the opportunity to study in other countries or to come from their home country to ViA were happy with their experiences. However, funding seems to be the main issue. Five Belarusian students have received scholarships from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and have started their studies in the ICS study field. Based on the conversations with students, access to Erasmus funding and scholarships appear to be a major criterion for accepting mobility opportunities. Similar recruitment techniques are used to attract foreign lecturers with some success, although these lecturers come with funding from various programmes, such as Erasmus+, Fulbright, or joint cooperation projects.

Pressure on budgets will continue to force reliance on external funding if international students and lecturers are going to join the study field. The widespread use of digital platforms may make it easier to attract international students as travel and accommodation would not be needed, but these opportunities will continue to be assessed.

5.3 Internships are an integral part of ViA study programmes. According to Section II, Part 5, subsection 5.3 of the SAR, the goal of an internship is to provide undergraduate and graduate students with the possibility to improve their knowledge and skills acquired during their studies and to prepare for a career in the chosen field, as well as to prepare for the development of the State examination paper.

The internship earns 26 credit points in the undergraduate programmes and two credit points at the postgraduate level. For the Media and Information Literacy programme, there are two possible lengths of internships with a duration of 2 or 22 weeks (2 or 22 credit points, respectively), depending on the applicant's previous education. Procedures for internships and their assessment are provided to students well in advance so that students understand the assessment fully.

During the evaluation visit, students spoke highly of the support they received in securing and organising their internships and the value of the internship experience towards their professional careers. Several students secured employment with the organisation that provided their internships.

Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses

The ICS study field has effectively developed cooperation with a wide range of commercial, professional, and academic organisations within Latvia and abroad, leading to opportunities for programme development and mobility for students and lecturers, as well as numerous internships for students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The system for the provision of internships includes an individual, student-centered approach. Overall, the study field takes a strategic and systematic approach to cooperation and internationalization issues. From the evidence provided, the study field complies with all prescribed requirements.

STRENGTHS:
1. ICS shows a strategic attitude to cooperation with different institutions from Latvia and abroad.
2. Effective cooperation with employers and professional bodies.
3. Cooperation with industry representatives is maintained, making it possible to react actively to changes in the study field and adapting study programmes accordingly.
4. ICS is strong in its commitment to programme improvement which allows cooperation with educational institutions in other countries, as well as attracting foreign students.
5. The effective support for internships enables students at both levels to improve their skills and gain work experience, which provides strong support for their careers.
6. ViA is expanding its activities to attract students from Eastern Partnership countries.

WEAKNESSES:
Reliance on external funding programmes limits the acceptance of incoming and outgoing students and teaching staff from abroad.

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

Analysis

According to the SAR for the Study field ICS (SAR, Part II, Section 6), as well as according to its Annex 22 "Recommendations' Implementation Plans" and the previous Joint Report of Experts on the Bachelor's study programmes in "Communication and Public Relations" and "Media Studies and Journalism" of the ViA in the beginning of 2012, two undergraduate programmes of the ICS study field were accredited by the International Accreditation Commission for a period of six years, which is the maximum possible length of accreditation. There were 6 recommendations for the HEI.

The HEI indicates in its SAR that the recommendations have been taken into account and steps have

been taken to implement them.

1. Recommendation: To improve strategic planning and extend cooperation to promote the crucial role of the institution in the region both in academic and social aspects.

Status: The formal development and approvement of ViA's strategy is currently on hold due to the overall higher education reform process lead by the Ministry of Education and Science, as found out during the Experts' visit at ViA. However, ViA's management has a clear mission and strategic development vision. ViA's strategic approach is – focus of more research-based, multidisciplinary approach, specialization. At the same time ViA maintains the professional education angle and bears in mind the mission to create value, positive impact and promote security in the society, providing digital solutions for social challenges and strengthening civic society.

The academic focus is therefore on media literacy, critical thinking, strategic communication and governance. There is strong cooperation with State Chancery, NATO Strategic Communication Excellency Centre, analytical journalistic centre Re:Baltica.

As regards, the regional cooperation, ViA, both according to SAR, (Part II, Section 6), and the knowledge gained during the Experts' visit, regional dimension is implemented in the HEI's general development strategy, thus referring also to the ICS study field. ViA experts have participated in the region's development planning process, smart specialization development, local employers offer internship opportunities for the students. ViA also involves in regionally relevant research activities.

Assessment: Fully implemented.

2. Recommendation: To improve library and database resources available for the students and academic staff, especially regarding scientific publications.

Status: The percentage of ViA's resources allocated for library and information resources is not firmly specified neither on study field level, nor on study programme level. During the Experts' visit both ViA representatives and the students confirmed that the overall academic and scientific information availability is satisfactory. Although the financial resources are limited, the library information is updated twice per year, based on the requests of the academic staff. Furthermore, ViA partners with the Latvian National Library to ensure access to the content not available locally in ViA resources. The information base is updated using ViA budget allocation and alumni donations (SAR, Part II, Section 6). Among the databases available for the students, there are such as Web of Science, SCOPUS, ScienceDirect, EBSCO HOST. Library in cooperation with Culture Information Systems Centre takes part in database trials (information from Experts' visit).

According to the literature lists for all study programmes provided during the Experts' visit, most of the content required for the study courses is available in the library. In cases, when the book is not available in the library, the information for the students (the necessary chapters) are provided by the academic staff.

Assessment: Implemented. In the future, on-going effort to ensure access to relevant, up-to-date library and database resources is needed.

3. Recommendation: To focus on the labour market requirements during the strategic planning process of the study field.

Status: ViA analyses the actual labour market trends annually in the ICS SAR, based on the labour market forecasts prepared by the Ministry of Economics and other relevant reports (SAR, Part II, Section 6). The annual ViA graduate survey is also used to assess the alumni work opportunities after graduating the HEI.

During the licencing process of Master's level programmes SCG and MIL market trends have been analysed to ensure relevant, specific content for the students. The employees' representative during the Experts' visit admitted that the study content and level of professional skills' training is relevant and competitive, esp., as regards data journalistics, audiovisual communication skills and analytical skills training.

Assessment: Fully implemented

4. Recommendation: To introduce a new course in the curriculum - "Creative Writing".

Status: "Creative Writing" course is introduced in both programmes - "Communication and Public Relations" (CPR) and "Media Studies and Journalistics" (MSJ). The management (information from Experts' visit) assesses the course positively.

Assessment: Fully implemented

5. Recommendation: To analyse the content of similar programmes and focus on the competitive differences in the HEI offering.

Status: The CPR and MSJ study programmes are annually compared with the content of other similar programmes. In addition, at the end of 2014, the content of both programmes was compared with the content of communication programmes of Kiel University of Applied Sciences in Germany (SAR, Part II, Section 6).

ViA management and academic staff indicates the following strengths of ViA offered programme content – strong focus on professional skills, balanced with academic knowledge and research opportunities, specialized courses and focus on specific target audiences (public sector) and/or current development trends, e.g., media literacy course is currently offered in ViA only, according to the knowledge of ViA management (Experts' visit, meeting with programme director). Furthermore, the academic staff representatives, as well as students indicate the use of innovative study methods, simulation games, etc. (Experts' visit).

Assessment: Fully implemented. Ongoing approach.

6. Recommendation: To introduce a course on media environment and media consumption in Latvia.

Status: Introduced (SAR, Part II, Section 6).

Assessment: Fully implemented.

The HEI considers that the overall impact of the recommendation implementation has been significant and valuable for the quality of the study programmes, which has also been proved by the fact that only minor amendments were needed to ensure the programme compliance with the requirements of recently (2020) introduced professional standards (SAR, Part II, Section 6).

Furthermore, according to the SAR, in 2018, a new academic Master's study programme MIL was licensed and in 2019, an academic Master's study programme SCG was licensed.

The recommendations for the SCG programme were, as follows:

Short-term recommendations which had to be implemented prior to the launch of the programme:

1. Recommendation: To amend the diploma layout, supplementing it with the emblem of the HEI on page 2, after the name of the institution.

Status: ViA provided explanation that the layout of the diploma complies with the normative regulation (Annex 22 to SAR, Recommendation implementation plans).

Assessment: Fully compliant.

2. Recommendation: To elaborate the description of the requirements of the internship goals and procedures to specify the differences from Master's Thesis development and research internship.

Status: completed. Internship regulations updated and approved by the Council of the study field (Annex 22 to SAR, Recommendation implementation plans).

Assessment: Fully completed

3. Recommendation: To emphasize in public communication the key target audiences of the programme – public administration specialists and NGOs.

Status: According to the "Plan of the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Study Programme Licensing Experts" (Annex 22 to SAR), the HEI planned the recruitment campaign of 2020 according to the recommendation. During the Experts' visit the information provided by ViA representatives, shows that there are ongoing programme marketing efforts, however the Experts suggest to specify the marketing goals, target audiences and the communication channels to ensure more clear positioning and precise audience reach.

Assessment: Partly completed / ongoing efforts.

4. Recommendation: Amendment in the name of the study course "Communications Law" to use the term "communication" (singular)

or "Law of the Communication Sector" Minor study course formulation recommendations.

Status: The course is renamed – "Communication Law";

Assessment: Fully compliant.

5. Recommendation: to ensure that the HEI will provide students with possibilities to continue their education in another study programme or HEI / college if the implementation of the study programme is discontinued, both in Latvian and in English.

Status: An addendum to the agreement with Riga Stradiņš University on the transfer of foreign students has been concluded in order to provide opportunities to continue studies in English as well.

Assessment: Fully compliant.

Long-term recommendations, which could be implemented later, where as follows:

1. Recommendation: to strengthen the administrative staff capacity thus reducing the administrative workload of the teaching staff.

Status: The workload was assessed during the annual staff development discussions, and amendments were made where necessary (SAR, Part II, Section 6). During the Experts' visit the academic staff members confirmed that overall the workload is balanced. However, the management representatives during the Experts' visit indicated that the project-based approach sometimes creates work-load challenges for the academic staff; the solution is individualized approach, splitting responsibilities among senior and junior staff members, involving more guest lecturers. Furthermore, "Overview of academic staff involved in the implementation of study programs of study direction "Information and Communication Sciences" (Annex 13 to SAR) shows that there are a few academic staff representatives which have disproportionately high proportion of study courses.

Assessment: Partially implemented / ongoing efforts.

2. Recommendation: To supplement the programme with a study course on lobbying.

Status: Study course included starting from the academic year 2021-2022. (Annex 22 to SAR, Recommendation implementation plans).

Assessment: Full implementation in process.

3. Recommendation: To improve the printed academic literature base in a concentrated and well-structured manner, esp., regarding literature on communication theory and strategic communication course.

Status: The HEI made a commitment to allocate at least 25% of the total ViA library budget funding for ICS study field for the renewal of the library collection for the needs of the SCG programme (starting from 2020). In 2019, according to the "Plan of the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Study Programme Licensing Experts", ViA started the development and renewal of the literature resources. However, currently ViA uses a less formalized approach, based on the overall study field's library resource update twice a year, as well as on a partnership with the National Library of Latvia to ensure access to information not available in ViA (see also the overall study field recommendation implementation section).

Assessment: Partly implemented / ongoing process.

4. Recommendation: In the programme implementation and development process to analyse the approach and learn from similar programmes, incl. programmes abroad.

Status: activity is performed annually, during the SAR development process (SAR, Part II, Section 6).

Assessment: Fully implemented.

The recommendations for the MIL programme were, as follows:

Short-term recommendations which had to be implemented prior to the launch of the programme:

1. Recommendation: To specify the form of the final examination of all study courses.

Status: The HEI has revised the course descriptions requiring exams for part A courses and test for part B and additional courses. (Annex 22 to SAR, Recommendation implementation plans)

Assessment: Fully implemented.

2. Recommendation: To specify the language of instruction for Latvian and foreign students.

Status: The instructions are clear and in compliance with the Law on Institutions of Higher Education. If there are no foreign students, the course may be provided in Latvian. If there are foreign students, the course is provided in English (Annex 22 to SAR). During the Experts' visit the management and the students confirmed that the language requirements are clear and the information is provided during the admission process. However, the students during the Experts' visit indicated that sometimes the information about the study programme and related information is not available in both languages.

Assessment: Fully implemented. Further improvements suggested.

3. Recommendation: To specify the language proficiency level for the admission to the study programme.

Status: The required English level competence is at least B2 category. During the Experts' visit the management representatives confirmed that the foreign students must submit IELTS or TOEFL test results. The Latvian students may submit centralized secondary education test results.

Assessment: Fully implemented.

4. Recommendation: To define more clearly the priority target groups and to give clear vision of the benefits of the programme for their professional growth and career.

Status: According to the "Plan of the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Study Programme Licensing Experts" (Annex 22 to SAR), the HEI planned to finalize the implementation of the recommendation at the moment of starting the programme implementation. During the Experts' visit the information provided by ViA representatives, shows that there are ongoing programme marketing efforts (defined target markets), however the Experts suggest to specify the marketing goals, target audiences and the communication channels to ensure more clear positioning and precise audience reach.

Assessment: Partly completed / ongoing process.

5. Recommendation: To ensure that lecturers are better acquainted with the quality management processes of the HEI, including the understanding of their specific role in this regard.

Status: An ongoing process is launched, with a seminar on the quality management processes organized for the academic staff (Annex 22 to SAR).

Assessment: Fully implemented.

6. Recommendation: Ensure compliance with the requirements of the regulatory enactments (Clause 7.2 of the Cabinet Regulations No. 70) – to develop a procedure for making amendments to the study agreement if the funding source changes; likewise changes to the amount of tuition fee should be specified.

Status: The study agreement is updated accordingly (Annex 22 to SAR).

Assessment: Fully implemented.

Long-term recommendations, which could be implemented later, where as follows:

1. Recommendation: To reconsider the length of the internship.

Status: During the Experts' visit the representatives of ViA management explained that the length of internship is related to the previous education of the student (academic or professional studies) to ensure the overall required length of studies to receive the corresponding Master's degree. The duration of internship is 2 or 22 weeks (2 or 22 credit points, respectively). There are internal Internship Regulations, forms of internship report and journal, as well as a sample of the internship programme form (Annex 20 to SAR).

Assessment: Fully implemented.

2. Recommendation: To introduce practical digital skills development courses.

Status: The HEI monitors the study process through course assessment questionnaires and other tools to identify if any additional skills are needed (the HEI already provides rather extensive skills training – such as statistical data processing, data and content visualization, etc. If necessary, the HEI plans to provide such additional possibilities (Annex 22 to SAR).

Assessment: Fully implemented; ongoing monitoring of the needs recommended.

3. Recommendation: To enter Erasmus and Erasmus+ programmes to promote study mobility and international context.
Status: ViA uses Erasmus and Erasmus+ programmes to promote study mobility and international context (SAR, Experts' visit).
Assessment: Fully implemented.
4. Recommendation: To improve the revenue structure of ViA, with the goal to finance staff development and to purchase equipment from annual budget rather than external fund budget.
Status: ViA uses combined approach – both state budget funding and project-based funding to cover these needs. The strategy is justified by the limited state-budget funding and the strategic focus of ViA on research projects.
Assessment: Partly implemented / ongoing process.

Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses

ViA has thoroughly followed-up with the recommendation implementation activities. There are currently a few key areas where further efforts are suggested - a more clear marketing strategy and activation, and challenges with the revenue structure of ViA (decrease in income from tuition fees, increasing dependency on state budget funding), at the same time ViA is successful and efficient in attracting project-based funding. The development of library and information base of the study field's programmes is challenging due to the limited resources available. However, ViA uses flexible approach combining project-based funding, as well as partnerships with other institutions, libraries to ensure access to the necessary information resources.

STRENGTHS:
1. ViA has contributed to the analysis of the recommendations and ensured thorough and precise review and implementation process both on study field and study programme level. This is especially important, as some of the recommendations require ongoing situation monitoring and introduction of amendments or new developments, if needed.
2. Most of the recommendations are fully implemented.

WEAKNESSES:
There are no specific weaknesses identified.

7. Assessment of the Requirements for the Study Field

1   Pursuant to Section 5, Paragraph 21 of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education, the higher education institution/ college shall ensure continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study direction whilst implementing their internal quality assurance systems:
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

   Justification: Study Quality Assurance Policy of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences. Although, 1.2. is assessed as "Partially compliant", the experts believe that ViA will consequently implement a more complex approach towards the Study Quality Assurance, by simultaneously including the consulting bodies in the mutual assurance of quality.

2   1.1. The higher education institution/ college has established a policy and procedures for assuring the quality of higher education.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

   Justification: Study Quality Assurance Policy of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences. REGULATIONS OF ETHICS OF VIDZEME UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES.

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: Partially compliant

Justification: ViA maintains formal procedures for the development of the study field and study programmes as well as formal control and monitoring procedures with the participation of stakeholders on various levels.
However, a more complex approach of a collaborative participation of all stakeholders (consulting bodies) should be followed, where all necessary parties meet at the same time and not separately.

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 made public.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

   Justification: Study guide:
   https://va.lv/en/study-here/study-guide
   VIDZEME UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES STUDY REGULATIONS

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

   Justification: The academic staff is elected according to clearly formulated principles. Regular feedback is collected to assess the quality of academic and scientific endeavor of the staff members.

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: Fully compliant

   Justification: Regular surveys of applicants, students and graduates are conducted.

7   1.6. The higher education institution/ college shall ensure continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study direction whilst implementing their quality assurance systems.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

   Justification: Based on the information provided in the SAR as well as based on the results gathered during the visit, the experts believe that ViA will demonstrate necessary performance whilst implementing their quality assurance system.

8   R2 - The cooperation with different organisations from Latvia and abroad implemented within the study direction ensures the achievement of the aims of the study direction.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

   Justification: Based on the SAR and conversations with stakeholders during the visit by experts, there is ample evidence of the excellent cooperation that ViA has established with local and national organisations and universities to achieve the aims of the study field. Good efforts have been made to develop effective relationships with universities in other countries and to attract international faculty and students.

9   R3 - Compliance of scientific research and artistic creation with the development level thereof (if applicable).
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

   Justification: The teaching staff actively participates in the scientific research proposals and carries out research projects. The unveiling of the programmes comes with strong collaboration, reacts to the contemporary needs, and is primarily based on research.

10 R4 - Elimination of the shortcomings and deficiencies identified during the previous assessment of the study direction, if it has been conducted, or the implementation of the provided recommendations.
   Assessment of compliance: Partially compliant

Justification: According to the SAR ICS (SAR, Part II, Section 6), as well as according to its Annex 22 "Recommendations' Implementation Plans" most of the recommendations are fully implemented. ViA's approach is thorough and systematic. For a few of the recommendations it is suggested to continue the already initiated development efforts.

8. Recommendations for the Study Field

Short-term recommendations

1. Organize mutual, collaborative stakeholder meetings, where all of the necessary parties (study field representatives, teachers, students, social partners) meet at the same time (not separately) to discuss necessary questions.
2. Empower the graduate network more in order to maintain a two way communication.
3. Ensure the adherence to the ESG Standard 1.6 "Learning resources and student support" by ensuring access to necessary data-bases and other resources crucial for researchers and for students to write final theses.
4. Ensure that major study documents are available in Latvian and in English.
5. Utilize the European University alliance more for collaborative projects, internationalization purposes, joint study initiatives, etc.
6. Make use of online platforms to invite international guest lecturers.
7. Include a question on the usage of the Moodle system in the surveys.

Long-term recommendations

1. Concentrate more on the consolidation side of the study programme portfolio, ICS field included.
2. Current marketing efforts should be greatly improved to raise ViA's and ICS's profiles across all potential markets for recruitment and collaboration.
3. Raise the activity on social media platforms involving Student Association and academic staff members, for the purpose of attracting more possible future students and graduates, marketing ViA as a great HEI to study in.
4. Eliminate further possibility of disbalance between academic work and research work for the teaching staff.
5. Attenuate the significant overlap between the study courses and study programmes in the study field.
6. Develop an inter-mediate (~3 year) study field and study programme financial plan - goals, strategy and KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) to be able to analyse progress and take timely adjustments, if needed.

II. "Communication and Public Relations" ASSESSMENT

II. "Communication and Public Relations" ASSESSMENT

1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme

Analysis

The professional bachelor's study programme "Communication and Public Relations" (classification code 42321) is a full-time, four-year programme taught in Latvian that offers a "Public Relations Manager" qualification which is awarded to graduates on completion of the required 160 credit points. The compliance of the qualification with the professional standard of "Public Relations Manager" is ensured. The purpose of the study programme is "to train well-educated, highly qualified, competent and competitive communication and public relations managers who will be able to successfully develop and manage strategic communication in today's complex and global environment, based on the knowledge and professional skills acquired" (SAR, p. 108).

The study programme "Communication and Public Relations" is included in the ICS study field, which is appropriate. As stated in the SAR and supported by the appendices provided, the study programme has clearly stated objectives.

There have been no significant changes in the main parameters of the study programme, except that the name of the professional qualification Latvian has been specified in accordance with the professional standard. The content of the study programme was evaluated and analyzed after the approval of the new professional standard at the beginning of 2020. The results of the study programme and study courses have been mapped and their compliance with the professional standard has been evaluated. The results of the analysis were that no significant changes have been required, except for certain aspects or topics that have been incorporated into the content of existing courses.

Throughout the implementation of the study programme, efforts have been made to review the study programme to ensure the compliance of the name of the programme with the degree and the professional qualification to be awarded. In each accreditation period, an in-depth analysis of the interconnection between the programme objectives and the planned outcomes has been carried out in order to ensure the interconnection of the objectives and outcomes and to improve the study programme content in accordance with the development tendencies of the field. Descriptions of the goals and objectives of the study programme have been used to map the study courses. Relevance and coherence between the outcomes of the study programme and the results of specific study courses are assessed annually by preparing a SAR. Information on the progress of the study programme implementation and achievement of the set objectives is assessed every academic year when meeting with students, at the study field council meetings, and at the meetings of the study field lecturers. In this way, coherence between the outcomes of the study programme and the results of the specific study courses is achieved.

Admission requirements for applicants are laid down in the ViA Admission Regulations for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Study Programmes, which, in accordance with the Law on Higher Education Institutions, are approved by November 1 of the current year and published on the ViA website.

Entering students are required to have at least a secondary education. There is a mandatory requirement for the admission competition – passed centralized examinations in Latvian, mathematics and in one of the foreign languages. Also, for the purposes of calculation of the competition score, ViA takes into account the marks indicated in the secondary education documents in the following subjects: Latvian, English, mathematics (or algebra and geometry), history of Latvia and world history, as well as information science. Applicants who place well in certain subjects and student research conferences receive additional points or may be admitted to the study programme outside of the admission competition.

During the visit by the expert panel, evidence was provided that supported the statements in the SAR that the components of the CPR study programme are interrelated and compliant with HEI regulations and national laws.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

Based on the evidence provided in the SAR and presented during the visit of the expert panel, the name of the study programme, the degree and professional qualification to be acquired, the aims, objectives, learning outcomes, and admission requirements are interrelated.

The study programme is included in the ICS study field which is appropriate. Admission requirements are clear and in compliance with HEI regulations and national laws.

STRENGTHS:

1. The professional bachelor's study programme "Communication and Public Relations" offers a "public relations manager" qualification that complies with the latest professional standard.
2. The content of the study programme and courses complies with the professional qualification.

WEAKNESSES:

Not identified

2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof

Analysis

2.1. Grounded on the regular renewal of the study programme, the following new courses have been included in order to meet the necessary demand and to be up-to-date (SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.1.): "Visual Communication Systems", "Digital Marketing", "Entrepreneurship in Creative Industries", "Sports Marketing", "Argumentation and Critical Thinking". In addition, the ICS director together with the teachers cooperated with a few professional associations to update the profession standard "Public Relations Manager". The study programme adheres to this standard. Overall, the study courses (including the traineeship, the final thesis) map to the learning outcomes of the programme and meet the goal of the study programme. Similarly, as has already been mentioned for the MSJ programme, the CPR overlaps quite significantly with its counterpart bachelor programme. Once again, this fact logically relates back to the consideration of the consolidation question that ViA needs to respond to or find ways to increase student enrolment and decrease student drop-out. During the meetings with the students, graduates, and employers, similar observations regarding the programme have been made as have already been mentioned for the MSJ programme: students praise the interrelation between theory and practice, the usefulness of internships, effective approach to writing final thesis. Similarly, it should be noted that such aspects as digitalization, data skills, artificial intelligence, speech techniques should be emphasized more in the programme curriculum. Moreover, it should be once again repeated that similar subjects should not be taught at the bachelor's and master's levels (e.g., Strategic Communication at BA level and Concept of Strategic Communication at MA level). Meanwhile, the course "Communication Theory" is in the master's programme "Media and Information Literacy". This made the experts think, if the "Communication Theory" might not be more adequate for the bachelor's level. Similarly as for the MSJ programme, the CPR programme makes good use of the internships (SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.4.). During the meeting with the employers, it was confirmed that students are motivated and competent, quite some stay after the internship to work. In addition, the students stated that the internship is one of the strongest parts of the programme. The preparation of the thesis process enables students to complete their thesis in time and do it with high quality (SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.5.). The grade average is increasing, the students present their findings in the meetings with professional associations, the theses topics are relevant to the study programme profile.

2.2. Very similar learning and teaching methods as well as the assessment methods are used for the CPR programme, as are for the MSJ programme. All of the information displayed in the SAR, Part III,

Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.3., as well as in the course descriptions, prove the variety of methods and traditional approach to assessment. As has already been mentioned for the MSJ programme, it is recommended to rethink and make the learning assessment as well as the criteria more concrete. Perhaps a core, fundamental didactical approach, method, could be used in the programme to single it out (e.g., challenge based or project / problem based approach, design thinking method, case based method, etc.). A clear student-centered approach is ensured in the programme's learning and teaching processes.

2.3. As has already been mentioned in the previous sections, the study programme is regularly renewed based on the feedback received from various stakeholders. One of the factors which can be singled out, is the wonderful idea to include the topic of lobbying as a public relations function.

2.4. Same as for the MSJ programme, the mobility possibilities are broad, but a decline in student motivation to participate in the exchange programmes is observed. During the meeting with students, it was noticed that some have used the opportunity of mobility.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

In summary, the CPR study programme's content and curriculum are sufficient, meet the study programme's goals, ensure the achievement of the learning outcomes and adherence to the needs of industry. Adequate changes have been made to renew the content by introducing new courses. Students are happy with the received theory, which is immediately implemented in practice via internships, they are also happy about the process followed to write a final thesis. Stakeholder feedback is collected to renew the curriculum. A great variety of learning and teaching methods are used to implement the content, infrastructure supports the learning process, assessment is conducted well. ViA experiences a decrease in student motivation to participate in exchange programs. This tendency is observed in other universities as well.

STRENGTHS:
1. The practical skills acquired and developed during the internships.
2. The support for writing the final thesis and the development of the scientific skills.
3. The interdisciplinary approach.
4. Great variety of learning and teaching methods, necessary infrastructure to apply theory in practice.
5. Feedback is appropriately collected from most of the target groups and necessary changes are implemented.

WEAKNESSES:
1. Content lacks such aspects as: digitalization, artificial intelligence, needs more upscale speech training.
2. Quite a significant part of the programme overlaps with the MSJ bachelor's programme. This once again brings us back to the question of consolidation.
3. Subject repetition is noticed between bachelor and master's programmes. This should be clarified.
4. The evaluation methods and criteria listed in the course descriptions are too general, too broad, while the criteria are unclear.
5. Collection of feedback from graduates is a challenge and should be addressed.
6. Mobility is a weakness, but this is true to various HEI. Hopefully the European University alliance will help to resolve this matter.

3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme

Analysis

The HEI doesn't split the ICS field funding and most of the resources, such as equipment, library resources, databases, administrative costs (SAR, Part II, Section 3; information from Experts' visit. There is also no specific methodological base for each programme. Please, visit "Resources and Provision of the Study Field" part of this document for more information on the availability of the resources.

There is a core literature base developed for each study course of the programme. An extensive part of the study literature is available in English only ("List of Study Course Literature and Information Resources" provided during the Experts' visit); for some courses this is the only option (E.g., Mass Communication, Communication and Public Relations Theories, Visual Communication Systems), which means that the students must have adequate English language proficiency to acquire the course. The admission rules for the study programme assess the results of the centralized English language exams of the secondary education graduates (SAR, CPR, Part III, Section 1).

During the Experts' meeting the student representatives confirmed that the overall academic information availability is sufficient.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

The resource provision is applied to the ICS study field rather than specific study programmes, there are only minor specifics related to the resource base of the field's study programmes.

The overall study provision, informative provision (including libraries), material and technical provision, and financial provision comply with the specific features and the conditions for the implementation of the study programme, create the prerequisites for the achievement of the learning outcomes, and indicate the possibility to ensure a high-quality study process also in the future.

STRENGTHS:
No specific strengths have been identified, as they'd relate to a unique profile of the programme.

WEAKNESSES:
There are no programme specific weaknesses.

4. Teaching Staff

Analysis

4.1. ViA undertakes measures in a target-oriented manner to avoid negative effects on the quality of the implementation of the study programme and the compliance of the study programme with the requirements set forth in the regulatory enactments, as a result of the changes in the composition of the teaching staff. The programme offers support through the individual approach of the thesis supervisor and programme director in relevant issues.

There is a significant overlap between the study courses and academic staff, especially between the MSJ and CPR programmes. Typically, the solution to the problem lies in splitting responsibilities among tutors, especially the senior and junior academic staff members, and involving more guest lecturers. Regular and systematic changes and improvements in the CPR programme have been made to react to the information gathered from students and stakeholders and the content of the programme have been updated, typically by introducing new courses. Students praised the received theory, which is also implemented in practice via collaboration and internships. they are also appreciative of the process followed to write a final thesis.

4.2. The qualification of the teaching staff members involved in the implementation of the study

programme complies with the requirements for the implementation of the study programme and the requirements set forth in the regulatory enactments, and it enables the achievement of the aims and learning outcomes of the study programme and the relevant study courses.

The teaching staff actively participates in the scientific research proposals and carries out research projects and mobility programmes. There is strong cooperation in place with several academic and research-based institutions, some of them are among the leaders in the respective fields in Latvia. The study programme and the academics involved in the implementation of the programme are considered to be among the best in the country.

4.3. Not applicable.

4.4. The academic staff is involved in scientific research at the national and international level. The obtained information is used in the study process. The study field has a history of effective partnerships with both domestic and international collaborators. It has been among one of the priorities since the establishment of ViA. The CPR study programme and research behind it is developed in cooperation with international and domestic partners representing both scientific and professional backgrounds. The CPR programme adheres to the standards and has a clear and significant academic quality.

Teaching staff that participated in the interviews with experts had experience in mobility provided by ViA. The programme annually invites foreign lecturers using various sources of funding. The interaction between the institutions also takes place on the basis of cooperation. Insufficiency of the budget resources doesn't allow for the regular professional development of the teaching staff. There is a small number of elected lecturers in the CPR study programme and ICS study field in general. There also seems to be a disbalance of teaching and research workload in the latest years due to the increase of teaching, resulting in overloading and burnout of the lecturers. There are difficulties in attracting additional high-level elected and guest lecturers from abroad or domestically without supplemental budget or external funding.

4.5. Attracting project-based funding is among ViA's main priorities. The institution is oriented towards success and efficiency in enabling the teaching staff to collaborate and take advantage of the new research and technological opportunities. The funding of the projects has been used to strengthen the collaborative research potential of the academic staff and to implement various technological tools in the study process. There is a mechanism for mutual collaboration between the teaching staff members in place, it contributes to the improvement of the programme.

The interviewed students seemed to enjoy the balance between the implementation of research and the practical side of the study programme in several scientific and experimental projects where the mutual and international collaboration of the teaching staff takes place. The CPR programme curriculum and CV's of the teaching staff also indicates a strong emphasis on the research and preparation of the final thesis as well as a strong and vivid collaboration between the members of the faculty. The CPR teaching staff is involved in relevant research and professional organizations. All of the cooperation, whether with academic, governmental, or professional institutions are based on strong academic and scientific background. The research is implemented on the bases of mutual local and international collaboration.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

The CPR teaching staff is involved in relevant research and professional organizations. All of the cooperation, whether with academic, governmental, or professional institutions are based on strong academic and scientific background. The research is implemented on the basis of mutual local and international collaboration. Some of the academic staff members carry a disproportionately high

workload. For some, the specific or general workload has increased in recent periods. Regular and systematic changes and improvements in the CPR programme have been made to react to the information gathered from students and stakeholders and the teaching staff upgrades the content of the programme, typically by introducing new courses. Students praised the theoretical knowledge of the teaching staff. A variety of teaching and learning methods are used to implement the content.

STRENGTHS:
1. Research is carried out in mutual collaboration between the members of the teaching staff. Teaching staff actively participates in scientific research proposals and carries out research projects and mobility programmes.
2. Students praised the interrelation between theory and practice, the quality and a personalized approach from the teaching staff.
3. Programme indicates strong cooperation with several academic and research-based institutions.
4. The quality of the research is sufficient and up-to-date with the development both in the academic and professional fields.

WEAKNESSES:
1. Significant overlap exists between the study courses and academic staff in the study field and especially between the MSJ and CPR programmes.
2. Some of the academic staff members carry a disproportionately high workload. For some, the specific or general workload has increased in recent periods.

5. Assessment of the Compliance of the Study Programme "Communication and Public Relations"

Requirements

1 1. The sample of the diploma to be issued for the acquisition of the study programme complies with the procedure by which state-recognised documents of higher education are issued.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
   Justification: Annex 36P-Sample-of-diploma-CPR to SAR.
   The sample of the diploma provided by ViA in Annex 36P to SAR complies with the Cabinet Regulation No. 202 of 16 April 2013 "Procedures for issuing State Recognized Higher Education Documents".

2 2. Documents confirming that the higher education institution/ college will provide the students with the options to continue the acquisition of education in another study programme or at another higher education institution/ college (a contract with another accredited higher education institution/ college), in case the implementation of the study programme is discontinued.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
   Justification: Annex LiepU-ViA-sadarbiba-par-studiju-turpinasanu-MSZ-KSA-2011APR to SAR in case of termination of the study programme (in accordance with the Cabinet Regulation No. 795 of 11 December 2018 "Regulations on Licensing Study Programs") provide opportunities to continue education in another HEI. For the professional bachelor study programmes "Communication and Public Relations" and "Media Studies and Journalism" in case of termination the HEI provides the possibility to continue their studies at Liepaja University study programme "Communication Management" (study fields "Public Relations", "Journalism" and "Cross-Cultural Communication").

3 3. Document confirming that the higher education institution/ college guarantees to the students a compensation for losses if the study programme is not accredited or the licence of the study programme is revoked due to the actions of the higher education institution/ college (actions or failure to act) and the student does not wish to continue the studies in another study programme.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annex 35P-Study-agreement-sample-CPR.docx to SAR. Section 2.8 of study agreement confirms:
2.8. - "To guarantee compensation for losses to the Student for the credit points not obtained (for which it is not possible to issue an academic statement, if the credits are not obtained due to a fault of ViA."

4   4. 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

Justification: Documents provided in Annex 14P -CV-IKZ--precise jumi-2020dec and CV of the teaching staff indicates the proficiency of the official language.

5   5. 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.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

6   6. 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.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

7   7. 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 Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

8   8. The sample of the study agreement complies with the mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annex 35P-Study-agreement-sample-CPR to SAR complies with requirements of Cabinet Regulation No. 70 of 23 January 2007 "Mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement".

9   9. 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 56.1, Paragraph two and Section 56.2, Paragraph two of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annex 34P-CPR_Study course descriptions-2019.7z
The course descriptions are prepared in Latvian and English and they meet most of the requirements. In some of the courses the study course mandatory literature is in English which is seen as reasonable because the HEI evaluates the language level of the students before admitting them.

10 10. The study programme complies with the valid professional standard or the requirements for the professional qualification (if there is no professional standard required for the relevant occupation) provided that the completion of the study programme leads to a professional qualification.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annex 32P-CPR_compliance with a professional standard_09122020_EN.docx to SAR.
Compliance of the study programme "Communication and Public Relations" with the professional standard "Public Relations Manager" of the professional standard of 2017.
The standard link: https://registri.visc.gov.lv/profizglitiba/dokumenti/standarti/2017/PS-130.pdf

11 11. 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 Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

12 12. The study programme complies with the State Academic Education Standard or the Professional Higher Education Standard.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Compliance of study programme "Communication and Public Relations" with the National Educational Standard provided to experts in Annex 31P-CPR_compliance with a standard_15122020.docx to SAR is analysed and confirmed.

13 13. The joint study programmes comply with the requirements prescribed in Section 551, Paragraphs one, two, and seven of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education (if applicable).
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

14 14. Each member of the academic staff has either publications published in reviewed editions within the last six years, including international editions (if they have worked for a shorter period of time, the number of publications shall be in proportion to the work period), or artistic creation achievements (for instance, exhibitions, films, theatre performances, and concert activity), or a five-year practical work experience (except for the experience in the implementation of the study programme) in accordance with the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Publications of academic staff has been listed in Annexes to SAR - 17P-IICS-list of publications-edited-16122020 and 14P-CV-IKZ-precizejumi-2020dec.

15 P5 - Overall rating
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Overall, the programme meets the requirements that have been indicated.

Requirements (R6-R8)

1 R6 - The compliance of the study provision, scientific support (if applicable), informative provision (including libraries), material and technical provision, and financial provision with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and ensuring the achievement of the learning outcomes.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: The programme has the necessary resource base, the students and the teaching staff have access to the necessary resources to ensure the quality of teaching and learning process.
Students have been provided with a new, technically advanced broadcasting studio, well - made sound recording room and all the necessary equipment for the study purposes.

2 R7 - The compliance of the qualification of the academic staff members, visiting professors, visiting associate professors, visiting docents, visiting lecturers, and visiting assistants with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and the provisions set out in the respective regulatory enactments.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annexes 14P-CV-IKZ-precizejumi-2020dec to SAR confirms the compliance of the qualification of the academic staff members with requirements set out in regulatory enactments.

3   R8 - The study programme leading to the master or doctoral degree is based on the advances and findings in the relevant field of science or artistic creation.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

The related requirements for the study programme have been fully met.

STRENGTHS:
1. The content of the study programme and courses complies with the professional qualification.
2. The practical skills acquired and developed during the internships.
3. The interdisciplinary approach.
4. Great variety of learning and teaching methods, necessary infrastructure to apply theory in practice.
5. Feedback is appropriately collected from most of the target groups and necessary changes are implemented.
6. Research is carried out in mutual collaboration between the members of the teaching staff. Teaching staff actively participates in scientific research proposals and carries out research projects and mobility programmes.
7. Students praised the interrelation between theory and practice, the quality and a personalized approach from the teaching staff.
8. Programme indicates strong cooperation with several academic and research-based institutions.
9. The quality of the research is sufficient and up-to-date with the development both in the academic and professional fields.

WEAKNESSES:
1. Content lacks such aspects as: digitalization, artificial intelligence, needs more upscale speech training.
2. Quite a significant part of the programme (study courses, academic staff) overlaps with the MSJ bachelor's programme.
3. Subject repetition is noticed between bachelor and master's programmes. This should be clarified.
4. The evaluation methods and criteria listed in the course descriptions are too general, too broad, while the criteria are unclear.
5. Collection of feedback from graduates is a challenge and should be addressed.
6. Mobility is a weakness, but this is true to various HEI. Hopefully the European University alliance will help to resolve this matter.
7. Some of the academic staff members carry a disproportionately high workload. For some, the specific or general workload has increased in recent periods.

Evaluation of the study programme "Communication and Public Relations"

Evaluation of the study programme:

Good

6. Recommendations for the Study Programme "Communication and Public Relations"

Short-term recommendations

1. Include courses related to artificial intelligence, speech techniques, digitalization.
2. Consider making the evaluation methods more specific, as well as the assessment criteria more concrete.
3. Instead of the great variety of active teaching methods, CPR could propose a very concrete and relevant didactical method (e.g., challenge based learning, project or problem based learning, design thinking, case method application).
4. Offer course "Communication Theories" at the bachelor's level, not master's.
Provide more concrete assessment criteria in the course descriptions.

Long-term recommendations

1. Utilize the participation in the European University more to empower mobility.
2. Strengthen the graduate network to receive more feedback on the CPR programme.
3. Proactively plan academic information base development; if necessary, partner with other ICS programmes in the planning process.
4. Even the workload for some of the academic staff members who carry a disproportionately high academic, scientific and administrative workload.
5. Attenuate the significant overlap between the study courses in the study field between the MSJ and CPR programmes.

II. "Media Studies and Journalism" ASSESSMENT

II. "Media Studies and Journalism" ASSESSMENT

1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme

Analysis

The professional bachelor's study programme "Media Studies and Journalism" (hereinafter - MSJ) (classification code 42321) is a full-time, four-year programme that offers a professional bachelor's degree in media studies and a "journalist" qualification which is awarded to graduates on completion of the required 160 credit points. The compliance of the qualification with the professional standard of "Journalist" is ensured. The purpose of the study programme is "to prepare competent, highly qualified and competitive media professionals and journalists for the work related to media content production and distribution in organizations and their own companies, during studies especially focusing on the latest tendencies in media development both from the point of view of media content production and media management" (SAR, p. 69).

The study programme MSJ is included in the ICS study field, which is appropriate. As stated in the SAR and supported by the appendices provided, the study programme MSJ has clearly stated objectives.

The content of the study programme and its learning outcomes or results focus on providing relevant knowledge, skills and competences needed for a successful career in media and journalism.

The content was evaluated and analyzed after the approval of the new professional standard in the beginning of 2020. The results of the study programme and study courses have been mapped, their compliance with the professional standard has been evaluated, and no significant changes were deemed necessary, except for certain aspects or topics that have been incorporated into the content of existing courses, such as the topic of media criticism as a journalism genre course "Journalism Genres and Techniques II".

Admission requirements for applicants are laid down in the ViA Admission Regulations for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Study Programmes, which, in accordance with the Law on Higher Education Institutions, are approved by November 1 of the current year and published on the ViA website. Entering students are required to have at least secondary education. There is a mandatory requirement for the admission competition – passed centralized examinations in Latvian, mathematics and in one of the foreign languages. Also, for the purposes of calculation of the competition score, ViA takes into account the marks indicated in the secondary education documents in the following subjects: Latvian, English, mathematics (or algebra and geometry), history of Latvia and world history, as well as information science.

Applicants who place well in certain subjects and student research conferences receive additional points or may be admitted to the study programme outside of the admission competition.

Based on evidence presented in the SAR and during the expert panel's visit, all components of the study programme are interrelated and clearly explained to staff and students.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

Based on the evidence provided in the SAR and presented during the visit of the expert panel, the degree and professional qualification to be acquired, the aims, objectives, learning outcomes and admission requirements are interrelated. The professional bachelor's study programme MSJ offers a degree in media studies and a "journalist" qualification which complies with the latest professional standard. The content of the study programme and courses complies with a professional qualification. The study programme is included in the study field ICS which is appropriate. Admission requirements are clear and in compliance with HEI regulations and national laws.

STRENGTHS:
1. The programme complies with the latest professional standard.
2. The content of the study programme complies with the professional qualification.

WEAKNESSES:
Not identified

2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof

Analysis

2.1. According to SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.1., the study programme's aim and learning outcomes comply with the content of the occupational standard "Journalist" and comply with the industry's vision of the profession. The following new courses were included during the previous accreditation process: "Multimedia Journalism", "Photography Basics", "Cultural Journalism", "Entrepreneurship in Creative Industries". The latter course was highly praised by the students during the meeting. The course "Latvian Media Environment" was developed and introduced into the programme based on the recommendations of the experts during the previous accreditation process. One of the priorities that the MSJ programme has are the internships, which allow the students to develop practical skills, which are very much demanded by the labor market. After the internship a student is quite often offered a job position (SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.1.).

According to SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.2. the content included in the courses and the results that they must achieve, as well as the literature resources are reviewed annually. Lecturers also renew the course content based on the feedback received by the students. Study goals of the programme are also reviewed annually upon the preparation of the SARs. Based on the Annex 23, the mapping proves that the programme results are achieved via the specific modules. To meet the needs of the relevant industry, the MSJ programme offers annual internships in the amount of 6 CP (240 hours) (SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.4.). Internship ensures the achievement of the learning outcomes related to the practical skills and approbation of theoretical knowledge in practical activity. Based on the internship experience and received feedback, the study director knows which subject must take place prior to the internship. The MSJ programme follows a very coherent and smooth process, which helps the students to prepare the final thesis in high quality and defend it on time. By following such a process, MSJ programme has ensured the increase of the average grade for the thesis.

Overall the MSJ course descriptions (including the traineeship, the final thesis) meet the necessary requirements in the achievement of the learning outcomes and following the needs of the labour market (Annex 26 and Annex 27).

Upon the visit with the students, the experts found out that the students especially enjoyed the practical side of the programme and the number of the projects. Students also have positive thoughts about research related courses and preparation of the thesis. The students recommend adding the course on visual communication or visual design. In addition, the graduates praised the practical experience, the scientific experience, and other relevant skills acquired during studies. The graduates wanted to have more free choice courses (electives). They also stated that digital marketing content should be included in both bachelor's programmes. Employers praised the graduates for the multidisciplinary skills, for knowing Python and other programmes.

Some of the observations where the opinions of the experts, graduates and employers meet, is that the programme should include more content related with speech training, fact checking, data skills, and digital aspects (perhaps Artificial Intelligence (AI)) and even more entrepreneurship.

One more observation made by the experts during the visit, was that the content of the two bachelor programmes overlap at quite great extent. Moreover, some subjects, for instance the MSJ subject "Argumentation and critical thinking" repeats at the master's level (with a slightly different title).

2.2. The MSJ programme uses a great variety of different methods (SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.3.) with the aims to emphasize the social interactions, learning by doing, developing research skills, etc. Moreover, traditionally the MSJ programme uses oral or written exams, tests, or final presentation as their major final assessment. The infrastructure available at ViA and observed upon the visit, is highly important in the learning and teaching process. For instance, students make great use of the Modern TV studio. Overall the course descriptions display a necessary alignment among the course summary, learning outcomes and the evaluation methods and criteria. Nevertheless, the evaluation methods and especially the criteria could be more specific, more concrete for the students to better know what specific methods will be used for evaluation and based on what criteria (what exactly will they be assessed on). It seems that the course descriptions list evaluation methods and not so much the criteria.

Upon the visit the students stated that they find the active methods to be very useful and would like to have even more simulations (e.g., how to write an article when circumstances require it to do it very quickly). The students also enjoyed a lot of the video editing practical work.

Overall, the student-centered approach is perceived both in programme content - providing the students with the possibility to choose from the elective courses, as well as via the organizational aspect - students learn in small groups and their expectations, needs can certainly be met individually. Moreover, upon the ViA visit, it was observed that the informal approach is used to resolve any type of questions or issues. Thus, a student may comfortably approach an

administrative or academic staff with an individual matter and have it resolved in a timely manner.

2.3. ViA and ICS field representatives regularly collect feedback from students, employers, and graduates (SAR, Part II, Chapter 2 and Part III Chapter 2). Results are used to renew content and implement necessary changes. Some of the examples include (SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.6.): the following new study courses were included in the study programme: "Latvian Media Environment", "Basics of Photography", "Multimedia Journalism", students also take courses that enhance development of entrepreneurial skills in the media industry "Entrepreneurship in Creative Industries". Taking into consideration the views of professionals, a course "Argumentation and Critical Thinking" is also included in the programme.

During the visit the students confirmed that feedback is collected and necessary changes are made. Employers also stated that regular discussions on competence development take place. Perhaps feedback collection from graduates would be a weaker area, since it is difficult to collect feedback from this group. As already mentioned in this report, a stronger graduate network might help to resolve this matter.

2.4. According to SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.7. the opportunities to use mobility are abundant for the students. Despite this, the motivation to participate in the exchange programme is decreasing. Experts observe that this tendency is noticed in the majority of the HEIs. Upon the meeting with the students, some confirmed the usage of the mobility and went to different countries (e.g., Cyprus, Portugal). The experts observe that most probably the European University alliance should open more opportunities for ViA, for instance inclusion of mobility windows in the study programmes, using the virtual mobility, applying various collaborative projects among the partner universities.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

In summary, the MSJ study programme's content and curriculum are sufficient, meet the study programme's goals, ensure the achievement of the learning outcomes and adherence to the needs of industry. Adequate changes have been made to renew the content by introducing new courses. Students are happy with the received theory, which is immediately implemented in practice via internships, they are also happy about the process followed to write a final thesis. Stakeholder feedback is collected to renew the curriculum. A great variety of learning and teaching methods are used to implement the content, infrastructure supports the learning process, assessment is conducted well. As it relates to the course descriptions - perhaps more concrete evaluation methods could be provided as well as more specific assessment criteria. ViA experiences a decrease in student motivation to participate in exchange programs. This tendency is observed in other HEIs as well. Perhaps being in an alliance of the European University, will bring some opportunities for student mobility.

STRENGTHS:
1. The practical skills are acquired and developed during the internships.
2. The support for writing the final thesis and the development of the scientific skills is ensured.
3. The programme offers the interdisciplinary approach.
4. Great variety of learning and teaching methods are applied, necessary infrastructure is used to apply theory in practice.
5. Feedback is appropriately collected from the necessary target groups and necessary changes are implemented.
6. Student-centered approach is used in the learning and teaching processes.

WEAKNESSES:

1. Quite a significant part of the programme overlaps with the bachelor's programme "Communication and Public Relations". This once again refers back to the question of consolidation.
2. Subject repetition is noticed between bachelor and master's programmes. This should be clarified.
3. The evaluation methods and criteria listed in the course descriptions are too general, too broad, while the criteria are unclear.
4. Mobility is a weakness, but this is true to various HEIs. Hopefully the European University alliance will help to resolve this matter.

3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme

Analysis

The HEI doesn't split the ICS field funding and most of the resources, such as equipment, library resources, databases, administrative costs (SAR, Part II, Section 3; information from Experts' visit. There is also no specific methodological base for each programme. Please, visit "Resources and Provision of the Study Field" part of this document for more information on the availability of the resources.

It is important to note that there is a modern multimedia laboratory and the TV studio available since 2020. It is well-equipped and of special value for the MSJ students, which can produce their own multimedia content, news stories, radio broadcasts, etc. The laboratory is equipped both with video, photo and audio equipment and with the necessary IT programmes, such as Premiere Pro CC, Photoshop CC, Media Encoder CC, Lightroom, After Effects CC (information received during Experts' visit). However, the funding for the renovation of the laboratory depends on project funding availability. This has been indicated as a not desirable situation by Master's programme licensing experts recently, however ViA indicates lack of state readiness to extend the state budget funding for such purposes (Programme Licensing Experts' Opininon; SAR).

There is a core literature base developed for each study course of the programme. Part of the study literature is available in English only (List of study course literature and information resources provided during the Experts' visit); for some courses this is the only option (E.g., Media Ethics), which means that the students must have adequate English language proficiency to acquire the course. The admission rules for the study programme assess the results of the centralized English language exams of the secondary education graduates (SAR, MSJ, Part III, Section 1).

During the Experts' meeting the student representatives confirmed that the overall academic information availability is sufficient.

ViA has a partnership agreement with analytical journalism centre Re:Baltica, which allows, for example, access for the students to big data and AI analytics tools, thus strengthening the programme's link to professional journalistics entities and readiness of the programme to offer data journalism skills for the students (Experts' visit, management interview, employers' interview).

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

The resource provision is applied to the ICS study field rather than specific study programmes, there are only minor specifics related to the resource base of the field's study programmes.

The overall study provision, informative provision (including libraries), material and technical provision, and financial provision comply with the specific features and the conditions for the implementation of the study programme, create the prerequisites for the achievement of the learning outcomes, and indicate the possibility to ensure a high-quality study process also in the future.

STRENGTHS:
1. ViA has an excellent multimedia laboratory and TV studio, with adequate IT programme provision.

2. ViA has established partnership with analytical journalism centre Re:Baltica, which ensures access to data analytics tools, as well as insight in modern analytical journalistics.

WEAKNESSES:
There are no programme specific weaknesses.

4. Teaching Staff

Analysis

4.1. During the visit both students and shareholders confirmed that relevant feedback is collected, discussions are organized and necessary changes in the MSJ programme are made on a regular basis. The inclusion of the course on "Entrepreneurship in Creative Industries" recommended for the study programme by experts and stakeholders were praised by the students during the Experts' visit to the institution.

A significant part of the MSJ programme is devoted to the topics of research methodology, ethics, academic writing, and development of the Bachelor's thesis in general. The programme offers both quantitative and qualitative research methods, supported through the individual approach of the thesis supervisor and programme director in relevant subjects for the quality of the final thesis. The final theses in the MSJ programme are evaluated by the professionals from the relevant industries who are included in the Bachelor's thesis defence commission on a regular basis.

There is a significant overlap between the study courses and academic staff in the study field and especially between the MSJ and CPR programmes. Typically, the solution to the problem lies in splitting responsibilities among tutors, especially the senior and junior academic staff members, and involving more guest lecturers.

ViA undertakes measures to avoid negative effects on the quality of the implementation of the study programme and the compliance of the study programme with the requirements set forth in the regulatory enactments, as a result of the changes in the composition of the teaching staff. Regular and systematic changes and improvements in the MSJ programme have been made to react to the information gathered from students and stakeholders and the content of the programme have been updated, typically by introducing new courses. Students praised the received theory, which is also implemented in practice via collaboration and internships. They are also about the process followed to write a final thesis. Students and stakeholder feedback is collected to systematically renew the curriculum. A variety of teaching and learning methods are used to implement the content. Perhaps more concrete evaluation methods and more specific assessment criteria in the course description would be needed.

4.2. The teaching staff actively participates in the scientific research proposals and carries out research projects and mobility programmes. There is strong cooperation in place with several academic and research-based institutions, some of them are among the leaders in the respective fields in Latvia (Re:Baltica in journalism). The internship provides undergraduate students with an opportunity to check their theoretical knowledge and newly acquired skills against employers and the labour market's demands.

During the Experts' visit, it was notified that both the staff members and the responsible ViA's administration are informed about the problem and are working on solutions to the disbalances in the workloads, and are aware of possible burnout. The typical solution lies in two areas: re-planning the dissemination of workload among actual staff members, thus relieving the overloaded employees and purposefully attracting new members of either teacher, research, and administrative staff.

The qualification of the teaching staff members involved in the implementation of the study programme complies with the requirements for the implementation of the study programme and the

requirements set forth in the regulatory enactments, and it enables the achievement of the aims and learning outcomes of the study programme and the relevant study courses.

4.3. N/a.

4.4. The study field has a history of effective partnerships with both domestic and international collaborators. It has been among the priorities since the establishment of ViA. The MSJ study programme and research behind it is developed in cooperation with international and domestic partners representing both scientific and professional backgrounds. The professional MSJ programme adheres to the standards and has a clear and significant academic quality.
Teaching staff that participated in the interviews with experts had experience in mobility provided by ViA. Although, it seems that the scope of these mobilities has diminished recently. According to SAR, this is explained by a rise in the workload, especially teaching workload among lecturers involved in the programme. It is emphasized in SAR and also was acknowledged during the Experts' interviews that ViA, especially at the graduate level, benchmark relevant international programmes in Denmark, Estonia, and the UK. A double degree cooperation agreement was entered with Kiel University in Germany in 2017 at the MSJ programme level. Programme annually invites foreign lecturers using various sources of funding (Erasmus, Fulbright). The interaction between the institutions also takes place on the basis of cooperation.

4.5. Attracting project-based funding is among ViA's main priorities. The institution is oriented towards success and efficiency in enabling the teaching staff to take advantage of the new research and technological opportunities and it is done in a mutual collaboration between the members of the teaching staff. Since 2018 ViA has been implementing the ESF project "Development of Academic Staff and Human Resources of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences" (No.8.2.2.0/18/A/012). According to SAR the funding of the project has been used to strengthen the research potential of the academic staff and to implement various technological tools in the study process.
The MSJ teaching staff is involved in relevant research and professional organizations. All of the cooperation, whether with academic, governmental, or professional institutions are based on strong academic and scientific background. The research is implemented on the bases of mutual local and international collaboration.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

Regular and systematic changes and improvements in the MSJ programme have been made to react to the information gathered from students and stakeholders and the content of the programme have been updated, typically by introducing new courses. Students praised the received theory, which is also implemented in practice via collaboration with teaching staff during lectures and internships. Stakeholder feedback is collected to systematically renew the curriculum. A variety of teaching and learning methods are used to implement the content, and the implementation is based on a mechanism for mutual collaboration between the teaching staff members in place. The MSJ teaching staff is involved in relevant research and professional organizations. All of the cooperation, whether with academic, governmental, or professional institutions are based on strong academic and scientific background. The research is implemented on the bases of mutual local and international collaboration.

STRENGTHS:
1. Directions of scientific research in the programme are compliant with the strategy and goals of ViA are carried out in mutual collaboration.
2. Students praised the interrelation between theory and practice, the quality and validity of

internships, and a personalized and practical approach to writing the final thesis which reflects the input and the quality of work by the teaching staff.

3. Teaching staff actively participates in the scientific research proposals and mutually carry out research projects and mobility programmes.

4. Strong cooperation with several academic and research-based institutions is in place and fosters collaboration among the teaching staff and also institutions.

5. The quality of the research is sufficient and up-to-date with the development both in the academic and professional fields.

WEAKNESSES:

1. Significant overlap between the study courses and academic staff in the study field and especially between the MSJ and CPR programmes.

2. Some of the academic staff members carry a disproportionately high workload. Also for some members of academic staff, the specific or general workload has increased in recent years.

5. Assessment of the Compliance of the Study Programme "Media Studies and Journalism"

Requirements

1 1. The sample of the diploma to be issued for the acquisition of the study programme complies with the procedure by which state-recognised documents of higher education are issued.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
   Justification: Annex 29P to SAR
   The sample of the diploma provided by ViA in Annex 29P to SAR complies with the Cabinet Regulation No. 202 of 16 April 2013 "Procedures for issuing State Recognized Higher Education Documents".

2 2. Documents confirming that the higher education institution/ college will provide the students with the options to continue the acquisition of education in another study programme or at another higher education institution/ college (a contract with another accredited higher education institution/ college), in case the implementation of the study programme is discontinued.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
   Justification: Annex LiepU-Via_sadarbiba_par_studiju_turpinasanu-MSZ-KSA-2011APR to SAR confirms that in case of termination of the study programme (in accordance with the Cabinet Regulation No. 795 of 11 December 2018 "Regulations on Licensing Study Programs") opportunities to continue education in another HEI will be provided. For the professional bachelor study programme MSJ" in case of termination the HEI provides possibility to continue their studies at Liepaja University study programme "Communication Management" (study fields "Public Relations", "Journalism" and "Cross-Cultural Communication").

3 3. Document confirming that the higher education institution/ college guarantees to the students a compensation for losses if the study programme is not accredited or the licence of the study programme is revoked due to the actions of the higher education institution/ college (actions or failure to act) and the student does not wish to continue the studies in another study programme.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
   Justification: Annex 28P to SAR. Section 2.8. of study agreement confirms:
   2.8 - "To guarantee compensation for losses to the Student for the credit points not obtained (for which it is not possible to issue an academic statement, if the credits are not obtained due to a fault of ViA."

4 4. 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

Justification: Documents provided in Annex 14P -CV-IKZ--precise jumi-2020dec and CVs of the teaching staff added to SAR indicates the proficiency of the official language on sufficient level.

5 5. 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.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

6 6. 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.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

7 7. 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 Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

8 8. The sample of the study agreement complies with the mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annex 28P_Study-agreement-sample -MSJ to SAR complies with requirements of Cabinet Regulation No. 70 of 23 January 2007 "Mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement".

9 9. 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 56.1, Paragraph two and Section 56.2, Paragraph two of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Course descriptions have been added as Annex 27P-MSJ_kursa apraksti_precizejums-15122020 to SAR.
The course descriptions are prepared in Latvian and English and they meet most of the requirements except that in some of the courses the study course mandatory literature is in English which is seen as reasonable because the HEI evaluates the language level of the students before admitting them.

10 10. The study programme complies with the valid professional standard or the requirements for the professional qualification (if there is no professional standard required for the relevant occupation) provided that the completion of the study programme leads to a professional qualification.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annex 25P-MSJ_compliance with a prof standard_edited-EN to SAR and information provided in SAR confirms that study programme complies with Journalism professional standard of 2020 link: https://registri.visc.gov.lv/profizglitiba/dokumenti/standarti/2017/PS-132.pdf.

11 11. 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 Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant

Justification:

12 12. The study programme complies with the State Academic Education Standard or the Professional Higher Education Standard.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Compliance of study programme MSJ with the National Educational Standard provided to experts in Annex 24P-MSJ_compliance with a standard_15122020 to SAR is analysed and confirmed.

13 13. The joint study programmes comply with the requirements prescribed in Section 551, Paragraphs one, two, and seven of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education (if applicable).
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

14 14. Each member of the academic staff has either publications published in reviewed editions within the last six years, including international editions (if they have worked for a shorter period of time, the number of publications shall be in proportion to the work period), or artistic creation achievements (for instance, exhibitions, films, theatre performances, and concert activity), or a five-year practical work experience (except for the experience in the implementation of the study programme) in accordance with the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Publications of academic staff has been listed in Annexes - 17P-IICS-list of publications-edited-16122020 and 14P-CV-IKZ-precizejumi-2020dec to SAR.

15 P5 - Overall rating
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: All of the requirements have been met. In some of the courses the study course mandatory literature is in English while the study programme is being implemented in Latvian which is seen as reasonable as the HEI tests the English language level before admitting them to the HEI and some of the most important study materials are only available in English.

Requirements (R6-R8)

1 R6 - The compliance of the study provision, scientific support (if applicable), informative provision (including libraries), material and technical provision, and financial provision with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and ensuring the achievement of the learning outcomes.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: The programme has the necessary resource base, the students and the teaching staff have access to the necessary resources to ensure the quality of teaching and learning process.
Students have been provided with a new, technically advanced broadcasting studio, well - made sound recording room and all the necessary equipment for the study purposes.

2 R7 - The compliance of the qualification of the academic staff members, visiting professors, visiting associate professors, visiting docents, visiting lecturers, and visiting assistants with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and the provisions set out in the respective regulatory enactments.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Annexes 14P-CV-IKZ-precise jimi-2020dec to SAR confirms the compliance of the qualification of the academic staff members with requirements set out in regulatory enactments.

3 R8 - The study programme leading to the master or doctoral degree is based on the advances and findings in the relevant field of science or artistic creation.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

The related requirements for the study programme have been fully met.

STRENGTHS:
1. The practical skills are acquired and developed during the internships.
2. The support for writing the final thesis and the development of the scientific skills is ensured.
3. The programme offers the interdisciplinary approach.
4. Great variety of learning and teaching methods are applied, necessary infrastructure is used to apply theory in practice.
5. Feedback is appropriately collected from the necessary target groups and necessary changes are implemented.
6. Student-centered approach is used in the learning and teaching processes.
7. ViA has an excellent multimedia laboratory and TV studio, with adequate IT programme provision.
8. ViA has established partnership with analytical journalism centre Re:Baltica, which ensures access to data analytics tools, as well as insight in modern analytical journalistics.
9. Directions of scientific research in the programme are compliant with the strategy and goals of ViA are carried out in mutual collaboration.
10. Students praised the interrelation between theory and practice, the quality and validity of internships, and a personalized and practical approach to writing the final thesis which reflects the input and the quality of work by the teaching staff.
11. Teaching staff actively participates in the scientific research proposals and mutually carry out research projects and mobility programmes.
12. Strong cooperation with several academic and research-based institutions is in place and fosters collaboration among the teaching staff and also institutions.
13. The quality of the research is sufficient and up-to-date with the development both in the academic and professional fields.

WEAKNESSES:
1. Quite a significant part of the programme overlaps with the bachelor's programme "Communication and Public Relations" (study courses, academic staff). This once again refers back to the question of consolidation.
2. Subject repetition is noticed between bachelor and master's programmes. This should be clarified.
3. The evaluation methods and criteria listed in the course descriptions are too general, too broad, while the criteria are unclear.
4. Mobility is a weakness, but this is true to various HEIs. Hopefully the European University alliance will help to resolve this matter.
5. Some of the academic staff members carry a disproportionately high workload. Also for some members of academic staff, the specific or general workload has increased in recent years.

Evaluation of the study programme "Media Studies and Journalism"

Evaluation of the study programme:

Good

6. Recommendations for the Study Programme "Media Studies and Journalism"

Short-term recommendations

1. Include courses related to visual communication, more courses emphasizing speech training, data skills, fact checking, courses about digitalization, artificial intelligence.
2. Consider making the evaluation methods more specific, as well as the assessment criteria more concrete in the descriptions of the study courses.
3. Propose a very concrete and relevant didactical method(-s).

Long-term recommendations

1. Attenuate the significant overlap between the study courses in the study field between the MSJ and CPR programmes.
2. Utilize the participation in the European University more to empower mobility.
3. Strengthen the graduate network to receive more feedback on the MSJ programme.
4. Even the workload for some of the academic staff members who carry a disproportionately high academic, scientific and administrative workload.
5. Proactively plan academic information base development; if necessary, partner with other ICS programmes in the planning process.

II. "Media and Information Literacy" ASSESSMENT

II. "Media and Information Literacy" ASSESSMENT

1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme

Analysis

The academic master's study programme "Media and Information Literacy" (classification code 45321) is a full-time programme. In SAR the name of the degree was Master's Degree of Social Sciences in Communications Sciences. However during the onsite visit, the agreement between the Experts and the management of the study field was made and the change to Master's Degree of Social Sciences in Journalism and Communication was affirmed to comply with the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No 322 "Regulations on the education classification of Latvia" (June 16, 2017). The programme is full-time for 18 months or two years, depending on the student's previous education. The programme is also offered for both time periods in either Latvian or English. The purpose of the study programme is "to provide internationally competitive education in communication science with an emphasis on media and information literacy in the digital environment, as well as to train highly educated professionals for the work in a variety of fields related to media content production and distribution, analysis, and media education promotion" (SAR, p. 88).

The study programme complies with the State standard for academic education and its content is developed to provide a set of knowledge, skills and competences at Level 7 as specified in the Framework of the Classification of the Latvian Education. The study programme's content has been developed to provide students with in-depth theoretical knowledge and research skills to develop a successful professional career, as well as to pursue doctoral studies.

The study programme "Media and Information Literacy" is included in the ICS study field, which is appropriate. As stated in the SAR and supported by the appendices provided, the study programme "Media and Information Literacy" has clearly stated objectives.

During the process of preparation of the study programme, a description of the study programme

was developed, and the analysis of the interconnection between the study programme objectives and the planned outcomes was made to ensure mutual coherence of objectives and outcomes which is further used for the mapping of the study courses. In the future, after the implementation of the first cycle of the study programme, it may be necessary to return to the issue of interconnection by analyzing student feedback on courses and meeting with students at the end of each semester. Further validation of courses will be achieved by discussing the study programme content in the ICS study field council and in the professional advisory council established in the study field, as well as by individual discussions with lecturers.

Admission requirements for applicants are laid down in the ViA Admission Regulations for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Study Programmes, which, in accordance with the Law on Higher Education Institutions, are approved by November 1 of the current year and published on the ViA website. Admission requirements to this programme are a professional Bachelor's degree or equivalent higher education (60 CP programme) or an academic Bachelor's degree or equivalent higher education (80 CP programme). This flexibility provides opportunities for a wide range of students to apply for studies. A mandatory requirement for admission is a thesis application (there is a specific form for this purpose) and an interview with each applicant, which provides for a possibility to understand research interests, experience and expectations of potential students regarding the study process and its outcomes. Each applicant is required to submit educational documents, CV, Master's thesis topic application, and a document confirming English language proficiency to at least Level B2, unless previous education was acquired in English.

During the visit by the expert panel, evidence was provided that supported the statements in the SAR that the components of the MIL study programme are interrelated and compliant with HEI regulations and national laws.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

Based on the evidence provided in the SAR and presented during the visit of the expert panel, the name of the study programme, the degree to be acquired, the aims, objectives, learning outcomes, and admission requirements are interrelated.

The study programme is included in the ICS study field which is appropriate. Admission requirements are clear and in compliance with HEI regulations and national laws.

The academic master's study programme complies with the State standard for academic education at Level 7.

No weaknesses have been identified.

2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof

Analysis

2.1. According to SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.1., the MIL programme is developed thoroughly together with the external stakeholders - the industry professionals (e.g., the Ministry of Culture) who have their own input on the quality of the study courses' content. It is stated that the objectives are to strengthen the students' critical thinking, information analysis and argumentation skills. The question remains that perhaps these objectives are more relevant for the undergraduate and not for the graduate level. In addition to these objectives, it mentioned that the programme seeks to "to popularize media literacy and multiply the knowledge acquired during the studies in society, thus contributing to resistance of different community groups against the implementation of political and commercial interests in the media environment." It is emphasized that the MIL programme benchmarks other relevant programmes in Denmark and the UK, as well as follows

relevant content provided by such organizations as UNESCO, EAVI, European Commission. In addition, some scientific publications (perhaps newer publications could be used) are analyzed while developing the programme. Moreover, the content was updated during the summer schools in 2017 and 2018 while working together with the with Riga Stradiņš University and the lecturers and students of the University of Minnesota (USA). The study courses were planned on the formulated 15 criteria for the study programme content. Study outcomes are also formulated based on these criteria. A thorough work is done in updating the programme - the content of the courses, their results. After the 1st study year, student feedback was collected and based on the licensing experts suggestions, some courses were combined and adjusted. Based on the urgency of the topics, the following courses were included: "Civil Society and Participation" and "Smart Technologies and Data Security". Course outcomes are mapped to the goals and objectives of the MIL study programme (Annex 37 to SAR). Depending on the previous education the internship length in the programme is either 2 or 22 weeks. The goal of the internship is linked to the Master's thesis, specifically to the chosen topic of the Master's thesis. The international students have a possibility to perform their internship either via the Erasmus+ programme or by using the help of the organizations which have international partners. The internship follows all of the necessary documents and it seems very much sufficient to work on the final thesis goals during the internship and have a more case based approach. According to SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.5. in spring of 2020, the first master's theses were defended in the study programme. The theses topics reflect the trends in the media environment.

Overall, the content of the study courses is sufficient. Similar observation as is already made for the bachelor's study programmes can be made here - perhaps more specific evaluation methods and especially the criteria could be provided in the courses. In some courses literature certainly could be newer. As has already been mentioned, based on the examples of similar programmes, as well as based on the goals of different study levels, it seems that the subject "Communication Theories" is more relevant for the Bachelor's and not the Master's studies. Still the questions remain in regards to some subjects which seem to repeat in the bachelor's and in the master's programmes (e.g., "Argumentation Theory and Critical Thinking). This certainly needs to be reviewed, especially because these subjects seem to be more relevant for the Bachelor's studies. A sufficient part of the programme is devoted for the research and development of the master's thesis. The programme offers both the quantitative and the qualitative research methods, support through other relevant subjects is given to the students to ensure the quality of the final thesis. It is very good that the international students are provided with the opportunity to study the Latvian language. One of the recommendations to be included in the programme curriculum is the subject related to the management of fake news. As was heard from the students during the meeting with them - they are happy about the collaboration with the "Cyber-security Engineering" programme and that they get the opportunity to study some relevant subjects related to data protection and similar. As seen in the study programme curriculum, quite a few subjects overlap between the MIL and the SCG study programmes (Social Cognition and Behavior; Argumentation Theory and Critical Thinking; Smart Technologies and Data Security; Civic Society and Participation; Communication Theory). This raises a question whether the programme is able to display its uniqueness, profile, and main focus. Thus, the students of both programmes study together. Meanwhile, in the separate subjects, quite small groups of students participate. Considering the potential drop-out, it is of high importance to market both programmes in a way to attract more students. The decreasing enrollment numbers give a signal that either some changes in the programme must be made or significant resources should be put into the marketing.

2.2. It seems that very similar (if not the same) assessment approaches are used for both - bachelor's and master's programmes. What is provided in SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.3., repeats the information. Thus, it might be difficult to single out the assessment peculiarities in the

MIL programme. While the mentioned assessment methods in the SAR as well as in the course descriptions (e.g., independent and research papers and their discussion with the authors; annual projects, peer review and public defence; consultations; cumulative assessment system) as well as the teaching methods are traditional and sufficient, the study programme director, might want to discuss it with the lecturers, students, social partners and emphasize a somewhat more concrete learning and teaching methods, more appropriate for the MIL programme and underlying its core profile. Once again, the evaluation methods and especially the criteria in the course descriptions could be more specific. Moreover, with such small student numbers, certainly the student-centered learning and teaching approach is ensured.

2.3. According to SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.6., since the number of students in the programme is relatively small (in 2020 four students were admitted, in total - 16 students), formal surveys are not conducted and the study programme director meets to discuss relevant matters with students in the focus groups. This approach may certainly have advantages and disadvantages. A close relationship may be built with students, clearer content may be discussed, additional questions may be answered. On the other hand it is not always that students feel comfortable sharing all information and sometimes they wish to remain anonymous. If formal surveys are not used, perhaps some sort of study quality assurance general e-mail or e-form could be used to provide the students with an opportunity to fill in anonymous feedback. As is written in SAR, necessary content updates are conducted based on the feedback collected from the students (e.g., several courses with similar content have been merged, for example, courses "Media theories" and "Media effects" are combined in the course "Communication theory", as well as courses "Introduction to propaganda and influential communication" and "Influential messaging workshop" are combined in the course "Influential communication", other changes related to edits of internship and the final thesis). Moreover, the first graduates are fully engaged in providing feedback regarding the satisfaction with studies after graduation, by providing recommendations on necessary corrections. One of the graduates even became a teacher. The SAR calls the program "Media and Digital Literacy". Considering ViA's strategy to strengthen the digitalization part, this might be a good idea to rename the programme from the Media and Information Literacy to Media and Digital Literacy. The SAR explains very nicely how the programme students and graduates can fulfill themselves from the entrepreneurial and innovative sides and create business, thus adding onto the development of the region. The majority of students already work during the studies, thus the employability factor is already high. During the meeting with the MIL graduates it was discovered that all of them are very happy with studies and would recommend this study programme to the other people.

2.4. According to SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.7., based on the fact that most of the students are full-time workers, no mobility has taken place yet and most probably the mobility factor will remain low for this programme. Despite this fact, ViA organizes the so called internationalization at home events to substitute for the absence of physical mobility. In addition, international faculty teach in the programme. Moreover, students also have the opportunity to participate in ViA Baltic International Summer School (BISS). Perhaps the attempt to attract more international students, the virtual mobility opportunities, and internationalization of curriculum might be the areas to replace physical mobility.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

A strong student-centered approach is observed in the programme due to small student numbers. This helps to create more personal relationships, to have clearer communication and implement faster necessary changes. As it relates to programme curriculum, a strong emphasis is put on the

research side and preparation of the final thesis, also through the internships implementation as well. Students and graduates provide timely feedback and the study programme director implements content editions based on it. Moreover, it is good that significance is given to digitalization, to entrepreneurship and innovations. Also, ICS field understands that the master's student body is a working community, thus physical mobility is hard to accomplish. Thus, an alternative is provided - the internationalization at home. Perhaps virtual mobility, more international faculty and students, as well as internationalization of curriculum should also be considered. As it relates to the main weaknesses, the curriculum should be reviewed having two goals in mind: 1) how to make a clear separation and continuation from the bachelor's level (no repeating subjects, no subjects which are more fit for the undergraduate level); 2) how to make a clear emphasis on the programme's core profile, selling points, scope and focus. Since the two MA programmes have overlapping subjects, as well as are interrelated with the Cyber-security engineering study programme, the MIL programme is at risk of losing its identity. The decreasing enrolment is a serious signal that content, learning and teaching methods and assessment, have to be very clear and unique.

The programme is yet quite new, but it already experiences some crucial signals with the significantly decreasing enrolment. Serious decisions must be made related to the necessary programme changes in order to attract more students or significant resources should be put into marketing. Otherwise the high overlap of the subjects between the MIL and SCG programmes as well as mutual subjects with the Cyber-security Engineering programme raise more questions - the Master's programme should traditionally be narrow and specialized. If subjects overlap, the programme loses its profile, identity, scope and focus. The overlap might be understood at the bachelor's level with the general subjects, but not at the Masters. Thus, the MIL programme's uniqueness should be emphasized more.

STRENGTHS:
1. Strong emphasis on aiding the students to write the final thesis of high quality. Internship related to the Master's thesis.
2. Very much student-centered approach is used in the study programme.
3. The strong emphasis put on entrepreneurship and innovation could be an important line to single out this or the other ICS programmes, as providing the students with opportunities for own businesses, start-ups, other relevant innovations.
4. Despite the fact that physical mobility does not take place in this programme due to the majority of students working full-time, ViA organizes the so called internationalization at home alternative.

WEAKNESSES:
1. The content of the programme should be reviewed and benchmarked to the other study programmes as role models, to avoid subjects geared towards the undergraduate level.
2. Not enough emphasis is put on the content related to dealing with fake news.
3. Overlap of the subjects between the MIL and SCG programmes as well as mutual subjects with the Cyber-security Engineering programme force the programme to lose its profile, identity, scope and focus.
4. General approach to learning and teaching methods as well as assessment methods, adequate for both bachelor's and master's programmes.
5. Since feedback is collected during focus groups, some discrete information might not be shared.

3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme

Analysis

The HEI doesn't split the ICS field funding and most of the resources, such as equipment, library

resources, databases, administrative costs (SAR, Part II, Section 3; information from Experts' visit. There is also no specific methodological base for each programme. Please, visit the "Resources and Provision of the Study Field" part of this document for more information on the availability of the resources.

Most of the programme's study course literature is in English (information provided during the Experts' visit), however, in some cases, the literature is in Latvian, which can create challenges for the foreign students.

As for the methodological base, part of the information in the Moodle platform is available in Latvian only, which can create challenges for the foreign students (Experts' visit, feedback from students).

ViA has a partnership agreement with analytical journalism centre Re:Baltica, which allows, among other opportunities, access for the students to big data and AI analytics tools, thus strengthening the programme's link to professional journalistic entities and readiness of the programme to offer data journalism skills for the students (Experts' visit, management meeting and Employers' meeting).

According to "ViA Study Programmes' Consolidation and Development Plan" information, the MIL programme focuses on innovative learning methods (e.g., simulations, strategic games and other).

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

The resource provision is applied to the ICS study field rather than specific study programmes, there are only minor specifics related to the resource base of the field's study programmes.

The overall study provision, informative provision (including libraries), material and technical provision, and financial provision comply with the specific features and the conditions for the implementation of the study programme, create the prerequisites for the achievement of the learning outcomes, and indicate the possibility to ensure a high-quality study process also in the future.

STRENGTHS:
1. ViA has an excellent multimedia laboratory and TV studio, with adequate IT programme provision.
2. Partnership with analytical journalism centre Re:Baltica ensures access to data analytics tools, as well as insight in modern analytical journalistics.
3. Innovative learning methods and efforts to ensure access to big data and AI tools through partnerships are used.

WEAKNESSES:
1. Information at ViA online environment is not always available in English, thus creating potential challenges for foreign students.
2. Part of the academic literature is available in Latvian only, thus creating potential challenges for foreign students.

4. Teaching Staff

Analysis

4.1. The concept of the newly established MIL programme targets the relevant groups and is in compliance with governmental and non-governmental as well as international, national, and regional partners. The MIL programme aids the general wellbeing, and development of the country and society, etc. The unveiling of the MIL programme comes with strong cooperation, reacts to contemporary needs, and is based on up-to-date research and improvements.

The MIL is oriented towards the improvement of the quality of research which allows cooperation with domestic as well as foreign institutions and attracts foreign students. During the Experts' visit,

it became clear that the relevant feedback is collected, and the necessary changes made. As notified, there still is a significant overlap between the study courses in the study field.

Not only is there a number of common courses between both undergraduate programmes in the study field, but some of those courses are also repetitive in the graduate programmes. The courses such as "Social Cognition and Behavior", "Argumentation Theory and Critical Thinking", as well as "Civic Society and Participation" has a similar counterpart at the undergraduate level of the study field.

Overall, ViA undertakes measures in a target-oriented manner to avoid negative effects on the quality of the implementation of the study programme and the compliance of the study programme with the requirements set forth in the regulatory enactments, as a result of the changes in the composition of the teaching staff.

4.2. The teaching staff members are engaged in the specific programme-related scientific research and carry out a number of research projects and mobility programmes. There is strong cooperation in place with several academic and research-based institutions, some of them are among the leaders in the respective fields in Latvia.

As this is more comprehensible to the professional undergraduate programmes which include a variety of lecturers with a professional qualification, the number of elected lecturers in the graduate programmes should be greater. Typically, the solution to the problem lies in splitting responsibilities among tutors, especially the senior and junior academic staff members, and involving more of the elected teaching staff members. According to Annex 13 to SAR, there are several associated professors among teaching staff of this programme (e.g. A. Dāvidsone, J. Buholcs, V. Silkāne, G. Krūmiņš), but there is no professor level academic involved in the teaching staff and in the implementation of the MIL graduate programme.

During the Experts' visit, it came clear the weaknesses and threats in the programme are identified for action, including increased workload for some members of the staff, rather small number of elected lecturers in the ICS study field; insufficient funds to foster professional development and recruit the staff, and difficulties in attracting guest lecturers from abroad.

4.3. Not applicable

4.4. Domestic and international cooperation has been a significant part of ViA's policy and one of the priorities since the establishment of the institution. During recent years active cooperation in the MIL programme has been carried out with the relevant partners like Baltic Media Centre of Excellence, the Ministry of Culture, and other organizations and experts of the respective field in Latvia. The academic staff is involved in scientific research and/or artistic creation both at the national and international level.

The knowledge and skills acquired during the collaboration are used in the development of the programme and to improve both the research directions and the study programmes. Study programme development and study quality improvement are at the forefront of the policy. The national and international cooperation result in jointly organized research, guest study courses, lectures and seminars by the members of partnering institutions, student, lecturer, and experience exchange programmes and quality assessment from the partnering institutions.

4.5. The MIL programme indicates a strong emphasis on the research and preparation of the final thesis as well as a strong and vivid collaboration between the members of the faculty. There clearly is a mutual and international collaboration in place, most deliberately in carrying out the research projects. ViA is oriented towards success and efficiency in attracting project-based funding. The MIL programme is engaged in cooperation, there is a mechanism for mutual collaboration between the teaching staff members in place, which contributes to the improvement of the study courses/

modules and their correlation.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

The MIL programme is funded in a strong research and theoretical background which is also implemented via collaborations and internships. The preparation of the final thesis seems to be backed by the systematic approach to the programme and strong involvement of the academics which also indicates the quality and mutual collaboration of the teaching staff. A variety of teaching and learning methods are used to implement the content. More detailed evaluation methods and specific assessment criteria could be used for the course descriptions. Relevant stakeholder feedback is collected to systematically renew the curriculum. The content of the programme has been updated according to the trends in the field. The MIL programme is developed thoroughly together with the external stakeholders - academics and industry professionals with strong input on the quality of the programme. Changes and improvements in the MIL programme have been made on a regular basis and react to the information gathered from relevant stakeholders and are carried out in a strong collaboration. The content of the programme is derived from a strong scientific engagement which is founded on enriching mutual as well as governmental, international, regional, academic and professional collaboration meets the urgent topic of strategic communication and is up-to-date.

STRENGTHS:
1. The MIL programme targets the relevant groups and is in compliance with governmental and non-governmental, as well as international, national, and regional partners.
2. There is strong cooperation in place with several academic and research-based institutions, some of them are among the leaders in the respective fields in Latvia. Academic and professional collaboration meets the urgent topic of media and information literacy and is up-to-date.
3. The MIL programme reacts to contemporary needs, and is based on up-to-date research. The teaching staff members are engaged in the specific programme-related scientific research and carry out a number of research projects.

WEAKNESSES:
1. Some of those courses in the graduate programmes are repetitive from the ones in undergraduate programmes in the study field which represents the shortages among the members of teaching staff.
2. The number of elected lecturers in the ICS study field is rather small.
3. There is no professor level academic involved in the teaching staff and in the implementation of the MIL graduate programme.

5. Assessment of the Compliance of the Study Programme "Media and Information Literacy"

Requirements

1   1. The sample of the diploma to be issued for the acquisition of the study programme complies with the procedure by which state-recognised documents of higher education are issued.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: 42P-Sample-of-diploma-MIL.zip
The sample of the diploma provided by ViA in Annex 42P to SAR complies with the Cabinet Regulation No. 202 of 16 April 2013 "Procedures for issuing State Recognized Higher Education Documents.

2 2. Documents confirming that the higher education institution/ college will provide the students with the options to continue the acquisition of education in another study programme or at another higher education institution/ college (a contract with another accredited higher education institution/ college), in case the implementation of the study programme is discontinued.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: RSU_MIL-ViA-Coorperation-agreement-WORKING-TRANSLATION.doc to SAR confirms that in case of termination of the study programme (in accordance with the Cabinet Regulation No. 795 of 11 December 2018 "Regulations on Licensing Study Programs") opportunities to continue education in another HEI will be provided.

ViA ensures continuation of studies for their students in the Master's study programme "Communication and Media Studies" at RSU in case ViA study programme "Media and Information Literacy" is discontinued.

3 3. Document confirming that the higher education institution/ college guarantees to the students a compensation for losses if the study programme is not accredited or the licence of the study programme is revoked due to the actions of the higher education institution/ college (actions or failure to act) and the student does not wish to continue the studies in another study programme.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Annex to SAR 41P-Study-agreement-sample-MIL.docx
Section 2.8. of study agreement confirms - "To guarantee compensation for losses to the Student for the credit points not obtained (for which it is not possible to issue an academic statement, if the credits are not obtained due to a fault of ViA."

4 4. 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
Justification: 14P-CV-IKZ-precizejumi-2020dec.zip

This annex to SAR provides the proficiency of the teaching staff in the official language.

5 5. 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.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: The study programme is also being implemented in English.

14P-CV-IKZ-precizejumi-2020dec.zip
This annex to SAR provides the proficiency of the teaching staff in English language.

6 6. 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.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

7 7. 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 Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Annex to SAR Apliecinajums-MIP-SKP-AL.55.pants-Latvian-only.zip confirms compliance with the requirements.

8 8. The sample of the study agreement complies with the mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Annex to SAR 41P-Study-agreement-sample-MIL.docx confirms compliance with the requirements.

9 9. 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 56.1, Paragraph two and Section 56.2, Paragraph two of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: The course descriptions provided at Annex to SAR 40P-MIL_course descriptions_2019.zip are prepared in Latvian and English and comply with the requirements.

10 10. The study programme complies with the valid professional standard or the requirements for the professional qualification (if there is no professional standard required for the relevant occupation) provided that the completion of the study programme leads to a professional qualification.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

11 11. 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 Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Annex to SAR AIP atzinums_MIP.pdf confirms compliance with the requirements.

12 12. The study programme complies with the State Academic Education Standard or the Professional Higher Education Standard.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Compliance with Academic Education Standard.
38P-MIL_compliance with the ctandard-edited-EN.docx
During the onsite visit, the agreement between the Experts and the management of the study field was made and the change to Master's Degree of Social Sciences in Journalism and Communication was affirmed to comply with the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No 322 "Regulations on the education classification of Latvia" (June 16, 2017).

13 13. The joint study programmes comply with the requirements prescribed in Section 551, Paragraphs one, two, and seven of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education (if applicable).
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant
Justification:

14 14. Each member of the academic staff has either publications published in reviewed editions within the last six years, including international editions (if they have worked for a shorter period of time, the number of publications shall be in proportion to the work period), or artistic creation achievements (for instance, exhibitions, films, theatre performances, and concert activity), or a five-year practical work experience (except for the experience in the implementation of the study programme) in accordance with the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Publications of academic staff have been listed in Annexes to SAR - 17P-IICS-list of publications-edited-16122020 and 14P-CV-IKZ-precizejumi-2020dec.

15 P5 - Overall rating
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Annexes to SAR confirm that requirements have been met.

Requirements (R6-R8)

1. R6 - The compliance of the study provision, scientific support (if applicable), informative provision (including libraries), material and technical provision, and financial provision with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and ensuring the achievement of the learning outcomes.
   Assessment of compliance: Partially compliant
   Justification: The programme has the necessary resource base, the students and the teaching staff have access to the necessary resources to ensure the quality of teaching and learning process.
   Students have been provided with a new, technically advanced broadcasting studio, well - made sound recording room and all the necessary equipment for the study purposes.
   It is advised to reassess if the information resources and methodological base is available in English at an adequate level to ensure a quality study process for foreign students.

2. R7 - The compliance of the qualification of the academic staff members, visiting professors, visiting associate professors, visiting docents, visiting lecturers, and visiting assistants with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and the provisions set out in the respective regulatory enactments.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
   Justification: Annex to SAR 14P-CV-IKZ-precizejumi-2020dec confirms compliance with the requirements.

3. R8 - The study programme leading to the master or doctoral degree is based on the advances and findings in the relevant field of science or artistic creation.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
   Justification: Research seems to be a part of the study process with the increase of student research skills.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

The related requirements for the study programme have been fully or partially met.

STRENGTHS:
1. Strong emphasis on aiding the students to write the final thesis of high quality. Internship related to the Master's thesis.
2. Very much student-centered approach is used in the study programme.
3. The strong emphasis put on entrepreneurship and innovation could be an important line to single out this or the other ICS programmes, as providing the students with opportunities for own businesses, start-ups, other relevant innovations.
4. Despite the fact that physical mobility does not take place in this programme due to the majority of students working full-time, ViA organizes the so called internationalization at home alternative.
5. Excellent multimedia laboratory and TV studio, with adequate IT programme provision.
6. Partnership with analytical journalism centre Re:Baltica ensures access to data analytics tools, as well as insight in modern analytical journalistics.
7. Innovative learning methods and efforts to ensure access to big data and AI tools through partnerships ensures access to data analytics tools, as well as insight in modern analytical journalistics.
8. The MIL programme targets the relevant groups and is in compliance with governmental and non-governmental, as well as international, national, and regional partners.
9. There is strong cooperation in place with several academic and research-based institutions, some of them are among the leaders in the respective fields in Latvia. Academic and professional collaboration meets the urgent topic of media and information literacy and is up-to-date.

10. The MIL program reacts to contemporary needs, and is based on up-to-date research. The teaching staff members are engaged in the specific programme-related scientific research and carry out a number of research projects.

WEAKNESSES:
1. Information at ViA online environment is not always available in English, thus creating potential challenges for foreign students.
2. Part of the academic literature is available in Latvian only, thus creating potential challenges for foreign students.
3. The content of the programme should be reviewed and benchmarked to the other study programmes as role models, to avoid subjects geared towards the undergraduate level.
4. Not enough emphasis is put on the content related to dealing with fake news.
5. Overlap of the subjects between the MIL and SCG programmes as well as mutual subjects with the Cyber-security Engineering programme force the programme to lose its profile, identity, scope and focus.
6. General approach to learning and teaching methods as well as assessment methods, adequate for both bachelor's and master's programmes.
7. Since feedback is collected during focus groups, some discrete information might not be shared.
8. Some of those courses in the graduate programmes are repetitive from the ones in undergraduate programmes in the study field which represents the shortages among the members of teaching staff.
9. The number of elected lecturers in the ICS study field is rather small.
10. There is no professor level academic involved in the teaching staff and in the implementation of the MIL graduate programme.

Evaluation of the study programme "Media and Information Literacy"

Evaluation of the study programme:

Good

6. Recommendations for the Study Programme "Media and Information Literacy"

Short-term recommendations

1. Benchmark the content of the study programme following the programme role models by gearing the subjects towards the graduate level more.
2. Include more in-depth content related to fake news.
3. Study methods, assessment methods and assessment criteria should be more specific in the course descriptions.
4. Implement the formal surveys in addition to the focus groups used to collect feedback from students.

Long-term recommendations

1. The more traditional approach of the narrow and specialized master's programme should be followed to emphasize the programme's uniqueness, identity, scope and focus, and to avoid any type of repetitions with the other programmes.

2. Current marketing efforts (positioning, marketing goals and strategy) should be more clearly formulated and improved to raise the programme's profile across all potential target audiences and markets.
3. Proactively plan academic information base development; if necessary, partner with other ICS programmes in the planning process.
4. The professor level academic should be involved in the teaching staff and in the implementation of the MIL graduate programme.
5. Exclude the overlapping courses with the graduate programmes in the study field.

II. "Strategic Communication and Governance" ASSESSMENT

II. "Strategic Communication and Governance" ASSESSMENT

1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme

Analysis

The academic master's study programme "Strategic Communication and Governance" (classification code 45321) is a full-time programme. In SAR the name of the degree was Master's Degree of Social Sciences in Communications Sciences. However during the onsite visit, the agreement between the Experts and the management of the study field was made and the change to Master's Degree of Social Sciences in Journalism and Communication was affirmed to comply with the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No 322 "Regulations on the education classification of Latvia" (June 16, 2017).

The programme is full-time for two years and is offered in either Latvian or English. The purpose of the study programme is "to provide internationally competitive education in communication science, as well as to prepare highly educated communication professionals for the work in public, non-governmental and private sectors" (SAR, p. 127).

The study programme complies with the State standard for academic education and its content is developed to provide a set of knowledge, skills and competences at Level 7 as specified in the Framework of the Classification of the Latvian Education. The study programme's content has been developed to provide students with in-depth theoretical knowledge and research skills to develop a successful professional career, as well as to pursue doctoral studies.

The study programme "Strategic Communication and Governance" is included in the ICS study field, which is appropriate. As stated in the SAR and supported by the appendices provided, the study programme has clearly stated objectives.

During the process of preparation of the study programme, a description of the study programme was developed and an analysis made of the interconnection between the study programme objectives and the planned outcomes to ensure mutual coherence of objectives and outcomes which was also used for mapping the study courses. Relevance and coherence between the study programme outcomes and the results of specific study courses in the process of developing the study programme content were assessed several times with the director of the study field, individual lecturers, and the study field council. This process secured a high degree of interconnection between the study programme outcomes and the results of specific study courses. Following the implementation of the first cycle of the study programme, it will be necessary to return to the issue of interconnection by analysing student feedback on courses, meeting students at the end of each semester, by discussing the study programme content in the ICS study field council and in the professional advisory council established in the study field, as well as by individual discussions with lecturers.

Admission requirements for applicants are laid down in the ViA Admission Regulations for

Undergraduate and Postgraduate Study Programmes, which, in accordance with the Law on Higher Education Institutions, are approved by November 1 of the current year and published on the ViA website.

Admission requirements to this programme are a professional or academic Bachelor's degree or equivalent higher education in social sciences or humanities. This flexibility provides opportunities for a wide range of students to apply for studies. A mandatory requirement for admission is a thesis application (there is a specific form for this purpose) and an interview with each applicant, which provides for a possibility to understand research interests, experience and expectations of potential students regarding the study process and its outcomes.

During the visit by the expert panel, evidence was provided that supported the statements in the SAR that the components of the SCG study programme are interrelated and compliant with HEI regulations and national laws.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

Based on the evidence provided in the SAR and presented during the visit of the expert panel, the name of the study programme, the degree to be acquired, the aims, objectives, learning outcomes, and admission requirements are interrelated.

The study programme is included in the ICS study field which is appropriate. Admission requirements are clear and in compliance with HEI regulations and national laws.

STRENGTHS:
The academic master's study programme "Strategic Communication and Governance" complies with the State standard for academic education to Level 7.

WEAKNESSES:
Not identified.

2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof

Analysis

2.1. The SCG study programme is yet very new with only the first enrolled student group studying in it. Thus, it may be hard to make final assessments on its quality and effectiveness. The content of the programme was approved when it was licenced. Its transitioning from the Strategic Communication and Management from the Sociology, political science and anthropology study field was explained during the meeting. It is yet hard to assess whether such a move is successful. The current students numbers are sufficiently small (10), but the time will give the answers. As stated in SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.1. the content is developed to meet the needs of the labor market and to follow the scientific requirements. The concept of the programme targets the strategic communication specialists in public administration with the main goals of national security, as well as for the reputation of the state, unity of the society, etc. ViA reacts to the contemporary context and as a response offers the SCG programme. Moreover, collaborations with some foreign universities in the similar field (e.g., Ukraine, Georgia) hopefully will ensure the higher enrolment of international students. The SAR explains well the inclusion of certain courses in the curriculum based on the needs for such competencies as: critical thinking, argumentation, influential communication, data security in the digital environment. Still the questions remain whether such subjects as Communication Theories, Argumentation Theory and Critical Thinking, Sustainable Development, Persuasive Communication would not be more appropriate in the offered bachelor's programmes. On the other hand subjects related to fake news management and information wars might be more relevant for this programme. In addition to the observations made by the Advisory Council of the ICS

study field where they emphasized that there is a great need in Latvia for professionals capable of performing duties of a communication manager, senior management consultant, assisting organizations with communication to achieve their goals by establishing sustainable relationships with stakeholders, perhaps the content should offer more relevance to organizational strategic communication. Communication takes place with the following organizations NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence in Riga, State Chancellery, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Culture, King's College in London, as well as the Latvian Association of Communication for the appropriate development of the programme. Perhaps the time will show how successful are the developments of this programme. Yet, it needs to be mentioned that the already discussed overlap with the MIL programme raises questions about the profile of the programme (the following subjects overlap: Social Cognition and Behavior; Argumentation Theory and Critical Thinking; Smart Technologies and Data Security; Civic Society and Participation; Communication Theory. It seems that the programme seeks to transition from the political science field to ICS field. Is its core still related more to the political side and the public sector or does it attempt to transition to the organizational strategic communication as observed by the Advisory Council? It is highly recommended to substantiate the uniqueness of the programme more specifically and to separate very clearly between the MIL and SCG programmes. As it relates to the programme goals and objectives and the course learning outcomes they are prepared sufficiently and were approved by the licencing experts. The aim to emphasize the uniqueness of the programme should help to achieve the clearer understanding of the necessary content. Thus, the goal and the scope of the programme should be more specific. Same as in the MIL programme, 2 credit points are devoted for the internship in the SCG programme. The internship is linked to the chosen Master's thesis topic. The final thesis quality cannot be discussed yet, because there are no graduates yet.

2.2. It is stated in SAR, Part III, Chapter 2, Sub-chapter 2.1. that the "Advisory Council advised also to promote student cooperation during the study courses and to organize group work. This idea is integrated in the study programme implementation format – developing strategic games and social simulations as widely used study methods, as well as properly preparing lecturers to integrate such methods in the study process." Yet this suggestion might be difficult to achieve with such a small group of students. Comments regarding the study methods, assessment methods and criteria are the same as have already been provided for the MIL programme. The main recommendation would be to find the study methods which would single out the SCG programme from the other programmes and to make the assessment methods and the criteria more specific. A student-centered approach is ensured in the learning and teaching processes via the programme content (e.g., electives) and the organizational procedures (e.g., small group approach).

2.3. As has already been mentioned in point 2.1. above, various external organizations participated in the content creation. Moreover, the study programme director plans to be organizing focus groups with students to collect feedback (since the group is small), instead of organizing formal surveys. Additionally, the student-centered approach is strong, since the group is small and the study programme director maintains close relationships to know the student's needs and expectations.

2.4. Since the programme is still new, the mobility has not happened yet. It is available, but the guess might be right that the situation might be similar to the MIL programme, if the students work full time. Thus, most probably other internationalization opportunities will be offered to the students.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

Overall, the content of the programme meets the urgent topic of strategic communication and is up-to-date. Perhaps it should be made more clear whether it is targeting the public sector more or if the private sectors (organizations, businesses) are also included. The goal of the programme could be more concrete in this case. The programme is still very much new, thus, it is hard to judge on its quality, while the original licencing experts have already approved it. Some of the risk areas include:

the overlap with the MIL programme and thus the unclear profile. A strong marketing strategy should be applied for this programme, international cooperations should be used, social partners should become the mecenate for this programme and should consider sending their employees to study in this programme.

STRENGTHS:
1. The programme offers relevant, urgent content.
2. Linkage between the internship and the final thesis.
3. Very strong student-centered approach.

WEAKNESSES:
1. Due to overlapping courses with the other programmes, the SCG loses its focus.
2. Assessment methods and criteria are too general.
3. Shortage of content related to dealing with fake news and to information wars.
4. Lack of formal surveys might not provide the students, who might feel uneasy, to share discreet, confidential feedback.
5. Lack of internationalization opportunities.

3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme

Analysis

The HEI doesn't split the ICS field funding and most of the resources, such as equipment, library resources, databases, administrative costs (SAR, Part II, Section 3; information from Experts' visit). There is also no specific methodological base for each programme. Please, visit the "Resources and Provision of the Study Field" part of this document for more information on the availability of the resources.

As for the information base, most of the programme's study course literature is in English (information provided during the Experts' visit), however, in some cases, the literature is in Latvian (e.g., Media and Communication Rights, which can create challenges for the foreign students).

As for the Moodle environment, part of the information in the Moodle platform is available in Latvian only, which can create challenges for the foreign students of this programme. Most of the requirements have been met. The study programme is being implemented in Latvian and English.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

The resource provision is applied to the ICS Study Field rather than specific Study Programmes, there are only minor specifics related to the resource base of the Field's study programmes.

The overall study provision, informative provision (including libraries), material and technical provision, and financial provision comply with the specific features and the conditions for the implementation of the study programme, create the prerequisites for the achievement of the learning outcomes, and indicate the possibility to ensure a high-quality study process also in the future.

STRENGTHS:
There are no specific (unique) programme related strengths.

WEAKNESSES:
1. Information at ViA online environment is not always available in English, thus creating potential challenges for foreign students.

2. Part of the academic literature is available in Latvian only, thus creating potential challenges for foreign students.

4. Teaching Staff

Analysis

4.1. ViA undertakes measures in a target-oriented manner to avoid negative effects on the quality of the study programme and that results in changes to the composition of the teaching staff. The newly established SCG programme is in compliance with governmental and non-governmental as well as international, national, and regional partners. The unveiling of the SCG programme comes with strong cooperation, reacts to contemporary needs, and is based on up-to-date research. As notified, there is a significant overlap between the study courses in the study field. Not only is there a number of common courses between both undergraduate programmes, but some of those courses are also repetitive in the graduate programmes. During the Experts' visit, it also became clear that the relevant feedback is collected, and the necessary changes to the programme are made.

4.2. The teaching staff members are engaged in the specific programme-related scientific research and carry out a number of research projects and mobility programmes. There is strong cooperation in place with several academic and research-based institutions, some of them are among the leaders in the respective fields in Latvia. As this is more comprehensible to the professional undergraduate programmes which include a variety of lecturers with a professional qualification, the number of elected lecturers in the graduate programs should be greater.

4.3. Not applicable

4.4. Domestic and international cooperation has been a significant part of ViA's policy and one of the priorities since the establishment of the institution. ViA has been developing a double degree agreement with Tbilisi State University. Also, an initiative with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia was carried out, and five scholarships were established for Belarusian students to study in SCG. During recent years active cooperation in the SCG programme has been carried out with the relevant partners like Baltic Media Centre of Excellence, NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence in Riga, the Ministry of Culture, and other organizations and experts of strategic governance in Latvia.

The academic staff is involved in scientific research at the national and international level. The knowledge and skills acquired during the collaboration are used in the development of the programme and to improve both the research directions and the study programmes. Study programme development and study quality improvement are at the forefront of the policy. The national and international cooperation result in jointly organized research, guest study courses, lectures and seminars by the members of partnering institutions, student, lecturer, and experience exchange programmes and quality assessment from the partnering institutions.

4.5. The SCG programme indicates a strong emphasis on the research and a strong and vivid collaboration between the members of the faculty. There clearly is a mutual and international collaboration in place, most deliberately in carrying out the research projects. There is a mechanism for mutual collaboration between the teaching staff members in place and abroad and that contributes to the improvement of the SCG study programme. ViA is oriented towards success and efficiency in mutually attracting project-based funding.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

The programme is founded on a strong research and theoretical background which is also implemented via collaborations and internships. The preparation of the final thesis is backed by the systematic approach to the programme and strong involvement of the academic staff. A variety of teaching and learning methods are used to implement the content. Relevant stakeholder feedback is collected to systematically renew the curriculum. The content of the programme is derived from a strong scientific engagement which is founded on strong mutual as well as governmental, international, regional, academic and professional collaboration, meets the urgent topic of strategic communication and is up-to-date.

STRENGTHS:
1. The SCG programme reacts to contemporary needs, and is based on up-to-date research. The teaching staff members are engaged in the specific programme-related scientific research and carry out a number of research projects.
2. Academic and professional collaboration in the SCG programme meets the urgent topic of strategic communication and is up-to-date.
3. There is strong cooperation in place with several academic and research-based institutions, some of them are among the leaders in the respective fields in Latvia.

WEAKNESSES:
Not identified

5. Assessment of the Compliance of the Study Programme "Strategic Communication and Governance"

Requirements

1 1. The sample of the diploma to be issued for the acquisition of the study programme complies with the procedure by which state-recognised documents of higher education are issued.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
   Justification: 48P-Sample-of-diploma-SCG.zip
   The sample of the diploma provided by ViA in Annex 42P to SAR complies with the Cabinet Regulation No. 202 of 16 April 2013 "Procedures for issuing State Recognized Higher Education Documents

2 2. Documents confirming that the higher education institution/ college will provide the students with the options to continue the acquisition of education in another study programme or at another higher education institution/ college (a contract with another accredited higher education institution/ college), in case the implementation of the study programme is discontinued.
   Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
   Justification: RSU_SCG-ViA-Coorperation-agreement-WORKING-TRANSLATION.doc to SAR confirms that in case of termination of the study programme (in accordance with the Cabinet Regulation No. 795 of 11 December 2018 "Regulations on Licensing Study Programs") opportunities to continue education in another HEI will be provided.

   ViA ensures a possibility for students to continue studies in the Master's study programme "Strategic Management and Public Relations" at RSU.

3 3. Document confirming that the higher education institution/ college guarantees to the students a compensation for losses if the study programme is not accredited or the licence of the study programme is revoked due to the actions of the higher education institution/ college (actions or failure to act) and the student does not wish to continue the studies in another study programme.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annex to SAR 47P-Study-agreement-sample-SCG.docx, Section 2.8. confirms compliance with the requirements.

4 4. 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

Justification: Annex to SAR Apliecinajums-IKZ-valsts-valoda.edoc confirms compliance with the requirements.

5 5. 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.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annex to SAR Apliecinajums-MIP-SKP-anglu-valoda.edoc confirms compliance with the requirements.

6 6. 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.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant

Justification:

7 7. 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 Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annex to SAR Apliecinajums-MIP-SKP-AL.55.pants-Latvian-only.zip confirms compliance with the requirements.

8 8. The sample of the study agreement complies with the mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annex to SAR 47P-Study-agreement-sample-SCG.docx confirms compliance with the requirements.

9 9. 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 56.1, Paragraph two and Section 56.2, Paragraph two of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: The course descriptions provided at Annex to 46P-SCG_course descriptions_2019.zip are prepared in Latvian and English and comply with the requirements.

10 10. The study programme complies with the valid professional standard or the requirements for the professional qualification (if there is no professional standard required for the relevant occupation) provided that the completion of the study programme leads to a professional qualification.
Assessment of compliance: Not relevant

Justification:

11 11. 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 Institutions of Higher Education.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annex to SAR AIP atzinums_SKP.pdf confirms compliance with the requirements.

12 12. The study programme complies with the State Academic Education Standard or the Professional Higher Education Standard.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: 44P-SCG_compliance with the ctandard-edited-EN.docx
During the onsite visit, the agreement between the Experts and the management of the study field was made and the change to Master's Degree of Social Sciences in Journalism and Communication was affirmed to comply with the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No 322 "Regulations on the education classification of Latvia" (June 16, 2017).

13 13. The joint study programmes comply with the requirements prescribed in Section 551, Paragraphs one, two, and seven of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education (if applicable).

Assessment of compliance: Not relevant

Justification:

14 14. Each member of the academic staff has either publications published in reviewed editions within the last six years, including international editions (if they have worked for a shorter period of time, the number of publications shall be in proportion to the work period), or artistic creation achievements (for instance, exhibitions, films, theatre performances, and concert activity), or a five-year practical work experience (except for the experience in the implementation of the study programme) in accordance with the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Publications of academic staff have been listed in Annexes to SAR - 17P-IICS-list of publications-edited-16122020 and 14P-CV-IKZ-precizejumi-2020dec.

15 P5 - Overall rating

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annexes to SAR confirm that requirements have been met.

Requirements (R6-R8)

1 R6 - The compliance of the study provision, scientific support (if applicable), informative provision (including libraries), material and technical provision, and financial provision with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and ensuring the achievement of the learning outcomes.

Assessment of compliance: Partially compliant

Justification: The programme has the necessary resource base, the students and the teaching staff have access to the necessary resources to ensure the quality of teaching and learning process.
It is advised to reassess if the information resources and methodological base is available in English at an adequate level to ensure a quality study process for foreign students.

2 R7 - The compliance of the qualification of the academic staff members, visiting professors, visiting associate professors, visiting docents, visiting lecturers, and visiting assistants with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and the provisions set out in the respective regulatory enactments.

Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant

Justification: Annexes to SAR 14P-CV-IKZ-precizejumi-2020dec confirms compliance with the requirements.

3   R8 - The study programme leading to the master or doctoral degree is based on the advances and findings in the relevant field of science or artistic creation.
Assessment of compliance: Fully compliant
Justification: Research seems to be a part of the study process with the increase of student research skills.

Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses

The related requirements for the study programme have been fully or partially met.

STRENGTHS:
1. The programme offers relevant, urgent content.
2. Linkage between the internship and the final thesis.
3. Very strong student-centered approach.
4. The SCG programme reacts to contemporary needs, and is based on up-to-date research. The teaching staff members are engaged in the specific programme-related scientific research and carry out a number of research projects.
5. Academic and professional collaboration in the SCG programme meets the urgent topic of strategic communication and is up-to-date.
6. There is strong cooperation in place with several academic and research-based institutions, some of them are among the leaders in the respective fields in Latvia.

WEAKNESSES:
1. Due to overlapping courses with the other programmes, the SCG loses its focus.
2. Assessment methods and criteria are too general.
3. Shortage of content related to dealing with fake news and to information wars.
4. Lack of formal surveys might not provide the students, who might feel uneasy, to share discreet, confidential feedback.
5. Lack of internationalization opportunities.
6. Information at ViA online environment is not always available in English, thus creating potential challenges for foreign students..
7. Part of the academic literature is available in Latvian only, thus creating potential challenges for foreign students.

Evaluation of the study programme "Strategic Communication and Governance"

Evaluation of the study programme:

Good

6. Recommendations for the Study Programme "Strategic Communication and Governance"

Short-term recommendations

1. It is recommended to formulate the study methods, assessment methods and assessment criteria more specifically.
2. Should consider adding more in-depth content related to fake news and information wars.

3. In addition to planning to conduct informal focus groups, formal surveys should also be applied.
4. Ensure internationalization through various means in addition to offering mobility.

Long-term recommendations

1. The programme should be more specific and should emphasize its uniqueness, scope, focus not to overlap with other programmes.
2. Current marketing efforts (positioning, marketing goals and strategy) should be more clearly formulated and improved to raise the programme's profile across all potential target audiences and markets.
3. Proactively plan academic information base development; if necessary, partner with other ICS programmes in the planning process.
4. The professor level academic should be involved in the teaching staff and in the implementation of the SCG graduate programme.
5. Exclude the overlapping courses with the graduate programmes in the ICS study field.
6. Develop the programme further based on the collected feedback from all relevant stakeholders.

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

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

Assessment of the Requirements for the Study Field

Requirements	Requirement Evaluation		Comment
Pursuant to Section 5, Paragraph 21 of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education, the higher education institution/ college shall ensure continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study direction whilst implementing their internal quality assurance systems:	Fully compliant		Study Quality Assurance Policy of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences. Although, 1.2. is assessed as "Partially compliant", the experts believe that ViA will consequently implement a more complex approach towards the Study Quality Assurance, by simultaneously including the consulting bodies in the mutual assurance of quality.

Requirements	Requirement Evaluation		Comment
R2 - The cooperation with different organisations from Latvia and abroad implemented within the study direction ensures the achievement of the aims of the study direction.	Fully compliant		Based on the SAR and conversations with stakeholders during the visit by experts, there is ample evidence of the excellent cooperation that ViA has established with local and national organisations and universities to achieve the aims of the study field. Good efforts have been made to develop effective relationships with universities in other countries and to attract international faculty and students.
R3 - Compliance of scientific research and artistic creation with the development level thereof (if applicable).	Fully compliant		The teaching staff actively participates in the scientific research proposals and carries out research projects. The unveiling of the programmes comes with strong collaboration, reacts to the contemporary needs, and is primarily based on research.
R4 - Elimination of the shortcomings and deficiencies identified during the previous assessment of the study direction, if it has been conducted, or the implementation of the provided recommendations.		Partially compliant	According to the SAR ICS (SAR, Part II, Section 6), as well as according to its Annex 22 "Recommendations' Implementation Plans" most of the recommendations are fully implemented. ViA's approach is thorough and systematic. For a few of the recommendations it is suggested to continue the already initiated development efforts.

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)

No.	Study programme	R5	R6	R7	R8	Evaluation of the study programme (excellent, good, average, poor)
1	Communication and Public Relations (42321)	Fully compliant	Fully compliant	Fully compliant	Not relevant	Good
2	Media Studies and Journalism (42321)	Fully compliant	Fully compliant	Fully compliant	Not relevant	Good
3	Media and Information Literacy (45321)	Fully compliant	Partially compliant	Fully compliant	Fully compliant	Good
4	Strategic Communication and Governance (45321)	Fully compliant	Partially compliant	Fully compliant	Fully compliant	Good

The Dissenting Opinions of the Experts

None