

# Expert group joint opinion

Evaluation Procedure: Assessment of Study Field

Higher Education Institution: Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies

Study field: Sociology, Political Science, and Anthropology

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

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The bachelor study programme (BSP) and the master study programme (MSP) "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration" (SOPA) were evaluated at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LBTU). No particular problems are observed at the level of some aspects of the strategic management of the institution, given that most formal documents are passed and adopted at the level of the entire LBTU. However, there are challenges in terms of the number of students in some forms of the study programmes (e.g. delivered in English), in terms of the age structure of teachers, in encouraging and creating conditions for scientific productivity and the internationalization.

LBTU has established the quality assurance (QA) policy which is available both in Latvian and English but versions are not mutually harmonized (in terms of length and detailedness). The QA policy ensures achievement of the aims set by the LBTU and the respective study field and expected learning outcomes of the study programmes, however, on-site visit indicates that the effectiveness of some elements of the system is hindered by low level of stakeholder engagement (e.g. low level of students' suggestions, low response of academic staff to personal development criteria, etc.).

LBTU is an institution with good study and research facilities, and it possesses necessary resources for implementing the study field. Study field attracts the most students from the local area and in recent years also from abroad. There is an established system for determining and redistributing financial support. LBTU supports subscriptions to social science databases, computer equipment, and software for the needs of the study field. The study field provides ICT solutions which ensure an effective and appropriate study process on site and remotely. The majority of lecturers of basic study courses have a long working experience at LBTU but are close to retirement age. Attracting new teachers is challenging, especially in the field of public administration where some courses are delivered by doctor of sciences in history.

The academic staff is overloaded with lecturing, so there is no time for research, it is practically impossible to use academic leaves. The bonus system offered by the administration is not effective enough to attract new teachers. Psychological support for students is provided quite formally, in the study programmes. Lecturers work with a very small number of students, which promotes an individual approach. Academic staff are forthcoming and flexible, especially with regard to work-study balance, since a large majority of students are employed.

The structures for the scientific research are in place but the actual achievements leave quite a lot of room for improvement. More research projects, peer-reviewed journal articles in international journals and more research papers co-authored with scholars from abroad would improve the study field's contribution to the overall mission and strengthen its role in the LBTU.

Cooperation with partners in Latvia is based mostly on regional development issues. Employer engagement with LBTU varies in duration and intensity, including joint projects, guest lectures, field trips to enterprises, among other activities like serving on the master's examination committee, and creating summer schools. In 2023, LBTU approved an Internationalization Policy and developed an Internationalization Plan to guide its international cooperation efforts. Overall, there is a lack of specific plans for the sociology field, limiting its development. Incoming academic staff numbers at LBTU are sufficient, but outgoing mobility is lower. The sociology field has limited cooperation agreements and more agreements specifically for this field are needed. Outgoing student mobility is

notably low, while incoming student mobility has been satisfactory. Both study programmes are licensed to be conducted in English, which is a competitive advantage.

The recommendations from the previous accreditation were only partially fulfilled. Recommendations concerning the attraction of personnel with a strong focus on public administration and its strengthening in the study programmes, and additional acquisition of recent scientific literature in that area, are recommendations that have not been sufficiently fulfilled.

The BSP is aligned with its field, as evidenced by the interrelation of its title, code, degree, and professional qualifications with its aims, objectives, learning outcomes, and admission requirements. The number of students in the study programme has fluctuated greatly which has had negative consequences both for pedagogy and economic viability of the study programme.

The teaching process is designed around compulsory and optional courses, which are positioned in the later stages of the study. However, content related to public administration is still not sufficiently represented in courses in comparison to courses from other disciplines. Students participate in various events such as competitions organized by trade unions or international conferences, mainly organized by the LBTU itself. The small number of students enrolled in the study programme conducted in English raises numerous questions related also to the application of adequate teaching methods and work applicable in the social sciences. The relatively high dropout rate calls into question the sustainability even of full-time studies in the Latvian language, not to mention the study programme in English language.

The qualification of the academic staff is solid at the current moment, and complies with the requirements of national regulations, but their capacity has to be strengthened in terms of regeneration of the academic staff, and their research and publication performance. The Human Development Plan does not include enough evidence on plans for the regeneration of teaching staff in the field of sociology, which is considered as the main threat to the implementation of the study programmes. Although publication activities of the teaching staff meet formal requirements having articles indexed in Scopus/ Web of Science, this criterion is mostly reached by publications in conference proceedings published by their own university (LBTU). Due to this, the opportunities to receive international recognition of the research work done by the sociologists has been diminished.

The MSP SOPA is a well-designed study programme in a specific area of specialization. However, the potential of the study programme is reduced by the insufficient amount of content from the field of public administration, which is particularly significant given that the basic goal of the study programme is to educate specialists who will be largely employed in various public administration bodies. The programme struggles with the small number of enrolled students, which is especially visible in the English study programme. This reduces the potential of pedagogical methods based on teamwork and group work, discussion groups, etc., as well as the economic viability of the study programme. The MSP lacks leveling courses, which is particularly significant considering the fact that many students in MSP do not have prior knowledge in the field of BSP.

The qualification of the academic staff complies with the requirements of national regulations, but their performance has to be improved, especially with regard to international networking and publications into international academic journals. Cooperation of academic staff has been ensured mainly through mutual meetings, seminars and the work of the methodological commission, but there is a shortage of information about mutual cooperation of academic staff at the level of daily practices. Key members of the academic staff have long-standing experience in their teaching work; thus, having solid knowledge, meanwhile reaching pre-retirement age. There has not been included analysis of potential challenges produced by the age of the teaching staff, but the Human

Development Plan of the faculty does not include specific targets for the regeneration of academic staff.

## **I - Assessment of the Study Field**

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#### **1.1 Management of the Study Field**

##### **Analysis**

1.1.1. Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (hereinafter – LBTU) is a science university and it is the only science university outside the capital city Riga. The current development strategy of LBTU is adopted in December 2022 and covers a five-years (2023-2027) period. LBTU established three strategic areas of specialization, one of which is called ‘social sciences’ and in relation to the other two (Agriculture, forestry and veterinary sciences; Engineering and technology) is the most generally defined. There are three research priorities within the social sciences research area, namely: Strategic effects of a knowledge-intensive bioeconomy; Opportunities for sustainable and smart territorial development; Interaction between the competitiveness of environmentally responsible businesses and the development of society (SER, p. 15).

The study field named ‘Sociology, Politology and Anthropology’ (hereinafter – study field) also fits into the mentioned area of specialization, in which the two analyzed study programmes are carried out. The main goal of the study field is “... to prepare internationally competitive specialists through delivering bachelor and master’ programmes and building up an appropriate set of research skills and competences in the field of organizations and public administration in order to solve problems related to the sustainability of society.” (SER, p. 15). Two assessed study programmes, at BA and MA level, are delivered under the auspices of the Faculty of Economics and Social Development (ESAF), which is one of the faculties of LBTU.

The interconnection between the two assessed study programmes (BA and MA ‘Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration’) is logical. Although the two analyzed programs are logically connected and represent a rounded whole, they still lack a significant presence of content from the field of public administration in order for the study programs to achieve their goals. This was also noted in the 2012 assessment report and is still present. Knowledge in this area is particularly important because the study is related to leaning on public administration, both in terms of the use of guest lecturers and in terms of the future employment of graduates from these study programmes.

1.1.2. LBTU conducted an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of the study field in the context of the overall position and activities of LBTU in the societal, economic and higher education development trends in Latvia (SER, p. 18-19). Also, a special EU funded project was devoted to the enhancement of the governance of LBTU. According to SER (p. 21), the main outputs of that project were enhancement plans, both for BSP and MSP that covered several short term (2021-2023) and the longer term activities that should be accomplished in the six year period (SER Annex Study direction development plan). Among the short term activities were the establishment of the distance learning opportunities, updating the learning outcomes and use of the MOODLE system and purchase of the academic literature (SER, p. 21). Longer term activities consist of seven measures, out of which three should be undertaken on a yearly basis (Tasks 4, 5 and 6), while others have a future deadline for implementation (e. g. academic year 2024/25, 2027/28 or 2030). What is not entirely clear, however, is why such long deadlines have been set for the completion of some tasks. For example, why must the development of new study materials (Task 7) wait for 2027/28? Or why the deadline for the implementation of Task 2 (Improvement and development of distance learning studies to potentially offer part-time distance learning studies in

English) is set for 2030, when the live study programme is already performed in English.

As a result of the analysis, the university introduced some novelties, among which the most important are distance learning mechanisms. Accordingly, the study courses of both assessed study programmes are adapted to distance learning, and the MOODLE system is used to set up digital learning content. The functionality and characteristics of the MOODLE system were presented to the expert panel during the visit to LBTU. Furthermore, recommendations are being addressed in the ESAF Development Strategy for 2023-2027.

However, although a SWOT analysis was carried out (SER, p. 18-19), the age structure of the teachers was not determined as one of the weaknesses or threats of the institution that should definitely be addressed in the future. Namely, if LBTU wants to ensure the sustainability and stability of both assessed study programmes, it is necessary to seriously consider and take adequate measures.

1.1.3. The management structure of the entire study field is clear and transparent with clearly defined responsibilities of all formally foreseen institutional actors (SER, Annex 2.1.). The organizational unit of LBTU that carries out the analyzed study programmes is the ESAF which consists of three institutes. Each degree study programme, both at BA and MA level, has its own study programme director who is responsible for their performance and improvement. The delivery of the study programmes is supported by three administrative personnel who are responsible for office work and other student and administration related tasks (SER, p. 20).

There are formal documents which are adopted by the senate of LBTU (e.g. LBTU Regulations on Programme Directors) that regulate the selection and powers of study programme directors. Study programme directors have a significant role in the improvement and development of study programmes in order to respond to changed circumstances. The study programme directors are also members of the Methodology Commission (SER p. 21), which has a significant role in changes to study programmes, such as introducing new study courses, changing study plans, adopting self-evaluation reports, etc. This commission is established on the level of BSP and MSP.

When it comes to the decision making process at the entire LBTU and especially at the ESAF and the level of evaluated study programmes, the formally determined management structure (Annex 2.1 Administration of the study direction and the organizational units involved) is rational, simple and it enables the effective addressing of issues related to the management of study programmes. The position of the study programme director, as the person most responsible for the implementation of BSP and MSP, is well regulated and gives him/her the formal opportunity and tools to manage the study programme, propose and implement changes and perform other tasks important for the effective implementation of study programmes. Also, the existence of the Methodological Commission is particularly significant, which, in addition to other tasks, adopts important documents and determines steps for improving study programmes. The general meeting of study programme directors and institute directors involved in the field of study, organized by the Dean's office, promotes the same goal (Annex 2.1.).

Administrative support for the delivery of the study programme is organized in the following way: "The administrative personnel ensuring the functioning of the study direction include the dean, vice-deans, programme directors and ESAF institute directors. To deliver the study programmes contained in the study direction, ESAF office specialists (3) are employed as auxiliary personnel who supervise student matters and are responsible for office work at ESAF, inform students and are responsible for internal and external document flows and record-keeping." (SER, p. 20). During the assessment visit there were no significant problems in administrative support reported from any of the interviewed groups, which can be partially attributed to the relatively small number of domestic and international students enrolled in the assessed study programmes.

1.1.4. The LBTU has clear and understandable instructions for applying to all study programmes,

both for domestic (Latvian) and international students. The information is available on the website of LBTU and contains all the necessary information to easily submit an application for admission to one of the offered study programmes at the BA or MA level of studies.

Enrollment in the BSP is possible after previously acquired secondary education in accordance with the regulations in force in Latvia. It is stated that: "Applicants are admitted on a competitive basis based on their scores in centralized examinations in Latvian, a foreign language (English, German, French or Russian) and mathematics." (SER, p. 22). Enrollment is also possible through the e-system, which enables a standardized enrollment system at 11 Latvian universities.

Enrollment in MSP is possible after completing the first level of education in the field of Social sciences, Business and Law. The entrance exam is taken by students who obtained a previous diploma in the field of educational sciences. International students must have at least B2 level of English language skills (SER, p. 22). Although it is stated that applicants "... are admitted on a competitive basis based on the average weighted mark in their bachelor-level education or higher professional education ..." (SER, p. 22), it remains questionable how this system functions in practical terms due to the relatively small number of enrolled students, especially in the international study programme (conducted in English).

During the assessment panel visit to LBTU and the interview process with students and employees of the university, no significant technical obstacles were noted in the enrollment process for both study programmes that are being assessed. However, students who are enrolled in the MSP SOPA, and who have not completed the previous cycle of the same study at the BA level, sometimes face challenges and difficulties when mastering the content of certain MA level study courses which require previous knowledge. In overcoming these obstacles, teachers help them, which is at the moment facilitated by the fact of a small number of enrolled students in MSP, but it is an open question how much this will be possible in the case of a larger number of enrolled students without prior education in key study courses of the BA level of the same field of study.

The system for recognition of the study period, professional experience and prior formal and non-formal education have been prescribed by LBTU and it is published on the web site, but only in Latvian language (SER, p. 23). There is also the possibility to start studies in the later stage if applicants "... have acquired necessary knowledge, skills and competences, completing a formal or informal education." (SER, p. 23).

The system for the assessment of students' achievements and learning outcomes is determined partly by state regulations, and partly by documents and regulations adopted by the LBTU. As a general rule, each study course contains a detailed description of learning outcomes and criteria for evaluating student achievements (SER, Annex with description of study courses). Students are in advance informed about what is expected of them in each study course and during the assessment panel visit to LBTU this was confirmed in a meeting with students of all study levels.

1.1.5. Methods, principles and procedures for assessing achievements of students have been developed and defined by several documents adopted by LBTU and ESAF, as well as in the Cabinet Regulations regarding the State Academic Education Standard - Cabinet Regulation No. 240 of 13/05/2014 (SER, p. 24). Main regulations in this regard are Regulation of Studies (bachelor's and master's degree studies) and Regulation of Doctoral Studies (SER, p. 13). It is stated that: "An evaluation of student learning outcomes is based on the principle of a summation of positive performance, which gives the student an opportunity to demonstrate to what extent s/he has achieved the expected learning outcomes." (SER, p. 24). Principles of final thesis evaluation is prescribed by Regulations regarding Final Examinations, which is adopted by the Senate of LBTU (SER, p. 24).

When it comes to the relevance of assessment methods and procedures for achieving the aims of study programmes and the needs of students several mechanisms have been established. The powers related to the improvement of the study programme are largely entrusted to the director of

the individual study programme and the methodological commission. Main tasks of this commission are the following: "... discussing and evaluating new courses and plans; evaluating self-assessment reports for the licensing and accreditation of the programme; reviewing and agreeing study plans; discussing and evaluating study course programmes and their content in accordance with the guidelines on the programme/specializations." (SER, Annex, 2.1.).

Information about the study courses and what is expected of them is shared with study course participants in advance. Also, the syllabi of each study course describe the learning outcomes, as well as other details and requirements that must be met in order to complete each course.

There is a well-developed electronic system (MOODLE) for holding classes, setting materials and assignments, and communicating with students. All relevant information for study courses are part of this system.

However, it has to be noted that the potential of new methods is significantly reduced by the small number of students on a particular type of study, which significantly reduces the quality of the study process.

1.1.6. Formal documents governing academic integrity have been adopted both at the level of the entire university (LBTU) and at the level of the organizational unit that carries out the assessed study programmes (ESAF). The basic document is the LBTU Code of Ethics, Academic Integrity Policies and Regulations on Academic Integrity Violations in Students' Theses/Doctoral Theses (adopted on 28. 11. 2022. - Nr. 4.3.-8/227 - see SER, Annex) which is published and available on the LBTU website, in Latvian as well as in English. There are also other important documents that regulate these issues, such as the Rector regulation On Submission Procedure of Electronic Copies of Theses and their Control in the Online Plagiarism Control System (SER, p. 25), and also Academic integrity regulation approved by LBTU Senate on 14. 6. 2023 (decision No. 11-112). However, some of the mentioned documents have been adopted quite recently (November 2022 and June 2023).

Student papers are checked through the Turnitin system for plagiarism detection and from 2021/22 all student written contributions, not just seminar papers and final theses, go through the plagiarism check system. In the ten-year period (2013-2023), over 160 student papers were checked for plagiarism, of which one was found to be plagiarized (SER, p. 25).

Topics related to academic integrity are an integral part of several subjects taught at the bachelor and master level of study. In the BSP courses which include such topics are Introduction to Studies, Professional Ethics, Basics of Research, Quantitative Research Methods, Qualitative Research Methods, Sociology (study project) and also these topics are addressed in process of preparation of Bachelor thesis (SER, p. 26; relevant course description in the Annex). In MSP study courses which contain such topics are, in particular, Philosophy of Science; Principles of Scientific Research; Social Research Methods; Processing of Sociological Information, and also these topics are addressed in the process of elaboration of Master's thesis (SER, p. 26; relevant course description in the Annex).

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

Management of the study field does not significantly differ from other study fields that exist within the framework of LBTU. No particular problems are observed at the level of some aspects of the strategic management of the institution, given that most formal documents are passed and adopted at the level of the entire university. However, there are challenges in terms of the number of students in some forms of study programmes (e.g. delivered in English), in terms of the age structure of teachers who are involved in the implementation of study programmes (for details see analysis under Criteria 2.4. and 3.4.), in encouraging and creating conditions for their greater scientific productivity and the internationalization of their work.

Strengths:

- 1) LBTU is a relatively small and integrated university, which enables easier management of study programmes and the achievement of cohesion between different study programmes and faculties within the university.
- 2) Formal and policy documents governing the study process have been adopted and the methods and tools provided for in them function without significant difficulties that would negatively affect the study process.

Weaknesses:

- 1) Lack of preparatory (leveling) courses for students enrolling in the MA level of study, who have not previously completed a BA study programme in this or a related study field.

## **1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System**

### **Analysis**

1.2.1. LBTU has developed and documented a QA policy. The main document is Quality Management Manual (QAM, 61 page in length without annexes) which is originally presented in Latvian and is not publicly available (annex “LBTU\_dokumenti\_latviesu\_valoda-20240102”, 4\_1\_LBTU\_Kvalitates\_vadibas\_rokasgramata\_26102023.pdf) that is included in the annex of the SER. Two publicly available summaries of the QA policy are presented in Latvian and English. They vary in the length and detailedness of the description, resulting in the shortages of coherency among them. The QA policy summary in Latvian consists of two pages (see <https://www.lbtu.lv/lv/llu-pamatdokumenti>), but the QA policy summary in English consists of 11 pages (see <https://www.lbtu.lv/sites/default/files/2020-08/Quality%20Assurance%20System.pdf>). The executive summary of the QA principles is also provided in the SER (pp. 31-32). No contradictions have been found among short and long versions of QA policy documents. However, to ensure transparency and mutual understanding among all stakeholders involved, the coherence of both QA policy summaries has to be ensured. As the full QAM is available only in Latvian, it should be noted that the accessibility to full QAM is also crucial, especially if the LBTU and the respective study field aims to attract more foreign students.

The QA policy includes key principles needed to achieve the aims and expected learning outcomes of the study field and the respective study programmes. They include the supervision of the quality of study programme through various instruments applied such as hospitation of study courses and performance of teaching staff, collection of students’ feedback, as well as feedback of alumni and employers, the analysis of various other performance indicators (SER, pp. 31-32). The QA system also includes various supervisory bodies at the faculty and the LBTU level (SER, pp. 31-33). The QA policy includes relevant and measurable indicators monitored on a regular basis (see list SER, pp. 27-31). In the QA of the study process, LBTU adheres to the ENQA principles (full QAM in Latvian, p.38; see annex “LBTU\_dokumenti\_latviesu\_valoda-20240102”, 4\_1\_LBTU\_Kvalitates\_vadibas\_rokasgramata\_26102023.pdf); however, that is not referenced in the respective sections of the SER (SER, p. 12, section 2.2.). The QA principles set by the LBTU and applied in the QA of the respective study field complies with the requirements set forth in the legal framework and the logic of organization of the study process at the higher education institution. Interviews with academic staff and students demonstrate their awareness of the content of QA principles.

LBTU’s QA system is internationally assessed and has received the international (UK-based) “Investors in Excellence Standard” certificate (SER, p. 11; the English version on QA, p. 1; <https://www.lbtu.lv/sites/default/files/2020-08/Quality%20Assurance%20System.pdf>). An international certification is a positive indication in the terms of transparency and internationalization of the LBTU’s QA processes, but the certificate chosen is not specific to



universities (see the description of the standard: <https://www.investorsinexcellence.com/why-us/about-us/>). The general principles of organizational excellence, as defined by the standard, are poorly adapted (translated) to the specifics of LBTU's as a university performance (see list of principles as set in publicly available QA English version <https://www.lbtu.lv/sites/default/files/2020-08/Quality%20Assurance%20System.pdf>, pp.2-3).

With regard to ensuring continuous improvement and efficient performance of the study field, some of the principles of the QA system are not fully operational in practice. This is reflected in the findings discussed in the following sections on the professional development and research participation of academic staff and the low engagement of students into the achievement of internalization and study field development goals of the LBTU (formal participation into study assessment surveys, low level of suggestions for improvements, low participation into international mobility, etc.).

1.2.2. LBTU has established and documented the respective procedures (SER, pp. 33-34, QMM, p. 39) and feedback collection mechanisms (QMM, p. 59). They are clear and logical, but lacking comprehensive evidence on their effectiveness, especially, in the long-term perspective.

At the level of LBTU, the revision of study courses is regulated by Regulations regarding Developing, Approving and Changing Programmes at LBTU (SER, p.33; respective document is added in annex "LBTU\_dokumenti\_latviesu\_valoda-20240102":

13\_Studiju\_kursu\_izstradasanas\_un\_atjaunosanas\_kartiba\_2022.pdf). The SER evidenced that the evaluation of the study programmes recently resulted with introduction of new, relevant study courses such as Economic Sociology, Media Literacy and Platform Society, Environmental Sociology, as well as part-time distance learning option (SER, p.34). However, developments and review are reported in the annual self-assessment evaluation of the respective study field and study programmes which are available publicly for the last study year only (see <https://www.lbtu.lv/lv/studiju-virzienu-parskati-un-pasnovertejuma-zinojumi>). As explained by the management, more earlier reports are excluded from the website of LBTU with the arrival of the more recent self-assessment report. With such an approach, no opportunities to reconstruct regularity of the improvements is provided.

Significant emphasis is put on receiving feedback from students and graduates, including their employability, however, the results of the respective surveys, based on publicly available reports and examples given during the expert visit could be considered as potentially uninformative (not efficient) for the further development of study courses (such results as few comments on the content received; lack of critical remarks and suggestions; overall high scores for the general statements which used as evaluation indicators lead to formal performance of the procedures). Although employers' feedback is recognized as important and is reported as being collected, the SER does not contain accurate information on the results employers' assessments received for the last study years (on the same measurement scale as in the student surveys). However, interviews with academic staff and students conducted during the on-site visit indicate that the feedback mechanisms operate on the daily routine level, covering both private and public sector employers.

1.2.3. The process for student complaints and suggestions is described in the QA policy documents and the SER (pp. 34-35). This included various methods of issuing the complaints/ suggestions and various levels of their revision. The basic level is presenting complaints to the curator, but the full process includes opportunities to submit complaints to the higher university level - to the LBTU Board of Studies or the Senate (SER, p. 34). An anonymous reporting form has also been established, however, available only in Latvian (SER, p. 34) that might reduce opportunities to submit complaints for foreign students.

Despite the existence of a full circle of procedures for submission of student complaints and suggestions, in fact, there is little evidence about their effectiveness. Besides assessment of each

study course at the end of the semester, student interviews indicate that they have a little comprehension of how to use complaints and suggestion mechanisms.

1.2.4. SER (Table 2.4. in section 2.2.1.) provides an overview of the collected statistical data, which comprehensively describes the viability of the study field and study programmes, student and academic staff performance, employment of graduates, availability of technical and material resources (altogether 17 indicators of quality of the learning process such as admission, enrollment, drop-out, performance of students, evaluation of study courses, employability; 16 indicators of qualifications and work quality of teaching personnel such as qualification, turnover, professional performance; and 2 indicators of the environment for learning such as library and technological resources, SER, pp. 27-31). The practical implementation of these criteria is described in section 2.2.4. (SER, pp. 35-38).

The list of indicators is comprehensive and in general (with some exceptions) provides LBTU with the necessary information to ensure the sustainability of the university's activities, to evaluate the quality of studies and the work performance of the teaching staff, as well as to plan and monitor the necessary improvements. Information shortages could be mentioned as follows: employers feedback is not included into the list of QA indicators; average age and workload of the teaching staff is not analyzed (pp. 27-31). As to the last two criteria, SER generally describes the profile of academic staff (pp. 6-7), but the list of QA indicators (pp. 27-31) does not include statistical data that would allow tracking the regeneration of academic staff, especially within the ESAF and the study field (see also the analysis under criteria 1.3.5., 1.3.7., 2.4.1., 2.4.2., 3.4.1. and 3.4.2.).

The periodicity of the collection of the statistical data is clear, stable and corresponds to the organization of the study process at the LBTU. The QA indicators are translated into the disbursements of the academic staff, but there is little detailed evidence along the SER and interviews with various representatives of management of study programmes how the feedback is translated into coordinated, specific and measurable actions aimed to improve the study field. For example, in section 2.2.4., the SER describes the procedures of gathering the statistical data (QA indicators), but there is no evidence how the measures have been taken when the need for improvement is identified such as how deadlines, the content of revision and other steps in the process are set. For the renewal of library materials for the study field, it is not defined how the list of books and resources to be purchased is determined and coordinated within the study field and among other interrelated study fields to be both comprehensive and financially efficient.

1.2.5. The information on the study programmes is provided in all mentioned above registers (VIIS, e-platform) and LBTU webpage in both languages (Latvian and English as the study programmes are implemented in both). It provides the most necessary overview about the title, the length and content of the study programmes (years, ECTS/ CP), admission criteria and process, etc. The SER provides a detailed list of information available in various resources produced by the LBTU (SER, pp. 38-39). The LBTU website provides extended information in both languages about study plan, including the breakdown by years of study, and further career opportunities, as well as various stories of students' lived experiences (the last - only in Latvian); see information on LBTU website: <https://www.lbtu.lv/lv/pamatstudijas/organizaciju-un-sabiedribas-parvaldes-sociologija> for BA in Latvian and [https://www.lbtu.lv/en/sociology\\_of\\_organizations\\_and\\_public\\_administration](https://www.lbtu.lv/en/sociology_of_organizations_and_public_administration) for BA in English).

However, small inconsistencies have been observed between the platforms, which are partly attributable to the LBTU, but partly solvable only at the governmental level, which is the maintainer of the VIIS and e-platform system. The inconsistencies refer to provision of information about ECTS (they are provided in English, not available in Latvian version at the LBTU website; not possible to provide at the e-platform (CP is provided instead)).

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

LBTU has established the QA policy that is described in the set of interrelated documents. The publicly available Latvian and English summaries of the QA policy are not mutually harmonized (in terms of length and detailedness of the information provided). The QA policy as described in the Quality Management Manual (in Latvian) and the SER ensures achievement of the aims set by the LBTU and the respective study field and expected learning outcomes of the study programmes. That includes collecting feedback from all relevant stakeholders, however, with various further impacts on the development of the study programmes. Although the QA system corresponds to all formal requirements set by the national regulations, on-site visit indicates that the effectiveness of some elements of the system is hindered by low level of stakeholder engagement (such as low level of students suggestions, low response of academic staff to personal development criteria, etc.).

### Strengths:

- 1) Ensuring compliance with international standards, including receiving certification.
- 2) Emphasis in the QA policy on receiving feedback from students and graduates, including tracking their employability.

### Weaknesses:

- 1) Limited publicly available information does not ensure the systematic development and regular review of the respective study programmes for external reviewers.
- 2) Information on QA system elements is not balanced between English and Latvian versions, there is a need to harmonize information available in Latvian and English and provide a full version of the Quality Management Manual in English.

## Assessment of the requirement [1]

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

### **Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

Several indicators listed below have received “partially compliant” evaluation. There is a need to improve the performance of existing QA system in terms of transparency of the procedures in Latvian and English and ensure the efficiency of these mechanisms.

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

### **Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

See analysis under Criterion 1.2.1. above.

There is a need to harmonize existing versions of the quality assurance policy summaries in Latvian and English, provide detailed QA manual in English.

- 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

See analysis under Criterion 1.2.2. There is a need to ensure the efficiency of application of the established mechanisms when receiving feedback from all target groups involved.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The criteria and procedures are described clearly, they are transparent and provide sufficient evidence to be evaluated as effective.

- 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:** Partially compliant

See analysis under Criterion 1.2.4. Although indicators have been established, some important aspects are not fully covered (such as staff regeneration and balance of workload).

- 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

LBTU has established and described the list of indicators analyzed that cover all relevant aspects of the performance.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

See analysis under Criterion 1.2.1. Although indicators have been established and monitored, there is little evidence of their regularity and effectiveness in the long-term, limited information is available to ensure continuous improvement of the study field (including, the fact that self-evaluation reports are available only for the last year).

### 1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field

#### Analysis

1.3.1. SER (p. 40) states the following: "The number of state-funded study places is agreed and specified in a tripartite agreement between the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) and LBTU. Every year, the LBTU Senate approves the distribution of revenues and expenses specified in the LBTU budget and financial plan, which are drawn up in accordance with the Law on the State Budget adopted annually by the Parliament and an annual decision on LBTU Consolidated Budgeting by the LBTU Rector. From 2023, after the distribution of revenues and expenses in the LBTU budget and financial plan has been approved by the LBTU Senate, the documents are forwarded for consideration and approval by the LBTU Supervisory Board. The consolidated budget is controlled and audited by an independent sworn auditor whose opinion and report are considered and approved by the LBTU Senate, while from 2023, after the consideration by the LBTU Senate, they are forwarded for consideration and approval by the LBTU Supervisory Board." The distribution of revenues and expenses procedure at the LBTU is described in detail in the SER, p.40. Interviews with study programme management, Faculty's management, members of the academic staff, students and graduates did not reveal any weakness regarding the system of determining and redistributing financial support for the implementation of the study field. In the period 2018-2020, there were no state-funded study places in the BSP and the amount of

tuition fees slightly exceeds costs per student. For the sake of transposing the financial resources (income obtained through state budget and tuition fees) into high-quality teaching there is a system in place which ensures effective redistribution across various types of studies. Funding for science consists of funding earmarked for the implementation of research projects. However, basic funding for science, which is allocated from scientific research projects, is distributed according to the performance of leading researchers and researchers in science (SER, p. 42). The number and level of publications (CVs of academic staff) is quite uneven - some of the academic staff mainly have publications in international conferences organized by the university.

The self-evaluation report describes the research organization at LBTU as a whole. Analyzing the CVs of the academic staff involved in the implementation of study programmes, some researchers are involved in several projects, while others are involved in only a few. Similarly, the types of different projects (international projects, national research programmes or contractual works) are rarely differentiated, and it is not clear whether LBTU is represented in them as an institution, or participation in them takes place through some other research institutions. The same conclusion refers to involvement of academic staff of the study programmes into these research projects. There is not enough evidence to evaluate their role within these research projects (leading researcher, leader of work packages, etc.).

Although a large part of the academic staff has experience in research, the research potential of the academic staff of the LBTU study field has not been fully utilized and funding from involvement in the research projects coordinated by the LBTU is not always a stable part of the remuneration. From the SER, it is difficult to determine how much of the research work of the academic staff of the field of study is financed through LBTU. In some CVs of academic staff there is not correctly indicated the institution where the research was carried out - i.e. the research was not funded by LBTU. This means that academic staff of the study field gets even less research funding from LBTU. It appears that there is not a specified system in place to offer financial incentives to academic staff for their research activities and improvement of this system could be beneficial for more intensive engagement of the academic staff in research activities.

1.3.2. The study process is organized mostly in the building of the ESAF and at the LBTU main building. The delivery of the study programmes contained in the study field is also organized using the common material and technical resources of LBTU and those of the other Faculties or facilities. The material and technical resources of the ESAF classrooms are modernized and supplemented each year within the financial means available, scientific and educational literature is regularly purchased, especially in English, which is available to students at the Centre for Studies and Scientific Information. Students, including foreign students, have access to a variety of databases and resources provided by the LBTU Fundamental Library at <https://llufb.llu.lv/en>.

Classrooms in all of the Faculties are equipped with audio and video equipment (e.g. computers, projectors, screens, interactive whiteboards and chalkboards). Students and teaching personnel have at their disposal the Technology and Knowledge Transfer Division (TEPEK), which aims to promote the protection of intellectual property of scientists and companies and the commercialization of research results at LBTU. The common material and technical resources of LBTU and those of the other Faculties or facilities are at disposal of the study programmes of the study field. Hostels are available to students and academic personnel.

A tour of the premises showed that all claims made in the document are true and valid. Overall, the infrastructure under review is to be assessed as very good. Interviews with key stakeholders underlined that there are plenty of opportunities for acquiring necessary books, databases, software packages, as well as for financing conference attendance in the country and abroad.

1.3.3. The Fundamental Library of LBTU (hereinafter - LBTU FB) is an accredited library of national significance, which provides users with information resources (SER, p. 43). More than 30 various

assistance materials are available for students (SER, p. 46). The funds of the LBTU FB are an independent component of the LBTU budget (SER, p. 48). A tour of the premises showed that all claims made in the document are true and valid. Overall, the infrastructure under review is to be assessed as very good. Subject-specific literature: books, newspapers and magazines, digitally work with all the available databases and search engines and receive services: printing, scanning and copying are available at the ESAF Centre for Studies and Scientific Information. For the Centre, books and other sources are purchased from the budget of ESAF. The Centre offers a wide range of periodicals that provide information necessary for the study field. These periodicals are only available at the Centre of ESAF. A detailed account of the statistics on the usage of various e-resources was provided. The LBTU FB users have an opportunity to search for information in the following subscribed foreign and national online databases: CAB Abstracts, CRC Press e-books, EBSCO eBook Academic Collection database covering a wide range of multidisciplinary topics in the EBSCO host databases, Academic Search Ultimate etc., ScienceDirect Journals, Scopus, SciVal, Web of Science, Wiley Online Library, Letonika, Newspaper library (Lursoft). Every user of the library is given an opportunity to receive professional help and advice at a time, manner and form acceptable to them. Advice and training are provided both individually and in groups.

In the discussions with students and members of the academic staff the issue of potentially insufficient resources has never been seriously raised. Although it was pointed out as a shortcoming in the previous accreditation process and it was recommended to supplement the book collection, the library still has too few books in the field of public administration.

1.3.4. In the study process at LBTU, the MOODLE platform is used in almost all courses in full-time and part-time studies, including part-time distance learning. It is a support system for the traditional study process for posting instructional materials, submitting homework, taking tests, as well as for communication with teaching personnel/students, remote online classes and other activities (SER, p. 50). The MOODLE platform contains learning materials that are intended to be used both for full-time studies and, in particular, for part-time distance learning. They are voluminous, with a range of additional materials, so that students can independently learn distance learning study courses according to the study plan. Teaching personnel regularly participate in training related to the use of digital solutions in teaching. Teaching personnel have regularly updated their knowledge of distance learning practices as part of the LBTU professional development study programme for higher education educators Innovations in University Didactics (120 h), in which special modules are taught on adult education and e-studies. An e-studies module is delivered by an LBTU e-studies methodologist, and she offers individual and group consultations and is always available for both teaching personnel and students. At the beginning of each academic year, the study programme director delivers face-to-face introductory classes (as part of the study course Introduction to Studies), in which also guest lectures are invited to students of both full-time and part-time distance learning, as well as the e-studies methodologist participates, introducing the students with the specifics of the MOODLE platform and how to use it. Students are introduced with how to use library resources at the LBTU FL and remotely, as well as how they can access the resources of the LBTU FL.

Studies for students of part-time distance learning are organized according to the Education Law (<https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/50759-education-law>) and regulations developed in LBTU, using specially designed study materials, provided by LBTU, and various technical and electronic means of communication such as MOODLE or BigBlueButton tool (SER, p. 50).

The study field provides information and communication technology solutions which ensure an effective and appropriate study process, as well as that it can be executed remotely.

1.3.5. The SER describes in detail procedures for attracting and/or employing the teaching staff. The LBTU Personnel Department announces an open competition for vacant academic positions by

publishing an advertisement in Official Publisher Latvijas Vēstnesis and on the LBTU website. Academic personnel elections are held by open voting: professors and associate professors are elected by the Board of Professors of the relevant branch of science not later than four months from the date of announcement of the competition; assistant professors, leading researchers, researchers, lecturers, assistants and research assistants are elected by the Board of each Faculty not later than three months from the date of announcement of the competition; leading researchers, researchers and research assistants are elected by the Board of Science of the respective research institute not later than two months from the date of announcement of the competition (SER, p.52). According to changes in national legislation from 2021, LBTU began evaluating professors every six years, and there is no longer a re-election procedure. At LBTU since 2022, a periodic evaluation of professors is held every two years according the rector's decision on Procedure for Evaluating the Scientific and Pedagogical Qualifications and Organizational Competence of LBTU Professors and Associate Professors (SER, p.52). The LBTU has developed a Procedure for Recruitment of Foreign Visiting Lecturers - a visiting lecturer may be invited by the responsible Faculty, or a foreign visiting lecturer may express a wish to carry out pedagogical / scientific activity at LBTU (SER, p.53).

At LBTU, the remuneration of an academic personnel member consists of 3 components: a salary, based on the Cabinet regulation Regulations regarding Remuneration of Pedagogues (<https://likumi.lv/ta/id/283667>) the rector decision On Remuneration of Pedagogues; a bonus paid based on the motivation system, as LBTU has developed and introduced a motivation system that allows the university to collect and evaluate the academic work activities of each teaching personnel member, which are not included in the workload. The system provides a point system based on 16 criteria; a bonus for scientific performance - every year LBTU collects and evaluates the performance of LBTU academic personnel, leading researchers, researchers and research assistants in terms of efficiency of scientific activity based on 7 criteria (SER, p.53). Studying the reports of the teaching staff on the academic work activities of each teaching staff, which are not part of the workload, it can be concluded that a large part of the activities mentioned in them are a mandatory part of the study process. These reports mentioned, for example, study tours to the library and various government institutions and NGOs.

However, analyzing the attached CVs of the academic staff, it can be concluded that the majority of lecturers who provide basic study courses in study programmes have a long working experience at LBTU and are close to retirement age. It seems that attracting new teachers is problematic. Some academic staff members do not have appropriate qualifications in the field of study (study courses in public administration are delivered by doctor of sciences in history) and have not proved their expertise in other ways (such as research work and publications).

1.3.6. The SER describes the formal system of professional and didactic development of the teaching staff. Professional development of academic personnel involves participation in appropriate professional development programmes, experience sharing and participation in conferences and seminars, as evidenced by the documents issued upon completion. Various university pedagogy courses offered by the structural unit of LBTU are widely subscribed to (SER, p. 54). In their CVs, academic staff members have mentioned courses delivered by LBTU and other agencies such as Innovations in university didactics (LBTU); Using the possibilities and tools of artificial intelligence in the study process (Ventspils University), Learning adult skills in Latvia - from data to practical work (ESAF project); EEA project "Entrepreneurship in Zemgale" webinar "International business etiquette"; Academic integrity (LBTU); Online teaching methodology (LBTU); Online tools for creating and communicating an interactive presentation and creating online surveys (LBTU); MS cloud services for data storage and sharing (LBTU). Every six years, academic personnel are entitled to six-month paid academic leave for research or for research activities outside their workplace; however, during the interviews, it became clear that none of those present had used it due to the heavy teaching load.

The motivation system evaluates teaching personnel according to 16 criteria, which are divided into 5 categories: student assessment; preparation of teaching aids; organizational work; professional development, and scientific activity. The motivation system allows teaching personnel to earn an extra bonus for high-quality work. The quality assessment points earned by a teaching personnel member are added up, and each criterion is assigned a weight. The LBTU Financial Planning Centre calculates the size of a bonus for each teaching personnel member based on the total score earned (SER, p. 54).

Academic staff have also other opportunities for professional development supported by the LBTU - ERASMUS + mobility programme, participation in international scientific conferences and seminars is funded within financial possibilities and the annual LBTU Academic Conference aiming to encourage teaching personnel to systematically develop their didactic competence and share their success with their colleagues (SER, p. 55).

In general, the SER describes the professional and didactic development of teaching staff in a very general way, its description in the CVs differs in the degree of detail. Therefore, the future self-evaluation report should come with more hyperlinks to external documents and web-sources that attest to the fulfillment of required criteria, primarily by relying on obligatory Google Scholar profiles for all members of the academic staff.

1.3.7. Twenty-nine teaching personnel are engaged in implementing the study field. Most of the teaching personnel are employed by the three institutes of ESAF: the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities (SOHU), including the Language Centre (ValC) - 20 teaching personnel; the Institute of Economics and Finance (EKFI), and the Institute of Business and Management Science (UZVA) have a total of 5 teaching personnel, yet teaching personnel from other LBTU faculties are also involved in delivering certain study courses (for example, the Faculty of Agriculture and Food Technology, the Faculty of Forest and Environmental Sciences and the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technologies - a total of 4 teaching personnel). The workload of teaching staff employed in the study field (SER, p. 56) is calculated as full-time equivalents and does not represent the actual workload of the main part of academic staff. In the 2022/2023 academic year, the total number of full-time employees equivalents in the BSP were 5.97 (a total of 31 lecturers were involved), while in MSP it was 1.28 full-time employees (total of 15 lecturers involved). Lecturers from other structural units provide a small part of the study courses, so the load distribution is uneven. Examining the CVs of the personnel involved in the implementation of the study programmes, it can be noticed that the lecturers recruited from other fields of study have more research experience, which is evidenced by participation in projects and the number of publications, and high-level knowledge of the English language (mainly C1, while those lecturers who provide the major part of the study process have B2). In the interviews with the academic staff, opinions were expressed that the teaching makes up the largest part of the workload, so there is little time left for research. In SWOT analysis, heavy workloads of academic personnel and difficulty in involving the personnel in producing instructional aids and textbooks are also mentioned as ones of the weaknesses (SER, p.18). This is inconsistent with the statement in SER p. 57 that cases of disproportionate workload for a teaching personnel member, do not occur because the workload is planned according to the LBTU Statute on Academic Workloads.

The status of a science university (Law on Higher Education Institutions <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/326218-par-valsts-augstskolu-tipiem>) presupposes the connection of studies and research; the minimum proportion of academic staff with a PhD (at least 65%) and involvement in research has been determined. The LBTU strategy mentions the strategic direction of research in social sciences as well: "Exploring social processes, social innovations and smart solutions in rural communities. Evaluating community-led development strategies. Attitudes and habits of society, entrepreneurs and certain social groups (youth, non-governmental organizations, entrepreneurs, educational institutions) study of changes as a result of climate change and the impact of



environmental policy (circular economy, climate change, zero waste, etc.). Analysis of opportunities for social and cultural sustainability. Promoting leadership and civic engagement in communities." (in Latvian - Latvian University of Biosciences and Technologies strategic areas of specialization and primarily developing science branches in the implementation of scientific activity, p.12 [https://www.lbtu.lv/sites/default/files/2023-02/2023\\_virzieni.pdf](https://www.lbtu.lv/sites/default/files/2023-02/2023_virzieni.pdf))

The general conclusion is that the main part of the academic staff involved in the study field is overloaded with lecturing, so there is no time for research, it is impossible to use academic leaves. The bonus system offered by the administration is not effective enough to attract new teachers, because due to the heavy lecture load, there is not enough time to develop a professional career.

1.3.8. The SER (p.58) describes in detail the financial aid for students and opportunities for various sports activities. Directors of the study programmes also participate in solving various issues of concern to students, for example, by listening to students' needs and recommending where to seek support (SER, p.58). On a competitive basis, students may apply for state scholarships and several scholarship contests administered by the LBTU Development Fund. The international students recruitment process and support in obtaining visas and arranging living conditions are described in detail. The international students are provided with a room in a well-equipped student hostel, are introduced to LBTU and the learning and living environments and the Latvian cultural environment, the LBTU SSC and foreign relations coordinators of the Faculties, as well as study programme directors inform students from abroad about the internal rules of procedure of LBTU and the respective practices, give advice on learning and everyday life issues, help with paperwork and help to solve various problems (SER, p. 59). The inspection of the premises showed that the visited buildings are equipped with elevators, enabling easy access to the auditoriums for students with mobility impairments. Unfortunately, the ESAF Center for Studies and Scientific Information is located in a part of the building that can only be accessed by narrow and steep stairs.

A survey on psycho-emotional health issues was conducted among LBTU students, which clarified the students' opinions on anxiety and depression. In the SER, the possibilities for receiving psychological support are described in very general terms - a lecture cycle was organized on topics identified by the survey as significant for the students. Once a month, the physician remotely provides professional consultations on depression, anxiety, and burnout to both Latvian and international students. Discussion with students from both study programmes showed that there is generally plenty of support for students with specific life situations such as sickness, disability, family-related stressful situations, etc. Members of the academic staff are forthcoming and flexible, especially with regard to work-study balance, since a large majority of students are working.

In general, in the interviews, students referred to individual communication with lecturers and directors of study programmes in solving various daily life and study problems. The LBTU has a supportive study environment and sports infrastructure. There is no information about specific support for distance students.

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

LBTU is a HEI with good study and research facilities. Well-equipped auditoriums, infrastructure resources and material and technical support are available for all LBTU study programmes, however, priority is given to those study areas that are unique on a national scale - agriculture, food processing technologies, etc. - the majority of students, professors and associated professors, research activities are in these fields of studies (SER, p. 5-6). The infrastructure under review is to be assessed as very good. Study field "Sociology, Political Science and Anthropology" attracts the most students from the local area and in recent years also from abroad.

LBTU possesses necessary resources for implementing the study field. There is an established system for determining and redistributing financial support but the presentation of it in the SER

should be more detailed. One also needs to provide the precise amount and composition of funding per every year under review.

LBTU supports financial subscriptions to social science databases, computer equipment, software for the needs of the study field. The overall conclusion is that the study field provides information and communication technology solutions which ensure an effective and appropriate study process, as well as that it can be executed remotely.

Although the study field academic staff includes some associate professors, experienced researchers, analyzing the attached CVs of the academic staff, it can be concluded that the majority of lecturers who provide basic study courses in the study programmes have a long working experience at LBTU and are close to retirement age. It is evident that attracting new teachers is problematic. Some academic staff members do not have appropriate qualifications in the field of study (study courses in public administration are delivered by doctor of sciences in history). The overall conclusion is that academic staff of the study field is aging, attracting new teachers seems problematic.

In general, this section of the SER describes the professional and didactic development of teaching staff in a very general way, its description in the CVs differs in the degree of detail. Therefore, the future SER report should come with more hyperlinks to external documents and web-sources that attest to the fulfillment of required criteria, primarily by relying on obligatory Google Scholar profiles for all members of the academic staff.

The general conclusion is that the academic staff is overloaded with lecturing, so there is no time for research, it is impossible to use academic leaves. The bonus system offered by the administration is not effective enough to attract new teachers, because due to the heavy lecture load, there is not enough time to develop a professional career.

Although in general, psychological support for students at LBTU is provided quite formally, in study programmes, lecturers work with a very small number of students, which promotes an individual approach to the study process. Discussions with students from both study programmes showed that there is generally plenty of support for students with specific life situations such as sickness, disability, family-related stressful situations, etc. Members of the academic staff are forthcoming and flexible, especially with regard to work-study balance, since a large majority of students are working.

#### Strengths:

- 1) Excellent infrastructure and synergies among structural units of the LBTU.
- 2) Good availability of various e-resources, databases, news outlets, and software packages.
- 3) Qualified academic staff with experience in research and teaching, with English language skills.
- 4) Accessibility for disabled students.
- 5) 24/7 library services and plenty of work space.
- 6) Members of the academic staff are forthcoming and flexible, especially with regard to work-study balance, since a large majority of students are working.

#### Weaknesses:

- 1) The number of students in the study programmes is small, so the tuition costs are high (see Analysis 1.3.1.).
- 2) High workload of academic staff in teaching, which limits their opportunities to engage in research.
- 3) Insufficiently motivating academic staff remuneration bonus system.
- 4) It is difficult to determine how much of the research work of the academic staff of the study field is financed through LBTU and how much through other sources of funding making LBTU support even lesser (see Analysis 1.3.1., 1.3.7.).
- 5) Although it was pointed out as a shortcoming in the previous accreditation process and it was recommended to supplement the book collection, the library still has too few books in the field of

public administration.

6) Aging academic staff, attracting new teachers seem problematic.

## **1.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation**

### **Analysis**

1.4.1. The University acknowledges the current problems in Latvian rural development. There is a lack of livelihoods in the rural areas. The migration flows from rural to urban areas and from rural areas to abroad pose challenges for the viability of rural areas. The University emphasizes regional development in social science research. According to SER (p. 60) LBTU's strategic research priorities in social sciences include sustainable and smart territorial development, socio-economic impacts of a knowledge-intensive bioeconomy, and the interaction between environmentally responsible businesses and societal development. The directions of scientific research of the study field correspond to the development goals of the higher education institution in the emphasis on rural sociology. The research in the study field is focused e.g. on local food production. According to SER (p. 61), LBTU conducts research in its key areas, such as sustainable territorial development, community involvement in promoting and enhancing local life, food systems, culture and identity, educational issues, and more. According to their area of specialization, the analyzed study programmes fit into the general research directions of the LBTU. Both study programmes, at the BA and MA level, are largely focused on issues of regional and rural development as a special area within the broader focus of the sociology of organization and public administration.

1.4.2. The LBTU's priorities align with Latvia's Smart Specialization Strategy and focus on both fundamental and applied research (SER, p. 61). The LBTU Research Programme sets specific targets such as publishing in SCOPUS and WoS-indexed journals, participating in EU projects, and increasing private sector collaboration. Operational plans support these goals through initiatives like Horizon Europe participation and enhancing research quality. Collaborations with institutions like Vytautas Magnus University and the University of Helsinki, alongside various commissioned studies representing applied research, are deemed to enhance LBTU's international visibility and research impact. However, the connection of scientific research of the study field with the study process is mostly realized through completion of bachelor and master thesis. Since the academic staff members' scientific output is low, there are only few opportunities to integrate their research outcomes into the study process. The students indicated that the teachers only seldom made reference to their own research findings. However, there is no evidence of publications of student BA thesis in domestic or international scholarly journals, nor joint authorship of students with professors.

1.4.3. The study field has established cooperation with Vytautas Magnus University, the Estonian University of Life Sciences, the University of Helsinki (Ruralia Institute), Wageningen University, and the Nordic Council of Ministers. The academic staff has participated in few European level research projects. According to SER (p. 63), the primary scientific research activities involving leading researchers and their engagement with the international scientific community include participation in COST activities, Horizon2020 projects, and European Commission Erasmus+ (KA2) projects (e.g., REMAP, SKILLED UP, RuralCOM). The LBTU argues that these initiatives facilitated the international transfer of knowledge and experience, resulting in the creation of educational materials, public educational events, and interactive e-training tools. The SER also indicates that research papers have also been published in highly cited and open access journals. However, this is not seen in the publication record of the teachers. There are in general very few international peer-reviewed articles and in particular very few scientific publications co-authored with international collaborators. This indicates that within the study field and the relevant study programmes international cooperation in

the field of scientific research and applied research is not fully ensured and purposefully developed.

1.4.4. University aims to emphasize publications in Scopus/ Web-of-Science ranked journals. According to SER (p. 65), LBTU has implemented a motivation system that annually assesses scientific performance, considering the number and quality of research papers (especially those in high-impact journals), participation in and management of national and international research projects, patents, involvement in sectoral organizations, and peer reviews. As for bonus for publications the study centers calculate publication and reward bonus salary for academic achievements. Publications is one criterion for awarding bonuses. This evaluation applies to elected teaching staff, researchers, and leading researchers, who receive a bonus to their salary based on their performance. ESAF supports high-level research papers (targeting international Q1 and Q2 publications) and participation in various research projects, available to all researchers and lecturers, including guest lecturers. The system does not seem to incentivise publications in international peer-reviewed journals or there are other obstacles for this type of research output. The fact is that the academic staff has only very few Scopus/ Web-of-Science publications. During the interviews they cited teaching workload as the main reason for not publishing peer-reviewed articles. The SER (p. 65) argues that the teaching staff involved in the study direction engage in interdisciplinary research, utilizing social sciences and sociology findings to address complex problems. According to SER (p. 65), during 2013-2023, the teaching personnel participated in around 40 research and commissioned projects, including the ERA-NET project "RETHINK". The SER argues that research opportunities are equally available to elected and guest lecturers. LBTU management informed during the interviews that there are competitive internal University funds for research projects (max 10 000 euros for two years). Projects are awarded to three main directions of the University. However, only very few teachers in the study field have applied for these grants. The Project Center in the University supports faculty members in grant writing and project management. There was no information if the academic staff in the study field has applied for external research funding. By law, every faculty member is entitled to half year sabbatical leave after six years of service. This opportunity was not utilized in the study field. Collaboration with partners from Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, and Romania aims to create an international master's study programme in community development, under the Erasmus+ (KA2) project "Joint Master's Curriculum in Rural Community Development." Currently the project is on hold. LBTU has developed mechanisms for the involvement of the teaching staff in scientific research and applied research. However, they are not fully utilized in the study field.

1.4.5. According to the SER (p. 67), involving students in research is considered crucial for enhancing the research capacity of the study direction. Both bachelor and master's students participate in research activities. In collaboration with the LETA news agency, students have conducted exit polls for various elections. Students have also worked on research projects, with some serving as assistants to leading researchers through formal contracts. Teaching personnel can utilize LBTU internal grant programmes to involve master's and doctoral students, as well as new scientists, in research. However, only very few teachers in the study field have applied for these grants. The University organizes annual international scientific conferences for undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate students. In the study field, both bachelor and master level students have been participating in the conferences. At these conferences, bachelor and master's students present their research findings and theses, publishing abstracts and research papers. Additionally, with their advisors, students prepare research papers for publication in international scientific conference proceedings. During the interviews, the students cited positive comments of their participation. The material obtained during the evaluation demonstrates that the students of the study programmes of all levels are involved in scientific research and applied research.

1.4.6. SER (p. 68) mentions summer schools and Moodle platform as innovative solutions which have significant positive impact on the study process. The Moodle platform appears as a standard tool while the summer schools were not mentioned as important by the students during the interview. However, the practice to engage students in scientific research appears as an innovative solution. Among other events, the University organizes an annual International Scientific Conference with the title 'Students on their way to science' for undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate students. That gives the students an easy access to engage with international scientific research. Also, there are other similar events, such as the conference 'Economic Science for Rural Development', which is interdisciplinary in character and where researchers from other disciplines (e.g. sociology) take part.

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

The structures for the scientific research are in place but the actual achievements leave quite a lot of room for improvement. The students of the study programmes of all levels are involved in scientific research and applied research. However, teachers' own engagement in scientific research is on a low level. Teachers' teaching schedule should be more flexible to allow time for writing research applications and conducting scientific research. More research projects and peer-reviewed journal articles in international journals would improve study fields' contribution to university's overall mission and strengthen its role in LBTU. That goes also for having more research papers co-authored with scholars from abroad. That would also enhance the quality of the teaching and students' engagement in scientific research.

#### **Strengths:**

- 1) Study field's focus on rural sociology aligns with LBTU's overall goals.
- 2) Involving the students in scientific research through an annual international research conference.

#### **Weaknesses:**

- 1) Scientific output in terms of international peer-reviewed publications and participation in research projects is low.
- 2) The staff members do not apply for internal or external research funds and do not utilize the research leave scheme.
- 3) LBTU has developed mechanisms for the involvement of the teaching staff in scientific research and applied research. However, they are not fully utilized in the study field.
- 4) Small number of enrolled students undermines the potential of new teaching and working methods.

### **Assessment of the requirement [2]**

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

#### **Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

The level of scientific research in terms of international peer-reviewed articles is very low. Teachers' teaching schedule should be more flexible to allow time for writing research applications and conducting scientific research. More research projects and peer-reviewed journal articles in international journals would improve study fields' contribution to university's overall mission and strengthen its role in the HEI.

## **1.5. Cooperation and Internationalisation**

### **Analysis**

1.5.1. Through on-site interviews and statements in the SER, it was determined that the central focus of study programmes in the study field is the regional development and that the key edge is the rural and regional dimensions of these study programmes. Consequently, cooperation partners in Latvia are selected based on distinctive features of the field of study and relevant study programmes. For example, cooperation with local municipalities and the non-governmental sector takes place in accordance with the orientation of the study programmes to study current problems in Latvian regions (SER, p.71).

Employers' responses during the on-site visit varied in terms of the duration of their cooperation with LBTU. Some indicated a longstanding partnership of 30 years, others mentioned that collaboration started since initiation of study programmes, others mentioned over 5 years of cooperation, some mentioned collaboration since 2019, while other employers noted no explicit cooperation, aside from the employment of graduates of these study programmes. Each of them described various ways of partnering with LBTU. For instance, engaging in joint projects with LBTU, as seen with the Zemgale Planning Region. Another approach involved direct communication with LBTU lecturers, who invite industry professionals to give lectures to students, as observed by the Zemgale NGO Centre. For example, the head of the Zemgale NGO center, delivered a guest lecture titled "Civil Participation" to master's students in the study course "Public and Non-Governmental Sector", which was organized by assistant professor Jānis Ķūsis. Furthermore, some employers maintain regular communication with directors of study programmes, delivering lectures or organizing excursions at their center, as practiced by research agency KANTAR. For instance, a senior client manager at KANTAR, conducted a guest lecture titled "Latest Approaches and Methods in Market and Marketing Research" for students in bachelor and master's study programmes, as part of the courses "Sociology in Latvia" and "Fundamentals of Research Work", organized by the director of the study field and master's study programme. Overall, according to information provided by LBTU, there has been significant collaboration established with industry professionals to provide guest lectures for students. Between 2019 and 2023, industry partners such as the representatives from University of Latvia, Jelgava region, among others, have delivered guest lectures, organized by different lecturers at LBTU. However, there is no evidence that visiting lecturers (including, employers) contribute to provision of the core study courses like qualitative and quantitative research methods to demonstrate links between study subjects and practical demonstration of various solutions or discussion on linking theory and research methods together in practice.

Also, as part of Alumni Week in the fall semester each year, guest lectures are delivered to all bachelor's and master's students at the Faculty of Economics and Social Development, during which, faculty alumni share their professional experiences and offer insights into current industry developments (SER, p.69). According to the information provided by LBTU, since 2019, there have been at least 8 graduates each year who have delivered guest lectures to students. Experts regard organization of such events as a beneficial practice for enriching students with field-specific information. At the on-site meeting, both bachelor and master's students acknowledged having guest lecturers. They cited representatives from the before-mentioned enterprises and graduates in Alumni Week as examples. Furthermore, graduates of the study programmes recalled the presence of guest lecturers during their own study periods. One graduate mentioned being approached by LBTU teachers to give a guest lecture to first-year master's students, while others who had not yet been invited to give guest lectures, expressed their openness in doing so. Overall, experts recognize that LBTU makes an effort to arrange guest lectures by field representatives for students. They suggest continuing this practice and propose that inviting more guest lecturers from the industry could further provide students with even greater hands-on insight into the field.

Moreover, within the study courses, the teaching staff arranges study trips to organizations that best exemplify the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical aspects of organizational performance (SER, p. 71). This was also confirmed during on-site visit by LBTU academic staff. For instance, assistant professor Jolanta Millere mentioned that in 2022 she organized field trip to the NP

Jelgava Business Park for master's students, and associate professor Signe Dobelniece noted that for her courses, which focuses on social welfare, problems, and work, she arranges visits to social service enterprises. Additionally, as indicated in the information provided by LBTU, Gita Kronberga, the director of the bachelor's study programme, arranged a field trip to the Zemgale NGO center in 2022. At the on-site meeting, bachelor's students also shared their experience of participating in various study field trips. At the same time, in the meeting with international bachelor's students, they revealed that they have had limited opportunities to participate in field trips to local businesses compared to local students. One student mentioned visiting Zemgale NGO center as part of their study experience, while others primarily mentioned visiting museums focusing on local or municipal topics. This is also supported by information provided by LBTU, which reveals that aside from the two visits to local businesses previously mentioned, the majority of field trips are organized primarily to museums within LBTU and the Jelgava municipality, as well as to Jelgava St. Trinity Church Tower and LBTU facilities. In general, while experts agree that it is admirable for LBTU to arrange cultural insight trips to Jelgava and facility tours, there is a need to broaden these excursions to better align them thematically with the study field and integrate them more closely with the study process for both local and international students.

As it is mentioned in SER (p.70), lecturers of both study programmes have established cooperation with associations of rural communities, for example the association Public Centre "Aizkalne", which operates in Preiļi municipality, Craft Centre "Rūme" in Zasa parish, as well as the association "Watermarks" in Kaldabruņa village. Two summer schools were organized in cooperation with these associations. The first summer school called "Building a Community. Its Social, Economic and Cultural Aspects in Practice" was held in 2017 in Kaldabruņa village. The school was held in cooperation with association "Watermarks" and gathered students from various study programmes of the Faculty of Economics and Social Development. The activities involved theoretical workshops on community building and local resources, as well as practical application of various social research methods. As a result, students presented their vision for the future development of the local community (SER, p. 68). The second summer school, called "What to do with the Place?" was held in 2019 and was organized in cooperation with association Public Centre "Aizkalne". It gathered bachelor and master students from various LBTU Faculties, as well as two universities of Latvia - LBTU and the University of Latvia, thereby creating an interdisciplinary view of local development scenarios (SAR, p. 68). The purpose of the summer school was to explore the existing cultural, social, physical and other resources and to create a collaborative model for promoting development for the place. For a week, the students got to know the cultural and historical region of Latgale, visited local farms and craftsmen, as well as observed and questioned the residents of Aizkalne (SER, p.133). During the on-site meeting, students also confirmed their participation in the summer school, as well as associate professor Ženiņa Krūzmētra confirmed that she has helped with the organization of these summer schools. Experts view the introduction of these summer schools as a valuable innovation, providing students with the opportunity to apply their research skills and knowledge in practical settings by analyzing real-life cases, as well as highlight this cooperative practice involving associations, other Latvian universities, and students from various fields.

There is not a formal internship system established within the study field, but it seems that students are aware of internship opportunities available to them. During the on-site visit, nearly all employers elaborated on several aspects regarding student internships and practical training and stated some of them already offer opportunities for student practice and that there are open positions for internships. Many noted that students typically find out about practice possibilities at their enterprises independently. Furthermore, all employers emphasized the importance of students gaining more practical experience alongside their theoretical knowledge. They suggested that internship implementation into study programmes would provide students with valuable practical experience, particularly in research institutions where flexibility is crucial and is best learned through hands-on experience, and expressed readiness to continue hosting internships if they were

part of the curriculum. Therefore, considering the evident student interest to do internships, even if not formally integrated into the study plan, along with the present and future willingness of employers to host them, it is suggested to explore the possibility of incorporating internships into the study curriculum, which would be aligned with the structure of the study field, allowing students to use internships as a method to contribute to their educational outcomes as well as allow them to discover local companies and gain early exposure to their respective fields. During the on-site visit, three employer representatives noted that some graduates from study programmes are currently employed in their enterprises and acknowledged that these students are well-prepared for the labor market. Similarly, graduates at the on-site meeting also recognized that their education at LBTU had adequately prepared them for the labor market. For instance, Inta Priedola from KANTAR mentioned that sociology students are their centers' first choice when looking for new employees. She highlighted that over the past decade, numerous graduates have been employed at KANTAR, with five currently working there, including three specifically involved in research processes.

Additionally, cooperation with employers is maintained by inviting them to participate in the work of the Master Examination Committee, encouraging them to suggest topics or research problems for graduate theses and inviting them to be student advisors (SER, p. 70). As stated in the SER and verified during the on-site visit, Dace Vilmane, a representative from the administration of Zemgale Planning Region, regularly participates in this committee to evaluate the relevance of students' research topics. In general, regarding their involvement in curriculum development, most employers on the on-site meeting stated that they typically do not participate. However, one employer mentioned providing suggestions for the improvement of both study programmes in 2019. At the same time, they highlighted the need of integrating study courses that develop research methods and data analysis skills into the study programmes. Therefore, to ensure that students receive the most up-to-date knowledge in sociology and research, it is crucial to increase the participation of industry professionals in the development of study courses.

In the SER, the LBTU states that in the future, they plan to develop and expand closer cooperation with several groups of employers and organizations representing employers to strengthen the linkage between education and the labour market (SER, p. 70). Experts agree that this approach will be beneficial, as indicated previously, especially involving them, when it comes to work with students and research. Overall, experts observe that the institutions in Latvia with which LBTU collaborates are well-aligned with the skill set expected of graduates in sociology and social anthropology. Furthermore, during the on-site visit, it was evident that the management of the study field acknowledges the importance of collaboration between the field of study and Latvia's industry representatives. Employers have also demonstrated a high regard for the study field, indicating that the graduates of the study programmes are in demand in the job market.

1.5.2. In 2023, LBTU Supervisory Board approved the LBTU Internationalization Policy ([https://www.lbtu.lv/sites/default/files/2023-03/LBTU\\_Internacionalizacijas\\_politika\\_2023.pdf](https://www.lbtu.lv/sites/default/files/2023-03/LBTU_Internacionalizacijas_politika_2023.pdf)), which defines the goals and priorities of LBTU's international cooperation (SER, p. 71).

Additionally, for cooperation with foreign institutions, LBTU has developed an Internationalization Plan. According to LBTU, this plan outlines the goals, priorities and performance targets of international cooperation in the areas of student exchange, full-time studies for foreigners and living conditions for foreigners, as well as defines several key activities. These include prioritizing partnerships with higher education institutions in EU and partner countries that share similar study and research profiles with LBTU, emphasizes collaboration with international university associations in which LBTU participates, such as European Association of Life Sciences Universities, Baltic University Programme, Baltic-Nordic Agricultural University Network, and Nordic Association of Agricultural Scientists, as well as notes participation in joint projects, research, mutual cooperation in scientific and methodological conferences and other (SER, p. 71). LBTU also provided further clarification regarding the Internationalization Plan. According to LBTU representatives, this plan is



standardized for all foreign admissions and follows a specific steps: each faculty develops a faculty plan to implement the LBTU strategy, where all indicators are aligned with both the faculty and the fields of study; the plan is discussed in the Faculty Council, including representatives from all study programmes, including students, and overall the plan specifies the anticipated outcomes, tracks progress, and reports on the achieved outcomes. As observed in an excerpt from the Faculty of Economics and Social Development's Plan, it outlines internationalization objectives for upcoming years. The plan predominantly consists of key performance indicators from 2022 to projected outcomes in 2027, including metrics such as student and graduate numbers, graduate employment rates, financial aspects, study quality ratings, the number of English-language programmes, student and academic staff mobility figures, among others. However, the plan appears somewhat different from what was described in the SER. Rather than a strategy with specific steps to achieve objectives, it primarily presents the desired outcomes that LBTU aims to accomplish. It has to be noted that the documents provided contain minimal mention of specific plans for the sociology field, instead offering a general overview of LBTU or Faculty of Economics and Social Development plans as a whole.

LBTU outlines its approach of selecting international cooperation partners for the study fields and programmes based on specific criteria. At the university level, collaboration agreements are established with universities sharing similar profiles in social sciences studies and research. Additionally, partners are chosen to enhance the internationalization of studies based on the interests and needs of students and faculty. Moreover, new collaboration opportunities are discovered through networking at scientific conferences and projects related to the study fields' focus (SER, p. 73). It is important to note that, once again, this information applies to general practices at LBTU and does not specify procedures for the sociology study field.

According to annex 2.5.1, LBTU has primarily listed cooperation agreements with partners in Latvia. Regarding international partners, there are only five general agreements listed with international HEIs, including The West University of Timisoara, Fulda University, University of Vienna, Slovak University of Agriculture, and Aeres University of Applied Sciences. The current number of foreign partner HEI's is low and should be expanded, especially focusing on sociology study field specifics.

During the reporting period, work was started to establish an international master's programme in community development, in collaboration with partner universities from Estonia (Estonian University of Life Sciences), Lithuania (Vytautas Magnus University), Finland (Ruralia Institute of the University of Helsinki), and Romania (Bucharest University of Economic Studies). As a result, between 2020 and 2023, cooperation efforts resulted in the implementation of the project "Joint Master's Curriculum in Rural Community Development" under the ERASMUS+ program, which focused on developing and approving joint study materials (SER, p. 73). During the on-site visit, LBTU representatives expressed optimism about the future prospects of this collaborative international study programme. Experts view this programme as a potential future success and a model of effective international cooperation practice.

Overall, it is evident that while there are plans and indicators in place for LBTU or ESAF as a whole, there is a lack of specific plans established for the sociology field. In the expert view, this is somewhat limiting because while the overall plans of LBTU offer guidance, without specific plans for individual study fields, which have their own unique characteristics, it limits opportunities for development and proactive measures. Therefore, specific plans and objectives specifically tailored to the development of the sociology field need to be established.

1.5.3. For recruiting teaching staff from abroad, LBTU relies on a Procedure for Recruitment of Foreign Visiting Lecturers, developed based on the decision of LBTU Rector. This procedure outlines that a visiting lecturer can either be invited by the responsible Faculty or lecturers themselves can express interest to carry out pedagogical or scientific activities at LBTU. The responsible Faculty then assigns study course or research, as well as pedagogical tasks to the foreign visiting lecturer

based on their competences (SER, pp. 52-53). As of October 1, 2023, there are a total of 7 foreign visiting professors, visiting assistant professors, and visiting lecturers at LBTU (SER, p. 7). The presence of visiting foreign academic staff at LBTU is currently limited, suggesting room for improvement to increase their numbers.

Between 2013 and 2023, a total of 92 foreign academic staff representatives visited LBTU from various countries including Hungary, Netherlands, Turkey, Poland, Lithuania, U.S., Germany, Croatia, Italy, Romania, Portugal, Spain, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Albania, Czech Republic, Sweden, U.K., France and Estonia (Annex 2.5.4). However, the number of incoming staff has significantly decreased since 2018.

Outgoing staff mobility is nearly a half the size of incoming staff mobility. Between 2013 and 2023, LBTU academic staff participated in a total of 52 Erasmus+ mobilities, including both staff mobility for teaching and staff mobility for training. Specifically, 42 of these mobilities were dedicated to teaching, while 10 were for training purposes. These mobilities took place in various countries including Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Sweden, Spain, Portugal, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Netherlands, France, Croatia, Finland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Italy, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Poland (Annex 2.5.4). Although the overall staff mobility during the reporting period is satisfactory, similar to incoming academic staff, there has been a significant decrease since 2019, with no more than four members participating in mobility per year. Specifically, in the academic year 2022/2023, only two staff members took part in mobility, which is still a relatively low figure, apart from the years of the COVID pandemic (Annex 2.5.4). At the same time, several academic staff representatives during the on-site meeting confirmed that they have used Erasmus+ mobility opportunities. They unanimously expressed the value of this experience, emphasizing the knowledge gained, which they further on use in the study process. Additionally, they highlighted establishing contacts with academic staff members of foreign HEI's and significance of insights gained into the organization of study processes in other countries and mentioned adopting tips and tricks, such as making seminars more interactive, as one of the significant benefits. Moreover, they mentioned attending storytelling masterclasses, which improved their ability to present study material in engaging ways, which certainly exemplifies the added value to the study process. Overall, academic staff members expressed that LBTU is receptive to teachers' proposals for project participation and has not refused their participation in them. In general, experts believe that both the outgoing and incoming staff numbers are insufficient and need to be increased, especially taking into account the positive reviews of LBTU's academic staff members, who have already participated in mobilities.

The study field, as outlined in LBTU's website (<https://www.lbtu.lv/lv/erasmus-studejoso-mobilitate>) has established four mobility cooperation agreements with foreign HEIs, including institutions like OLSZTYN University, Polish Academy of Sciences, Adnan Menderes University, and Kırıkkale University. The low number of cooperation agreements is clearly evident. Specifically concerning the sociology field, LBTU representatives confirmed that there are only four partner universities. However, they added that students in the sociology study field can also choose partner universities from various other study fields listed on the website, such as social and behavioral sciences, social work and counseling, education and political sciences and civics. If the study fields previously listed are included, there are cooperation agreements with 15 universities, according to LBTU representatives. Additionally, they added that students have the option to choose study fields like economics as well, if the courses can be equated and are approved by the study programme director. Overall, LBTU representatives concluded that students' Erasmus choices are not necessarily closely "tied" to a specific field of study, as all courses must ultimately be coordinated with the study programme director. Therefore, according to them, to a large extent, it depends on the flexibility of the study programme's management to align courses. They also mentioned that the sociology study field is undergoing contract renewal, with existing contracts being reviewed and renewed, alongside the signing of new agreements where possible. On the whole, the system seems somewhat perplexing. Despite students having the option to pick partner universities from other study fields,

and the flexibility of LBTU management, there still remains a need for more cooperation agreements specifically for the Sociology study field.

Outgoing student mobility has been lacking with a notably low number of students using these opportunities. Between 2013 and 2023, only 7 students in total from both bachelor and master's study programmes, participated in mobility. Among them, six were bachelor's students and one was a master's student, going to countries such as Spain, Portugal, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania. In academic years of 2015/2016 and 2019/2020, only 2 students per year participated in mobility, while in other years, there was only one student, and in some instances, none at all (Annex 2.5.3). Overall, there has not been a noticeable increase in outgoing student mobility since 2013/2014 and it is alarming to see such low participation from students in both bachelor and master's study programmes. As indicated in the SER and confirmed during on-site visit, bachelor students have shown more active involvement in Erasmus+ opportunities compared to master students. During the on-site visit, bachelor's students mentioned their participation in Erasmus+ mobility but acknowledged the challenge of finding universities that would align with their study programme at LBTU due to very specific courses that are difficult to align. Master's students' limited participation in the mobility is primarily due to the majority of students working alongside their studies and family commitments (SER, p. 74), however, they expressed openness to participate in shorter-term Erasmus opportunities if they were available. Overall, students in all study levels noted that the International Centre of LBTU informs them about Erasmus possibilities, with teachers also offering support. Despite students appearing to be aware of Erasmus+ mobility opportunities, the overall system is evidently deficient, as confirmed by statistics on student participation in such mobilities. To improve the current situation, experts suggest that there should be different strategies for bachelor's and master's students. For bachelor's students, greater promotion of opportunities and addressing the issue of study course alignment by establishing agreements with more foreign HEIs for diverse study course options in the field of sociology are recommended. To engage more master's students in Erasmus mobility, LBTU should explore shorter project opportunities within the Erasmus framework.

Regarding the incoming student mobility, the engagement has been satisfactory, with a total of 80 students from abroad studying in the study programmes of the study field between 2013 and 2023. These students originated from a variety of countries, including Belarus, Czech Republic, Croatia, Netherlands, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Turkey, Germany, Estonia, Kazakhstan, France, Slovakia, Malta, Albania, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Although the number of students decreased during the years of the COVID pandemic, it stabilized in the academic year 2022/2023 with 10 students present in LBTU (Annex 2.5.3). However, information regarding the distribution of incoming students across study programmes was not provided by LBTU.

During the reporting period, efforts were made to internationalize the study programmes, resulting in their licensing to be conducted in English (SER, p. 91), therefore, at the moment there are permanent international students enrolled at LBTU. LBTU use several strategies to attract international students, such as e-marketing activities, participation in international education fairs (SER, p. 74) and partnerships with recruitment agents in foreign countries (SER, pp. 73-74) such as the United Kingdom, Azerbaijan, India, Netherlands, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam (SER, p. 72). During the on-site visit, Ligita Vaita, a representative from LBTU's International Cooperation Centre, explained that LBTU has established special cooperation agreements with these foreign agencies to facilitate student recruitment. As indicated in Annex 2.5.2, the student enrollment from countries with which LBTU has cooperation agreements, with recruitment agents is sometimes higher, particularly in cases like India and Sri Lanka. However, for other countries, the number of students is similar to those without such agreements. Furthermore, according to the statistics, it appears that students from most of the countries with whom LBTU has such agreements, in fact, have not studied in LBTU programmes in the reporting period (Annex 2.5.2). Also, during the on-site meeting, international students from both bachelor's and master's study

programmes mentioned that they discovered the study opportunities at LBTU through internet searches, particularly by searching on Google for sociology field studies. Many of them chose these study programmes because LBTU is the only university in Latvia offering sociology studies in English. Experts view LBTU's offer of sociology studies in English as a significant competitive advantage and believe that it has a potential to attract more international students in the future. However, the fact that students relied on Google rather than recruitment agents with whom LBTU has agreements to find out about study opportunities, raises questions about the effectiveness and necessity of such services. Instead, larger PR campaigns may be suggested as a more effective approach to attract foreign students in the future. Between the academic years 2016/2017 and 2022/2023, a total of 29 bachelor's students have been enrolled in the bachelor's study programme, while from 2015/2016 to 2023/2024, there have been 21 master's students enrolled in the master's study programme, making up a total of 50 international students permanently enrolled in the study field programmes during the reporting period (Annex 2.5.2). Overall, it is apparent that there has been steady growth in the number of international students in both bachelor's and master's programmes during the years. It is worth noting that, in comparison to the overall number of students, there has also been a considerable dropout rate among permanent international students. In the bachelor's study programme, a total of 11 students dropped out between the academic years 2017/2018 and 2022/2023. For instance, in the academic year 2020/2021, out of 8 enrolled students, 5 dropped out, marking the highest number within the reporting period (Annex 1. Statistical data on students enrolled on the academic bachelor programme SOPA clarified). However, LBTU did not provide similar statistics for master's students. The SER (p. 104) mentions that studies are also provided for groups of students with less than 5 students, and during on-site interviews, students revealed that only a handful of master's international students are studying in the English streams, indicating that dropout rates among master's international students may also be present. Overall, at the on-site meeting, students expressed a desire for stronger connections between local and international students. Local students mentioned that they would be open to attending lectures in English since they already engage with English materials in their studies. Experts support this view and suggest combining certain study courses for both Latvian and English streams. This approach could create a mutually beneficial situation by optimizing teacher workload of teaching the small number of students in English streams while fostering greater integration between local and international students.

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

Cooperation with partners in Latvia is based on the study field's distinctive focus on regional development. Employer engagement with LBTU varies in duration and intensity, including joint projects, guest lectures, field trips to enterprises, among other activities like them serving on the master's examination committee and creating summer schools. While there is no formal internship system in place, students are aware of existing opportunities, as well as employers express readiness to continue the practice of providing internships for students. All in all, collaboration between LBTU and institutions in Latvia is viewed positively by experts.

In 2023, LBTU approved an Internationalization Policy and developed an Internationalization Plan to guide its international cooperation efforts. Overall, it is evident that while there are plans and indicators in place for LBTU or ESAF as a whole, there is a lack of specific plans established for the sociology field, limiting its development.

Incoming academic staff numbers at LBTU are sufficient, but outgoing mobility is lower, indicating a need for improvement. The sociology field has limited cooperation agreements, with only four partner universities, and although students can choose mobilities from other study fields, more agreements specifically for the sociology field are needed. Outgoing student mobility is notably low, while incoming student mobility has been satisfactory. With both study programmes licensed to be

conducted in English, experts view LBTU's offer of sociology studies in English as a significant competitive advantage.

**Strengths:**

- 1) Long-standing collaborations with employers and organizations in Latvia, as well as alumni.
- 2) Introduction of summer schools in collaboration with several local associations.
- 3) Work toward the future establishment of an international master's programme, if realized, shows a promising model of international cooperation practice.
- 4) Satisfactory incoming student mobility and growth in permanent international student enrollment.
- 5) English-taught sociology programmes are a competitive advantage in comparison to other HEI's in Latvia.

**Weaknesses:**

- 1) Limited frequency of field trips to local enterprises, along with lack of alignment with the features of the study field.
- 2) Lack of a formal internship system within the study field.
- 3) Limited involvement of employers in curriculum development.
- 4) Lack of specific plans and international cooperation agreements for the sociology field within LBTU's internationalization efforts.
- 5) Limited presence of foreign visiting staff and declining staff mobility.
- 6) Low participation in outgoing student mobility between both bachelor and master students.

### **Assessment of the requirement [3]**

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

Although LBTU's collaboration with institutions in Latvia is strong, there are shortcomings in terms of international cooperation and Erasmus+ mobility aspects.

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

### **Analysis**

1.6.1. The previous accreditation of the study field was in 2012 (Report 2012), and then certain recommendations were given in order to improve BA and MA study programmes and the recommendations had to be fulfilled in the coming period. After that, there were three recommendations during the evaluation of changes in the accredited study field (SOPA MA study programme) during 2021, and three additional recommendations in 2022. These recommendations concerned the inclusion of electronic forms of teaching materials in the study curriculum for individual study courses, the improvement of English language proficiency, the introduction and improvement of distance learning and the development of a system of additional financial compensation for teachers who participate in this form of teaching due to the increased scope of work and individualized progress.

The report from 2012 contained seven recommendations concerning a clearer connection of the courses with the results of teacher's research; attracting academic staff specialized in the field of public administration as a supplement to existing employees; inclusion of foreign or visiting professors in the core courses of study programmes; internationalization primarily through participation in Erasmus and similar programs of students, as well as teachers; strengthening the

capacity of the library, especially with regard to acquiring titles in the field of political science and public administration; establishing an alumni community and improving the financial and spatial conditions for the work of the student council.

In the past ten years, no academic staff "... with a distinct profile in public administration..." (Report 2012, recommendation 2) has been employed, although this was an explicit recommendation that aimed at strengthening the public administration dimension of the studies. The increase of content in the field of public administration is mainly implemented through the organization of guest lectures delivered by practitioners from various public administration organizations. However, courses in the field of public administration are still not represented to a sufficient extent among the mandatory and optional courses in both study levels, BA and MA.

The library regularly acquires new titles, mainly from the fields of sociology, economics, organizational sciences but much less from the field of political science and very few from the field of public administration.

Distance learning has been introduced, but only for the BA study level, while at the MA level such a form is still not applied. Hopefully, it will be implemented in the future also at the level of MSP.

Also, a teacher payment system at the university level was developed, which is based on three salary components (basic salary and bonuses for motivation - 16 criteria and scientific performance - 7 criteria).

The Alumni Club was formally established in 2014, but graduates are not sufficiently informed about its existence despite the fact that Alumni Week is held relatively regularly (the last one was in March 2024, just before the visit of the experts' group). Graduates participate in student employability surveys conducted by LBTU for the purposes of improving the study process (SER, p. 117-118).

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

The recommendations from the previous study programme accreditation cycle were only partially fulfilled. Recommendations concerning the attraction of personnel with a strong focus on the field of public administration, strengthening of public administration content in study programmes, and additional acquisition of recent scientific literature in that area, are recommendations that have not been sufficiently fulfilled. This significantly reduces the clear focus of the studies.

Although the teaching staff remuneration system has been introduced and worked out in detail, there are certain shortcomings (e.g. extra payments for the "ordinary"/ methodological work of teachers) of this system that will probably need to be solved in the coming period.

#### **Strengths:**

- 1) LBTU has demonstrated the possibility of introducing changes, both in terms of organization and study content.
- 2) It is demonstrated that changes can be introduced both at the level of LBTU as well as on the level of assessed study programmes.

#### **Weaknesses:**

- 1) Recommendations from previous accreditation cycles have not been fully implemented which creates long-term shortages in achieving the aims of the study field.
- 2) Distance learning has not been introduced for the MSP level of study, but only exists for the level of BSP.

### **Assessment of the requirement [4]**

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

Some deficiencies are still present, for example, the attraction of personnel with a strong focus on the field of public administration, strengthening of public administration content in study programmes, and additional acquisition of recent scientific literature in that area.

**1.7. Recommendations for the Study Field****Short-term recommendations**

In order to ensure a uniform and measurable evaluation system, by the beginning of the next academic year, all members of the academic staff must prepare Google Scholar profiles to describe their professional and didactic development

Develop at least one interdisciplinary research project with other strategic areas and study fields within the LBTU such as agriculture, forestry, regional development with strong emphasis on e.g. evaluation of social sustainability aspects within those areas or impact on development on particular region/s or local self-government unit/s.

Attract at least one public administration specialist for the full-time work position.

Include methodological work in regular salary and not in the motivation remuneration.

Support balance between teaching and research by developing a bonus system more favorable to the development of the professional career of teaching staff - by promoting the research networking and partner search, supporting conferences and attendance of summer schools, especially for early-stage researchers.

Increase the frequency and thematic focus of field trips to local enterprises to better align with the study field's features.

Increase efforts to attract at least one foreign visiting staff and enhance at least one outgoing staff mobility per academic year.

Develop strategies to increase participation of at least two students in outgoing student mobility per academic year.

Each faculty member with a permanent position will publish at least one research article in a peer-reviewed international journal in two years.

**Long-term recommendations**

Develop altogether at least three interdisciplinary research projects with other strategic areas and study fields within the LBTU such as agriculture, forestry, entrepreneurship and regional development with strong emphasis on e.g. evaluation of social sustainability aspects within those areas or impact on development on particular region/s or local self-government unit/s.

Attract and elect at least three researchers who are at the beginning of their academic career in order to ensure the long term personal stability of the BA and MA study programmes.

Each faculty member with a permanent position will publish at least one research article in a peer-reviewed international journal every year.

Establish a formal internship system within the study field to provide students with practical experience and give students an opportunity to gain early exposure to the field.

Increase employer involvement in curriculum development and as visiting lecturers to ensure up-to-date knowledge is implemented in the study process and core subjects of the study field.

Develop specific plans and objectives tailored to the sociology field within LBTU's internationalization strategy, strengthening collaboration with higher-ranked universities abroad by establishing cooperation with at least two universities within the whole entire period. The cooperation might entail all kinds of academic activities such as joint research projects, joint articles, student and staff mobilities, etc.

Expand international cooperation agreements, particularly focusing on partnerships relevant to the sociology field.

Fully implement distance learning for the MSP level of study.

## **II - "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration" ASSESSMENT**

### **II - "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration" ASSESSMENT**

#### **2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme**

##### **Analysis**

2.1.1. The academic bachelor study programme "Sociology of organizations and public administration" (43314) aims to prepare internationally competitive specialists in Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration, with an emphasis on sustainable societal development. According to SER (p. 87) the study field has six strategic goals: (1) enhancement and development of programmes at all the levels of study, focusing on the preparation of specialists based on needs for rural areas and regions of Latvia; (2) recruitment of applicants at all the levels of study, (3) internationalization of studies; (4) development and implementation of e-learning (distance learning); (5) promotion of research activities implemented by students and teaching personnel; (6) strengthening and development of cooperation with public, non-governmental and private sector organizations. Six strategic goals are set to enhance and develop the study programme, promote e-learning, and foster research and cooperation with various sectors. Offering the study programme in both English and Latvian and as full-time and part-time distance learning have broadened accessibility and achieved the goal of internationalization. The qualification code of the study programme and the learning outcomes of the study programme demonstrate that it is designed and delivered to ensure compliance of the study programme with the study field. The study programme clearly falls into the domain of the study field.

2.1.2. The academic bachelor study programme, titled "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration," effectively interrelates its title, code (43314) and degree (Bachelor Degree of Social Sciences in Sociology) with its aims, objectives, and learning outcomes (SER, p. 115). These components are designed to align with LBTUs' mission to ensure that students acquire relevant skills and knowledge for professional advancement in public administration and related fields. The admission criteria is secondary education. For English language variations (full-time and part-time) an additional admission criteria is at least B2 level of English language skills. The criteria are reasonable and justified. The study programme's duration and scope, including its full-time and part-time distance learning options, are both reasonable and justified, offering flexibility to accommodate diverse student needs and lifestyles.

The implementation in both Latvian and English languages supports the study programme's internationalization goal, making it accessible to both domestic and international students, thereby



enhancing the cultural diversity and broadening the perspective within the study programme. This strategic delivery aligns with the university's broader objectives and meets the established criteria for effectiveness and inclusiveness in higher education.

2.1.3. The changes described in the evaluation documents and during the interviews pertain to internationalization of the study programme, flexible learning options and enhancing programme attractiveness. By offering the study programme in English, the university has successfully expanded its reach to attract international students. This shift not only diversifies the student body but also gives opportunities to develop a global perspective of the study programme. The introduction of part-time distance learning options is a significant improvement that addresses the needs of students who may find full-time, on-campus study challenging. This flexibility is particularly beneficial for students who are working, living abroad, or have other personal commitments, allowing them to manage their studies alongside other responsibilities. This adaptability makes the study programme more inclusive and accessible, thus widening the university's educational reach. The changes have made the study programme more attractive by offering modern learning approaches and increasing its accessibility. An analysis of the goals, objectives, and learning outcomes of the study programme set out in the table with the characteristics of the study programme demonstrate that they were mutually agreed upon and linked to LBTU's mission – to create an internationally competitive, innovative, creative, and sustainable future for the development of society. Overall, these developments demonstrate the university's commitment to adapting to changing educational needs and global trends.

2.1.4. There is a clear economic and social justification of the study programme. In Latvia, only two universities, the University of Latvia and LBTU, offer study programmes in sociology, with LBTU uniquely providing a focus on sociology of organizations and public administration tailored to both rural and regional needs. The LBTU study programmes are designed to address specific administrative, development, and societal challenges in Latvia. Students often collaborate with national authorities, NGOs, and local government bodies to ensure their thesis projects directly contribute to real-world applications in public administration and regional development (SER p. 117). There is a growing demand for managers and specialists in Latvia, which the SOPA study programme at LBTU addresses by preparing graduates who are quickly employed in various sectors, reflecting the study programme's alignment with labor market needs. Graduate monitoring data from the National Education Information System reveals that SOPA graduates from the thematic group "Social Sciences, Business and Law" have an employment rate of 86.46% for all LBTU graduates in 2020, the highest among all universities in Latvia. Employment in this thematic group increased by 4% from 2018 to 2021, stabilizing at 86.2% in 2021, with an average annual income growth of €5,215 over the same period, reaching €21,428 in 2021. The data also show a significant disparity in employment rates in higher skilled occupations between graduates from private and public higher education institutions, with 85% of public graduates employed in these roles in 2021, highlighting the advantages of advanced degrees in the job market. However, the number of students in the programme has fluctuated greatly which has had negative consequences both for pedagogy and economic viability of the programme. In 2017/2018 only 29 students were enrolled, while the most recent figure in the SER was 62 (SER, p. 119).

2.1.5.

Not applicable

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

Indicators describing the study programme demonstrate compliance with the assessment criteria

discussed above. The study programme is well-aligned with its field, as evidenced by the interrelation of its title, code and degree with its aims, objectives, learning outcomes, and admission requirements. Adjustments made to the study programme's parameters during the assessment period are thoroughly analyzed and justified, ensuring continued relevance. The economic and social justifications for the study programme are validated by the dynamics of student enrollment and strong employment outcomes for graduates, affirming the study programme's effectiveness and relevance in meeting labor market needs.

#### Strengths:

- 1) By offering the study programme in English, the university has successfully expanded its reach to attract international students.
- 2) The introduction of part-time distance learning options addresses the needs of students who may find full-time, on-campus study challenging.

#### Weaknesses:

- 1) The number of students in the study programme has fluctuated greatly which has had negative consequences both for pedagogy and economic viability of the study programme.

## **2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof**

### **Analysis**

2.2.1. The BSP is entitled Sociology of Organization and Public Administration (SOPA), and the vast majority of its content is thematic and corresponds to the name of the study programme. The study programme mainly contains various sociology courses with additional courses in political science, organizational studies, economy and other related disciplines. One of the main strengths of this study programme is the analytical knowledge and skills that students acquire during the educational process.

According to the available information listed in Annex 2 of the SER. BA study programme Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration is in accordance with the National academic standard of education. The main goal of the programme is "... to prepare highly qualified specialists, providing the students with knowledge of and skills and competence in analyses of the performance of public, private and non-governmental organizations and development of reasonable proposals for solving problems in the fields of organizations and public administration." (Annex 2 of the SER).

Mapping of the study courses / modules for the achievement of the learning outcomes of the study programme is provided (document OSPS Mapping clarified.xlsx in the Annexes section) and in general terms the study programme ensures the achievement of the stated outcomes. It has clear emphasis on various sociological aspects, but it could benefit more from the public administration and public law contents due to the above proclaimed main goal of the study programme.

The relationship between compulsory and elective courses is relatively balanced, and elective courses are left for later stages of study, more precisely for the last three semesters when students have acquired basic knowledge in the field of study. However, as clearly stated in the accreditation report from 2012, contents related to public administration are not sufficiently represented. Evaluation report from 2012 stated the following: "... there is a lack of literature within public administration both of introductory character and research contributions. ..." (Report 2012, p. 2, 3.). At the BSP study level, there are only two (out of a total of 25) compulsory courses directly related to public administration (Public Administration, and Organization of Local Municipalities) and both carry only 3 ECTS. Admittedly, content from the field of public administration is also present in other courses, but often these are more generic study courses that are not predominantly focused on the public sector (e. g. Management, etc.). In others, public administration and other important topics

are represented with a small number of teaching hours (e.g. Political Theory, Public Administration, Organisation of Local Municipalities) and some courses are only elective and also not covering public administration and public law topics enough (e.g. Basics of Law with insufficient hours devoted to public and particularly administrative law). This is particularly significant considering the main goal of the programme and the fact that graduates from the analyzed study programme tend to be significantly employed in public administration bodies at the national, as well as at the territorial self-government level.

#### 2.2.2.

Not applicable.

2.2.3. There are three variants of the BA SOPA study programme. Full-time in Latvian, full-time in English (international study programme) and a part-time distance learning study programme in Latvian. Regarding the study process and student-centered learning, the SER states the following: "The study process does not differ for those studying in Latvian or English. A student-centered approach is applied to the learning process, and interactive learning methods, the e- learning system, creative teaching methods, guest lectures and study trips are widely used as well." (p. 129). Courses are carried through the usual teaching methods used in social sciences, such as lectures, seminars, individual assignments such as paper reading, case studies, writing essays, preparing presentations by students, etc. There is a range of monological, dialogical and research methods foreseen for the realization of the study programme. There are five groups of different teaching techniques that are used during the implementation of the BA SOPA study programme, namely, traditional methods: (e.g. lectures, practicals, seminars), methods that build analytical, critical, systemic and creative thinking, as well as communication skills (e. g. group work, discussions, debates, presentations, case studies, situation analysis, problem solving, study trips, educational games etc.), methods for independent and research work performed by students individually or in groups (e.g. reports, essays, homework, a study project and a bachelor thesis), meetings with experts (e.g. guest lectures and during the ESAF Alumni Week) and summer schools (SER, p. 131). Some of the mentioned activities are held relatively regularly, such as guest lectures and study trips. However, it is pointed out that "... three key methods, which are used in the delivery of courses contained in the program along with lectures, are discussions, practicals individually and in groups and presentations." (SER, p. 131). This diminishes the potential of other previously mentioned methods, such as summer schools, which were stated to have been held only twice (in 2017 and 2019) during the entire reporting period (SER, pp. 131-132).

Distance-learning programme relies on the quite developed e-learning system (MOODLE) and lectures are delivered by BigBlueButton, Zoom or other similar platforms. Although the previous accreditation report from 2012 recommended the introduction of a distance learning study programme, this was only achieved in the academic year 2022/23 due to a lengthy and relatively demanding preparation process. A procedure for revising and supplementing the content of individual study courses is formally foreseen, and the tools provided for this are being changed, such as the mapping of study courses.

However, the number of students enrolled in the assessed study programme is rather small, which necessarily raises questions about the economic sustainability of the study programme. Also, a small number of students reduces the potential of certain pedagogical methods such as work in small groups, teamwork, discussion groups and other similar methods that are particularly important for social science studies such as the subject studies of sociology of organization and public administration. This is especially evident in the study programme conducted in the English language for foreign students, in which case it is not uncommon for only one or two international students to attend lectures throughout the whole year.

Each variant of the BA SOPA study programme has its own specific challenges, from the number of

enrolled students, which is especially visible with the international study programme, relatively high drop-out rates, and problems arising from the use of artificial intelligence tools and plagiarism challenges, which is a special challenge for distance learning programs.

2.2.4.

Not applicable.

2.2.5.

Not applicable.

2.2.6. The BA SOPA study programme is finalized with the preparation of a Bachelor thesis, which carries 15 ECTS points. There were 122 Bachelor thesis completed and defended from the 2013/14 up to 2022/23 academic years, which is 12 thesis per academic year on average. It is stated that the BA thesis is "...an empirical research study conducted independently by the student, which confirms the build-up of theoretical knowledge and methodological skills in the sociology of organizations and public administration within the scope set by the programme." (SER, p. 135).

Regarding the topics of the BA thesis, they can be grouped into six broad categories covering wide array of themes connected to performance of organizations, socio-economic aspects of local governments, issues in education, social and labour market, and social inclusion / exclusion and quality of life in different regions (SER, pp. 135-136). Topics of final BA theses generally correspond to the study programme. BSP students present papers at various practical and scientific events such as the TAKE-OFF competition organized by the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees, or the international student scientific conference Students on their Way to Science, organized by LBTU (SER, p. 137).

Although some of the BA final theses are highly rated, there is no information that some of them were published in domestic (especially student) or international magazines and other publications.

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

The BA SOPA study programme corresponds to its name in terms of content and expected learning outcomes. The teaching process is well-designed and there are balanced compulsory and optional courses, which are positioned in the later stages of the study, after the students have mastered the basic contents provided for in the compulsory study courses. Students participate in various events such as competitions organized by trade unions, or international conferences (e.g. Students on their way to Science), mainly organized by the LBTU itself. There are a variety of envisaged teaching methods, but some of them are not regularly implemented (e.g. summer schools) and the potential of others is sometimes hindered by the small number of enrolled students.

However, as noted in the previous assessment report from 2012, contents related to public administration are still not sufficiently represented in study courses in comparison to study courses from other disciplines. This is a significant disadvantage considering that graduates are employed in public administration bodies at the state and local self-government levels.

The BA SOPA study programme does not provide an internship. Although it is an academic study programme for which there is no legal obligation to carry out an internship, there is a desire among students for such a form of education. Also, this form of education is supported by employers who, during the meeting with the experts, clearly expressed their support for the potential introduction of internships.

Strengths:

1) The study programme corresponds to the name and mainly enables the realization of the learning outcomes for which it was founded.

2) A relatively larger number of students is enrolled in the full-time BA SOPA study programme in Latvian compared to the other two versions of the study programme (in English and part-time distance learning).

Weaknesses:

- 1) A small number of students enrolled in the study programme conducted in English, which raises numerous questions related to economic sustainability, but also to the application of adequate teaching methods and work applicable in the social sciences as well.
- 2) The relatively high dropout rate calls into question the sustainability even of full-time studies in the Latvian language, not to mention the study programme in English language.
- 3) Content related to public administration is still not sufficiently represented in study courses in comparison to courses from other disciplines.

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

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

## **2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme**

### **Analysis**

2.3.1. A big advantage is that LBTU is a HEI with good study and research facilities. For the delivery of the study programme, the shared informational, material and technical resources of LBTU, ESAF and other faculties are exploited. Well-equipped auditoriums, infrastructure resources and material and technical support are available for all LBTU study programmes, including academic bachelor study programme "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration" (SOPA). LBTU possesses necessary resources for implementing the respective study programme, however, there are still too few books on public administration. The Fundamental Library of Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (hereinafter - LBTU FB) is an accredited library of national significance, which provides users with information resources subject-specific literature: books, newspapers and magazines, digitally work with all the available databases and search engines and receive services: printing, scanning and copying are available at the ESAF Centre for Studies and Scientific Information. LBTU supports financial subscriptions to social science databases, computer equipment, software for the needs of the bachelor study programme SOPA. The MOODLE platform is used in almost all study courses in full-time and part-time studies, including part-time distance learning. All students have equal access to library resources at LBTU and ESAF. Students having an LBTU username and password can access all the resources needed for the learning process, e.g. library e-resources, MOODLE, communication with teaching personnel etc. even when they are outside the building of LBTU. Teaching personnel regularly participate in training related to the use of digital solutions in teaching (SER, p.138).

2.3.2.

Not applicable.

2.3.3. Although there is a small number of students at the study programme and the study costs are high, LBTU manages to balance the budget within the field of study. This is due to the fact that a large part of the students are fee-paying students. A different number of contact classes and

therefore a different minimum number of students per group have been set for each version of the study programme delivered. The calculations indicated the minimum number of students at the maximum number of contact classes for self-paid students. If the number of contact classes is smaller, the minimum number of students is also smaller. If both government-funded and self-paid students are included in a full-time group, the minimum number of students is also different because the group is formed without changing the number of contact classes. The minimum number of students varies depending on the workload of self-paid students (SER, p. 139). This study programme attracts the most students from the local area, and in recent years also from abroad. During admission, LBTU forms a group for the study programme if at least 5 students have applied for it. The programme is delivered if the required minimum number of students has been achieved at the start of studies; however, students drop out during their studies. Since one of the goals of LBTU and of the field of study is internationalization, the programme is also delivered to groups of less than 5 students (SER, p. 139). Interviews with students show that there are students from abroad who have been the only ones enrolled in their study course throughout their studies. It seems that such a study organization cannot be financially sustainable in the long term. Table 3.7. (SER, p.137) shows the total number of graduates, without indicating how many of them are foreign students. Interviews show that even now there are foreign students who are the only ones matriculated in their course.

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

Since LBTU provides the implementation of the bachelor's study programme from the common resources without creating additional expenses, the financial sustainability of the bachelor's study programme does not raise doubts, despite the fact that the number of enrolled students is not large. However, this practice is not sustainable in the long run either from the point of view of finances or the quality of studies - there are forms of learning that cannot be used with such a small number of students - such as group work, seminars.

#### **Strengths:**

- 1) Excellent infrastructure and synergies among structural units of the LBTU.
- 2) All students have equal access to informative and library resources at LBTU and ESAF.
- 3) Although there is a small number of students at the study programme and the study costs are high, LBTU manages to balance the budget within the field of study.

#### **Weaknesses:**

- 1) Small number of students, high tuition costs. Costs are balanced at the level of LBTU.
- 2) Although it was pointed out as a shortcoming in the previous accreditation process and it was recommended to supplement the book collection, the library still has too few books in the field of public administration.

### **Assessment of the requirement [6]**

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

#### **Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

See analysis under criterion 2.3.3.: Excellent infrastructure and synergies among structural units of the LBTU; Small number of students, high tuition costs; in the long run, this cost balancing model is not sustainable.

## 2.4. Teaching Staff

### Analysis

2.4.1. As evidenced in the SER (Table 3.8., pp. 140-141), six elected associate professors have been engaged in implementation of the study programme at the 2023/2024 study year, although Annex 2.3.1. allows to validate five elected associate professors. Before (in 2022/2023 and earlier), one elected professor participated in the implementation of the study programme (SER, pp. 140-141). According to the SER (Table 3.8., pp. 140-141), the number of elected professors and associate professors has been stable over the last five years (6-7 persons). This proves that the qualification of teaching staff of the bachelor study programme is compliant with the requirements stated by the national regulations which prescribes that at least five elected professors or associate professors have been involved (the Law on Higher Education Institutions, Section 55, Paragraph one, Clause 3). According to the Human resources development plan at the ESAF level (Ekonomikas un sabiedrības attīstības fakultātes personāla attīstības plāns (31.01.2024.) - document available in Latvian upon request of the expert team), single call for associate professorship is planned to be announced in 2024.

As evidenced in the SER (pp. 140-141) and the Annex (2.3.1; CV\_EN 4.zip), the teaching staff consists of a wider range of academic personnel, such as ESAF general staff resources, academic staff of the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, and, although decreasing within the last years, visiting teaching staff. By involving teaching staff from other structural units, LBTU demonstrates its ability to create synergies between its various strategic science fields, as well as between LBTU and practitioners. However, integration of teaching staff from other units might be strengthened in future. While the teaching staff of the study field provides training in core study courses of the study programme, the staff from other structural units of the LBTU provides a small part of study courses. The core teaching staff of the BA study programmes has long and solid teaching experience which results in the fact that their average age is relatively high (SER does not provide an average age calculation of the teaching staff of the study programme, but it is estimated based on the attached CVs). Number of the study courses assigned for each member of the core teaching staff are high and their titles are diverse. This approach entails high involvement of the academic staff in teaching activities which limited space for other types of academic performance such as research work and publications (see also section 2.4.4.). Thus, the concentration of study courses only in the hands of core staff creates a moderate risk for the successful implementation of the study programme.

Future mutual cooperation opportunities are seen in integration of the courses in rural sociology, public administration and other with study courses from other strategic directions of the LBTU such as agriculture, study programmes in entrepreneurship and management. The last group of the teaching staff also has wider research experience which is evidenced by their participation in research projects and publication activities.

There is a discrepancy between the data on elected teaching staff presented in various sections of the SER and annex. According to Table 3.8. (SER, p. 141) 81% of teaching personnel are elected, but calculations based on the list of teaching staff involved (Annex 2.3.1.) shows that 70% of teaching staff is elected (19 persons out of 27 persons; for the calculations, personnel who teach BA level students or BA & MA level students were selected). The elected staff basically teaches the most important (core) subjects of the bachelor's study programme.

Out of all the personnel involved in provision of the bachelor's study programme, the share of personnel with doctoral degrees is 62% (17 out of 27 persons, annex 2.3.1.; for the calculations, personnel who teach BA level students or BA & MA level students were selected). Three of lecturers without doctoral degrees are currently in the final years of their ongoing doctoral studies. Teaching staff involved in working with foreign students have the required English language proficiency level. Thus, it can be concluded that the teaching staff is sufficient to ensure the achievement of the

learning outcomes of the study programme.

2.4.2. As indicated under criterion 2.4.1, the core teaching staff of the study programme providing most essential study courses has relatively high age which creates a risk for the implementation of the study programme in the future. The number of teaching staff also has decreased over the past decade (SER, p. 142). However, the interview with faculty management during the on-site visit shows that recruitment policies are reactive rather than proactive. This approach leads to overloading of current teaching staff, as they admitted in interviews. Some of the key teaching personnel are of pre-retirement age (SER does not provide a calculation of average, but that is estimated based on information provided in CVs), which leads to the expectation that more attention has to be paid to personnel regeneration. Although at the ESAF level, the human resources development plan includes a clear vision of expanding teaching staff by electing as academic staff several postdoctoral researchers (Ekonomikas un sabiedrības attīstības fakultātes personāla attīstības plāns (31.01.2024.)); only one potential re-election refers to the assessed study field (sociology) and can contribute to the implementation of the considered bachelor's study programme. Although these facts have no potential impact in the short-term perspective, they may negatively affect the implementation of the study programme in the long term.

2.4.3.

Not applicable

2.4.4. Key academic staff involved in the implementation of the bachelor's programme has peer-reviewed publications, however, most of these are published in conference proceedings rather than in international academic journals, especially those having high citation rates (annex 2.4.). The conferences attended by the teaching staff are organized by their own university (LBTU) indicating a low level of networking with other academic staff of the respective field both nationally and internationally. The number of publications among the academic staff is highly uneven. According to the publication list presented in annex 2.4. (Excel table), few members of the teaching staff from other LBTU units have not any recent publications (2017-2023). The titles of the articles demonstrate that interdisciplinary publications together with representatives of other LBTU study fields, especially in the field of agriculture, are rarely produced.

2.4.5. The SER describes cooperation of the teaching staff (p. 143) that indicates the existence of clear mechanisms which ensures the achievement of the aims of the study programme in terms of aligning the curriculum content of the study programme. This mechanism is also developed and described at the level of LBTU by the respective regulations - Procedure for Developing Course/traineeship Programmes and the Procedure for Registering and Updating Information in the IS Course Register of LBTU. The mechanism includes meetings of the teaching personnel and supervision of the work by the Methodological Commission. The annexes describing the study programme and study courses included demonstrate the interconnections between the study courses and the study programme. They also demonstrate that study courses normally are developed by two persons from the academic personnel that ensures supervision of the study content. However, the description of the procedure does not include any evidence about mutual cooperation of teaching staff outside the direct implementation of the study programme such as mutual consultations, learning or research work.

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

The qualification of the academic staff is solid at the current moment of the evaluation and complies with the requirements of national regulations, but their capacity has to be strengthened in the long-



term perspective in terms of regeneration of the academic staff and their research and publication performance. Key members of the teaching staff have long experience in their academic work; thus, they have reached the pre-retirement age. However, the Human Development Plan at the faculty level does not include enough evidence on plans for the regeneration of teaching staff in the field of sociology. This is considered as the main threat to the implementation of the study programme in the long-term perspective.

Although publication activities of the teaching staff meet formal requirements set by the national regulations and the LBTU level documents, including having articles indexed in Scopus/ Web of Science, this criterion is mostly reached by publications in internationally indexed conference proceedings published by their own university (LBTU). Due to this narrow approach to the publication activities, the opportunities to receive international recognition of the research work done by the sociologists of the LBTU has been diminished.

**Strengths:**

- 1) Involvement of teaching staff from other branches of LBTU into implementation of the study programme ensuring interdisciplinary approach in the study process.
- 2) Solid teaching experience of key academic staff involved in the implementation of the study programme.

**Weaknesses:**

- 1) Insufficient measures have been taken to ensure the renewal of teaching staff and balancing their workload in terms of distribution teaching workload and increasing research workload and academic networking.
- 2) Low participation of academic staff in academic networking events (conferences) outside the own university (LBTU).
- 3) Low number of publications produced by the academic staff in international, highly-indexed peer-reviewed journals.

## **Assessment of the requirement [7]**

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

See analysis under Criterion 2.4.1. and 2.4.4.

The problem of personnel renewal and recruitment for all fields of expertise necessary for the fulfillment of the study programme has not been sufficiently addressed. Moderate number and uneven distribution of publications among academic staff.

## **2.5. Assessment of the Compliance**

### **Requirements**

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The study programme generally fulfills the criteria outlined in the State Academic Education Standard (Regulation Nr. 240 of the Cabinet of Ministers). The mandatory part and the limited elective part of the bachelor's study programme include the guidelines, principles, structure and

methodology of the relevant scientific branch or sub-branch (not less than 30 credit points), the history of the development of the scientific branch or sub-branch and current problems (not less than 15 credit points), as well as scientific characteristics and problems of the sector or sub-sector in the cross-sectoral aspect (not less than 15 credit points).

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The study course descriptions and materials are prepared in the languages in which the programme is implemented (Latvian and English), and comply with the requirements set forth in Section 561, Paragraph two and Section 562, Paragraph two of the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Diploma sample for completing the study programme is in accordance with the requirements of the Procedures for Issuing State-Recognized Higher Education Documents (Regulation Nr. 202 of the Cabinet of Ministers).

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Confirmation signed by the LBTU Vice-rector for Studies verifies that the academic staff of the academic study programme comply with the requirements set forth in Section 55, Paragraph one, Clause 3 of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Confirmation signed by the LBTU Vice-rector for Studies verifies that the proficiency level in the state language of the academic staff involved in delivering the study programme meets the requirements of the Regulations Regarding the Extent of the Knowledge of the Official Language and the Procedures for Examining the Proficiency in the Official Language (Regulation Nr. 157 of the Cabinet of Ministers).

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Confirmation signed by the LBTU Vice-rector for Studies verifies that the teaching staff who are involved in the implementation of the study programme have at least B2 level knowledge in English in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Sample of the study agreement complies with the mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement and requirements of the Mandatory Provisions To Be Included In The Study Agreement (Regulation Nr. 70 of the Cabinet of Ministers).

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

LBTU has signed an agreement with University of Latvia, which include confirmation that in case of discontinuation of the study programme "Sociology of Organisations and Public Administration", University of Latvia undertakes to provide study opportunities for students of this programme in the academic bachelor's study programme "Sociology".

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Confirmation signed by the LBTU Vice-rector for Studies states that the LBTU guarantees students compensation for loss if a study programme is discontinued and students do not wish to continue their studies at University of Latvia.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

### **Assessment of the requirement [8]**

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Fully compliant with all the requirements.

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

The BA SOPA study programme corresponds to its name in terms of content and mainly ensures the realization of expected learning outcomes. The teaching process is relatively well-designed, and there are balanced compulsory and optional study courses, which are positioned in the later stages of the study, after the students have mastered the basic contents provided for in the compulsory study courses. Students participate in various events such as competitions organized by trade unions or international conferences (e.g. Students on their way to Science), mainly organized by the LBTU itself. There are a variety of envisaged teaching methods, but some of them are not regularly implemented (e.g. summer schools) and the potential of others is sometimes hindered by the small number of enrolled students. However, as noted in the previous assessment report from 2012, contents related to public administration are still not sufficiently represented in study courses in comparison to study courses from other disciplines. This is a significant disadvantage considering that graduates are employed in public administration bodies at the state and local self-government levels. The BA SOPA study programme does not provide an internship. This practice existed in the past, but it has since been abandoned. Although it is an academic study programme for which there is no legal obligation to carry out an internship, there is a desire among students for such a form of education. Also, this form of education is supported by employers who, during the meeting with the experts, clearly expressed their support for the potential introduction of internships.

The qualification of the academic staff complies with the requirements of national regulations, but their performance is not sufficient with regard to research and publication activities. As the number of study courses provided by each member of the academic staff is high and diverse, the teaching staff's lecture load is expected to be high. This evidence shows that academic staff are largely focused on their teaching work which does not create enough space for personal development, research, publications and academic networking. Currently, the criterion on academic publications indexed in Scopus/ Web of Science most often is reached by publications in the conference proceedings produced by LBTU (own university) that ensures compliance with formal criteria, but does not promote inter-institutional visibility of the study programme. For some members of teaching staff, deficiencies are found in the number of publications and time of their production (no recent publications indicated). The core team of teaching staff is in their mature age which creates potential insufficiency of the personnel in the next few years perspective. Currently, this challenge is not tackled properly in the respective documents at the ESAF and LBTU level.

The study programme fully complies with the requirements set forth in the Law on Higher Education Institutions and other regulatory enactments such as State Academic Education Standard (Regulation Nr. 240), Procedures for Issuing State-Recognized Higher Education Documents (Regulation Nr. 202), Regulations Regarding the Extent of the Knowledge of the Official Language and the Procedures for Examining the Proficiency in the Official Language (Regulation Nr. 157) and

Mandatory Provisions To Be Included In The Study Agreement (Regulation Nr. 70). Furthermore, there is an agreement signed with the University of Latvia ensuring that if the study programme is discontinued, students will have the opportunity to continue their studies in the University of Latvia's academic bachelor's programme in Sociology. Additionally, there is confirmation signed by the LBTU Vice-rector for Studies which confirms that the teaching staff involved in the study programme implementation have at least B2 level English proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and guarantees compensation for students if the study programme is discontinued and they choose not to continue their studies at the University of Latvia.

## **Evaluation of the study programme "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration"**

Evaluation of the study programme:

Average

## **2.6. Recommendations for the Study Programme "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration"**

### **Short-term recommendations**

Ensure that at least three students participate in any form of international exchange programmes (Erasmus+ or similar).

At least one teacher in a short-term period (up to 2-years) uses sabbatical for research projects and/or professional development (e.g. book, preparation of methodological material, international mobility, e.g. Fullbright, etc.).

Introduce new obligatory courses with a clear public administration (PA) focus or rearrange existing ECTS distribution in order to ensure that each of two existing PA courses weigh 6 ECTS.

Strengthen the summer school and ensure that it is continuously held (at least every second year).

Include the annual calculation of average age of teaching staff in Human Resource Development plan at the ESAF and study programme level to ensure regeneration of the personnel, to state a level of average age which has to be tackled immediately to diminish risks of implementation of the study programme.

Attract at least one teacher with respective educational and professional background in the position of elected assistant professor for the study courses "Qualitative research methods" and "Quantitative research methods".

Increase the number of invited visiting lecturers (including, employers) to core study courses such as Qualitative and quantitative research methods, Work sociology, Regional development etc. to explain certain theoretical concepts from the point of view of practical application - at least three visiting lecturers per year.

Review the book purchase policy to ensure regular updating of literature in areas necessary for the field of study, especially public administration.

### **Long-term recommendations**

In order to promote the creation of an international study environment and to optimize study costs, it is recommended to include in study plans joint study courses taught in English for local and foreign students in bachelor's study programme. It is allowed by the Law on Higher Education Institutions Section 56. Regulation of Studies (3) The study programmes of higher education institutions and colleges shall be implemented in the official language. In a study programme which is implemented in the official language, not more than one-fifth of the credit point amount of the study programme may be implemented in other official languages of the European Union, taking into account that final and State examinations as well as the writing of a qualification paper, bachelor or master's thesis may not be included in this part. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/37967> .

To attract young teachers and support balance between teaching and research by developing a bonus system more favorable to the development of the professional career of teaching staff - by promoting the research networking and partner search, supporting conferences and attendance of summer schools, especially for early-stage researchers every young teacher should be involved in at least one research project during the first year of his/her work at the LBTU.

At least three teachers use sabbatical for research projects and/or professional development (e.g. book, preparation of methodological material, international mobility - e.g. Fulbright, etc.)

Publish at least 3 articles in high-ranked/ indexed journals related to the study field by various academy staff.

Publish at least 6 joint, interdisciplinary publications (among sociologists and academic staff of other key science fields of the LBTU).

Introduce a second lecturer - in the position of assistant professors or lecturers - for all teaching staff members who will reach retirement age in the next six years; to establish this rule ("teaching assistant for every pre-retirement age teaching staff member") as systematic human resource policy measure set forth in the respective formal documents of the LBTU and ESAF level; to abdicate the re-election of teaching staff who have reached retirement age, allocating assistant positions to them.

Organize at least two summer schools devoted to the topic of the study programme.

## **II - "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration" ASSESSMENT**

### **II - "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration" ASSESSMENT**

#### **2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme**

##### **Analysis**

2.1.1. According to SER (p. 81), the goal of the SOPA "is to train specialists in the sociology of organisations and public administration who meet the requirements of the European Union labour market for managerial work in public and private sector organisations in Latvian regions and rural territories, as well as for scientific research work". Six strategic goals are set to enhance and develop the study programme, promote e-learning, and foster research and cooperation with various sectors. The strategic goals are as follows: (1) enhancement and development of programmes at all the levels of study, focusing on the preparation of specialists based on needs for rural areas and regions of Latvia; (2) recruitment of applicants at all the levels of study, (3) internationalization of studies; (4) development and implementation of e-learning (distance learning); (5) promotion of research activities implemented by students and teaching personnel; (6) strengthening and

development of cooperation with public, non-governmental and private sector organizations.

The study programme clearly falls into the domain of the study field 'Sociology, Politology and Anthropology'. The content of the SOPA study programme builds up an appropriate set of research skills and competences in the field of organizations and public administration in order to solve problems related to the sustainability of society (cf. SER, p. 15). The study outcomes are aligned with the study programme's objectives and content. The study programme's development follows LBTU and ESAF's strategic goals and expert recommendations from previous accreditations. The curriculum is designed to achieve the study programme's objectives, with a student-centered approach facilitated by small group sizes. Master's students gain in-depth knowledge through face-to-face classes, guest lectures, and study tours, enabling them to analyze social processes and perform in public and non-governmental institutions. The study programme equips students with the skills and competencies needed for independent research and professional work in interdisciplinary teams. Offering the study programme in both English and Latvian and as full-time and part-time distance learning have broadened accessibility and achieved the goal of internationalization. Part-time distance learning makes the study programme more accessible to those who cannot attend face-to-face classes, such as Latvian nationals abroad, shift workers, parents with young children, and professionals in specific sectors. The internationalization of the study programme, through its English-language offering, aligns with the LBTU Strategy 2023-2027, attracting international students and enhancing the study programme's global appeal.

2.1.2. The academic Master's study programme in Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration (SOPA) is offered in full-time (2 years or 4 semesters) and part-time distance learning (2.5 years or 5 semesters) formats in Latvian, with full-time studies also available in English (SER, p. 87). The study programme, which awards a Master of Social Sciences in Sociology degree, comprises 120 ECTS credits. The study programme is designed and delivered according to relevant legal and internal regulations of LBTU. The programme effectively interrelates its title, code (45314) and degree (Master of Social Sciences in Sociology) with its aims, objectives, and learning outcomes. These components are designed to align with LBTU's mission to ensure that students acquire relevant skills and knowledge for professional advancement in public administration and related fields. The study programme admission requirements for study programme in Latvian are: First cycle higher education in Social Sciences, Business and Law, if first cycle higher education obtained in Education Sciences, an entrance exam must be taken. Additional requirement for studies in English is knowledge of the English language at least at Level B2 (SER, p. 83). The criteria are relevant for the study programme. However, the interview with international students revealed that some international students did not have relevant competence to study sociology without additional bridging studies. The duration and scope of the study programme, including its full-time and part-time distance learning options, are both reasonable and justified, offering flexibility to accommodate diverse student needs and lifestyles. The implementation in both Latvian and English languages supports the study programme's internationalization goal, making it accessible to both domestic and international students, thereby enhancing the cultural diversity and broadening the perspective within the study programme. This strategic delivery aligns with the university's broader objectives and meets the established criteria for effectiveness and inclusiveness in higher education. In 2024, LBTU adopted the ECTS credit system, leading to minor adjustments in the annual study plan for the 2024/2025 academic year to align the volume of two courses. The content of the study programme remained largely unchanged, with the volume of the courses mathematically recalculated into the new credit points. Also this change is reasonable and justified.

2.1.3. The changes since the previous accreditation of the Master's study programme "Sociology of Organisations and Public Administration" (SOPA) on 22 May 2013 described in SER and annexes and during the interviews pertain to internationalization of the programme, flexible learning options and

enhancing programme attractiveness through marketing efforts (SER, p. 85). The changes have been made based on recommendations from the expert committee, updates in Latvian higher education regulations, and the strategic development plans of the study field. The most significant efforts during the reporting period focused on launching the Master's study programme in distance learning (e-studies via the MOODLE platform) and in English.

The changes are reasonable and justified. By offering the study programme in English, the university has successfully expanded its reach to attract international students. This shift not only diversifies the student body but also gives opportunities to develop a global perspective of the study program. The introduction of part-time distance learning options is a significant improvement that addresses the needs of students who may find full-time, on-campus study challenging. This flexibility is particularly beneficial for students who are working, living abroad, or have other personal commitments, allowing them to manage their studies alongside other responsibilities.

This adaptability makes the study programme more inclusive and accessible, thus widening the university's educational reach. The changes have made the study programme more attractive by offering modern learning approaches and increasing its accessibility. Overall, these developments demonstrate the university's commitment to adapting to changing educational needs and global trends.

2.1.4. There is a clear economic and social justification of the study programme. In Latvia, only two universities, the University of Latvia and LBTU, offer study programmes in sociology, with LBTU uniquely providing a focus on organizations and public administration tailored to both rural and regional needs. The LBTU study programmes are designed to address specific administrative, development, and societal challenges in Latvia. Students often collaborate with national authorities, NGOs, and local government bodies to ensure their thesis projects directly contribute to real-world applications in public administration and regional development.

There is a growing demand for managers and specialists in Latvia, which the SOPA study programme at LBTU addresses by preparing graduates who are quickly employed in various sectors, reflecting the study programme's alignment with labor market needs. A survey connected among the alumni indicated positive employment outcomes. Graduate monitoring data from the National Education Information System reveals that SOPA graduates from the thematic group "Social Sciences, Business and Law" have an employment rate of 86.46% for all LBTU graduates in 2020, the highest among all universities in Latvia, with master's graduates achieving an even higher rate of 88.2% compared to the national average of 80.9%. Employment in this thematic group increased by 4% from 2018 to 2021, stabilizing at 86.2% in 2021, with an average annual income growth of €5,215 over the same period, reaching €21,428 in 2021. The data also show a significant disparity in employment rates in higher skilled occupations between graduates from private and public higher education institutions, with 85% of public graduates employed in these roles in 2021, highlighting the advantages of advanced degrees in the job market.

However, the number of students in the study programme has fluctuated greatly which has had negative consequences both for pedagogy and economic viability of the study programme. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that there are currently both Latvian and English language teaching. The number of international students is still very low (there were four cohorts with one student only during the assessment period).

2.1.5.

Not applicable

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

Indicators describing the study programme demonstrate compliance with the assessment criteria



discussed above. The study programme is well-aligned with its field, as evidenced by the interrelation of its title, code, degree with its aims, objectives, learning outcomes, and admission requirements. Adjustments made to the study programme's parameters during the assessment period are thoroughly analyzed and justified, ensuring continued relevance. The economic and social justifications for the study programme are validated by the dynamics of student enrollment and strong employment outcomes for graduates, affirming the study programme's effectiveness and relevance in meeting labor market needs.

**Strengths:**

- 1) By offering the study programme in English, the university has successfully expanded its reach to attract international students.
- 2) The introduction of part-time distance learning options addresses the needs of students who may find full-time, on-campus study challenging.

**Weaknesses:**

- 1) The number of students in the study programme has fluctuated greatly which has had negative consequences both for pedagogy and economic viability of the programme.

## **2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof**

### **Analysis**

2.2.1. The MA programme Sociology of Organization and Public Administration (SOPA) naturally continues from the previous BA level of study, and in this sense follows a similar structure, goals and study outcomes only at a higher level, more appropriate for the master's level.

According to the available information listed in Annex 2 of the SER, MA study programme SOPA is in accordance with the National academic standard of education. The main goal of the MA SOPA study programme is "... to train specialists in the sociology of organizations and public administration who meet the requirements of the European Union labour market for managerial work in public and private sector organizations in Latvian regions and rural territories, as well as for scientific research work." (SER, p. 87, Annex 2. Compliance of the academic master's study programme "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration" with the national academic standard of education).

The content of the study programme corresponds to its name and the main goal it aims to achieve. Sociological subjects prevail in the programme curriculum, with additional courses in political science, economics, and other related disciplines. Nevertheless, similar as with the BA SOPA study programme and as noted also in the previous assessment report from 2012, "... there is a lack of literature within public administration both of introductory character and research contributions. This is especially critical for masters." (Report 2012, p. 2, 3.). The aforementioned remark is still present, and it is especially significant in the context of the fact that the explicit goal of the MA study programme is the training of specialists who will be employed in public administration bodies, especially territorial self-government bodies, after completing their studies. There are only two study courses that are explicitly related to public administration topics. Admittedly, unlike the BA level of studies, these study courses have slightly more ECTS points (Public administration - 4.5; Public and nongovernmental sector - 6). Some of the study course names are slightly confusing, such as the Public and Nongovernmental Sector study course, which actually refers to the narrower field of local self-government and the non-governmental sector.

Regarding the remaining study courses, it can be concluded that they are mostly interconnected, complementary and correspond to the basic goals and learning outcomes of the MA SOPA study programme. Employers speak positively about the graduates of the MA SOPA study programme, especially emphasizing their analytical and communication skills as well as the broader perspective and wider view of societal and public problems that students acquire during their studies. As

students noted during the onsite visit, there is a balance between the study courses, and information regarding study course requirements is given in advance.

Students who enroll in the MA study programme, and have not previously completed the BA level of this or another related study programme, encounter difficulties in mastering some content of some study courses. This is especially the case with teaching content that requires prior knowledge. For now, these 'gaps in knowledge' are solved through more or less an individualized approach and individual work with students. This is still possible due to the relatively small number of students enrolled in the MA study programme. Certainly, this problem should be approached more systematically if the number of students in the MA study programme significantly increases, which will certainly overload and make it practically impossible for teachers to continue providing the above mentioned individualized help to students.

2.2.2. Relevant achievements and concepts are partially included in the content taught to students in the MA SOPA study programme. The same is realized mainly through the organization of guest lectures given by practitioners in different fields. It is stated that: "Guest lecturers include professionals from other universities, state and local government institutions, research and academic institutions, as well as NGOs from both Latvia and abroad." (SER, p. 95). There is no clear evidence on the number of these lectures per year in the SER nor supporting annexes. During the onsite visit, there was evidence provided from students, academic staff and study programme director of several of such lectures per academic year. (p.49). However, after the completion of the final report, the LBTU provided the list of the visiting lectures (Annex 9: Guest lectures from the industry (2014-2024)) showing that the number of these lectures varies between 1 (in the year 2019/20) and 9 (in 2021/22). In the academic year 2023/24 there were 6 guest lectures.

The list of scientific and professional projects, in which teachers and other academic staff involved in the implementation of the study programme participated, is listed in SER (p. 96) and includes about eight such projects. The results of the mentioned projects are included in various places in the study programme, mainly in the content of some relevant study courses.

However, data on the scientific productivity of teachers, participation in international conferences and publications in relevant scientific publications undermine the conclusion that research results are significantly included in the teaching content of the study programme. Teaching staff participating in the implementation of the study programme are overloaded with teaching and do not have much time left for participating in research projects, participating and presenting papers at international scientific conferences.

2.2.3. According to the SER: "Master's study programme SOPA is currently implemented in full-time studies (2 years or 4 semesters) in Latvian and English and in part-time distance learning studies (2 years and 6 months or 5 semesters) in Latvian. The programme is 120 ECTS and the degree awarded is a Master of Social Sciences in Sociology." (SER, p. 87). However, it has to be noted that part-time distance learning is not currently implemented in the Master's programme (SER, p. 99).

As previously noted also with the BA study programme, each of the three variants of the MA SOPA study programme also faces its own challenges in terms of implementation.

Although the small number of participants enables an individualized approach to teaching, it also represents a significant obstacle to the use of numerous methods based on a discussion approach, group and team work, etc. Nevertheless, during the onsite visit it was reported that there is a pretty good interaction of students and professors, there is room for individualized approach in teaching and overcoming potential study obstacles. Due to the small number of students, especially in the international study programme (in English), professors can much more help students with the gaps in previous knowledge. This is especially the case with the students who did not finish the first, BA level of SOPA study programme. It is stated that the study process "... is not significantly different for those studying in Latvian and English." (SER, p. 99), but this claim is significantly undermined by

the fact that very few students are enrolled in the English language study programme.

One of the main advantages of the MA SOPA programme is gaining academic and practical knowledge, research and analytical skills, good communication skills and wider perspective on societal issues that students acquire during the educational process, which was clearly expressed during the onsite visit meetings with various stakeholders (e. g. employers' representatives).

2.2.4.

Not applicable

2.2.5.

Not applicable

2.2.6. The MA thesis carries 30 ECTS points and is written during the last, fourth semester of study. In the ten-year period (from the academic year 2012/13 to 2022/23), 44 master's theses were defended (SER, p. 100), which is an average of only four MA theses per year. Some of the MA theses topics deal with the issues such as the quality of professional life at a university, promoting the development of entrepreneurial skills at the university, development of innovative cultural events in local self-government, trends in culture consumption and participation in local self-government, or flexible working hours and employee's motivation. All in all, the MA theses correspond to the assessed field of study and study programme.

The average grades of final MA theses by year are quite high and range from an average grade of 7, which was the lowest grade in the analyzed period, to an average grade of 9, which is also the highest average grade of a final MA thesis.

Master's theses rated with high grades (9 and 10) are presented at conferences and published in the proceedings of these conferences. LBTU organizes the annual conference 'Students on the way to science', in which the best student MA papers are presented. Also, students of the MA SOPA study programme participate in scientific projects in the framework of which they prepare their final theses. Two MA theses in the analyzed period were created within the framework of student participation in such projects (SER, p. 102).

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

The MA SOPA study programme is a well-designed programme in a specific area of specialization such as sociology of organization and public administration. However, the potential of the study programme is reduced by the insufficient amount of content from the field of public administration, which is particularly significant given that the basic goal of the study programme is to educate specialists who will be largely employed in public administration bodies at the state level, as well as at the territorial self-government.

The study programme struggles with a small number of enrolled students, which is especially visible in the case of the study programme conducted in English, which reduces the potential of pedagogical methods based on teamwork and group work, discussion groups, etc., as well as the economic viability of the study programme.

The study programme lacks leveling courses, which is particularly significant considering the fact that students who do not have prior knowledge in the field of performing studies at the BA level from this or related study programmes are enrolled in this MA study programme.

Strengths:

- 1) The name, main goal and learning outcomes of the MA SOPA study programme are mutually compatible and inter-connected, and to a large extent enable its implementation.
- 2) Students acquire analytical knowledge and skills, as well as communication skills and an overview of the wider picture when solving societal and other public problems.

Weaknesses:

- 1) An extremely small number of students enrolled in the study programme conducted in English, which calls into question not only economic sustainability, but also the use of quality work methods applied in the social sciences.
- 2) The absence of preparatory content (leveling courses) that gives students basic knowledge and prepares them for the MA level of SOPA study, which is especially important for students who have not previously completed a BA study within this or a similar study programme.

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

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

Analysis in 2.2.1. to 2.2.3. and 2.2.6. Small number of enrolled students, thus use of modern pedagogical methods is diminished. Lack of leveling courses. Lack of public administration content.

### **2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme**

#### **Analysis**

2.3.1. A big advantage is that LBTU is a HEI with good study and research facilities. Well-equipped auditoriums, infrastructure resources and material and technical support are available for all LBTU study programmes, including the master study programme 'Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration' (SOPA). Due to recent renovations and IT support for STEM fields, for MA SOPA students there are available several auditoriums equipped according to modern requirements, lecturers can use a variety of teaching methods. LBTU possesses necessary resources for implementing the MA SOPA study programme. The Fundamental Library of Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (hereinafter - LBTU FB) is an accredited library of national significance, which provides users with information resources and subject-specific literature: books, newspapers and magazines, digitally work with all the available databases and search engines and receive services: printing, scanning and copying are available at the ESAF Centre for Studies and Scientific Information. LBTU financially supports subscriptions to social science databases, computer equipment, software for the needs of the bachelor study programme SOPA. The MOODLE platform is used in almost all courses in full-time and part-time studies. Teaching personnel regularly participate in training related to the use of digital solutions in teaching.

The majority of lecturers who provide basic study courses in the study programme have a long working experience at LBTU. Members of the academic staff are forthcoming and flexible, especially with regard to work-study balance, since a large majority of students are working.

2.3.2.

Not applicable

2.3.3. Although there is a small number of students at the study programme, but the study costs are high, LBTU manage to be balanced within the field of study, because a large part of the students are fee-paying students. The number of students required to cover the costs of the programme: the number of students making up 2 groups must be 12. The minimum number of students making up one group must be 6 (this covers salaries and other costs). Material and technical resources are provided for the delivery of study programmes at LBTU, involving no additional expenses (SER, p.

104). Studies are provided if the required minimum number of students has been enrolled at the start of the studies, but students drop out during their studies. Since one of the goals of LBTU and the study field is the internationalization of studies, studies are also provided for groups of students with less than 5 students, and admission takes place twice a year. Joint classes are not organized for local and foreign students. In recent years, there has been a greater interest in studies from foreign students, thus the groups also become larger, reaching the set minimum.

This study programme attracts the most students from the local area and in recent years also from abroad.

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

Although material and technical resources have been provided at LBTU for the provision of study programmes, without creating additional expenses, doubts arise about the financial sustainability of the master's study programme, since the number of enrolled students exceeds the minimum required only in 2023/24.

Strengths:

- 1) Excellent infrastructure and synergies among structural units of the LBTU.
- 2) Qualified academic staff with experience in research and teaching, with English language skills, which provides master's studies in the study programme "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration" maintaining continuity.

Weaknesses:

- 1) Small number of students, high tuition costs (see comment under criterion 3.3.3.).
- 2) Although it was pointed out as a shortcoming in the previous accreditation process and it was recommended to supplement the book collection, the library still has too few books in the field of public administration.

### **Assessment of the requirement [6]**

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

See analysis under criterion 2.3.3.: Small number of students, high tuition costs. Material and technical resources are provided for the delivery of MA SOPA programme at LBTU, involving no additional expenses to reach the goals of LBTU and the study field - internationalization of studies.

## **2.4. Teaching Staff**

### **Analysis**

2.4.1. As evidenced in the SER (pp. 105-106) and CVs provided in the annex (CV\_EN 4.zip), five elected associate professors have been engaged in implementation of the study programme in 2023/2024 study year (SER, p. 105; validated by the list of elected associate professors in annex 2.3.1.). The number of elected associate professors has been stable over the last five years (five or six elected associate professors). This means that the qualification of teaching staff of the master's study programme is compliant with the requirements stated by the national regulations which prescribe that at least five elected professors or associate professors have been involved (the Law

on Higher Education Institutions, Section 55, Paragraph one, Clause 3). However, as presented before, the requirement is fulfilled only by associate professors (none of personnel involved has full professorship). Calculation based on data presented in the SER (p. 105) evidences that 87.5% (14 out of 16) of teaching personnel have a doctoral degree. Academic staff involved in work with foreign students have the required English language proficiency level.

Most of the teaching staff has specialization in the related study fields (10 out of 14 persons), not particularly in Sociology (4 out of 14 persons). Some academics who teach study courses such as in the field of public administration have a degree in history. Although this meets the requirements of the national regulation, ensuring the capacity and qualification of the teaching staff would require regular publications in their areas of expertise, both at the national and international level. As described under criterion 2.4.4., some shortages into publication activities of the academic staff are observed. This partly results from the work organization at the study programme level. Number of study courses assigned for each member of the teaching staff are high and their titles are diverse which demonstrate high involvement of the academic staff in teaching activities. High teaching workload and low workload in other types of academic performance might limit opportunities of the teaching staff to pursue their personal development goals. Altogether these circumstances might create shortcomings in the achievement of the aims of the study programme and learning outcomes.

The core teaching staff of the MA study programmes has solid teaching experience, but high workload in terms of the number of subjects they lead as is evidenced by CVs of the personnel (CV\_EN 4.zip) and as they report during on-site visit. The estimated average age of the personnel is relatively high (SER does not provide an average age calculation of the teaching staff of the study programme, but it is estimated based on the attached CVs). There is no evidence (neither in SER, nor during interviews with the academic staff) that substitutes for certain study courses - the new generation of teaching staff - would be trained in a targeted manner. Thus, the concentration of study courses mainly in the hands of present teaching staff creates a moderate risk for the successful implementation of the study programme in future.

2.4.2. As indicated under criterion 2.4.1, the core teaching staff of the study programme providing most essential study courses has two main shortcomings: first, high workload in teaching that limits opportunities to engage in other academic activities and, second, relatively high age which creates a risk for the implementation of the study programme in future. The evidence of measures against potential negative impact of changes in the composition of the teaching staff are not described properly (SER, pp. 106-107). Although a part of the key academic staff is of pre-retirement age, this is not reported at the SER as potential threat to the implementation of the study programme in the long-term perspective. The high workload and non-systematic engagement of the personnel into other academic activities also has not been analyzed in detail throughout the SER. This means that insufficient attention has been paid to personnel regeneration at the faculty and the study programme level. Although the Human Development Plan has been developed at the faculty level which includes clear vision to elect as academic staff several postdoctoral researchers (Ekonomikas un sabiedrības attīstības fakultātes personāla attīstības plāns (31.01.2024.) - document available in Latvian), that includes only one potential re-election candidate with regard to the assessed study field (sociology). That can be considered as insufficient for the needs of regeneration of the academic staff of the respective study programme, in terms of both, number of attracted new members of the personnel and the fields of expertise covered by the new staff members.

2.4.3.

Not applicable

2.4.4. Academic staff proves their expertise to varying degrees. Number of academic publications

and teaching materials published has fluctuated over time, especially, they have decreased during recent years (annex 2.4.1. summarizing the number of publications for the teaching staff of the study field; there are no separate summaries of number of publications and other academic activities in the breakdown by each study programme). For example, the number of peer-reviewed publications written by all the teaching staff of the respective study field published in journals indexed by Scopus/ Web of Science was as follows: 3 items in 2020, 10 in 2021, 5 in 2023 and 13 in 2023 (annex 2.4.1.). Considering the total number of teaching staff involved in the implementation of the study programme, these figures provide evidence that, on average, the number of publications indexed in Scopus/ Web of Science is less than one article per single member of academic staff per year. Number of publications in conference proceedings was as follows: 13 items in 2020, 15 in 2021, 12 in 2022 and 8 in 2023 (according to the summary table in annex 2.4.1). These data indicate that, on average, one conference proceeding per one staff member is published each year. As evidenced by CVs of the academic staff, most often these figures have been reached through conference proceedings published by LBTU. Altogether data shows that more than half of publications are reached through conference proceedings, but only few are published in international scientific journals (annex 2.4.1., CVs provided in the annex (CV\_EN 4.zip)). The number of conference attendances of the academic staff has decreased in 2022-2023 (25 and 21 participations) as compared to 2017-2018 and 2021 (44, 37 and 47 participations respectively, according to the summary table in annex 2.4.1).

Altogether the information presented indicates a low level of networking of the academic staff of the study field and programme with scholars of the respective field both nationally and internationally through relevant academic events. Academics providing courses in public administration and policy analysis have no recent publications in their field of expertise. The titles of the articles demonstrate the low level of interdisciplinarity among LBTU strategic areas such as writing of joint publications together with scientists of other LBTU study fields, especially in agriculture.

2.4.5. According to the SER (pp. 108-109), the interconnections between the study courses and the study programme are ensured by formal arrangements and several governing bodies at the LBTU level, as well as daily practices of mutual cooperation among the academic staff. This mechanism is described at the level of LBTU by the respective regulations - Procedure for Developing Course/traineeship Programmes and the Procedure for Registering and Updating Information in the IS Course Register of LBTU. The mechanism includes meetings of the teaching personnel and supervision of the work by the Methodological Commission. The annexes describing the study programme and study courses included demonstrate the interconnections between the study courses and the study programme.

According to SER, four study courses are taught by several faculty members (SER, p. 109). Although this is considered a good practice, which allows creating more comprehensive study courses and allowing each teaching staff to focus on their own topic of exercise and reducing the workload of each individual teaching staff, the need for mutual coordination mechanisms is recognised, but they are not described in detail (SER, p. 109). This might create some overlaps in the study course content which are not addressed in the SER.

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

The qualification of the academic staff fully complies with the requirements of national regulations, but their performance has to be improved in the long-term perspective, especially, with regard to international networking and publications into international academic journals in their fields of expertise. This is partly explained by the high workload of academic staff in teaching activities. Although various sections of the SER recognize the importance of mutual cooperation of academic staff, it has been ensured mainly through mutual meetings, seminars and the work of the

methodological commission, but there is a shortage of information about mutual cooperation of academic staff at the level of daily practices.

Key members of the academic staff have long-standing experience in their teaching work; thus, having solid knowledge, meanwhile reaching pre-retirement age. In SER, there has not been included analysis of potential challenges produced by the age of the teaching staff, but the Human Development Plan of the faculty does not include specific targets for the regeneration of academic staff in the field of sociology. The only one potential re-elected academic in the field of sociology mentioned in the Human Development Plan is not considered as sufficient actions toward diminishing potential threat.

Although publication activities of the academic staff meet formal requirements stated by the regulations at the national and LBTU level, including having publications indexed in Scopus/ Web of Science, this criterion is mostly reached by publications in the conference proceedings published by their own university (LBTU).

Strengths:

1) Solid work experience of key academic staff involved into the implementation of the study programme.

Weaknesses:

1) Insufficient measures have been taken to ensure the regeneration of academic staff involved into the implementation of the study programme.

2) Low participation of the academic staff in international and national networking events (conferences) outside their own university (LBTU).

3) Low number of publications produced by the academic staff in international, highly-indexed peer-reviewed journals.

4) Low number of interdisciplinary publications produced together with scholars from other strategic areas of specialization of the LBTU.

## **Assessment of the requirement [7]**

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

See the analysis under criterion 2.4.1., 2.4.2. and 2.4.4. The problem of personnel renewal and recruitment for all fields of expertise necessary for the fulfillment of the study programme has not been sufficiently addressed. Moderate number and uneven distribution of publications among academic staff.

## **2.5. Assessment of the Compliance**

### **Requirements**

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The study programme generally fulfills the criteria outlined in the State Academic Education Standard (Regulation Nr. 240 of the Cabinet of Ministers). The OSPS Master's programme consists of 20 (30) CP per semester. The compulsory part consists of 44 (66) CP of study



courses, the restricted elective part consists of 16 (24) CP of study courses, the Master's thesis is 20 (30) CP. (Annex  
SOPAm\_Compliance\_with\_National\_Standard\_Academic\_Education\_ENG.docx)

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The study course descriptions and materials are prepared in the languages in which the programme is implemented (Latvian and English), and comply with the requirements set forth in Section 561, Paragraph two and Section 562, Paragraph two of the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Diploma sample for completing the study programme is in accordance with the requirements of the Procedures for Issuing State-Recognized Higher Education Documents (Regulation Nr. 202 of the Cabinet of Ministers).

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Confirmation signed by the LBTU Vice-rector for Studies verifies that the academic staff of the academic study programme comply with the requirements set forth in Section 55, Paragraph one, Clause 3 of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Confirmation signed by the LBTU Vice-rector for Studies verifies that the proficiency level in the state language of the academic staff involved in delivering the study programme meets the requirements of the Regulations Regarding the Extent of the Knowledge of the Official Language and the Procedures for Examining the Proficiency in the Official Language (Regulation Nr. 157 of the Cabinet of Ministers).

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Confirmation signed by the LBTU Vice-rector for Studies verifies that the teaching staff who are involved in the implementation of the study programme have at least B2 level knowledge in English in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Sample of the study agreement complies with the mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement and requirements of the Mandatory Provisions To Be Included In The Study Agreement (Regulation Nr. 70 of the Cabinet of Ministers).

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

LBTU has signed an agreement with University of Latvia, which include confirmation that in case of discontinuation of the study programme "Sociology of Organisations and Public Administration", University of Latvia undertakes to provide study opportunities for students of this programme in the academic master's study programme "Sociology".

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Confirmation signed by the LBTU Vice-rector for Studies states that the LBTU guarantees students compensation for loss if a study programme is discontinued and students do not wish to continue their studies at University of Latvia.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

### **Assessment of the requirement [8]**

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Fully compliant with all the requirements.

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

The MA SOPA study programme is a well-designed programme in a specific area of specialization such as sociology of organization and public administration. However, the potential of the study programme is reduced by the insufficient amount of content from the field of public administration, which is particularly significant given that the basic goal of the study programme is to educate specialists who will be largely employed in public administration bodies at the state level, as well as at the territorial self-government. The study programme struggles with a small number of enrolled students, which is especially visible in the case of the study programme conducted in English, which reduces the potential of pedagogical methods based on teamwork and group work, discussion groups, etc., as well as the economic viability of the study programme. The study programme lacks leveling courses, which is particularly significant considering the fact that students who do not have prior knowledge in the field of performing studies at the BA level from this or related study programmes are enrolled in this MA study programme.

The qualification of the teaching staff complies with the formal requirements set by the national regulations, although some academics have degrees in related fields, not precisely in social sciences (sociology and social work). Although good practice in such circumstances is to demonstrate the qualifications of the teaching staff through other activities, such as research and publications in their current field of expertise, the other academic performance of personnel of this study programme is limited. This partly results from the work organization at ESAF, the study field and the study programme level which entails high workload of the academic staff in teaching activities. In turn, this approach does not create enough space for personal development, research and publications activities, as well as academic networking. The criterion on the number of academic publications indexed in Scopus/ Web of Science most often is reached by publications in the conference proceedings of internal conferences organized by ESAF which, therefore, hinders inter-institutional visibility of the study field and respective study programme. Some members of the teaching staff have no recent publications. The core team of teaching staff is in their mature age which creates potential insufficiency of the personnel in the next few years perspective. Currently, this challenge is not tackled properly in the respective documents at the ESAF and LBTU level.

The study programme fully complies with the requirements set forth in the Law on Higher Education Institutions and other regulatory enactments such as State Academic Education Standard (Regulation Nr. 240), Procedures for Issuing State-Recognized Higher Education Documents (Regulation Nr. 202), Regulations Regarding the Extent of the Knowledge of the Official Language and the Procedures for Examining the Proficiency in the Official Language (Regulation Nr. 157) and Mandatory Provisions To Be Included In The Study Agreement (Regulation Nr. 70). Furthermore, there is an agreement signed with the University of Latvia ensuring that if the study programme is discontinued, students will have the opportunity to continue their studies in the University of Latvia's

academic master's programme in Sociology. Additionally, there is confirmation signed by the LBTU Vice-rector for Studies which confirms that the teaching staff involved in the study programme implementation have at least B2 level English proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and guarantees compensation for students if the study programme is discontinued and they choose not to continue their studies at the University of Latvia.

## **Evaluation of the study programme "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration"**

Evaluation of the study programme:

Average

## **2.6. Recommendations for the Study Programme "Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration"**

### **Short-term recommendations**

Develop leveling courses for students from different study fields that consists of at least 6 ECTS points.

Each faculty member with a permanent position will publish at least one research article in a peer-reviewed international journal in two years.

Keep the level of students engaged into scientific work of their teaching staff at level 2-3 persons per academic year.

Include the annual calculation of average age of teaching staff in Human Resource Development plan at the ESAF and study programme level to ensure regeneration of the personnel, to state a level of average age which has to be tackled immediately to diminish risks of implementation of the study programme.

Attract at least one teacher with respective educational and professional background in the position of elected assistant professor for the study courses "Qualitative research methods" and "Quantitative research methods".

Increase the number of invited visiting lecturers (including, employers) to core study courses such as social research methods, social welfare, life-quality studies, human development etc. to explain certain theoretical concepts from the point of view of practical application - at least three visiting lecturers per year.

Review the book purchase policy to ensure regular updating of literature in areas necessary for the field of study, especially public administration

### **Long-term recommendations**

In order to promote the creation of an international study environment and to optimize study costs, it is recommended to include in study plans joint study courses taught in English for local and foreign students in master's study program. It is allowed by the Law on Higher Education Institutions Section 56. Regulation of Studies (3) The study programmes of higher education institutions and colleges shall be implemented in the official language. In a study programme which is implemented in the official language, not more than one-fifth of the credit point amount of the study programme may be implemented in other official languages of the European Union, taking into account that final and State examinations as well as the writing of a qualification paper, bachelor or master's thesis may not be included in this part. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/37967> .

Expand participation in international academic conferences. Each member of academic staff should attend at least 1 conference outside LBTU per year).

Each faculty member with a permanent position will publish at least one research article in a peer-reviewed international journal every year.

Introduce a second lecturer - in the position of assistant professors or lecturers - for all teaching staff members who will reach retirement age in the next six years; to establish this rule ("teaching assistant for every pre-retirement age teaching staff member") as systematic human resource policy measure set forth in the respective formal documents of the LBTU and ESAF level; to abdicate the re-election of teaching staff who have reached retirement age, allocating assistant positions to them.

### 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
R1 - Pursuant to Section 5, Paragraph 2.1 of the Law on Higher Education Institutions, the higher education institution/ college shall ensure continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field whilst implementing its internal quality assurance system:		Partially compliant		Several indicators listed below have received "partially compliant" evaluation. There is a need to improve the performance of existing QA system in terms of transparency of the procedures in Latvian and English and ensure the efficiency of these mechanisms.

Requirements	Requirement Evaluation		Comment
R2 - Compliance of scientific research and artistic creation with the level of development of scientific research and artistic creation (if applicable)		Partially compliant	The level of scientific research in terms of international peer-reviewed articles is very low. Teachers' teaching schedule should be more flexible to allow time for writing research applications and conducting scientific research. More research projects and peer-reviewed journal articles in international journals would improve study fields' contribution to university's overall mission and strengthen its role in the HEI.
R3 - The cooperation implemented within the study field with various Latvian and foreign organizations ensures the achievement of the aims of the study field.		Partially compliant	Although LBTU's collaboration with institutions in Latvia is strong, there are shortcomings in terms of international cooperation and Erasmus+ mobility aspects.
R4 - Elimination of deficiencies and shortcomings identified in the previous assessment of the study field, if any, or implementation of the recommendations provided.		Partially compliant	Some deficiencies are still present, for example, the attraction of personnel with a strong focus on the field of public administration, strengthening of public administration content in study programmes, and additional acquisition of recent scientific literature in that area.

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

No.	Study programme	R5	R6	R7	R8	Evaluation of the study programme (excellent, good, average, poor)
1	Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration (43314)	Not relevant	Partially compliant	Partially compliant	Fully compliant	Average

<b>No.</b>	<b>Study programme</b>	<b>R5</b>	<b>R6</b>	<b>R7</b>	<b>R8</b>	<b>Evaluation of the study programme (excellent, good, average, poor)</b>
2	Sociology of Organizations and Public Administration (45314)	Partially compliant	Partially compliant	Partially compliant	Fully compliant	Average

### **The Dissenting Opinions of the Experts**