

# Expert group joint opinion

Evaluation Procedure: Assessment of Study Field

Higher Education Institution: Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences

Study field: Architecture and Construction

Experts:

1. Dina Suhanova (Chair of the Experts Group)
2. Veljko Srzić (Secretary of the Experts Group)
3. Milena Seržantė
4. Ervīns Krauklis (Employers' Confederation of Latvia)
5. Mārtiņš Arājs (Student Union of Latvia)

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

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

Study field “Architecture and Construction” opened in 2013 and is one of five Study fields (henceforward – SF) of ViA realised at the Faculty of Engineering. Although very different from the rest of HEI's branches of engineering and social sciences, the reasoning to establish and develop SF containing currently one college-level study programme (henceforward – SP) “Construction of Sustainable buildings” corresponds to the needs of the national economy and fits to regional development strategy. It corresponds as well not only to the urgent needs of regional corporate businesses of the construction industry but also wider global trends.

The strategic goals of the SF are well defined within the formal documentation and relevant strategies and are generally attainable. They correspond to the strategic goal of ViA that aims to provide “academic and professional higher education and research, providing interdisciplinary, practically applicable and innovative higher education providing the labour market with competent specialists”. To ensure quality standards, ViA has implemented a quality assurance system and mechanisms that generally contributes to achieving the primary aims and objectives of SF/SP.

Study provision, scientific support, informative provision, material and technical provision, and also financial provision fully complies with the specific needs of the SF and its successful implementation and ensures an optimal quality learning process.

Scientific research has been identified as implemented into the SF and recognised as aligned with the SF content. The origin of the research goals mainly stem from the local circumstances and natural resources availability thus defining dominant research areas. Besides the timber related research activities, academic staff of the SP demonstrates the expertise in smart building, environmental issues, etc. Significant discrepancies of scientific production has been evidenced in between academic staff members. The latter has been explained relying on the fact most of the lecturers are part time engaged and/or practitioners from the industry sector. This fact obviously does not allow full dedication to scientific work and research activities but ensures professional competences to reach expected learning outcomes for the assessed study program. Lack of motivation system, measures and rewards that supports academic/teaching staff development and research excellence.

University collaborates with local institutions and institutions and organisations from abroad. All these collaborations, in general, contribute to achieving the aims and learning outcomes of the study field and the relevant study programme. Business representatives have shown to be very motivated to collaborate with the university. Active engagement and continuous work from University, SF/SP management is needed to make use of all the possibilities and benefits that cooperation with industry and private companies can provide. Experts recognise that there are low levels of student and academic staff mobility, e.g. there was no outgoing mobility of academic staff between 2014 and 2021; in general there are underused international internship exchange possibilities and in general SF must aim for much more international reach.

SF and opportunities to study construction in ViA is not widely known and as relatively small SF containing one first level professional higher education 3 years study programme “Construction of Sustainable Buildings” meaning there is no further education possibilities in particular field at the university.

Study programme “Construction of Sustainable Buildings” is compliant and corresponds with the thematic reach of the study field “Architecture and Construction”. The SP is a regionally oriented and compact program offering individual approach and flexibility in preparing qualified, competent and competitive building construction managers, responding to the industry's demand for advanced specialists in sustainable construction. After internal and external evaluation SP is revised, updated and substantiated improvement has been done compared with the previous accreditation cycle. The study programme generally is organised in accordance with the national regulatory enactments and content corresponds to the professional standart. While revising SP, teaching platform is composed of academic staff and guest teaching staff as practicing professionals coming from industry. In this way SP can be in line with the premise of keeping up to professional level and trends of the industry – students are qualified and ready for the needs of market requirements.

Referring to the implementation of recommendations from latest reaccreditation cycle, it is obvious some recommendations still need further efforts to carry out (number of professors, international research projects, greater involvement of academic staff & students into the research activities).

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

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

##### **Analysis**

1.1.1. Study field “Architecture and Construction” opened in 2013 and is one of five Study fields (henceforward - SF) of ViA realised in one of two university faculties – the Faculty of Engineering. Although very different from the rest of HEI's branches of engineering and social sciences, the reasoning to establish and develop SF containing currently one college-level study programme (henceforward - SP) “Construction of Sustainable buildings” clearly corresponds to the needs of the national economy and not only very well fits to regional development strategy, but corresponds to the urgent needs of regional corporate businesses and global trends in the construction industry. The strategic goals of the study field (SAR, p. 14) defined in SAR are clear, attainable and for the reporting period of 2013-2020 were the following:

- 1) To develop appropriate competencies for those already working in the construction industry who have not acquired the education suitable for the labour market and necessary for specialists in the industry;
- 2) To provide students with practically oriented higher professional education in the area of construction;
- 3) To develop students' research skills and the desire to explore the world around them, on the basis of which to develop students' competencies for their further self-education process and to create motivation for further education;
- 4) To provide students with the necessary set of knowledge, skills and competencies in the area of construction, so that after successful completion of the study programme they would be able to work for private, public and municipal companies, promoting competitiveness in the changing socio-economic conditions;
- 5) To ensure the development of versatile personality skills.

Abovementioned goals corresponds to the strategic goal of ViA that aims to provide “academic and professional higher education and research, providing interdisciplinary, practically applicable and innovative higher education providing the labour market with competent specialists”.

Although new ViA strategy is in development and pending to be supplemented with the ViA Strategic

Specialization (to be determined by the Ministry of Education and Science), from experts point of view it is only logical that for the period of 2021-2027 the strategic goals are defined as more ambitious (considering HEI's aim to develop as innovative and competitive regional centre for education and research and develop the centre of knowledge and experience (a "hotspot") on sustainable building construction practices within the SF (SAR, p. 16)) and are as follows:

- 1) To develop a recognizable quality mark of the study field in Vidzeme region and Latvia;
- 2) To define and develop strategic research, innovation and specialization directions that would be unique and competitive in the Baltic Sea Region;
- 3) To respond to the industry's demand for modern and advanced young professionals to help increase the productivity and competitiveness of the construction industry both locally and internationally.

Additionally to above mentioned and ViA's intention for more commercialised education, experts would advise to work on marketing strategy to promote the SF and its respective SP, widely advertising the possibilities to study building construction management in Valmiera. As noted in meeting with employers there is still perception on ViA as university to study social sciences, and tourism.

As confirmed by SAR and heard in the meetings with ViA representatives (rector, faculty dean and SF/SP director (currently represented by one person)), in recent years SF management has closely followed the needs and the development trends of the society and national economy aiming to develop SF accordingly. SF was founded based on the demand from the construction industry (development strategy of Latvia for 2017-2024) requiring increased numbers of field professionals by 2030 (SAR, p. 13). The demand for professionals is still actual on a regional and national scale, particularly considering also international labour market, upcoming large-scale projects and global sustainability trends and EU sustainable construction direction. In the expert view, it is commendable also recently established ViA's cooperation with Valmiera Municipality and Valmiera Development Agency (SAR, p. 4-5). It was also confirmed in the meeting with employers where the Valmiera representative took part. ViA has been taking part in Valmiera's strategic development planning for 2030, "taking into account its study and research offer and development opportunities, with the main emphasis on the circular economy, wooden building construction, sustainable development, IT areas" (SAR, p. 5).

ViA is interested in and actively monitors trends in economic development and by involving industry professionals it follows also actualities in the labour market. SF/SP has undergone external revision – the university is proactive in implementing change based on actual sustainability trends, technologies and requirements from the labour market that demand specialists able to operate in sustainable construction. Initiatives from the university are proven by SAR, as well as during the meetings with SF management, SP director, teaching staff and employers. Based on the strategic goals of the EU Construction Union, the Latvian construction industry, SF ensures their realisation in directly playing important role in raising smart and qualified specialists, overall improving human capital base, and also increasing the number of graduates as future highly qualified professionals for labour market.

Currently, there is just one SP in the SF – 3 years duration 1st level professional higher education study programme "Sustainable Building Construction". The general opinion from experts is that SF needs to be developed by offering consecutive SP (SPs) by developing at least successive BA level studies thus allowing the logical continuation of the education path for graduates.

1.1.2. ViA has elaborately identified and analyzed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the SF – see SAR, p. 16, (1. Table. SWOT analysis of the study field). According to SAR and as confirmed in the meetings with management, Faculty and SF leadership university will continue working on strengthening the SP of the SF. In the report ViA has thoroughly laid out the strengths of the SF showing numerous highly valued qualities of the SF, such as individual approach, interdisciplinarity and cross-curriculum links, IT and contemporary software and learning tools, content adapted to industry trends, cooperation with industry, private companies and labour market, practitioners as teachers. Additionally, it must be noted that experts recognize and would like to distinguish ViA cooperation with Valmiera municipality. As for the weaknesses, ViA has precisely identified multiple of them and the listed corresponds to what experts observed during several meetings. Opportunities listed show the potential of the SF and the need for it to be developed by e.g. branding and providing accessible contemporary education, offering foreign language courses, expanding cooperation opportunities, attracting new academic staff, establishing specialization and becoming a sustainable building competence centre, taking part in the international projects, offering life long learning courses and training, ensuring teachers' qualification, developing international scientific cooperation, and improving the SF / SP by constant monitoring of labour market.

University has integrated conclusions from SWOT into development planning documents, annexe “Study Field “Architecture and Construction” Development Plan 2021 – 2027” focusing on strengths to overcome weaknesses and mitigate threats. Undoubtedly SF and its corresponding SP are up to date, well connected and current for the industry, updated in terms of how the sector is developing in terms of digitalisation and other advancements, innovation-oriented and fitting with globally pressing environmental concerns.

Looking through the development plan, it is not clear the authority of it – whether it is carried out by higher university leadership, faculty, SF or SP level. Saying that it would be also recommendable to elaborate the plan of general goals and tasks with detailed and targeted assignments, time plan and responsible institutional level/positions / persons to realize the envisioned goals. Additionally, the development plan does not explicitly indicate the resources (human, financial, other) that will be needed for its realisation.

Experts stress that by setting the development direction and particular goals, SF needs to grow by adding next study levels (BA, possibly MA), offering continuous education in sustainable construction thus ensuring also basis for remarkable, competitive education and research, also solid and substantiated ground for competence centre / “hotspot” in the field not only in local but also in the Baltic Sea Region as mentioned in one of SF development goals. This currently was mentioned in the development plan but was not set as a task for the next 6-year period. However, before opening new programs, it might be advisable to analyse the potential and capacity of the university. As written in the plan and experts can only agree – “Bachelor's level studies would ensure the continuity of development of knowledge and skills competencies.”

The international education market is another possibility for development if the program would offer English taught courses – a program (partially) implemented in English would mean welcoming exchange students and teaching staff. However, since there is a strong regional focus and SF with one SP currently is quite compact, before doing so experts advise analysing capacity, impact and outcome.

1.1.3. Since recently there are changes in the university governance model, the new governance structure for ViA has not yet been approved by ViA (it will be done by ViA Council – at the time of

submitting the report ViA Council has not yet had a formal decision making power, SAR, p. 6). The annexe to the report gives an overview of the currently existing ViA governance structure (Annex 3). Although not very explicit, the management structure of the SF is shown in the diagram (SAR, p. 20.). The SF is managed by SF director who reports directly to the Faculty dean. In ViA case current SF director is covering the duties of the SP director as well. SAR (p. 19) explains that “important decisions for the study field are made in close cooperation with the industry representatives who participate in the jointly organized meetings” – this is understood as the Consultative / Advisory council of the SF and consists of 10 representatives. However, it must be commented that the presented scheme on SF management doesn't give a clear understanding of the relationship between governing, decision making and consulting structures and authorities of those. The titles used in the description differ from the ones in the scheme.

Overall the involved management is supportive, prefers direct communication and is oriented towards the development of the SF. The role of SF and SP director (same person in ViA's case) in SAR is not explained in details, although it can be accepted that generally, the main job responsibilities are 1) to maintain, improve, develop and ensure the content and realization of the study direction 2) to manage the work of the study direction council 3) prepare the self-assessment report and accreditation of the field of study 4) plan and control the execution of the study plan 5) to perform quality control of the study process 6) organize student internships. Overall, the newly appointed SF/SP director has redesigned the SP in a holistic approach involving (inviting) teaching staff, responding to the needs of industry, composing a team from former and new internationally experienced teachers and integrating state-of-the-art technologies and digitalisation tools in the curriculum for the prospective students – IT, equipment, VR possibilities. During the visit experts notice that currently there are numerous additional minor tasks put in the responsibility of these positions. The appointed SF and SP director is a talented manager and has a broad connection network, however, experts would point out that there is a risk of trying to cover all the issues starting from the conceptual development of SF and solving minor issues and student problems as well. A clear division of duties must be introduced and instructed to all involved to ensure sustainability of these positions.

Due to the size of the university, also SF and respective SP and involved personnel, the decision-making is quite efficient – however, it often happens on a personal level / informal way in occasional meetings.

The support provided by the administrative and technical staff is well established and ensures the needs of the SP corresponding to the SF. ViA study process support functions are ensured by the Administrative Department covering such functions as study administration, international cooperation administration, IT infrastructure coordination, ViA operational management, financial management and accounting, marketing and public relations, as well as document management and circulation, and internal communication. (SAR, p. 21).

1.1.4. There are a system and procedures developed for the admission of students – admission criteria to ViA study programmes are approved by ViA Senate yearly before admission period (SAR, p. 23). The admission regulations at ViA are issued in accordance with the requirements of Paragraph 46 of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education of the Republic of Latvia, Cabinet of Ministers Regulations. Admission regulations indicate general provisions, application requirements and procedures for different applicants and study levels, competition and announcement of results, appeal procedure, registration for studies and matriculation. Annexe of the regulations also specifies particular admission requirements for different study programmes at the university. The full version of the document is available in the ViA study environment <https://moodle.va.lv>, in the section “News

for students” (information is available only to ViA students and employees when connecting to the system): <https://moodle.va.lv/course/view.php?id=454#section-1>. For potential students, regulations are publicly available on the ViA website in Latvian: <https://va.lv/lv/studijas/uznemsanas-noteikumi-20182019-akadgada>. The information for foreign students are placed in the English section of the website; the application for foreign students takes place through Dreamapply platform but for particular SP it is not offered. SAR also describes admission for international students thus it is not completely clear whether SP is offered for foreign students. Assuming SP is not implemented in English, this would not be possible for non-Latvian-speaking students.

There are a system and procedures for the recognition of the study period, professional experience, and prior formal and non-formal education at the university. SAR (p. 23) and meetings with SF management confirm it is possible to start studies at ViA at later study stages and recognition of study results obtained in previous education is announced to be the regular procedure for any student. The equalization of study results (taking into consideration credit points received and required) is performed by SP director after the student submits the required documents (certificate or diploma with a diploma supplement for previously obtained education). The equalization of the study results is performed also in the case of Erasmus exchange studies. Students also has the right to submit an application to ViA for recognition of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired in previous education or professional experience in the study programme implemented by the higher education institution or part thereof. Information on starting studies in the later study stages can be also found online: <https://va.lv/lv/studijas/studiju-uzsaksana-velakajos-studiju-posmosparnaksana>. For student's convenience, there is an online application form to fill in and start the procedure of entering the University.

There is also information on recognition of professional experience, and prior formal and non-formal education publicly available on ViA website:

<https://va.lv/lv/studijas/arpus-formalas-izglitibas-un-profesionalas-pieredzes-atzisana>. Recognition of study results achieved in previous education or professional experience at ViA is governed by the Regulations – Appendix 8. Regulations are published on the website in Latvian. For recognition, a person must submit an application – a template available online and regulations indicates all the documents that need to be presented accordingly. Based on criteria, the decision on the recognition is made by the Study Results Recognition Commission established by ViA (p. 23) consisting of directors of the SF and SP, the dean, the director of the Knowledge and Technology Centre, a representative of the study administration group of the Administrative Department, and the pro-rector for academic and scientific affairs.

There is a system at ViA for assessing students' achievements and learning outcomes. University has Senate-approved Study Regulations (Appendix 9) that in detail lay down criteria, forms of examination and terms for the assessment of students' knowledge, conditions regarding academic debts, and other requirements for achieving learning outcomes (SAR, p. 24) – section VI. describes Content of academic obligations and basic rules for their fulfilment, section VII. describes Assessment of the fulfilment of academic obligations; VIII. – Appeal procedures. Study regulations are available to all involved parties – the full version of the document is available in the ViA study environment <https://moodle.va.lv>, in the section “News for students” (information is available only to ViA students and employees when connecting to the learning environment system): <https://moodle.va.lv/course/view.php?id=454> (Senate, 25.01.2012, with the last amendments 27.01.2021.). Information on learning outcomes, study calendar and requirements for course completion and criteria for assessment are also provided in study course descriptions provided to students. Students in the meeting confirm they are always informed about what is required for

course completion at the beginning of the course or during it.

1.1.5. Methods, principles and procedures for assessing achievements of students have been developed and are clearly defined – University has Senate-approved Study Regulations (Appendix 9) that in detail lay down criteria, forms of examination, and terms for the assessment of students' knowledge, conditions regarding academic debts, and other requirements for achieving learning outcomes (SAR, p. 24). The methods, principles and criteria of assessment are required in all course descriptions, available, known to all involved parties and are consistently used by teaching staff to assess academic achievements. Students are informed about assessment criteria before and during every course, they also have access to evaluation criteria, conditions and related procedures on the Moodle platform. Students' academic obligations and their fulfilment requirements within the framework of a specific study course are specified in the descriptions of the study courses. During the meeting, students confirm the conditions are rather clear and they are always informed about them at the beginning of the course.

Basic forms of examination at ViA are rather conventional: written or oral examination, test / preparation and defence of internship report, preparation and defence of the annual project, and state examination. Particularly speaking of SF and respective SP – lecturers can specify also other forms of examination, e.g. course papers, practical work, homework, tests, and examinations.

Students can receive cumulative assessment (passed or failed) or grade according to the 10-point grading scheme. Generally, the methods of assessment and grading are relevant, logical and justified. Due to the size of University and SF/ SP, individual approach to students is also possible for receiving feedback, and communicating assessments and that is noticeably praised by the students as an important benefit while studying at the university.

Additionally, it is advised for regulations to explain how examination may take place if there are remote study situation – for instance in Covid-19 or other similar cases and how efficiently Moodle platform is used to receive grading. During the meetings experts learned that not all teachers and students use Moodle – certain effort must be put in encouraging students and lecturers to use Moodle e-learning platform as efficiency can be reached if all involved parties are fluent in using it.

Additionally, to Study regulations, there are the following regulations that provide ruling for preparing study projects, graduation papers, internship reports:

- 1) Guide for Preparation Study Projects and Graduation Papers;
- 2) Internship Regulations.

Regulations of Ethics can be used in case of complaints for resolving matters related to students' assessment. It also clearly indicates the types of violations of academic ethics, e.g. falsification of marks and documents of examination, the use of unauthorized sources and ways of obtaining information (cheating) during examinations. These regulations lay out sanction involved parties can impose or receive and relates to students and general staff. Regulations also describe procedures for identifying violations and imposing sanctions, however, it must be noted that, in the meeting with students there is no common knowledge about what is violation, what to do if it is noticed and there is no information about the procedures. Thus experts would suggest working on informing students in this regard, so they acknowledge that there are general basic principles of ethics at ViA, can recognise wrongdoings and know procedures they may take to report or avoid violation of ethics.

1.1.6. The university has established the principles of academic integrity – they are formulated in

the ViA Regulations of Ethics (ViA Regulations of Ethics and the Ethics Violation Scheme, Appendix 10). The goal of the Code of Ethics of ViA is to promote the development of a fair and just environment in the institution of higher education, as well as to encourage ViA staff to act in good faith and responsibly. The Code of Ethics of ViA includes basic ethical principles and norms that ViA staff (students, academic and general staff) should respect in their attitude towards ViA, in their work, relations with other ViA representatives and society.

Section II on Violations of ethics describes Types of violations of academic ethics, including plagiarism. Regulations also describe procedure for identifying violations and imposing sanctions, e.g. – “If the violation of academic ethics is identified in the Unified Plagiarism Control System (hereinafter – the system), the Director of the study field, upon consulting with the responsible lecturer (supervisor and/or reviewer), investigates the possible violation of academic ethics on the merits by examining system’s report and the student’s paper.” (Regulations of Ethics, 9.3.) Regulations are publicly available and published on ViA website: <https://va.lv/lv/par-via/dokumenti>. Additionally, experts can commend the fact that Adherence to academic ethics is also subject briefly explained/reminded in all the SP study course descriptions available to students for every study course.

As for plagiarism detecting tools, according to SAR, ViA has entered into an agreement with the University of Latvia on the use of the Unified Computerized Plagiarism Control System (SAR, p. 26). The system is one of the most essential anti-plagiarism tools at ViA. As described in SAR (p. 26), students have to upload their papers (also Qualification papers) to the study information system LAIS which is synchronized with the plagiarism control system. If there are cases where a lecturer has suspects regarding a student’s paper, the plagiarism control system may be also used to check course papers (SAR, p. 26) Effectiveness of the system is proved by one case in 2018 when a case of plagiarism in the development of the Qualification paper was detected.

To promote awareness and examine violations University has founded a body examining cases of academic and research violations – Academic Ethics Commission. Their establishment, competence and general terms of operation are thoroughly described in regulations. Annexe of the regulations also provides a template to fill in to report violations case. Although regulations quite in detail describes code of ethics, types of violations, reporting of them and imposing sanctions, in the meeting with students it has been noticed that students are not well informed about principles, moreover procedures related to the violation. Experts would suggest to work on informing students in this regard, so they acknowledge that there are general basic principles of ethics at ViA, can recognise wrongdoings and know procedures they may take to report or avoid academic violation, particularly plagiarism. Additionally, during the meetings it can be also noted that in particular SF / SP plagiarism is not very common since course projects and Qualification papers are very individual unique, based on individual output data, respective calculations and development solutions.

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

The reasoning to establish and develop SF containing currently one college level SP “Construction of Sustainable buildings” corresponds to the needs of the national economy and not only very well fits regional development strategy, but corresponds to the urgent needs of regional corporate businesses and global trends in the construction industry. The strategic goals of the SF are defined and generally attainable – they correspond to the strategic goal of ViA. For the upcoming period of 2021-2027, the strategic goals are defined as more ambitious considering HEI's aim to develop as an innovative and competitive regional centre for education and research and develop the centre of knowledge and experience in sustainable building construction practices. To keep up with the

ambitions, experts would advise working on a marketing strategy to promote the SF and its respective SP, widely advertising the possibilities to study building construction management in Valmiera.

ViA has elaborately identified and analyzed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the SF. Submitted SAR shows that HEI has integrated conclusions from SWOT into development planning documents, focusing on strengths to overcome weaknesses and mitigate threats. It would be also recommendable to elaborate the plan of general goals and tasks with detailed and targeted assignments, time plan and responsible institutional level/positions/persons to realize the envisioned goals.

Overall the involved management is supportive, prefers direct communication and is oriented towards the development of the SF. The support provided by the administrative and technical staff is well established and ensures the needs of the SP corresponding to the SF. Due to the size of the university, also SF and respective SP and involved personnel, the decision-making is quite efficient – however, it often happens on a personal level / informal way in occasional meetings. The appointed SF/SP director is a good manager and has a broad connection network, however, experts would point out that there is a risk of trying to cover all the issues starting from the conceptual development of SF and solving minor issues and student problems as well. Clear division of duties must be instructed to all involved parties to ensure the sustainability of these positions.

There are a system and procedures developed for the admission of students, a system and procedures for the recognition of the study period, professional experience, and prior formal and non-formal education at the university and a system for assessing students' achievements and learning outcomes.

Study regulations are available to all involved parties. Information on learning outcomes, study calendar and requirements for course completion and criteria for assessment are also provided in study course descriptions provided to students. As well methods, principles and procedures for assessing the achievements of students have been developed and are clearly defined.

Due to the size of the University and SF/ SP, individual approach to students is possible for receiving feedback on courses and that is noticeably praised by the students as an important benefit while studying at the university.

The university has established the principles of academic integrity – they are formulated in the ViA Regulations of Ethics. As for plagiarism detecting tools, ViA has entered into an agreement with the University of Latvia on the use of the Unified Computerized Plagiarism Control System. Although Regulations of Ethics in detail describe the code of ethics, types of violations, reporting of them and imposing sanctions, students are not well informed about principles, moreover procedures related to violations, however it can be also noted that in particular, SF / SP plagiarism is not very common since course projects and Qualification papers are very individual and unique, based on individual output data, respective calculations and development solutions.

#### Strengths:

- 1) The reasoning to establish and develop SF containing currently one college-level SP “Construction of Sustainable buildings” clearly corresponds to the needs of the national economy and not only very well fits to regional development strategy, but corresponds to the urgent needs of regional businesses and to global trends in the construction industry.
- 2) ViA's close cooperation with the local municipality and Valmiera Development Agency and taking part in Valmiera's strategic development planning for 2030, “taking into account its study and research offer and development opportunities, with the main emphasis on the circular economy, wooden building construction, sustainable development, IT areas”.
- 3) Only educational institution in the Vidzeme region that offers higher education in construction.
- 4) Considerate and actual specialisation in sustainable construction that benefits SF.
- 5) Objective and elaborate self-assessment and SWOT analysis for SF.

- 6) Due to the size of the university, decision-making is effective, overall the management is supportive and is oriented towards the development of the SF.
- 7) Individual approach to students e.g. receiving feedback, and communicating assessments is noticeably praised by the students as an important benefit while studying at the university in particular SF.
- 8) Adherence to academic ethics is a subject briefly explained in all the SP study course descriptions available to students for every study course.

Weaknesses:

- 1) Perception of ViA as the university to study social sciences, and tourism – it is not widely known for opportunities to study construction.
- 2) Consequently, SF in ViA is not widely known and as a relatively small SF containing one college-level SP does not offer further education possibilities.
- 3) Management structure of the SF is rather concisely depicted not allowing a complete understanding of the structure and hierarchy.
- 4) The authority of development plan is not completely clear. The plan does not indicate specific assignments, time plan and responsible institutional levels/positions/persons to realize the envisioned goals, and resources (human, financial, other) that will be needed for its realisation.
- 5) Regarding the SF/SP director (currently duties are performed by one person) there is a risk of undertaking a wide range of duties – all the issues starting from the conceptual development of SP and solving minor issues and student problems as well.
- 6) Regarding the code of ethics in ViA, students of SF are not well informed about the types of violations and procedures for reporting them.
- 7) In order to assess student achievements, currently Moodle is not yet used to its full capacity.
- 8) Organisation of examinations during remote study situations in case of (like Covid-19) restrictions is not explained in Study regulations.

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

### **Analysis**

1.2.1. A quality assurance and control policy document has been formulated and implemented at the ViA, and based on information presented in SAR (p. 27), it was approved on 31 January 2020 at the Senate meeting. The study quality assurance policy document is available on the ViA website (LV [https://va.lv/sites/default/files/ViA\\_Studiju-kvalitates-nodrosinasanas-politika-APST-31012020.pdf](https://va.lv/sites/default/files/ViA_Studiju-kvalitates-nodrosinasanas-politika-APST-31012020.pdf) ENG: <https://va.lv/en/about-us/documents>).

ViA has designed and continues to maintain a quality assurance system, which contributes to realising the main goals and objectives of the particular SF and SP. ViA ensures that through the following activities: student surveying, colleagues' attendance at the lectures, study director's meeting with the students, and regular meetings with academic staff. It is price-worthy that ViA Faculty of Engineering Sciences (henceforward - FES) has actively involved an advisory board (which includes all the stakeholders, incorporating business representatives as well) in developing SF and assuring and monitoring the quality. However, it is also recommended to give attention to providing feedback about the changes – information on what has been done to ensure the quality can be outspread to inform HEI community. The newsletter, which, based on the study director's feedback, is being sent out once a month, is an excellent example. However, after the site visit, the dissemination of the implemented changes can be more active. Especially commendable is that the management initiated the additional programme quality assessment in 2019 by an independent group of experts (SAR p. 28) to improve its quality. In general, FES makes reasonable efforts in order to guarantee that the SP is continuously being improved and developed.

1.2.2. Based on the information presented in SAR (p. 28-29) and site visit information, the methods for the creation and audit of study programmes in the study area are outlined logically, involving all the necessary stakeholders (students, teachers, administration, and business representatives), and has creative feedback mechanisms. All the procedure for the development and review of the relevant study programmes of the study field are defined in the "Study Quality Assurance Policy of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences". The policy is a component of ViA's strategic management and is developed, reviewed, and implemented in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015)", the "Law on Higher Education Institutions" of the Republic of Latvia, and other applicable laws and regulations while taking into account the opinions and needs of ViA's internal and external stakeholder. At several levels, including formally and informally, the survey of students, graduates, and employers is carried out. assessing the overall effectiveness of the course as well as the individual lecturers over each semester (SAR Annex "First Level Professional Higher Education Study Programs "Wooden Houses And Eco-Building" Reporting Period (2013-2021) Analysis Of Results Of Students, Graduates and Employers"). In addition, the survey contains open-ended questions that invite students to provide feedback. For graduates (annually) - to determine whether or not graduates are happy with the level to which their education can be applied in their professional lives. The survey of employers is carried out in an informal manner (defence commission, lectures for students, informal discussions) on multiple levels, and it also involves membership in professional organizations. At the end of each academic semester, the director of the program compiles a summary of the survey's findings, reviews them, analyses the responses that respondents have contributed, and compiles a summary of suggestions for improvement, which are then discussed with the lecturers. However, as mentioned previously, the dissemination of the results needs to be strengthened.

1.2.3. ViA has a mechanism designed for submitting student complaints and recommendations: students can express their opinions, suggestions, and criticisms about the content of the study program, course, and teaching staff. This mechanism encourages the implementation of changes. Students receive a newsletter from the director of the study field at a regularity of at least once per month. In this newsletter, students are encouraged to express an opinion, and provide recommendations for improving the study program. In addition, the director of the study field asks students to provide feedback on the study program. Each study course has its own dedicated chat room on MS Teams where continuous feedback may be provided (SAR p. 29). The study programme director serves as the primary point of contact for students with concerns, suggestions and any other issues. From one point of view, such a director's commitment is commendable. However, it is also recommended to involve the rest of the FES community in the quality assurance mechanism.

1.2.4. ViA has a statistical data collecting mechanism developed by the institution, which includes the assessment by applicants, students and graduates and formal and informal meetings with industry entrepreneurs (SAR, p. 31). The results are an essential source of data for enhancing the study program. In SAR (p. 30-31) are presented good examples of how the content of the courses has been updated based on the results of the statistical data, which have been provided as an assessment of the study process by the students. For example the corrections made to the program planning of budget allocations, rotation, and scholarships. In addition, based on the applicant surveys, it was decided to improve marketing activities by launching individual activities for college programs. This decision was made after it was decided to improve marketing activities. There have been some rotations in the lecturers who teach the classes that are associated with the practical studies like geodesy, spatial planning, building mechanics, and construction technologies. Based on the information provided at a site meeting, it is praiseworthy that up to 90 percent of students are participating in the collection of the statistical survey.

1.2.5. The information about the study programme is published online on ViA website - <https://va.lv/lv/studijas/koledza/koka-eku-celtnieciba-un-ekobuves/par-programmu>.

It provides applicants and students with important general information about the study programme, its content, and program benefits and gives an overview of the career opportunities. Currently before accreditation information is published under the previous SP title - SF/SP director should follow/provide that after accreditation the information and SP data are changed accordingly. It is good that currently there is a remark on website indicating these future changes. The information is published in Latvian - language of SP implementation. Information (Title: Koka ēku celtniecība un ekobūves / Wooden Houses and Eco-building; amount 100 CP; qualification: būvdarbu vadītājs) in VIIS and e-platform - <https://eplatforma.aika.lv/index.php?r=site%2Fprogram%2Fview&id=1113> is relevant to SP as it is before SP changes worked out during this accreditation and which were submitted to this assessment procedure. In the current situation is acceptable as the officially changed name, qualification and other indicators can be published only after accreditation.

There is no especially highlighted information on the study field Architecture and Construction. Information on faculty is very difficult to locate. As currently information on SP on ViA website is published in only Latvian, in order to gain international reach and visibility (related to internationalisation, mobility, cooperation projects, research etc.) experts would recommend publishing minimum information also in English.

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

ViA has created and maintains a quality assurance system that contributes to achieving the study program's primary aims and objectives. To assure the quality of the study program, ViA carries out student surveys, meetings between study directors and students, frequent meetings with academic staff, and colleagues' attendance at lectures, and has a well-developed statistical data collecting mechanism. ViA FES has well organised advisory board (which includes all the stakeholders). However, it is recommended to spend more effort on the feedback about the changes, which have been done to assure the quality. The study program director is the main point of contact for students who have questions, recommendations, or other problems. From one perspective, the director's dedication is noteworthy; nonetheless, it is advised that the whole FES community be included in the quality assurance method.

Strengths:

- 1) Involvement advisory board in the development of the SP, as well as in assuring and monitoring the quality.
- 2) Sufficient (around 90 percents) amount of students participating in the statistical survey collection thus helping to provide objective feedback and reliable results.
- 3) Good examples of how the content of the courses has been updated based on the results of the statistical data, which have been provided as an assessment of the study process.

Weaknesses:

- 1) The feedback about the study quality, process and academic staff should be improved in terms of dissemination and visibility for all the stakeholders (students, academicians, partners).

### **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:** Fully compliant

The requirement is evaluated as fully compliant as respective subcriteria are evaluated as fulfilled – ViA ensures continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the SF whilst implementing its internal quality assurance system.

ViA has developed and successfully implements a quality assurance policy document, including all the necessary methods for the creation and review of study programmes, as well as involves all the required stakeholders in the procedure.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

A quality assurance and control policy and procedures are established – respective document has been formulated and implemented at the ViA, and based on information presented in SAR (p. 27), it was approved on 31 January 2020 at the Senate meeting.

ViA Study Quality Assurance Policy is also available on ViA website:  
<https://va.lv/en/about-us/documents>

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Based on the information presented in SAR (p. 28-29) and site visit information, the methods for the creation and audit of study programmes in the study area are outlined logically, involving all the necessary stakeholders, and has suitable feedback mechanisms.

- 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

ViA Senate has approved the Study Regulations, which lay down criteria, forms and terms for the assessment of students' knowledge, conditions regarding academic debts, and other requirements for achieving learning outcomes (SAR p. 24).

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The qualifications and competencies of the academic staff every year are assessed based on their professional, academic and scientific achievements. The regulatory documents are available to students and academic staff on the ViA e-environment (SAR p. 7-8).

- 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

ViA performs data collecting and analysis on 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, e.g. Appendix 12p, FIRST LEVEL PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION STUDY PROGRAMS “WOODEN HOUSES AND ECO-BUILDING” REPORTING PERIOD (2013-2021) ANALYSIS OF RESULTS OF STUDENTS, GRADUATES AND EMPLOYERS. The surveys are conducted formally and informally. All respondents are key components for the development and improvement of the SF/SP.

- 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:** Fully compliant

ViA has developed and maintains a quality assurance system, which contributes to realising the main goals and objectives of the particular study field and its respective program. ViA ensures that through the various activities, e.g. student surveys, colleagues' attendances at the lectures, study director's meeting with the students, and regular meetings with academic staff.

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

#### Analysis

1.3.1. There is an established and controlled budget for the implementation of SF and respective SP in ViA, separating financial resources for the implementation of the SP and research activities (SAR 2.3.1. chapter). The research budget is not divided by the SF, but is directed to scientific institutes (SAR, p. 32), grant programmes, research projects and commissioned work. Distribution of budget for funding scientific applied research or artistic creation is laid out in SAR, however, since the distribution of it is not assigned to a particular SF and from SAR it is difficult to assess the effectiveness and the amount of resources for research funding targeted to this particular SF.

Overall ViA has established a system for determining the financial support required for the implementation of the SF and the corresponding SP consisting of direct semi-direct and indirect costs (SAR, p. 35-36). As described in SAR (p. 37), “control and sustainability of the use of financial resources are laid down in the procedure of development, approval, execution and control of the budget of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences (approved on 26 October 2011 at the ViA Senate meeting, decision No. 10/7.1). In ViA each faculty every year defines their financial needs for the following year and those requirements are discussed and agreed upon with the administration, SP directors and teaching staff meetings. From the joined university budget, each faculty gets a percentage specifically for development and can be used according to current programme needs (new courses, materials, etc).

1.3.2. The infrastructure resources and material and technical support necessary for the implementation of the SF have been identified and are at the disposal for SF and corresponding SP. Overall, the study process in ViA is organised in two buildings in Valmiera, at Cēsu Street 4 and Tērbatas Street 10 – study process, scientific, research and administrative activities take place with a total area of 71312 m<sup>2</sup>, of which 2387 m<sup>2</sup> are used directly for the study and research process. The current study base consists of 38 lecture rooms (total area of 1445 m<sup>2</sup>), incl., 3 computer classrooms with 90 workstations and the Internet connection (195 m<sup>2</sup>) and 9 laboratories – Energy Efficiency Laboratory, Construction Laboratory, Computer Network Laboratory, Multimedia Laboratory, VR/AR Laboratory, Electric Engineering Laboratory, RFID Laboratory, Mechatronics Laboratory and Mobile Technology Laboratory (total area of 324 m<sup>2</sup>). All computers are connected to the common network ensuring a unified circulation of information, as well as there is access to the Internet and databases. A conference room (257 m<sup>2</sup>) is also used in the study process. There are also rooms for group work and individual studies (350 m<sup>2</sup>) in the study blocks (SAR 2.3.2. chapter).

The Laboratory of Construction and Energy Efficiency are directly related to the implementation of the SF and respective SP. They have sufficient and appropriate equipment in order to assess the energy efficiency of buildings and materials, to perform long-term energy efficiency modelling and it provides the possibility to measure materials, buildings, to assess the quality of construction work. The material and technical base and requirements for the latest tools is supplemented by the opportunities offered by cooperation partners. Depending on course contents, academic staff and students can also use other available laboratories at ViA. HEI provides necessary computer software, specified in SAR, p. 38-39). Students confirm the availability and access of all needed software. Related to professional specifics, it is highly recommended to develop a library of different building materials' samples for the SP, adding information about technical, physical and sustainability data for each material. The idea of establishing a hands-on learning, practical workshop and sustainable construction applied research centre together with the industry and regional municipalities should be considered.

Additionally, currently, there is no canteen / cafe at University facilities. Having it on the site is not only a basic need (to be able to have lunch, and food during your study time), but also a very good socializing and gathering place for students and staff. In the on-site visit, it was taken in expert knowledge, that students have access to all programs needed for the SF/SP, and the computers are up to date.

1.3.3. Every year, following requests from teaching staff, new book titles are purchased and databases bought, if necessary and affordable. ViA has invested more than 134 thousand EUR from 2014 until 2021 for purchasing of new books (for the whole institution), periodicals and electronic documents, which helps to maintain information 7 resources up to date. Funding for Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences library collections is not divided by study fields because during the study process the library resources are often used by students of several study fields. The most important items within each course are renewed on a cyclic basis, while the most current items of additional literature are purchased regularly. The books are also cross-checked within the available databases and, therefore, a percentage of them are also available in the digital environment. There are different online databases available, both in Latvian and English, for electronic material search, including full-text databases like EBSCO, ScienceDirect, Scopus, Web of Science and others. There is cooperation with the Latvian National library, where access to their databases is available. Library management is responsible for the availability of those databases, but the IT department is helping to make them accessible. During the Covid-19 pandemic period, with the help of IT department databases were made available remotely.

All processes of ViA library are automated by means of the library information system ALISE. Since January 2006, there is an i-library available providing a possibility to order books from the electronic catalogue of Valmiera Integrated Library, to book those items that are already lent, to extend the lending period for books, to view data on the books lent/not returned on time/booked. Since spring 2015, the mobile version of the library information system ALISE is available. Thus, the electronic catalogue is also easily accessible from mobile devices. (SAR 2.3.3. chapter)

Library resources and databases are available to students and meet the needs of the study field. Catalog of SF literature or other standardized procedure would help students find the needed literature on their own when studying. The library is in a different location than the faculty. Overall the service, facilities, rooms, and equipment is very good, convenient and appropriate. It would be great to have an in-house methodological small library (Terbatas str. building) especially for literature needed daily in the courses of SP.

The library collects students' diploma papers (Master's theses, Qualification papers) that are already in a digital form. It is possible to access papers through the library's electronic catalog. Do students know about this and do they use it? A database of lecturers' publications is being compiled in the library's electronic main catalog under the section "Publications by ViA lecturers". The libraries catalog of the publications and annotations of the publications can be found in the ViA homepage.

"To promote research carried out by ViA students and to make specialists of the field know about it, the best 26 papers written by the students of the programme "Construction of Wooden Houses and Ecobuilding" are available under the section "ViA student papers" of the library's electronic joint catalog, 18 of which have access to the full text of the paper. It would be great if the best student finishing work papers would be promoted among the professional industry. It would work as motivation to excellence.

1.3.4. In October 2021, ViA made a transition to a unified information technology communication (ICT) system for both lecturers and students operating in the MS Office 365 environment (SAR, p. 45). The Faculty was the first of the ViA structures to make full use of it and all possibilities of the MS Office 365 environment, incl. automating the services provided to students to ensure the study process, for example, an automatic form for drawing up a student internship agreement, application for the final examination and qualification work topic.

Regarding use of ICT in ensuring the study process, several information and communication technology systems are integrated to ensure the study process. The Moodle system is used to provide study course study materials to students (lecture materials, literature, additional literature, etc. course materials). The Moodle system is also used for submitting term papers and homework. In the on site visit it was noted that not all academic staff is using the MOODLE system effectively and students would like it if they would use it. Some good examples were given that there are tests, possibility to hand in homework in MOODLE and get direct feedback there. It is commendable that digital communication tools are used for providing feedback to students and disseminate surveys to receive student opinion about the study process and particular courses after their completion.

LAIS is a study administration system in which students register for courses and follow the study progress, which is administered by the ViA Study Administration Group.

Students can quickly follow the list of lectures and its changes using the system [lekcijas.va.lv](http://lekcijas.va.lv), which is administered by ViA Facilities Group.

Due to the limitations of Covid-19, many lectures were organized online using the Webex platform, and in October 2021, the MS Office - MS Teams application was switched to provide online lectures using all the features offered by the application for quality remote work.

Provision of technology and ICT solutions in study process are actively, especially considering the remote study process burning pandemic. Regarding the content of study program, digitization in the construction industry is one of the main guidelines (SAR, p. 46) - the curriculum contains special courses, e.g. in Building Information Modeling) and ICT also supports the acquisition of several courses that requires IT tools. ICT can be also learned during Internship in partner companies.

Overall the site visit and demonstration confirmed that in ViA the ICT solutions are developing and in place and are being used actively. Solutions are appropriate and effective. Communication from the student and lecturer side in the MOODLE system could be more actively promoted.

ICT applications in the SF are used also to collect feedback - e.g. electronic surveys, questionnaires, and electronic or video newsletters. In a further implementation of the program it would be advisable to explore use of recorded tutorials, video lectures - the efficiency is in the fact that lecturers, guest lecturers can devote their time once and recorded presentations can be

demonstrated several times, also in life long learning education for adults.

1.3.5. ViA has defined, implements and follows the procedures for attracting qualified teaching staff. University has a procedure for election to academic and positions (SAR 2.3.5. chapter) and it is regulated by “Regulations on election to academic positions at Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences” (Appendix 12). The Regulations are elaborate and outline criteria for the qualifications and suitability, election, and evaluation procedures; they are available (also on website: <https://va.lv/lv/par-via/dokumenti>) for all the stakeholders involved and are prepared in accordance to the Law on Higher Education Institutions and the Law on Scientific Activity. ViA’s academic staff consists of the following:

1) academic positions performing academic work – professor, associate professor, assistant professor, lecturer, assistant;

2) academic positions performing research work – leading researcher, researcher, research assistant.

Vacancies are advertised by announcing a competition on the official website of “Latvijas Vēstnesis”, as well as by publishing information on the ViA website. The principles of openness and access to information are complied with throughout the entire recruitment process. Persons are elected for academic positions as a result of open competition. The scientific, pedagogical and organizational qualifications of an applicant for the position of a professor or an associate professor are assessed by the Council of Professors in accordance with the procedures specified by the Cabinet. The scientific and pedagogical qualifications of the applicant for the position of an assistant professor, lecturer or assistant are assessed by the Council of the study field referring the matter to the relevant assembly of the faculty.

17 lecturers are involved in the implementation of the study field, seven of whom are elected academic staff (incl. two assistant professors, three lecturers and two visiting assistant professors, who are elected academic staff performing scientific activities at the ViA), three visiting assistant professors and nine guest lecturers. (Annex No. 14).

It is noticed by experts that the attraction of qualified and fitting guest lecturers depends very much on efforts and acquaintances of SF / SP director. Mostly those are experienced teachers that work as in a professional field already. On site visit it was acknowledged that a large proportion of teaching personnel involved in the SF is working and have their permanent work positions in the industry. Experts noted that there has been at least one case where the lecturer was very busy and expressed his/hers dissatisfaction about university salary and almost volunteered with a job at the university. Experts note that although it is commendable and valuable to have teaching staff from a professional field, there is a risk that job at the university is not their priority and they may not be thoroughly reliable to fill the positions in the longer time span. Those situations must be recognised and addressed by SF/SP director. Additionally, if speaking of the salary offered by HEI – it is not competitive and not comparable to wages gained in professional practice. This notorious situation is known and very common in universities in Latvia. On the other hand, particular SF/SP determines the high involvement of practitioner professionals, as the use of new technologies and approaches on the site is developing quickly nowadays.

Additionally for advanced up-to-date SP content and reasonable use of involved personnel capacity, it is also possible to take advantage of opportunities from e.g. guest lectures or pre-recorded lectures, tutorials from highly skilled professionals, adding online Q-A and discussion sessions afterwards.

“Regulations on election to academic positions at Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences” also determine procedures and frequency for evaluating the work results of professors and associate professors. Additionally, in order to provide an opportunity for the lecturers to improve their academic performance and monitor its quality, the following activities are implemented at ViA:

- 1) Student surveys at the end of each study course – the result summary is sent to the lecturer and the head of the study field.
- 2) Once a year a lecturer’s classes are attended by a colleague who afterwards provides feedback. Once a year a lecturer attends a class of his or her colleague.
- 3) At the end of the academic year, the lecturer summarizes the findings of the study course assessments and the experience obtained while observing classes, and writes a summary of his or her academic performance which is discussed with the head of the study field. If the lecturers want, their academic performance is discussed at the meeting of the study council.
- 4) If the head of the study field finds long-standing or serious problems in the academic performance of the lecturer, the necessary professional development measures are discussed with the lecturer, including the possibility to assign a mentor or consultant of the lecturer’s choice. If the professional development does not give a positive result, the head of the study field turns to the dean to jointly address this issue.

To ensure the assessment of the quality of ViA’s academic staff performance, once per academic year ViA organizes a seminar for lecturers on the study quality assurance issues in which they discuss their experience/observations gained during the lectures. (SAR 2.3.6. chapter and confirmed in the on-site visit).

1.3.6. As confirmed in the meetings and explained in SAR, elected academic staff participates in various types of courses, conferences or other events to improve their qualifications (SAR, p. 47). Professional development is regulated by the Regulations “Job Description and Responsibilities of the Teaching Staff of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences” (Annex 15, Speaking of the particular SF, opportunities to acquire and supplement knowledge of construction digitalization possibilities have been especially relevant and will be very crucial in implementing SF/SP. Opportunities, needs and possible funding (projects, Erasmus+, other financial sources) for training are actively discussed among Faculty and SF management. According to SAR, from 2018 to 2021, European Social Fund project “Development of Academic Staff and Human Resources of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences” was implemented for the professional development.

It has been noted that currently there is no established motivation system that supports (points, additional salary etc.) teaching staff development, measures and rewards their activity in the professional development or scientific and research excellence. It is also not explained whether guest lecturers also can use professional and didactic development support from HEI.

1.3.7. It is difficult to determine the exact amount since it varies in different time periods and from involvement in different projects. Some part of academic staff has started working quite recently as noted in the interviews. The targeted division of workload should be: 40% for academic activity, 40% research activity and 20% for administrative work.

As understood from interviews there are not a lot of academic staff that have participated in outgoing mobility activities but they have information about them, therefore it is suggested to also encourage other members of the academic staff to take part in Erasmus+ or other programmes.

The ratio of the teaching staff and students at the time of submitting the self-assessment report is 1 (SAR, p. 81.) which is very positive, emphasizing on average not overloaded lecturers.

1.3.8. ViA has identified necessary support for students and the following support is provided:

- 1) For first-year students ViA holds special introduction week and provides materials for better orientation at the University; it is understood that there is also an introduction course on getting acquainted to the library. On the other hand experts learned from former students that coming into “unknown territory” of university and studies is quite stressful and hard at the beginning – not only getting accustomed but also in terms of studying, fulfilling the requirements, tests, exams and so. Many students dropped out just for this reason. University can develop and introduce a more efficient buddy, mentor system to help first-year students to cope with stress and overload.
  - 2) SF director holds in-person meetings with the student board. Director addresses also individual assessment of particular student problems as noted from interviews from site visit.
  - 3) Study specialists, as well as employees of the Administrative Department also provide indirect support to students.
  - 4) Career and psychological support provided by the higher education institution is available to all ViA students. Career counselling is provided in person, by appointment, and also online through a variety of platforms. Individual career counselling free of charge is available to students throughout the year.
  - 5) Psychological counselling is a collaborative process that helps the student to more successfully solve the current difficulties of life, to gain support in solving various issues, to help see different alternatives to a certain problem.
  - 6) There is an established study fee discount system for future and existing students – <https://va.lv/lv/toposajiem-studentiem/studiju-maksas-atlaides>. ViA website also offers an online calculator to calculate study fee discount.
  - 7) Facilities are equipped and ensure access also for students with special needs (e.g. by elevators).
  - 8) ViA website has summarised important information on student related matters: <https://va.lv/lv/studentiem-un-darbiniekiem/studentu-dzive>.
  - 9) There are also discount system established from various institutions, businesses, and services for ViA students: <https://va.lv/lv/studentiem-un-darbiniekiem/studentu-dzive/atlaides>.
- Additionally, if speaking of support for students, there is available funding for students' self-government activities.

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

The necessary material, technical and financial provisions comply with the conditions for the implementation of the SP and reaching aimed learning outcomes. Informational sources are available and sufficient, and information systems are in place and used in the study process management.

There is a significant proportion of lecturers that come from industry so the information that is given to students is relevant to the actual situation, which is good. As confirmed in the meetings and explained in SAR, elected academic staff participate in various types of courses, conferences or other events to improve their qualifications.

ViA has identified necessary support for students and it is provided, for example: special introduction week, materials for better orientation at the University for the first-year students, in-person meetings with the student from board, individual career counselling free of charge, psychological counselling.

Strengths:

- 1) Facilities and other infrastructure are advanced, up to date and sufficient ensuring access also for persons with special needs.
- 2) Necessary support for students is identified, the system has been established and can be

evaluated as responsive.

3) Fast reaction to student problems and problem-solving, individual approach.

4) Students have the opportunity to access library digital resources remotely.

5) A lot of lecturers come from the industry.

6) Readiness of regional industry and municipal institutions to support the development and study activities (in terms of technology and resources) of the SF with practical help and material resources.

Weaknesses:

1) A distribution of budget for funding scientific, applied research or artistic creation is laid out in SAR, however, since the distribution of it is not assigned to a particular SF and from SAR it is difficult to assess its effectiveness and the amount of resources for research funding targeted to this particular SF.

2) It has been noted that currently there is no established motivation system that supports (points, additional salary etc.) teaching staff development, measures and rewards academic and teaching staff activity in the professional development.

3) There is no canteen/cafe in University facilities, Terbatas street building.

4) Lack of support for first year students helping to cope with study stress and study load. This issue contributes to the student dropout rate.

5) Proportionally half of academic/teaching staff does not use Moodle system efficiently.

6) Lack of established learning, practical workshop and sustainable construction applied research and resource center to experience real materials, products and solutions in real life, close to the construction site conditions.

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

### **Analysis**

1.4.1. Research goals of HEI are uniquely defined within the ViA's Research strategy (SAR p. 51) as a main relevant document setting up institutional goals in a research and development way as a response to new challenges induced by the transition to knowledge-based orientation. The long-term goal of research activities at ViA is to create and apply new technologies of the next-generation knowledge society. The medium-term goal of research at ViA is to promote the national and regional development of smart specialization areas and increase productivity by conducting research in the direction of current social and technological challenges.

Smart wood technologies and sustainable construction in the national economy – The need for this research sub-direction is determined by the regional demand, including the need of the specialists prepared by the study programme “Construction of Wooden Houses and Eco-building” implemented at ViA. Internationally, the construction of wooden houses and energy efficiency aspects become more and more popular, and the particular research sub-direction, although currently defined as a regional sub-research direction, has a high potential for growth in future. Since the timber industry has been well known for the broader area of gravity to the HEI, the choice of this particular sub-direction of the SF has been recognised as fully in correspondence to local conditions and market needs. The latter has been supported by the statements of graduated students and employers. Besides the Research strategy, the SF has been evidenced as contributing to the creation of competencies suitable for future perspectives of the market and adjusted to the Latvian construction Strategy perspectives.

The SF “Architecture and Construction” of ViA was established in 2013 based on the demand pointed out in the construction industry development strategy of Latvia for 2017-2024 in which an

increase in the demand for qualified specialists by up to 45 % in 2030 was anticipated. Although the strategy has not been updated, it is already clear that the Latvian construction sector is in danger of overheating in the next planning period due to the influx related to the new planning period of the EU funding and the implementation of large-scale projects not only in Latvia but also in the Baltics. One of such projects is Rail Baltica which directly affects Vidzeme region and opens up opportunities for increasing the competitiveness of the region's construction companies.

Within the framework of the circular economy pilot project of Vidzeme, a total increase of 49 % in the total demand for students in various fields of engineering, including construction, is planned in Vidzeme region (SAR, p. 13.), but, as already mentioned, the real demand due to the Rail Baltica project could be much higher. The only question is whether the construction companies of the region will be able to meet such a demand, comply with the project requirements and compete internationally.

HEI has also other relevant interdisciplinary research areas which can be viewed in the context of sustainable construction: i) Virtual reality technologies and visualization - focuses on the development of new, innovative solutions and the improvement of existing solutions in a number of sectors of the economy and society, including manufacturing, architecture, marketing, etc., ii) E-learning management and technologies - focused on the development of new, innovative solutions and on the improvement of existing solutions in the sectors of manufacturing, architecture, marketing, etc., iii) Socio-technical systems modelling technologies - focused on interdisciplinary research which includes the assessment of engineering technology solutions in the social system and the evaluation of social science research results using simulation modelling technologies.

1.4.2. As obtained during the SAR analysis and visit the HEI, there are several main active research directions highlighted within the research and academic staff. Dominant research branch is found within the timber construction and related investigation activities which is not found strange due to the orientation of the region towards the available natural resource. The second important research direction has been dispersed between construction management, heating and ventilation, environmental issues and circular economy (SAR p. 14. and 53).

Along with globalization and the entry of international larger-scale projects in Latvia and the free flow of the labour force, the industry sector can be analyzed on a larger scale. According to the data of the Quality Agency for Higher Education, seven higher education institutions have a study field "Architecture and Construction" in academic year of 2019/2020 with a total of 39 accredited study programmes. Tasks of the SF for the period of 2021-2027:i) to establish a center of knowledge and experience (a "hotspot") in construction of sustainable buildings, ensuring cooperation with designers; ii) to provide students with practically oriented higher professional education in the field of construction, using opportunities provided by the companies within the industry and the region; iii) to develop an adaptable training offer for companies and their employees in certain specializations; iv) to develop students' research skills and the desire to explore the world around them, on the basis of which to develop students' competencies for their further self-education process and to create motivation for further education; v) to provide students with the necessary set of knowledge, skills, competencies in the field of construction to enable them, after successful completion of the study programme, to operate in private, public and municipal companies, promoting competitiveness in changing socio-economic conditions; vi) to ensure the development of versatile personality skills.

Insight to the publication list from 2015 up to date (List of the publications, patents, and artistic creations of the teaching staff over the reporting period - Annex Nr.18.) supports previous

statements and highlights the scientific research activity of the academic staff which is closely related to the main goals of the SF. The structure of SF offers clear evidence of the compatibility of the research activities and study process which undoubtedly strengthens the fact about the connection between the research and teaching activities thus empowering the competencies of the academic staff and ensuring the quality of the learning outcomes.

Particular research areas which are well connected to the SF and are purposefully represented in the study curriculum (SAR, p. 52) are as follows:

- 1) “wood-wood” compounds in wooden structures – lecturers who specialize in this particular area integrate specific research tasks into their course curriculum and encourage students to think about research issues and applications in practice;
- 2) Construction processes and cyber security of buildings are the areas which can be further researched making additions to the study program in future and motivating students to undertake interdisciplinary research;
- 3) Other areas of research also directly or indirectly affect future construction managers. The rapid development and widespread use of the Internet will affect not only the development of social networks but also any type of industry and business, as it will serve as a comprehensive and sufficiently secure basis for information provision.

Currently the scientific activities within SF/SP are mainly focused on several applied research areas: in the field of heating and ventilation – I.Dimdiņa; in the field of energy efficiency and eco-materials – V.Zaķis, J.Simanovska, in the field of physics – I.Birzniece, in the field of mathematics – A.Cunška (SAR, p. 53). By developing SF/SP the following research directions will be evolved: Smart technologies and ecobuilding in the national economy; Virtual reality technologies and visualization. But at the moment it is very important to acknowledge that SF currently has only one SP – the 1st level / college level SP and so far performance in research is very much dependent on the achievements and ambitions of several members of academic staff. In general experts evaluate set of directions as appropriate and in further development encourage SF director (and research coordinating personnel) to overlook potential of connecting students, academic staff and curriculum with relevant scientific and applied research initiatives and projects.

1.4.3. ViA is involved in international cooperation projects with existing and initiated partner organizations. International cooperation in the research within the SF has been evidenced in two segments, through the academic/teaching staff activity and by the institutional cooperation project implementation procedures. SAR mentions international projects where ViA is a partner. There are at least two projects in the implementation stage until 2023.: STARGATE and EUDRES (SAR, p. 53.).

However, above-mentioned projects have not been adjunct to the SF/SP, instead they are implemented at the Faculty level. It could be advised for SF in further development to initiate/participate in the international research projects, that are targeted towards particular field of study. It was heard from Faculty management that this is one of their prerogatives in further SF development. Experts would certainly encourage searching for developing new collaboration modes and applied research activities (projects) that are relevant to SF and it's current first level professional higher education study programme level/ college level.

Several of academic staff have reported international research activities either by the activities on doctoral studies or individual participation in different collaboration modes which is recognised as a good practice example and should be additionally supported and evaluated. Academic staff in the meeting expressed that they would appreciate existence of mechanisms supporting and promoting excellence and achievements in the scientific research. Discussions held in the area of institutional

support lead towards unknown benefits for the academic staff members in case of excellence reached either in the lecture or research directions. For instance, the effort given to project proposals preparation or even successful project implementation has not been evaluated in a way that stimulates motivation.

Main lack is definitely the small number of scientific and/or applied research projects compared to ERASMUS program for instance. The latter can be found in the fact of the study program level and its orientation towards the market, this being mainly focused on professional skills and competencies rather than research and scientific ones. As a supportive and optimistic indicator, a novel HORIZON2020 application approval (as reported by the SF/SP director) should be taken into account as an indicator increasing the international research competitiveness of HEI and SF.

1.4.4. So far, no formal mechanism developed or prescribed for the involvement of the teaching staff in research has been detected during the visit. [1] As concluded by management members, due to the fact that most lecturers are coming from the industry and/or private sector, the scientific environment within the SF is hard to maintain. Instead, mostly research activities seem to be introduced based on the willingness and endeavour of individuals - they are involved in the SF and show active scientific production, based on the CV analysis, which is up to date and positive. Additional value for this relies on the fact most research activities are closely related to the content of SF.

Based on the feedback gained during the HEI visit, practitioners are more dedicated to the private sector companies which is an aggravating circumstance to involve them in research as an additional duty in the University. However, the institution has reported they found an approach to develop a research focus that is also relevant to the private sector, so the hope for more active involvement and interest of lecturers in research in the near future is expected (SAR, p. 55). The latter has been reported as partially successfully implemented.

Smart products development (or additional patent development) could be an additional trigger to enhance the involvement of practitioners (from teaching staff) in pursuing the research activities. For instance, timber structures are recognised as a main relevant topic which offers plenty of possibilities in construction: new technologies in timber elements production, products like joins and bearings, innovations in fire protection, etc.

Additionally, overall at the SF level it is necessary to develop a particular motivation system for scientific achievements. It was noted in the meeting with HEI management that the university already is on the track to develop such a motivation system.

1.4.5. Although the HEI reports the presence of student involvement into research activities within in total four courses (SAR, p. 55)., the feedback from both academic staff and graduated students offers different perspectives.

Graduate students emphasize the partial need for the research activities within the study program due to the fact of pretty clear competencies and their correspondence with market/industry needs. Academic staff emphasized very few examples of students' involvement in research activities. In general, there are some examples of student involvement into research activities but it has been recognised as an example rather than the rule.

Partial fact which could make this issue clear can be found along the State Education Standard which does not provide a strict amount of research activities within the assessed study program.

This could be doable, offering at the same time the possibility not to implement student research activities within the formal learning process, but also enabling the possibility to create specific, strictly program adjusted models for the research involvement into the study program.

1.4.6. Hereby, HEI reported several improvements and novelties introduced to improve SF quality and competitiveness. Video speeches, companies addressing, personal newsletter, social components have been introduced to gain visibility and enhance the contact with both, future students and market.

Second component of innovation has been recognized in target user need research which focuses the research towards narrow and high sophisticated knowledge needed to gain new relevant products, Finally, introduction of teamwork lectures, regular meetings and process synchronization seems like a novel approach in advising procedures.

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

Scientific research has been identified as implemented into the SF and recognised as aligned with the SF content. The origin of the research goals mainly stems from the local circumstances and natural resources availability thus defining dominant research areas. Besides the timber-related research activities, the academic staff of the study program demonstrates expertise in smart building, environmental issues, etc.

Besides the connection of the SF research activities and market needs, the SF has been set up in accordance to both national level and university level strategies and main goals.

Significant discrepancies in scientific production has been evidenced in between academic staff members. The latter has been explained by relying on the fact most of the lecturers are part-time engaged and/or practitioners from the industry sector. This fact obviously does not allow full dedication to scientific work and research activities but ensures professional competencies to reach expected learning outcomes for the assessed study program.

Projects referred to along the SAR are mainly implemented at doctoral study programs and/or at the Faculty level. Although the SP is the professional level of education, from the perspective of a university bachelor's degree study program, research activities should be connected to the SF and SP in the future.

Potential involvement in smart-orientated, or market-orientated applied research projects should potentially create the platform for the involvement of students into research activities in a formal way, fulfilling in the same time the broad definition of research obligations defined by State Education standards.

Strengths:

- 1) Positive individual research environment with several examples of excellence evident through continuous scientific production and international collaboration.
- 2) HORIZON2020 proposal approval gives new perspective and chance to increase the institutional (also the study program) relevance within the international HORIZON 2020 environment.
- 3) Well-established research areas coordinated with different level strategies and market needs.

Weaknesses:

- 1) Non-homogeneous scientific effort given by the academic staff makes difference in scientific production.
- 2) Student involvement into research activities has been evidenced as very low.

- 3) The lack of excellence support / motivation from HEI in research success.
- 4) Absence of projects orientated towards the production of novel products and/or patents compatible with the aims and scopes of the assessed SF.
- 5) Absence of a formal mechanism to ensure scientific research activities within the lecturers.

## 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: Fully compliant

Scientific research at the SF level exists and is conducted constantly. Dominant amount of scientific production has been evidenced as performed by the academic staff internationally established and active. Most of the part time lecturers does not show permanent involvement in research activities which may create a risk for linking the content of programs with actualities in science. However, experts understands that this study field includes one first level study programme and ViA approach ensures professional competencies to reach expected learning outcomes for the assessed study programme.

## 1.5. Cooperation and Internationalisation

### Analysis

1.5.1. ViA collaborates with various Latvian institutions (higher education institutions, business partners & different networks) within the framework of the SF. ViA has an excellent example of inter-university cooperation umbrella agreements with Riga Technical University, Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies and the BA School of Business and Finance, and with Rēzekne Academy of Technologies, with which an agreement has also been entered, ensuring the programme continuity (SAR p. 56-57). This inter-institutional agreement includes various possibilities of collaboration (f.e. expanding cooperation in higher education, studies, research and other areas related to the development of higher education institutions), which is a perfect space for developing the quality of the study programme and study field, including the mobility possibilities. However, it looks like this agreement is not actively being used, and it is highly recommended to involve more activities within the frame of this agreement. Price worth example is involving the municipalities and business representatives in developing the study programme. This cooperation contributes to the achievement of the objectives and learning outcomes of the study program. There are bright examples of collaboration with businesses, like cooperation with “3D Engineering” company. Students are satisfied with the internship place selection/suggestions/help system. Business representatives are motivated to collaborate with the university and are happy and ready to provide all the necessary equipment, and software. Employers enjoy being invited as lecturers and would like to continue doing so. More active engagement from the FES is needed to use all the possibilities (invited lectures from business, excursions to the construction side, internship promotion for students, career fair,, etc.), that business representatives are ready to provide. The selection of collaboration partners is based on the specific characteristics of the research area and the applicable study programmes. Generally, there are few ways of the cooperation directions: lecture with a lecture from partner university in the research/project collaboration; and ViA collaboration with industry associations and entrepreneurs.

1.5.2. ViA, in general, has an exhaustive list of international agreements with foreign institutions (120 cooperation agreements with partner institutions from 48 countries for the whole institution) (SAR p. 58) and praiseworthy is that the number of cooperation agreements has increased. Some of

these cooperations (with Estonia&Lithuania, Italy, Poland, Spain and Germany) are related to particular study program and contribute to the achievement of the aims and learning outcomes of the study field and the relevant study program. As well as some good examples of ViA cooperation with lecturers who apply their education and practical experience outside Latvia (SAR p. 59). The selection procedure for partnering collaboration is logical and looks in view of the specific features of the SF. It is praiseworthy that ViA has defined clear criteria for the selection of the partnering collaboration. For example, the criteria for foreign cooperation partners include goals like “possibilities for creating new or joint study programs; student and lectures exchange; joint participation in international industry organizations, working groups and interest groups, etc.” The study programme director works a lot by the individual connection with outside university partners, which also has some risks. It is highly recommended to involve the university representatives to assist or any other collaboration schemes.

1.5.3. ViA SP / SP CofSB do not implement studies in English, and international students are not admitted to the study programme. However, ViA FES offers the possibility for local students and academic staff to go abroad for Erasmus studies and internships and do some activities to attract lecturers from abroad. However, the mobility level (especially outgoing) needs to be upgraded. Only one student went abroad in 2013/2014, one in 2014/2015, and three in 2020/2021. And there was no outgoing mobility of lecturers within the period of years 2014-2021.

It is recommended to spend more on the motivation system and disseminate the possibilities for academic staff and students to use Erasmus mobility. Internationalisation opportunities need to be disseminated much more. Based on the information from the site visit, students prefer to use the Erasmus but are unaware of all available possibilities.

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

ViA FES collaborates with local institutions and institutions and organisations from abroad. All these collaborations, in general, contribute to achieving the aims and learning outcomes of the study field and the relevant study programme. Priceworthy is involving the municipalities and business representatives in creating the study programme. Business representatives are motivated to collaborate with the university and are happy and ready to provide all the necessary equipment, and software. Employers participate as invited lecturers and would love to keep doing that. More active engagement from the FES is needed to use all the possibilities that business representatives are ready to provide. The level of mobility needs to be upgraded. Spending more attention on the motivation system and disseminating the opportunities for academic staff and students to use Erasmus mobility is recommended. The study programme director works a lot by the individual connection with outside university partners, which also has some risks. It is highly recommended to involve the university representatives to assist or any other collaboration schemes.

Strengths:

- 1) Involvement of the municipalities and business representatives in developing the study programme.
- 2) Highly motivated business representatives who are happy and ready to provide all the necessary equipment, software.
- 3) Students are satisfied with the system for internship place selection.
- 4) Highly engaged and motivated SF director.

Weaknesses:

- 1) In some cases, there are untapped opportunities to use all the advantages which business

representatives are ready to provide.

- 2) Lack of engagement in the development of collaboration by all the community of FES.
- 3) Low level of mobility and limitations to using mobility opportunities (personal issues, family, permanent job positions etc.), as well as unawareness of the full spectrum of possibilities.

### **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:** Fully compliant

ViA collaborates and aims for fruitful future cooperation with various Latvian institutions, organisations (higher education institutions, business partners & different networks) within the framework of the SF and ensures the achievement of the aims of the study field. At the moment, international cooperation is average, however, with a new SP director it starts to improve, ViA has the necessary basic conditions to improve and ensure international cooperation, i.e. cooperation agreements with foreign universities. Considering the specifics of the SP, cooperation with Latvian institutions and prerequisites for international cooperation, the experts assess the requirement as compliant, at the same time emphasizing that international cooperation, including mobilities must be improved.

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

### **Analysis**

The previous assessment procedure took place in March 2012 (SAP, p. 62). Overall, the programme is refreshed, impactful and substantiated improvement has been done compared with the previous evaluation. Praiseworthy is the involvement of experts from outside the university in evaluating this study programme. The upgrades were confirmed by several parties during the site visit of experts (graduates, students, and academic staff). SAR (p. 62) presents information that implementing some recommendations is ongoing and will be continuing in the next planning period. For example, the development of international research projects and international training offered for international students.

There were eight main recommendations for improvement:

- 1) Regional academic cooperation should be enlarged.
- 2) International agreements should be made to obtain incoming foreign students.
- 3) The activities regarding improvements of pedagogical, linguistic and scientific skills for academic staff should be increased.
- 4) The teaching staff should have additional training on foreign language skills for the implementation of international courses and the attraction of new students.
- 5) More international research projects should be implemented.
- 6) The literature on ecological topics in building construction should be obtained in hard copies to ensure the quality of learning.
- 7) The equipment for specific study courses, for example, geodesy, should be obtained to represent the practical side of the study programme.
- 8) The higher number of professors should be involved in the study process.

Implementation:

- 1) Regional collaboration with non-governmental, professional organizations in the field has been

expanded. New cooperation agreements have been signed (with Rēzekne Academy of Technologies, LDDK NEP (Construction Council of Latvian Labour Association), companies in the Vidzeme region, Latvian Wood Cluster partners) (SAR, Annexe 21) [fulfilled];

2) Students have the possibility to use Erasmus for doing an internship or studying abroad. Several new cooperation agreements have been concluded within the framework of the Erasmus program (SAR, Annexe 21, SAR Annexe 19) within the framework of the FES [fulfilled].

3) The academic staff participates in various competency development courses, seminars, scientific conferences, and webinars (SAR, Annexe 21, information provided on a site visit) [fulfilled].

4) Lecturers are offered to increase their English language skills by providing additional trainings for them (SAR, Annexe 21, information provided on a site visit) [fulfilled].

5) The academic staff is involved in scientific research, publishing works and participating in scientific conferences. Greater involvement of students and lecturers in scientific and research activities is desirable (SAR annexe 21, information provided on a site visit) [partially fulfilled].

6) The recommendation on obtaining hard copies of ecological topics is mostly implemented. The form of e-books is being used more (SAR annexe 21, information provided on a site visit) [fulfilled].

7) ViA Established and equipped a new Construction Laboratory, which is being implemented in cooperation with a company that provides the most modern measuring equipment [fulfilled].

8) Since 2013, the new teaching staff has been recruited and involved in the execution of the study process. Seven lecturers with PhD degrees participate in the program's delivery (SAR annexe 21, information provided on a site visit) [fulfilled].

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

Overall, the previous recommendation of experts can be stated as fulfilled. In conclusion, when starting to implement new, revised and improved SP, it is suggested to pay attention also to all the previous recommendations – develop international cooperation, teaching staff training, international research projects, etc.

Strengths:

1) The management team has clearly specified goals, timelines, and desired outcomes for each expert's recommendation, leading to their respective execution and enhancement.

2) Internal assessment initiated by ViA, Faculty, performed by external experts.

Weaknesses:

2) Some recommendation still needs further development and efforts (number of professors, international research projects, greater involvement of academic staff & students in the research activities).

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

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The management team has clearly specified goals, timelines, and desired outcomes for each experts' recommendation, leading to their respective execution and enhancement. Some of the implemented actions still need further development and efforts (number of professors, international research projects, greater involvement of academic staff & students into the research activities).

## 1.7. Recommendations for the Study Field

### Short-term recommendations

To plan and to carry out the marketing strategy to promote the SF and its respective SP, widely advertising the possibilities, benefits and opportunities to study building construction management in ViA in Valmiera city.

Referring to submitted Development plan from HEI, experts would advise to work out Development plan for SF that is more structured, targeted and contains timeplan, responsibilities and resources needed to fulfill planned actions. Additionally, development plan should indicate the resources (human, financial, other) that will be needed for its realisation.

Regarding appointed SF and SP director, experts would point out that it is a risk when trying to cover all the issues starting from the conceptual development of SF and solving minor issues and student problems as well. Clear division of duties must be introduced and instructed to all involved to ensure sustainability of these positions.

The dissemination of the changes that HEI implements based on feedback, references, comments from staff, students, etc needs to be strengthened. This can also be implemented through the annual meetings with the students with a particular goal to share the activities which have been done with regard to surveys. As well as a particular issue dedicated for this in newsletter, social media, web page news section, etc..

Active promotion of using Moodle e-learning platform – certain effort must be put in encouraging students and lecturers (by adding it to Job description) to use Moodle e-learning platform as the efficiency can be reached if all involved parties are fluent in using it.

Experts would suggest to work on informing, familiarising students about principles of academic integrity, ViA Regulations of Ethics, so they acknowledge that there are general basic principles of ethics at ViA, can recognise wrongdoings and know procedures they may take to report or avoid academic violation, particularly plagiarism.

It is recommended to establish an “excellence support” model to motivate lecturers to participate into scientific or applied research activities. This could potentially empower significant applied scientific research production and motivate external professionals to participate into research activities. The consequence can also be the establishment of the connection between the research competences of the lecturers and SF capacity to reach compliance with relevant market needs.

SF/SP director should follow/provide that after accreditation the information and SP data available on website and other publicly available platforms are changed and adjusted accordingly. Consistent and equal use of official university title in all English language documents must be ensured.

As currently information on SP on ViA website is published in only Latvian, in order to gain international reach and visibility (related to internationalisation, mobility, cooperation projects, research etc.) experts would recommend to publish minimum information also in English.

### Long-term recommendations

SF can be developed offering consecutive SP (SPs) by forming at least successive BA level studies thus allowing logical continuation of education path for graduates and allowing the solid base to realise and reach the strategic goals set by university and SF. However, before opening new programs, experts advise to analyse the potential and capacity of university.

International education market is another possibility for development of SF by offering English taught courses – program (partially) implemented in English would mean welcoming exchange students and teaching staff.

Organising an international short-term intensive, professionally oriented annual summer school / summer programs is highly recommended to develop interdisciplinarity and integrate internationalisation into the study process. This could especially be beneficial for those who do not have the possibility to use Erasmus for a whole semester (working students, student with families).

By introducing academic and teaching staff motivation system, dedication to scientific research related activities of academic/teaching staff should be increased.

This inter-institutional agreement (umbrella agreement with Riga Technical University, Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies and the BA School of Business and Finance, and with Rēzekne Academy of Technologies), which includes various possibilities of collaboration, and is a perfect space for developing study field, including the mobility possibilities. However, it looks like this agreement is not actively being used, and it is highly recommended to involve more activities within the frame of this agreement.

Regarding further development of SF, establishment of hands-on practical learning centre, workshop and materials' library (presumably as part of envisioned competence centre) must be evaluated and estimated. In planning such learning centre, close cooperation, support and participation of the local companies and municipality should be considered. Funding possibilities within international projects needs to be explored.

Market orientated and/or smart solution development research projects should be a target for the HEI in the next period. This will enable better connection with the industry (collaboration in the expertise of academic institutions and industry), create a base for implementation of research activities into the study program and involve students into the branch prior to their graduation.

Smart product or smart technologies projects should be added on target for the future. Those projects do not present a hard task to be applied for, nor take large time scales from the application to the implementation period. The outcome offers several beneficiaries like experience in project implementation, popularization of the involvement of applied research into SF and better connections between market need and institutional preparedness to reply to. Consequently it could lead to the enhancement of the interest by the student population.

It is recommended to invest in developing the motivation system and to disseminate the possibilities for academic staff and students to use Erasmus mobility. Internationalisation opportunities need to be intensively disseminated and encourages.

## **II - "Construction of Sustainable Buildings" ASSESSMENT**

### **II - "Construction of Sustainable Buildings" ASSESSMENT**

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

##### **Analysis**

2.1.1. There is one SP in the SF currently – first-level professional higher education 3 years study programme “Construction of Sustainable Buildings”. It can be evaluated as compliant and corresponds with the thematic reach of the study field “Architecture and Construction”. The SP is a regionally oriented and compact program offering individual approach and flexibility in preparing qualified, competent and competitive building construction managers, responding to the industry's demand for advanced specialists in sustainable construction.

2.1.2. According to SAR (p. 69) “the aim of the study program is to prepare highly qualified, competent and competitive building construction managers, responding to the industry's demand for modern and advanced specialists, which would increase the productivity and competitiveness of construction companies both locally and internationally.” The SP “Construction of Sustainable Buildings”, code 41582 is established, and developed as complying with the State education standard (Appendix 25). The scope of 120 credit points fits standart requirements; duration of 3 years full-time studies and implementation language are reasonable and justified. Professional qualification “Building construction manager” is awarded after graduation. The degree is not awarded – (SAR, p. 69) “Students who have successfully fulfilled the requirements specified in the education programme and successfully passed the State final examination, receive the first-level professional higher education diploma, obtaining the qualification “Construction Manager” and are prepared to perform practical tasks.

SAR (p. 69) states the following: “Upon obtaining the 1st level professional higher education diploma of a construction manager and upon having practical work experience of 3 years, it is possible to obtain a certificate of construction practice.” Latvian Building council has issued an opinion on the SP and in response (letter on 13.06.2022.) informs that it has assessed the compliance of first-level professional higher education study program "Construction of sustainable buildings" (code 41582) with the qualification "Building construction manager" with the regulatory enactments of the regulated professions and approves it without objections. Knowing that there has been issues with denying certification for those with ViA education, experts now assume that this problem is now solved.

Additionally, the professional qualification recognition coordinator on June 22, 2022, assessed the program and concludes that the qualification obtained as a result of studying in the SP meets the requirements set for the profession of construction manager in regulatory acts. Following the coordinator's suggestion Experts would invite ViA to perform regular, systematic cooperation with the certifying institutions, because the result of this cooperation is the compliance of the content of the SP with the requirements of the certifying institution so that graduates have better chances of obtaining the right to perform professional activities in the profession they have learned.

SP is developed to provide Fourth level professional qualification (4th PQL) and corresponds to the fifth level of the Latvian Qualifications Framework (5th LQF). Experts must note that the overall documentation qualification title should be used consistently, because there are several variations found in the documentation – Building construction manager or Construction manager or Construction Manager of Buildings). According to the 2021 year document Qualifications structure of the construction industry ([https://registri.visc.gov.lv/profizglitiba/dokumenti/nozkval/NKS\\_buvnieciba.pdf](https://registri.visc.gov.lv/profizglitiba/dokumenti/nozkval/NKS_buvnieciba.pdf)) that gives an overview of industry professions, specializations included in them, related professions the particular qualification there are given following profession's titles in EN: Civil engineering project manager (ISCO), Construction project manager (ISCO).

Overall the tasks set corresponds to the aim of the SP, however, since the program is very locally /

regionally implemented, it must be further explored and developed in a way to enhance international relevance, competitiveness and global reach in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies.

In the admission of the SP, requirements (after completion of secondary education) emphasize exact sciences, mathematics and physics or chemistry, and additional points can be received for tests or examinations in informatics. It can be evaluated as appropriate and leads to the selection of students with the ability to think exquisitely accordingly to the chosen study field.

2.1.3. The above-mentioned corrections made to the SP parameters within the assessment of the SF are analyzed, justified and would be supported.

SAR (p. 68) describe changes in the parameters of the SP that has been made since previous accreditation. Important adjustments are based on an update of the occupational standard "Construction Manager" to "Building Construction Manager" (2021), the implementation of the recommendations from the previous accreditation report, and recommendations of the internal audit in 2019. The name of SP is changed from the previous "Construction of Wooden Houses and Eco-building" to "Sustainable Building Construction", offering a specialised but more comprehensive SP that is based on the development trends in the industry and educates and trains construction managers, particularly in sustainable construction. The scope of the programme is increased from 100 to 120 credit points (CP) while the duration of studies - from 2.5 to 3 years, adapting the programme content and structure to the current occupational standard "Building Construction Manager". The content and curriculum of the SP are seriously updated. It is commendable that in doing so the SP updating process was carried out through a series of workshops attended by existing lecturers, practising professionals, newly invited lecturers and representatives of the ViA administration.

Meeting with ViA leadership, faculty leader and SF director gave insight into the SF / SP development proving genuine interest in developing SF, purposeful evaluation of SP and substantiated upgrade of SP - its title, content and involved teaching personnel, teaching methods and overall goal to establish and develop cooperation network with and for industry and professionals.

2.1.4. Speaking of economic and/or social justification of the study programme - according to SAR, p. 69, the development of SP is based on the demand of qualified construction field specialists, reflected in the development strategy of the Latvian construction industry for 2017-2024 (an increase of specialists by 45% in 2030). SP is developed based on assumption that the building sector is inevitably expanding due to implementation of large-scale projects in Latvia and the Baltics and the growing competitiveness of Vidzeme region construction companies.

The education market is quite competitive if speaking of SF - currently represented in 7 Latvian universities. Similar SPs (qualific. "building construction manager") are accredited in 5 universities. ViA preference is in the fact that currently in the region there is no university offering similar SP. There are on average 20 students admitted every year. Due to internal assessment and expected changes in the SP were not admitted in the academic years of 2019/2020 and 2021/2022. Data shows the number of students in SP varies from 17 to 55 students (the highest number in 2016), Annex 2. There are an average of 38 students in the SP. The number of graduates varies from 0 to 16 in 2017. All students have the possibility to study in State-funded places. It is assumed that SP expects to enroll 20 new students each year. Seeing the high dropout rate, it would be advisable to explore options to enroll higher number (25) and introduce prevention measures for the reasons of dropout.

By being ViA student you are eligible for several offers that are e.g. discounts for services (<https://va.lv/lv/studentiem-un-darbiniekiem/studentu-dzive/atlaides>). University offers places in Student housing (paid service). At the same time, it is known at the municipality level that there is an insufficient offer (shortage of living options) for housing in Valmiera and that must be mitigated in order to attract students from near and far regions. University also offers extracurricular activities, and participation in student council, however, students from SP confirm they are not very interested to participate – practically all of them are employed, and many have families. Thus, although they are informed, there is no time to participate in students' activities.

Information and application documents on scholarships are available for students on Moodle platform. Granting of scholarships is regulated by Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of August 24, 2004 No. 740 "Rules on scholarships" and ViA Scholarship Award Regulations. Scholarships are awarded based on competition for students 1) who study on state budget funds in full-time BA study programs, professional higher education programs and MA study programs; 2) successfully pass the necessary tests and study course requirements within the specified term, as well as fully obtains the number of credit points intended for the relevant semester, except for cases where the student has obtained the missing credit points in the relevant semester in one of the previous semesters. Scholarships are awarded by the decision of the Rector or his authorized official, based on the proposal of the Scholarship Awarding Commission. From experts' point of view, the scholarship could be an important support for focusing much more on studies rather than paid job duties. It is widely known that scholarships in Latvia are not sufficient (monthly minimum stipend for professional higher education programs – 140.00 euros per month) but considering the high dropout rate for students of SP, it must be explored whether this factor (receiving of scholarship and what is a reasonable amount) can influence students ability to graduate SP. There are various stipends offered by ViA, but generally, the criteria of receiving it are students' academic and research achievements, except a one-time social stipend, is also introduced for students with particular social status. Starting from the 2021/2022 academic year, full-time students who study at a place state budget place or for a fee can apply for the "Studēt gods" social scholarship. In particular SP there are on average 4 students (lowest number 2 stud.; highest – 8 stud.) per semester receiving monthly stipend (source: ViA submitted document KECE STIPENDIJU IZMAKSAS PĀRSKATS).

The average annual dropout of students is 22% (excl. years when students were not admitted – 15%). University has analyzed the dropout reasons and for the next period must undertake necessary dropout prevention measures to decrease to number of students leaving studies, especially because the SP is already quite compact. As a positive aspect of meetings with current students and graduates, due to its size, SP offers a very direct and individually considered approach that is highly valued among students.

Analysis of results from students, graduates and employers surveys throughout reporting period of 2013-2021 regarding SP has been performed (SAR, Appendix 12). To find out the satisfaction of graduates with the applicability of studies within professional practice the surveys are performed annually – data shows that the employment rate of SP's graduated is high (Appendix 12 / SAR, p. 70) and employers are rather satisfied with the program, especially after implemented changes and overall cooperative character.

2.1.5. Not applicable.

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

SP can be evaluated as compliant and corresponds with the thematic reach of the study field

“Architecture and Construction”. The SP is a regionally oriented and compact program offering individual approach and flexibility in preparing qualified, competent and competitive building construction managers, responding to the industry's demand for advanced specialists in sustainable construction. Numerous important changes in the parameters of the SP that has been made since previous accreditation. The content and curriculum of the SP are seriously updated.

Experts must note that the overall documentation qualification title should be used consistently – several variations can be found in the documentation. Overall the tasks set corresponds to the aim of the SP although it could be further explored and developed in a way to enhance international relevance, competitiveness and global reach in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies.

In the admission of the SP, requirements are appropriate and lead to the selection of students with knowledge corresponding to the chosen study field.

The education market is quite competitive – ViA preference is in the fact that currently in the region there is no university offering similar SP. There are on average 20 students admitted every year. Seeing the high dropout rate, it would be advisable to explore options to enrol a higher number (25) and carefully consider and introduce dropout prevention measures.

Analysis of results from students, graduates and employers surveys throughout reporting period of 2013-2021 regarding SP has been performed – data shows that the employment rate of SP's graduates is high and employers are rather satisfied with the program, especially after implemented changes and overall cooperative character.

#### Strengths:

- 1) Updated SP, the name is changed from the previous “Construction of Wooden Houses and Eco-building” to “Sustainable Building Construction”, offering specialised but more comprehensive SP that is based on the development trends in the industry and educates and trains construction managers, particularly in sustainable construction.
- 2) SP updating process was carried out through a series of workshops attended by existing lecturers, practising professionals, newly invited lecturers and representatives of the ViA administration.
- 3) ViA preference in choosing a particular SP is in the fact that currently in the region there is no university offering a similar SP.
- 4) Data shows that the employment rate of SP graduates is high and employers are rather satisfied with the program graduates as potential employees.
- 5) All students have the possibility to study in State-funded places.
- 6) Cooperative character of SP ensured by current SP director.

#### Weaknesses:

- 1) Significantly high dropout rate.
- 2) Only SP in the SF meaning that graduates lack continuation of studies and if they wish to do so, they have to go to another HEI or abroad (e.g. VIA University college);
- 3) Since SP is implemented in Latvia, and there are no study courses in English, there is no possibility to attract incoming mobilities, foreign teaching staff
- 4) Inconsistent use of qualification title – variations: Building construction manager or Construction manager or Construction Manager of Buildings).
- 5) Regional and local SP in the competitive education market
- 6) Insufficient offer (shortage of living options) for housing in Valmiera
- 7) University also offers extracurricular activities, however, students from SP confirm they are not very interested to participate – practically all of them are employed, and many have families. Thus, although they are informed, there is no time to participate in students' activities.

## 2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof

## Analysis

2.2.1. The SP complies with the state education standard – the compliance to requirements and standard specifications in terms of mandatory parameters and content is demonstrated in Appendix 25P. The goal of the programme is to integrate practice as much as possible in the study process and to provide students with an educational platform on which they can deepen their knowledge, and develop not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills and competencies needed to work in the profession.

The compulsory content amount of 120 CP is divided into the following parts (SAR, Annex 26P):

- 54 CP (Mandatory courses of Part A);
- 32 CP (Professional specialization courses of Part B);
- 4 CP (two Professional specialization elective courses of Part C);
- 20 CP (Mandatory internship in the construction companies);
- 10 CP (Qualification paper).

The programme includes modules for the establishment of vocational competence in entrepreneurial activities (the organisation and founding of an undertaking, management methods, project development and managing principles, record-keeping and financial audit system, knowledge regarding the formation of social dialogue in the community and regulatory enactments regulating employment legal relationships), as well as courses on civil defence and environmental issues. The following courses cover these topics in the scope of 20 CP: Introduction to the Specialty; Sustainable Development; Higher Mathematics; Labour Protection and Civil Defence and First Aid; Professional English I and Professional English II; Business Fundamentals; European Green Course. Green Public Procurement; HR Management (Annex 25P, Annex 28P Study Course Descriptions).

The study courses are organized in accordance with the regulatory enactments effective in the country and the quality standards established by ViA in the organization of the study process.

The content of the SP is revised and updated targeting the speciality of sustainable construction. The overall developed curriculum is interconnected and complementary. The study plan of the 6 semesters programme is compiled by selecting the so-called “anchor subjects” for each semester: 1 sem. Mechanics of construction and resistance of materials; 2 sem. Building constructions I (wood); 3 sem. Construction project organization, management, BIS; 4 sem. Wooden Houses and Eco-building; 5 sem. Energy efficiency. The anchor subjects are courses of increased volume – 4 credits, and the knowledge, skills and competencies to be acquired in these courses are essential, also for developing the qualification paper that happens gradually starting from the 2nd semester. The anchor subject is complemented by “support” subjects each semester.

The curriculum (SAR Annex 28P) is well planned, logically organized and successive. However, there seems to be a minor choice of Part C elective courses (only 2 courses – Introduction to Fire Safety in Buildings and Labour Safety and Electrical Safety in Construction – both seem to be relevant for part B) – proposing additional choice for elective subjects would be beneficial – e.g. from other SFs where it could be possible for the students to choose from a variety of valuable elective courses to fit varied interests.

The study courses include and integrate sustainable construction topics very well. Those are extensively integrated into the following courses – Introduction to the Specialty; Sustainable Development; European Green Course. Green Public Procurement; Construction Products and Eco-building Materials; Construction Project Organization, Management, BIS; Wooden Houses and Eco-building; Energy Efficiency; Principles of Building Design, BIM. Goals of the abovementioned courses are set to provide students with the required basic knowledge of the construction principles of wooden houses and eco-building, various construction materials and eco-building technologies,

starting from rational planning of materials and technical resources to selection of optimal structures, devices and machinery for construction work performance; to develop students' understanding of circular construction practices, to plan an optimal use of natural resources taking into account next generations; new insights into the synergies between sustainable construction practices and the circular economy, as well as prior knowledge of international sustainable construction assessment systems that use a life-cycle cost approach; to introduce sustainable architecture, its history and modern sustainable architecture, its main problems, misunderstandings and future strategies; passive and active methods in designing sustainable buildings and related architectural solutions; Circular economy in architecture, applied architectural methods and principles (DfD, adaptability of buildings, etc.); Life cycle of buildings, its components, reduction of emissions and applied architectural methods and principles; examples of sustainable building designs and design analysis, comments, justification of the chosen methods, main problems.

Many more relevant topics are covered in great detail throughout the courses, making the SP a good example of integrating the latest European competence in the field.

After reviewing study course descriptions it can be concluded that the list of recommended literature included adds from course to course, forming a relevant, up-to-date collection that is both in Latvian and English, covering both basic and advanced topics, including fundamental but older sources and contemporary additions. It would be recommended to add an also valuable Latvian source of pre-WW2 technologies to the library: Bērzupe, Eduards. Būvdarbu tehniskie noteikumi 1.-5.gr., Rīga, LR Kultūras ministrijas Zinātniskās restaurācijas pārvalde, 1991. Faksimilizdevums no Satiksmes ministrijas Dzelzceļu virsvaldes Tehniskās direkcijas izd., 1935., atb. par izd. Z.Mende, as this material, explains building technologies that are both becoming popular again and being sustainable and ecological, and the buildings of the period, that are often to be reconstructed nowadays, and almost every time are at risk of neglecting proper approaches and methods for this pretty complicated job. Other sources to pay more attention to are, for instance, the German publishing house Detail [https://www.detail.de/en/de\\_en/](https://www.detail.de/en/de_en/), and others, where there are many resources available online for a very reasonable fee or even free of charge.

The aim of the study program is to prepare highly qualified, competent and competitive building construction managers, responding to the industry's demand for modern and advanced specialists, which would increase the productivity and competitiveness of construction companies both locally and internationally. In general the curriculum and content of renewed SP correspond to the objectives and results set (knowledge, skills, competencies) for a particular SP. The mapping of results to be achieved in the SP is provided in Appendix 29p.

The study courses are developed in accordance with the required knowledge, skills and competencies laid down in the occupational standard (the SP is developed in accordance with the Occupational Standard "Construction Manager of Buildings" approved on 11 August 2021), and are supplemented with current industry topicalities and expected knowledge, skills and competencies which reflect the needs of advanced and export-capable companies of the industry. Compliance of the SP with the professional standard Comparison provided in Appendix 26p – it shows a visibly high proportion in teaching such themes as Principles of sustainable construction, also Strength and durability of structures construction mechanics, Composition of the project and conditions for its development, Technological sequence of building construction works and performance technology, Basic knowledge in the design of buildings and structures.

The content of the study courses integrates all the points that are laid down as priorities to be implemented in the development strategy of the Latvian construction industry for 2017–2024 (SAR 3.2). Construction and building digitization and use of ICT, smart manufacturing and passive house construction, as well as energy efficiency, cyber security of buildings and construction process;

BREEM, LEAN certification, have been introduced in the curriculum. Additional but very valuable knowledge, skills and competencies are provided in such study courses as “European Green Course. Green Public Procurement”, “Introduction to Fire Safety in Buildings” and “Labour Safety and Electrical Safety” (SAR, p. 72). Overall, the SP after renewal will be developed in close cooperation with industry professionals (as teaching staff) and corporate companies as collaborators, e.g. to ensure equipment and provide practice placement.

2.2.2. Not applicable.

2.2.3. The study plan of the programme is compiled by selecting the so-called “anchor subjects” each semester. The anchor subjects are courses of 4 CP, and the knowledge, skills and competencies to be acquired in these courses are essential for writing the qualification paper. There is an anchor subject and “support” subjects in each semester. The lecturers adapt the content, relevant examples, tests, and homework of “support” subjects according to the needs of the anchor subject and the qualification paper themes chosen by the students. Thus, the qualification paper becomes the main guiding principle of the study process, and it is developed already during the study process. This approach allows us to “build” understanding gradually and consolidate knowledge, allowing students to explore deeper the subject of their qualification papers and strengthening their motivation and research interests for future studies and professional development. When choosing qualification papers as the guiding principle of the studies, it also largely marks the cooperation groups of the teaching staff and the “key” lecturers who will also take on the roles of the qualification paper supervisors. These lecturers become the mentors of the students throughout the study period thus enabling ViA to maintain feedback with students after graduation and also strengthening the alumni community (SAR, 3.2).

The methodological approach is result-oriented and very much student-centred, which was also emphasized by the former and present students during the interviews. Students especially praise the compactness of the program and the individual approach that is possible. Methods used for the study programme – (1) in-class/ online contact classes and fieldwork or practical work, (2) independent work, (3) field trips, and (4) training and internship. The main teaching methods of in-person/supervised online classes: lectures; practical classes, laboratory demonstrations, fieldwork as group work and individual work of different formats – situation analysis, a practical adaptation of theoretical models, discussions, presentations, seminars, tests, team building activities, simulations of real situations, etc. Independent work – homework, research, preparation of reports, accounts, preparation for seminars, final examinations, presentations, literature studies, calculations, etc.

Apart from classwork, there are several additional teaching/learning methods used in the SP – e.g. field trips. Field trips are organized as experience exchange visits to companies and organizations. Problem-based and example-based training is widely used in training. Field trips are compatible with cooperation companies, and organizations, as well as Valmiera city and Vidzeme planning region. It was noted that since the restart of the program in 2021, field trips have started to happen with more interaction and practical training (building airtightness practical training at Pavasars company was mentioned), which adds significantly more value for the students than passive observations and guided tours without hands-on interaction.

As noted from the site visit there are different approaches to student learning abilities, so students can excel if their skill level is above average. Also, it was noted that due to small course groups, students can receive extensive personal feedback; it is also given in the Moodle system directly. The Moodle system is well-developed and improved according to the needs of the students and teaching staff by the team of FES, as presented by the Dean of FES during the site visit. However,

encouragement to use it to maximum capacity is still needed.

There are a few samples of wall and roof structures and a sample timber frame structure scale model in the laboratory. It is very important to involve students in practical hands-on workshops with real materials as a part of SP, creating different samples, and models and solving practical problems that could arise later in their practice. For this purpose, a strong collaboration with the industry representatives should be established and maintained, organizing hands-on workshops and storing the best results of those. There are also different producers of construction products offering workshops with their own resources and training staff, organizing courses for professionals at their own expense. It should be considered to offer the students hands-on experience with different materials and solutions to broaden their practical skills. Construction site visits with discussions and workshops afterwards could add to the studies, too, as well as presentations of the students after their summer practice in front of the group. This would promote the culture of experience exchange and discussion among the young professionals and let them understand the connection between theory and practice much deeper, making the SP best example among the similar programs in the country.

2.2.4. Internships that are compulsory for gaining professional qualification are completed outside ViA (at places of internship) at the private and public organizations of the construction industry under the supervision of experienced specialists. The internship is performed in accordance with the “Agreement on Providing a Place of Internship” entered into between ViA, the host organization and the student. The internship goal is to provide an opportunity for students to practice the skills and abilities necessary for a construction manager in a real work environment in Latvia and Europe. The content of the internship programme integrates the knowledge, skills and competencies required for a building construction manager in accordance with the Occupational Standard and current requirements of the industry (Annex 32P, Internship Regulations 1.5.).

As described in SAR (p. 76), an internship is divided into three parts (3 semesters), in a total amount of 20 credit points:

I - training practice in a construction company, amount 4 CP, 160 h, 4 weeks;

II - internship in a construction company, amount - 6 CP, 240 h, 6 weeks;

III - practice in the construction company, amount - 10 CP, 400 h, 10 weeks.

SAR (p. 77) describes changes that have been made in the SP regarding the internship - the total number of credit points is increased by 2 CP - from 18 CP to 20 CP, and the course “Practical Construction Works I” (4 credits) is restructured into Internship I (4 credits) at the company SIA “Pavasars Housing”. As an additional bonus, upon successful completion of this particular internship, students can obtain a certificate confirming the practical acquisition of the specialized software Dietrichs.

Former students expressed suggestions that internship times could be adjusted because as it was organised in spring, every time students saw only site groundworks (study plan (Appendix 27p) indicate semesters when the internship is taking place - 2nd, 4th, 6th). But in general former students expressed satisfaction with their practice experiences. In case it is needed SP director offers help in finding good and relevant internship places. An internship can also take place abroad, e.g. present students expressed interest in short-term international exchange practice placement.

SP director is responsible for the successful internship process. The host organization assigns an internship supervisor for student(s) at the company during the internship. Internships are organised according to Internship Regulations (Annex 32P) that are clear and detailed, describing goals, tasks and the program of each internship part and describing the connection between theory and practice, covering the range of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired during previous study

semesters. Regulations also describe internship organisation, preparation of reports, and evaluation. During the internship, a student fills in the diary and prepares an internship report and public presentation in accordance with the internship regulations and annexes thereto (SAR, 3.2.3). Application and internship evaluation take place online in Moodle system. The evaluation is provided by a reviewer appointed by the programme director.

2.2.5. Not applicable.

2.2.6. The topics of students' qualification works are relevant to the field and in general correspond to the SP. Qualification papers are based on the analysis of a real construction project and the development of its construction process – according to SAR, a large part of their focus on the objects located in the Vidzeme planning region. Within the framework of the qualification papers a work performance project is prepared, additional calculations, inspections and detailing are made, and construction estimates are reviewed, providing recommendations for construction cost and energy efficiency optimization. Often qualification paper themes are related to the students' places of the internship. Experts can confirm qualification papers are relevant and timely, with additional value in helping to solve the challenges of local governments and promote the principles of sustainable construction. The topics include such as Technical equipment storage building; Construction of an apartment building, Beverīna district, Brenguļi; Construction of an industrial production building at Valkas street 5, Smiltene; Rebuilding of the Large Building of Alojās Ausekļa Secondary School; Renovation of building facades and replacement of roof covering; Steel processing plants, administration buildings and new boiler house buildings "Dzegas", Raiskuma parish, Pārgauja district"; The development of energy efficiency in a dwelling house to attain the passive house energy consumption criteria; SIA "Byko-lat" new industrial building; Reconstruction of Valkas Jānis Cimzes gymnasium boarding school and others. Since the previous study year, only Group III buildings are used for qualification works.

The papers are written in accordance with the applicable regulations regulating construction and building legislation, as well as in accordance with the guide for preparation of the graduation papers (Appendix 30p). Respectively, guidelines are intended for students of the Faculty who are writing various study projects or writing Qualification papers and are getting ready to defend them. The guidelines include the basic requirements for the preparation and formatting of papers. The methodological guidelines comply with the basic principles of preparation and formatting of scientific articles and projects and can be used as common principles for assessing students' projects and papers. The methodological guidelines summarize and formalize the criteria which should be considered as recommendations to the examination commissions.

Additionally, for students of the particular SP, the Qualification paper assignment (Appendix 31p) must be filled in, indicating the chosen topic, supervisor's agreement, submission deadlines and Components of the theoretical and practical part of the Qualification paper. Experts can advise indicating file formats/file size for submitting paper, especially if they should be submitted in digital form.

The themes of the qualification papers are chosen by the students on a voluntary basis. Every year SP director conducts a survey of the region's municipalities and regional cooperation partners compiling themes relevant to the field and the region, afterwards, those themes are offered to the students. (SAR, p. 77) Students will be able to choose the qualification paper designs for Group 3 buildings already in the 2nd semester of the 1st year within the study course "Principles of Building Design I". Studies are well connected with the qualification paper as it is envisioned that development of qualification paper is woven into the study process. This approach allows to "build" understanding gradually and consolidate knowledge, thus allowing students to explore deeper the

subject of their qualification papers and strengthening their motivation and research interests for future studies and professional development.

Experts would advise in further implementation of SP to have curated themes so that there is an overarching theme for students' groups, relevant to ongoing research and collaborative activities at the university, teacher's competencies, interests and prevailing trends. That can lead to stronger and more impactful outcomes when all graduates contribute to a general topic with a specific subtheme. In general, it also would be advisable that qualification themes and titles in future reflect the thematic focus of the SP – issues related to sustainable construction.

Examples of the so far executed and presented qualification papers evaluated during the site visit presented proper quality. As Qualification Paper Themes (Annex 34P) shows, since 2021 only a third group, more complex buildings are selected for the papers, significantly improving the level of student competence and effort needed for qualification. During the site visit it was noted by the industry representatives, the future employers, that the quality of the papers has been increasing, and as they are invited to be a part of the evaluation commission they can be in direct contact not only evaluating works, but also in suggesting improvements in the process, themes, and quality.

To gain visibility and attract a wider professional, and general audience it could be possible to organize public (also for instance online) Qualification paper defence sessions, and publish student projects to attract both – broader and specialist interest in sustainability topics looked into.

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

The content of SP and implementation are in accordance with the required knowledge, skills and competencies laid down in the occupational standard “Construction Manager of Buildings”, approved on 11 August 2021, and are supplemented with current industry topicalities and expected knowledge, skills and competencies which reflect the needs of advanced and export-capable companies of the industry. The study courses are organized in accordance with the regulatory enactments effective in the country. The content of the study courses integrates all the points that are laid down as priorities to be implemented in the development strategy of the Latvian construction industry for 2017–2024. After the restart of the study course the director of SP made a great effort to coordinate the program with above mentioned conditions, as well as had direct contact with a variety of industry representatives. New teaching staff was not only invited to work at the SP, but was involved in the planning of the course, its structure and content itself, based on the approved methods of the HEI. A truly result-oriented and student-centred study implementation system was finally developed and introduced; the internship program was carefully worked out and connected with study topics and theory in a unified system. Final theses were set as the focal point of the study program since the second semester, thus integrating the different study courses under the one main goal throughout the whole study period, at the same time increasing the complexity of its task and leading to a higher quality of the expected outcome.

In the future, it is recommended to establish contacts with some sustainable construction companies, producers of sustainable building products, and relevant institutions abroad to offer short-term internships (up to two weeks) and workshops for the students.

Practical training at companies in the Vidzeme region (one to two-day hands-on workshops with site visits and excursions) should be held on a regular basis. It is recommended to research and establish contacts with Latvian and Latvia-based branches of international companies producing sustainable building materials and offering hands-on training, both in their facilities and in-house, to

make students familiar with a wide variety of different materials and methods, ensuring the students have best practice experience already during their study period.

Strengths:

- 1) Well-established methods and practices of study organizing at the HEI level.
- 2) Well-planned SP with the participation of the teachers' team, developing anchor subjects, integrating Qualification paper development but keeping the focus on the main targets and outcomes throughout the whole study period.
- 3) Increased significance, quality and purposeful organisation of internship, clear and detailed descriptions of the procedures and tasks during an internship, and direct connection of practice places to the study content.
- 4) Systemic collaboration with different regional stakeholders – construction companies, prefabricated house producers, software and AI developers, vocational education and lifelong learning centres, and municipalities lays a good foundation for information exchange, and direct feedback and ensures the possibility of keeping the program updated to fit the needs of the industry and overall regional development directions.

Weaknesses:

- 1) Intensively “packed” study curriculum leads to the minor choice of Part C elective courses (only 2 courses – Introduction to Fire Safety in Buildings and Labour Safety and Electrical Safety in Construction) – these courses both seem to be relevant for parts A and B.
- 2) Low student mobility and international internship exchange possibilities often are not used because the majority of students have permanent jobs or families so they don't choose to go abroad.
- 3) Relevant hands-on practical training with a variety of materials, systems and components of sustainable construction with help of producers and different product representatives still to be developed. The use of resources of the construction industry and building products’ manufacturers and their involvement in organizing hands-on courses with different sustainable construction materials and practices should be considered.

### **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

Not applicable.

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

#### **Analysis**

2.3.1. The study and informative provision (including library), material and technical provision and financial provision comply with the specifics and conditions of implementing SP at ViA. The resources (including financial resources) and material and technical assets available to implement SP are relevant and allow to the organisation of the study process successfully. The analysis is provided in Chapter 3 “Resources and Provision of the Study Field”.

Additionally, teaching staff and students may use resources and laboratories of the other programmes (cyber security, virtual reality) of the Faculty. For example, the study course “Labour

Safety and Electrical Safety in Construction” is organized using virtual reality simulation software which allows one to have an in-depth understanding and experience of construction safety aspects. SP director actively initiates collaboration with private companies to ensure additional resources for the implementation of SP. Several cooperation agreements have been concluded, e.g. for example, in order to perform practical tasks of the study course “Geodesy”, company SIA “3D Engineering” provides the latest generation laser surveying equipment. Another example is cooperation with the company “Pavasars” to provide practice placement. Such an approach is commendable because in the current situation when SF/ SP is quite compact, the investments in technologies and tools (that constantly change and should be renewed) would not be considered rational.

IT and digital technologies are provided and available and used more and more in SP – e.g. e-environment is used in the study process, where study course materials, course schedules, etc. can be found. The MS Teams platform, Webex, Skype, Zoom (until February 2022), as well as the open source remote access platform for practical demonstrations are used to conduct online lectures. The library is up-to-date with minor recommendations for improvements.

2.3.2. Not applicable.

2.3.3. ViA has a precise overview of the funding available to the SP and funding sources (SAR, 2.3.). The sources of financial resources are the State budget and university income (study fees), comprising ~77thousand EUR. Funding for research and creative activities of the academic staff at ViA is not divided by SF, but is directed to scientific institutes, grant programmes, research projects and commissioned works in which academic staff from different study fields works. SAR shows total financial numbers for research funding not specifying part allocated for SF/SP.

Overall ViA has established a system for determining the financial support required for the implementation of the SF and the corresponding study programmes consisting of direct semi-direct and indirect costs (SAR, p. 35-36). SAR explains the distribution of funding between the defined positions during the reporting period – from the total SP budget 58.9% are direct costs and 41.1% – are indirect. SAR indicates the proportional distribution of finances but does not indicate costs per student.

Experts can conclude that available funding ensures full implementation of the study process. The SP is quite compact and needs on average 20 students enrolled every year to ensure the stability of the SP. Since SP shows a high student dropout rate, SF/SP management should analyse the dropout reasons, work out a strategy and implement measures to ensure a maximum number of students stay in the SP.

In terms of SP development, it can be concluded that additional activities and acquisition of complementary funds are pursued and will be needed to facilitate the development reaching higher quality of the SP. As confirmed by management, ViA plans to continue working on strengthening SP in the coming years. According to SAR (p. 16) “support in strengthening the SPs is also provided by ESF SAM 8.2.1. and SAM 8.2.2. activities of the operational programme, within which the work is underway to reduce the fragmentation of the study programmes, to strengthen resources, as well as to strengthen the academic staff in the areas of strategic specialization”.

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

There is a well-functioning support system, based on the needs of the students in ViA. Study provision, scientific support, informative provision, material and technical provision, and financial

provision fully comply with the specific needs of the SP and its successful implementation and ensure an optimal quality learning process. ViA plans to continue working on strengthening SP in the coming years – additional activities and acquisition of complementary funds are pursued to facilitate the development reaching higher quality SP.

Strengths:

1) To optimise expenses and investments SP director actively initiates collaboration with private companies to ensure opportunities, special equipment and tools for the implementation of SP.

Weaknesses:

1) It can be concluded that additional activities and the acquisition of complementary funds are needed to facilitate the development and constantly raise the quality of the SP.

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

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Control and sustainability of the use of financial resources are laid down in the procedure of development, approval, execution and control of the budget of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences (approved on 26 October 2011 at the ViA Senate meeting, decision No. 10/7.1) (SAR. P.2.3.1).

The library is open to readers 51 hours per week. ViA students and lecturers have remote access to databases and electronic catalogue 24/7. The library is also accessible for people with physical disabilities. The library provides all the traditional library services (SAR 2.3.3.).

## **2.4. Teaching Staff**

### **Analysis**

2.4.1. Since the accreditation procedure in 2012 on average 13 to 17 lecturers have been teaching in the SP. In 2022 in total 17 lecturers have been appointed to SP involving elected, research and guest lecturers with a goal to revise/renew (10 new teachers from 2022) the teaching staff collective and have stronger practical insight from field professionals. Currently, there are 7 persons elected as academic staff.

Both the elected academic staff and the invited lecturers – industry professionals, and experts are involved in the implementation of the study programme. ViA academic staff (except SF/SP current director) has a Master's degree or higher level education and at least ten years of practical experience in the industry (both in Latvia and abroad), thus, meeting the conditions for the implementation of the study programme. The renewed team of lecturers bring their share of international experience and current knowledge to the study programme, especially in the main "anchor" subjects of the programme. REGULATIONS ON ELECTION TO ACADEMIC POSITIONS AT VIDZEME UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES (Approved at the ViA Senate meeting on January 26th 2022) ensures the propositions and requirement to be fulfilled for the election or the promotion of the academic staff.

The academic staff has been formed covering both practical components and research

competencies. Since the practical component is introduced into the study program by the involvement of market or industry professionals, the study program is ensured to be up to date with market needs and demands, especially from the desired learning outcomes point of view.

The qualification of the teaching staff, especially the professional qualification of the lecturers of "anchor courses", expertise, experience in the industry, as well as leadership, management skills and presentation skills clearly help to achieve the results of the study program at the level of knowledge and skills. In addition, the results of each course are structured to help achieve the results of the program as a whole, covering several of the results within the course.

Basic information about the teaching staff involved in the implementation of the SF (Annex 16P) offers the confirmation of language level knowledge for all 17 lecturers. Inspection of academic staff CVs confirms partially the reference list is adjusted to each specific course given by a specific members of the academic staff. It is important to highlight here that the CV list (Annex 17P) does not offer a unique amount of data for each of the academic staff members.

Graduated students express satisfaction with preparedness for the work after graduation at the study program, as well as employers when reporting the general preparedness of graduated students for the work.

2.4.2. SP has been created with the idea to create market-orientated, relevant and competent students / new professionals prepared for the labour market and industry. In this way, academic staff has been elected to cover both research competencies and market/industry/field experience. This has been shown as a positive combination in market-prepared graduated students as reported by former students and employers.

The latest changes in the teaching staff composition have been made while preparing for the latest accreditation process. The present structure covers in total 9 guest lecturers, 3 lecturers, 2 assistant professors and 3 guest assistant professors.

The ratio of the teaching staff and students reported within the SAR equals unity which is highly positive compared to EU standards and capacities.

During the visit, students highlighted that sometimes not fully dedicated academic staff, explaining the cause that should be found in their working overload. The latter refers to professionals who are active in the industry, gaining their companies and/or working for other companies.

2.4.3. Not applicable

2.4.4. The main source for the analysis of this criteria has been found in the publication list and CVs (Annex Nr. 17 and Annex Nr. 18) of the academic staff.

Academic staff CVs and publication lists offer insight into scientific production since 2015 up to date thus covering a 6-year reference period. The constant international presence and scientific production have been evidence for less than 50% of the staff publishing in international peer review journals and/or attending international conferences during the last 6 years. A part of publications has been published in domestic journals thus decreasing the international dissemination and visibility.

During the 6 years, period on average 0.4 publications have been prepared and published per year per academic staff member.

In total 5 of the academic staff have been reported to be active in projects with in total of 6 projects being worked on as reported within Annex Nr. 18..

Practical experience, especially experience in technical projects related to SP content, has been evidenced for in total of 5 of 17 academic staff. During the visit, students emphasized preparedness and the presence of relevant professional competencies within the lecturers.

2.4.5. During the academic year 2020/21 HEI / SP director introduced synchronization meetings at the beginning of the semester with the idea to create homogeneity and interconnection between the courses which are related in a way of pre-demanded learning outcomes and competencies. Beneficiaries of those meetings are multiple as reported by the SP director, SAR and teaching staff: to define a unified and clear learning process, ensure the transition between semesters, and to produce qualification papers.

Those meeting mechanisms enable the staff interconnection, and their effort to contribute not only through the course they give but also through the study program. It also promotes the modern and state-of-the-art teaching process by eliminating potential course content overlapping but collaborative and supportive course co-existence. Additionally, a study plan is built for each semester to have “anchor subjects” of 4 CP, and the lecturers of these courses form the main core of the semester supporting students in the development of their qualification papers. It is understood that this approach allows for qualification papers no to be disconnected as an outcome in the last study period but they are integrated, developed gradually during the study process, better supervised and related to ongoing course topics.

HEI also encourages academic staff to improve competencies through guest lectures, seminars, conferences, pedagogical innovations implementation etc.

One of the mechanisms leading toward the teaching staff integration is the qualification paper which is done during the last semester and integrates the learning outcomes of the courses accomplished during the study program.

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

HEI works with a mission to create a stable teaching platform composed of two branches: research academic staff and teaching staff as professionals coming from the industry. In this way, SP keeps in line with the premise of creating professional-level students qualified for the need of local market requirements. This concept looks efficient as confirmed by both graduated students and employers being involved in the re-accreditation process.

Although dominant positive, the above-mentioned structure of teaching staff has been reported as leading towards not fully motivated individuals within the professionals stemming from the industry. The latter can be expected due to the obligations set up in the private sector and academy at the same time.

Interconnection of the teaching staff has been supported and partially implemented through several activities in a formal way when dealing with lectures and study program issues. Research activities are performed within smaller groups in accordance with the total number of academic staff enrolled in the study program with significant discrepancies in the scientific production. Scientific and research activities as found within the academic lecturers do not seem stable, thus not ensuring constant presence in international peer-reviewed journals.

Strengths:

- 1) Renewed academic and teaching staff of the SP based on the ability to attract field professionals aiming to enhance practical components in teaching.
- 2) SP has introduced synchronization meetings among academic and teaching staff at the beginning of the semester with an idea to create homogeneity and interconnection between the courses, teaching topics and overall study plan.
- 3) Involvement of practical components (e.g. laboratory experiments and applied laboratory activities, practice in private companies / in high-level construction companies within the formal in-class teaching process exists.
- 4) By introducing core subjects each semester, qualification papers will be better integrated, developed gradually during the study process related to course topics and better supervised.

Weaknesses:

- 1) Scientific production is low and should be enhanced. Additional involvement of staff members could help with;
- 2) Dedication of academic staff should be maintained, especially those who are coming from professional field and are guest teaching staff.

### **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:** Fully compliant

The election of academic staff has been well established along the internally established formal procedures. The effort given by the staff in the research and scientific area has not been uniformly evidenced thus leading to the fact research activities are not homogeneously conducted. The structure of the academic staff covers both practical components and research competence. Although the dedication of the academic staff has not been recognized temporarily, students highlight lecturers' competence.

### **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 complies with the professional Higher Education standard regulated by Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 141 "Regulations regarding the state standard in the first-level professional higher education". The total amount of CP in Study programme 120 CP length of implementation 3 years, CP are divided as follows: general education training courses in the scope of 20 CP, sector training courses in the scope of 70 CP, mandatory internship at the construction company in the scope of 20 CP and Qualification paper in the scope of 10 CP.

Considering that Law on Higher Education Institutions in section 55. part 1, point 2, subpoint c indicates that study programmes should include mandatory, limited elective and elective part of study programmes, experts find that the programme also includes these parts - 54 CP (Mandatory courses of Part A, including Labour Protection and Civil Defence and First Aid (2CP),

Construction Chemistry. Safe Handling of Chemicals (2CP)); 32 CP (Professional specialization courses of Part B); 4 CP (Professional specialization elective courses of Part C).

However, ViA should be careful with the inclusion and indication of specific study courses in Part C, because the opportunity for students to freely choose these courses is one of the prerequisites for academic freedom.

It is stated in state standard that the programme should include a module for the establishment of vocational competence in entrepreneurial activities (at least six CP), experts found that the programme has several courses that include requirements specified in the national standard, for example, Business Fundamental, HR Management, Project Management, Quality Management Systems and Conformity Assessment in Construction; Law and Standards of the Industry, at the same time, however, experts recommend ViA to specify more clearly how the business module is designed.

Based on the information provided by ViA, experts find that other requirements specified in the regulations are also met.

ANNEX 25P-IĒB-atbilstība valsts izglītības standartam-ENG2021-corr20042022.docx

- 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:** Fully compliant

The study programme complies with a valid professional standard which can be found here: <https://registri.visc.gov.lv/profizglitiba/dokumenti/standarti/2017/PS-161.pdf>

The standard for Building construction manager (Ēku būvdarbu vadītājs) was approved on August 11, 2021. Each competence in standard has been coupled with appropriate study courses. See annex: 26P-CSB-compliance-profession-standard-2021.xlsx

- 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 attached study course descriptions (ANNEX 28P-CSB-study course description-27022022.zip) comply with regulations set forth in the Law of Higher Education Institutions.

At the same time, in order to ensure that the list of mandatory literature is proportionate to the scope of the CP of the study course, ViA should consider the possibility of specifying specific pages or references – the parts which are binding and mandatory for the student in the source.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The provided Diploma sample (ANNEX23P-IĒB-Diploma-paraugs\_CS-Example-of-Diploma-precizejums-correction-05042022.zip) complies with the procedure by which state-recognised documents of higher education are issued according to Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 202 “ Procedures for Issuing State-Recognised Documents Attesting Higher Education”.

- 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:** Not relevant

Not applicable.

- 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

ANNEX Lecturers of the study program "Construction of Sustainable Buildings" (16P-IEB-docetaju-saraksts-2022\_LV-CSB-list-of-lecturers-ENG.edoc) verify that state language proficiency is compliant with Cabinet of Ministers No.733 of 07/07/2009 "Regulations Regarding the Extent of the Knowledge of the Official Language, the Procedures for Examining the Proficiency in the Official Language and the State Fee for Examining the Proficiency in the Official Language".

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

The study agreement sample mostly complies with the requirements of Cabinet Regulation No. 70 of 23 January 2007 "Mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement". However, a couple of technical clarifications should be made, for example,,: subsection 2.10 needs to be supplemented with ViA's obligation to inform students also about changes in study program accreditation or licensing data; 5.5. subsection needs to be supplemented with the obligation of ViA to determine the number of tuition fees, 1.9. subsection needs to be supplemented by clarifying: "Additional services related to the individual material and technical provision necessary for learning the study process (..), the contract should be supplemented, indicating the procedure by which ViA also informs the student about the expected changes in the Regulation of the Ministry of Culture No. 70 3.1. and in the information mentioned in subsection 3.2.

- 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

The agreement is entered into between ViA and Rezekne Academy of Technologies (hereinafter – RAT) in Valmiera, on 7 August 2020.

RAT undertakes to ensure a possibility for the students of the 1st level professional higher education study programme “Construction of Wooden Houses and Eco-building” of ViA, in case of its liquidation, to continue studies in the 1st level professional higher education study programme “Construction” at RAT.

- 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

As proof, ViA has attached a sample of the study agreement, which includes point 2.8. “To guarantee compensation for losses to the Student for the credit points not obtained (for which it is not possible to issue an academic statement if the credits are not obtained due to a fault of ViA) by transferring tuition fee paid by the Student to his or her specified bank account within 1 (one) month if the study programme is not accredited or the study programme license is taken away due to ViA’s activity (or inactivity), and the Student does not want to continue studies in another study programme”.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Letters presented to the expert committee confirm that the SP has received positive evaluation and acceptance regarding content and qualification from (1) Ministry of Education and Science Professional qualification recognition coordinator and (2) Certification body of Construction Specialists of the Latvian Union of Construction Engineers confirms compliance with the regulatory enactments of the regulated professions and approves SP without objections.

### **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

In general, experts believe that the program meets the requirements of regulatory acts. Nevertheless, ViA should review the sample of the study agreement and make sure that it is in line with Cabinet Regulation No. 70 of 23 January 2007 “Mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement.

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

By analysing and evaluating SP, there are no major and critical deficiencies identified that cannot be eliminated during the 2 to 6 years period. Many of the weaknesses highlighted by experts can be revised and diverted within either a short or long time period and must be considered to be rather a basis for recommendations that can help improve and develop SP to make it even better.

Experts are convinced it is possible to continue realising SP in the planned improved form in the Latvian language in the determined study location in Valmiera. SP is renewed and significantly updated and it must be allowed to start its implementation and development.

SP is revised and updated, and the name is changed from the previous "Construction of Wooden Houses and Eco-building" to "Sustainable Building Construction", offering a specialised but more comprehensive SP that is based on the sustainability trends in the industry. SP director has compiled the academic/teaching staff adding practising young and internationally experienced professionals into the teaching of courses. Established and systemic cooperations with stakeholders within the region are formed as the basis of SP implementation and development. The compactness of the SP offers an individual and considerate approach to students in terms of study process and assessment.

As for weaknesses, SP in ViA is local and not widely known and has high competition in the education market – furthermore because currently there is no continuation of studies at the next level. SP currently lacks international reach and has a low level of mobility. Academic staff and guest teaching staff do not have a motivation system in terms of scientific production, and personal and professional development.

## **Evaluation of the study programme "Construction of Sustainable Buildings"**

Evaluation of the study programme:

Good

## **2.6. Recommendations for the Study Programme "Construction of Sustainable Buildings"**

### **Short-term recommendations**

Corrections and consistent use of qualification title in the documentation related to Self-assessment report in Latvian and English (Qualifications structure of the construction industry, [https://registri.visc.gov.lv/profizglitiba/dokumenti/nozkval/NKS\\_buvnieciba.pdf](https://registri.visc.gov.lv/profizglitiba/dokumenti/nozkval/NKS_buvnieciba.pdf)).

Explore options in expanding the offer for part C courses – currently, there are just two Part C elective courses and they are directly related to professional specialisation so likely, not elective but actually mandatory.

Regularly checking up on updated literature and sources of the study courses are recommended, as well as various contemporary sources and high-quality online content, as video tutorials, films, digital content, and online lectures can be suggested and used as teaching material.

Introducing regular guest lectures from field professionals. Recorded lectures can serve as valuable teaching source and materials. By organising such lectures, SP can also gain wider popularity and offer the content to external audience as well.

Courses developed and taught in SP can be offered for further education, professional development and lifelong learning and training for adults in form of short courses and modules.

Since HEI offers extracurricular activities for students – in order to ensure social life during studies students of SP should be actively encouraged, involved and invited to take part (at least occasionally). Currently, although they are informed, there is no time (job duties, family) to participate in students' activities.

### **Long-term recommendations**

Currently, SP is very local and regionally implemented for Latvian-speaking students, however, considering goals set for SF/SP it must be further explored ways to enhance international relevance, competitiveness and global reach in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies.

Exploring the options to attract foreign students (via Erasmus+) is needed, e.g. by introducing a set of courses taught in English.

Considering the high student dropout rate, it would be advisable to carry out an updated investigation of the reasons for dropout and react to that by introducing the plan of preventing mechanisms to reduce dropouts.

SF/SP management should continue efforts to tend toward gradually increasing the percentage of full-time enrolled academic staff.

Considering the majority of students are employed or have families, SP may introduce short-term international internship exchange possibilities or international summer programs (summer courses).

Hands-on practical training with a variety of materials, systems and components of sustainable construction needs to be considered.

The establishment of an in-house materials and samples library in cooperation with the industry needs to be considered.

To gain visibility and attract a wider professional, and general audience it could be advisable to organize public Qualification paper defence sessions and create a digital publicly available platform to publish student projects.

SF/SP management should perform regular, systematic cooperation with the certifying institutions, because the result of this cooperation is the compliance of the content of the SP with the requirements of the certifying institution and graduates have a chance of obtaining the right to perform professional activities in the profession.

## **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**

<b>Requirements</b>	<b>Requirement Evaluation</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<p>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:</p>	<p>Fully compliant</p>	<p>The requirement is evaluated as fully compliant as respective subcriteria are evaluated as fulfilled – ViA ensures continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the SF whilst implementing its internal quality assurance system.</p> <p>ViA has developed and successfully implements a quality assurance policy document, including all the necessary methods for the creation and review of study programmes, as well as involves all the required stakeholders in the procedure.</p>
<p>R2 - Compliance of scientific research and artistic creation with the level of development of scientific research and artistic creation (if applicable)</p>	<p>Fully compliant</p>	<p>Scientific research at the SF level exists and is conducted constantly. Dominant amount of scientific production has been evidenced as performed by the academic staff internationally established and active. Most of the part time lecturers does not show permanent involvement in research activities which may create a risk for linking the content of programs with actualities in science. However, experts understands that this study field includes one first level study programme and ViA approach ensures professional competencies to reach expected learning outcomes for the assessed study programme.</p>

Requirements	Requirement Evaluation		Comment
R3 - The cooperation implemented within the study field with various Latvian and foreign organizations ensures the achievement of the aims of the study field.	Fully compliant		ViA collaborates and aims for fruitful future cooperation with various Latvian institutions, organisations (higher education institutions, business partners & different networks) within the framework of the SF and ensures the achievement of the aims of the study field. At the moment, international cooperation is average, however, with a new SP director it starts to improve, ViA has the necessary basic conditions to improve and ensure international cooperation, i.e. cooperation agreements with foreign universities. Considering the specifics of the SP, cooperation with Latvian institutions and prerequisites for international cooperation, the experts assess the requirement as compliant, at the same time emphasizing that international cooperation, including mobilities must be improved.
R4 - Elimination of deficiencies and shortcomings identified in the previous assessment of the study field, if any, or implementation of the recommendations provided.	Fully compliant		The management team has clearly specified goals, timelines, and desired outcomes for each experts' recommendation, leading to their respective execution and enhancement. Some of the implemented actions still need further development and efforts (number of professors, international research projects, greater involvement of academic staff & students into the research activities).

### 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	Construction of Sustainable Buildings (41582)	Not relevant	Fully compliant	Fully compliant	Fully compliant	Good

### The Dissenting Opinions of the Experts

Experts do not have dissenting opinions.