

# Expert group joint opinion

Evaluation Procedure: Assessment of Study Field

Higher Education Institution: Alberta College

Study field: Information and Communication Sciences

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# Summary Assessment of the Study Field

## Summary Assessment of the Study Field

The Alberta College (hereinafter – the College) has found its place in the market. The first level professional higher education study programme "Public Relations" is the only study programme of this level in Latvia, which offers a public relations specialist's qualification. The programme is appealing to potential students due to the short term length and focus on the profession's practical side.

Positive aspects:

1. The College is an advanced user of digital tools. For example, it uses the Moodle system with integrated Big Blue Button, and almost all relevant materials are available and up to date. All stakeholders admit that technical support is excellent. There is a focus on the professional development of professional digital skills.
2. A long-lasting tradition of distance education allows cooperation with educational organizations in other countries and gives the potential to attract international students (Latvians abroad).
3. The academic personnel meet the requirements and are passionate about work at the College. The College is committed to attracting academic personnel with both an academic degree and practical experience in the field.
4. Support system for students has been developed, and the students have highly appreciated it. Students agree that they receive an individual approach, and all problems are solved very quickly.
5. The College has a recently revised quality assurance policy that contributes to achieving the aims and learning outcomes of the study programme and study field. The policy ensures continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field and the relevant study programme.
6. The descriptions of the study courses are of high quality and include all the required information.
7. Regular and anonymous satisfaction surveys are organized, and lecturers are presented with the results, if necessary, discussing the improvement of work results.
8. Student admission requirements and systems are efficient.
9. Plagiarism detection tools are used.
10. Strategically targeted international cooperation encourages interdisciplinary and practice-oriented research.
11. The relevant stakeholders admit that College students' knowledge level is adequate to continue further studies at bachelor level without difficulties.
12. The previous accreditation recommendations were considered and implemented as appropriate following the previous accreditation process.

Negative aspects:

1. The current number of students is very low for sustainability and cost-effectiveness. However, the College has hired external mentors to improve PR and marketing strategy and attract additional financing.
2. Methodological and informational support of the study field, particularly the databases and provision of e-books, could be improved.
3. The Development Council of Alberta College is an independent institution that acts autonomously. Upon necessity, representatives of the strategic partner, University of Applied Sciences (EKA or UCEC), can be involved. But for the ad hoc regime, no regularity was seen in the documents. For example, a meeting every two months. When this ad hoc regime becomes relevant? As far as is known, meetings of The Development Councils' in higher education institutions are regular, for example, at least once a month
4. Additional attention should be paid to the students' literacy and even more in-depth analysis of the actual Latvian case studies, the ability to use a theoretical base for the empirical surveys, drawing conclusions and developing their communication skills with clients and employers.

5. The scheme "Structure of Alberta College" (Annex\_02\_AK\_administration\_structure\_edited.pdf) identifies six fields (Management science, Economics, Communication, Law, Information technologies, Tourism). It is not clear, if the Tourism field is closed, when the Economics field will be transferred to Management science.

## **1. Management of the Study Field**

### **Analysis**

1.1. The main goal of the study field "Information and Communication Sciences" (hereinafter – study field) is "to provide the preparation of qualified, socially active and responsible communication specialists who can successfully integrate into the job market and are oriented towards further education". It is a clearly defined and attainable goal, which corresponds well with the strategic development directions, mission and vision of the College. The self-assessment report and conversations with students, teachers and employees demonstrate the attainability of the study field goal by providing evidence about successful students' integration into the job market, and it corresponds with the purpose of the study programme "to prepare qualified, competent and competitive public relations specialists in line with the level four (EQF – level 5) professional standard of a public relations specialist who is able to enter into the labour market successfully and is oriented towards further training".

The mentioned goals and tasks are also in line with the set vision of "the most recommended college in Latvia from the point of view of employers", because during the accreditation process it was found that the College was one of the top five recommended institutions two years ago.

The aims of the study field are clearly defined and attainable and the relevant study programmes comply with the main directions of the strategic development of the higher college and meet the needs and the development trends of the society and national economy. The weak point in terms of industry trends would be the focus on pure public relations, as global developments point to an integrated approach to communication.

1.2. The study process management is clear, well organized and seems to correspond with the study results defined - "know broad facts and specialized facts appropriate for the professional area, as well as theories, regularities and technologies corresponding with the fourth (EQF 5th) level requirements of the respective professional standard; can apply soft, digital and professional skills in performing practical tasks within the profession and offer creative and modern solutions to professional challenges; are able to work both individually and as part of a team; observe principles of social responsibility; show initiative; improve their competencies, and are oriented towards further education".

During the evaluation visit, clear evidence was obtained that, to fulfil the aim and results of the study field, the head of the study field cooperates with teachers of the College, directors of other study programmes and the College Director. The director of college is also the head of the programme and in this cooperation with teachers has been developed the 2019-2024 Development Strategy for the College Study Direction "Information and Communication Sciences", which has been approved by the College Council. The study field has regular collaborations with other Latvian and foreign schools, also higher education institutions, employers and non-governmental organizations (NGO).

The administration of the study field is organized based on the College internal document

"Administration Structure of Alberta College", and the administration of the study field involves the administrative staff (incl. general and support staff) and academic staff (incl. guest lecturers), students, employers' representatives (incl. graduates), to ensure the overall functions of the College and a high-level execution of each study field and study programme.

The communication of the administrative structure is also ensured in the Moodle system, where information is regularly updated, and it is ensured that the involved parties follow the decisions made, their implementation and control.

In compliance with College Statutes and Cabinet Regulations No. 537 "Alberta College Regulations" of 7 August 2007, the Board is the highest administrative institution of the College and the decision-making body for strategic, financial and economic matters. Therefore, the College Board is formed of three Board Members.

But the structure of the management (administration) of the study field and the relevant study programmes is oriented towards the development of the study field and is clear. Decision-taking is efficient, and the support provided by the administrative and technical staff contributes to meeting all needs concerning the relevant study programmes of the study field. Regular and anonymous satisfaction surveys are organized, and lecturers are presented with the results, if necessary, discussing the improvement of work results.

Programme development actively involves its management, personnel, students and partners. Based on such Quality Assurance Policy framework principles as social and legal responsibility, leadership and involvement, efficiency and result-orientation, regular internal and cyclic external assessment within the College practice, the College Board develops strategic documents and makes decisions with the support of the Development Council. The Development Council is not a continuously existing institution, but it is instead created ad hoc by inviting the College Director, heads of study fields, study programme directors, students, graduates, partners, or external experts, various institutions, staff or partners, considering the matter at hand. During the accreditation process, no assurance was obtained that the Development Council works strategically and regularly. The Development Council of Alberta College is an independent institution that acts autonomously. Upon necessity, representatives of the strategic partner, EKA (UCEC), can be involved.

But for the ad hoc regime, no regularity was seen in the documents. For example, a meeting every two months. When this ad hoc regime becomes relevant? As far as is known, meetings of The Development Councils' in higher education institutions are regular, for example, at least once a month. On the other hand, the College Board actively cooperates with the Alberta College Council (and the director of Alberta College, as well as the Students' Self-government Council) by exchanging information, consulting and coordinating various decisions.

In the development strategy for Alberta College study direction "Information and communication sciences", 2019 - 2024 it is mentioned that there is regular cooperation with other Latvian and foreign universities, employers and NGOs in the study field, for example with the EKA, Turība University, Rīga Stradiņš University, RISEBA University of Applied Sciences, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Baltic International Academy, CTL Eurocollege (Cyprus), Kauno Kolegija/ Kaunas University of Applied Sciences (Lithuania), AKDENIC University (Turkey), etc. Cooperation with employers takes place in the form of provision of internship places, visiting lectures, creative workshops, the guidance of study tours, reviewing of qualification papers, participation in the State Final Exam Board, implementation of research and innovation projects and there is also regular cooperation with the Latvian Public Relations Association. This aspect is very good for study programme development.

The SWOT by the College mentions difficulties in attracting professional lecturers/specialists due to the lack of a master's degree. This problem is solved by accepting lecturers with a bachelor's degree as assistants, who are initially tested as guest lecturers.

1.3. The student admission requirements and system are defined in the "Rules on Admission" of the College, which the College updates at least once a year. The Rules on Admission have been developed in compliance with Cabinet Regulations No. 846 (Riga, 10 October 2016) and approved by the College Council. All additional admission requests are approved by the Council of Higher Education. According to Cabinet Regulations No. 348, the College submits updated admission requirements to the Ministry of Education and Science each year. All persons stated in the Education Law, Section 3, Part One, have the right to study in the College without discrimination. Considering that the study programme provides the first level professional higher education, only persons who have acquired secondary education may study therein.

Admission to studies at the College takes place with no additional entry examinations, based on the successful results of passed mandatory centralized exams proving the acquisition of general secondary education. On the issue of student admission, the SWOT analysis mentions students' weak skills, such as writing, etc. As evidence in the evaluation process shows, there is a mechanism for developing these missing skills in the study process. Special extra tasks for developing skills are included in the study process, and there is a focus on the professional development of professional digital skills too, which corresponds with the image of a graduate nominated by the College.

Considering that the College only offers first level professional higher education programmes, the basic admission criteria are secondary education-based. Additional requirements and restrictions are not necessary, but the above-mentioned additional activities form a balance of students' knowledge, and there is a test available on the website for choosing one's profession, which helps to choose the most appropriate study programme and makes sure that it matches students' interests, character, etc. It is possible to start studies in College, for example, with a master's or bachelor's degree also. For such cases College has a system in place for the recognition of the study period, professional experience, and the previously acquired formal and non-formal education, as well as for the evaluation of the achievements and learning outcomes of the students. A comparison is made with the previously acquired programs and the respective study courses are aligned.

The strategic goal of College is to ensure an effective study process by pursuing a student-centred approach, using modern teaching and learning methods, supporting applied research, innovation, strengthening practical skills and gaining international experience during studies. Confirmatory evidence was obtained in the accreditation process for the realization of this goal. For example, during the year of study, there has been at least one meeting with students of each study programme in each study form; at least 50% of students have completed their student surveys; students participate and make proposals for the development of the study process and study programme during the meetings of the Methodological Commission. Head of study fields, college management and other administrative staff have a schedule of consultations; the representatives of the academic staff have also scheduled consultations; consultations are provided both in person and in the e-environment (via email, Moodle, video conferencing). Furthermore, a graduate admitted that she already had a bachelor degree in the relevant field, but joined the College due to its ability to deliver practical skills.

During the year of study, there has been at least one meeting with students of each study programme in each study form; relevant topics have been integrated into the introductory lesson; current affairs are regularly published on the College website and the study programme news forum in Moodle.

During the study year at least two guest lectures have been delivered, at least two training tours and one creative workshop have been organized; professionals delivered speeches during the College Business Forum; students in all study forms take part in extracurricular activities; at least once a study period students have participated in the College applied game as part of an appropriate course of study. At least one student in the study field is an active member of the Student Council

At least one student (or student group) in the study field participated in a project, a competition, etc. or has received a scholarship or different support.

1.4 Alberta College has reacted and developed the Ethical and Academic Integrity Code of Alberta College (hereinafter – the Code). The development of the Code involved teachers of the College and its strategic partner UCEC (the University College of Economics and Culture), study programme directors and heads of study fields. The draft Code was reviewed by the administration, and the final edit of the Code was approved by the Council. One of the breaches pushing the development of such a Code is related to unethical practice in a teacher's professional activity. A case of plagiarism was discovered in creating e-courses, which was committed by a College teacher.

The College also encountered cases of plagiarism in students' individual assignments, especially among first-year students who are not entirely familiar with the concept and are still learning to learn. In response, the matters of the non-acceptability of plagiarism were included in the first-year student meeting. The study programme's study course "Introduction into Profession and Professional Ethics" was supplemented with a respective topic, and the study agreement clauses providing for sanctions in events of plagiarism and breaches of ethics were improved. As well, there is the use of an external anti-plagiarism system for the qualification papers of students. The higher the College has set certain academic integrity principles and mechanisms, and it uses appropriate plagiarism detection tools which are effective.

1.5 A lot of qualitative information about the study field is published on the College website [www.alberta-koledza.lv](http://www.alberta-koledza.lv) with sections according to the type of activity, study programme, etc. The main language of the website is Latvian. There is also information in Russian. Since the study process at the College takes place in Latvian, the English version of the website only allows the user to familiarize himself with general information about the College, study programmes, Erasmus+ mobility opportunities and key documents. The study programme director reviews and updates information pertaining to the study programme, as well as regularly checks that the website has information about various news. The International Relations and Erasmus+ Coordinator reviews current information regarding mobility opportunities, application procedures, etc. The E-coordinator updates information about the e-learning process, and the College Director reviews the totality of the information published on the website, updating specific sections when necessary.

## **Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses**

The College has a unique study programme for the college level and there is a clear strategy for programme development in the future. Although there are a little amount of students – 13 graduates in 2018. / 2019 to compare in 2013/2014 were 33, the programme is well managed and oriented on an increase of students, close cooperation with other relevant higher education institutions, employees and the Latvian Association of Public Relations Professionals. Programme development actively involves its management, personnel, students and partners. Based on such Quality Assurance Policy framework principles as social and legal responsibility, leadership and involvement, efficiency and result-orientation, regular internal and cyclic external assessment within the College practice, the College Board develops strategic documents and makes decisions with the support of

the Development Council but it is not a continuously existing institution, but it is instead created ad hoc by inviting the College Director, heads of study directions, study program directors, students, graduates, partners, or external experts, various institutions, staff or partners, considering the matter at hand.

#### Strengths

1. A unique study programme for the college level in Latvia is being implemented.
2. There is a clear strategy to increase the numbers of students in the future.
3. There is close cooperation with other Universities, employees and the Latvian Public Relations Association.
4. The structure of the management (administration) of the study field and the relevant study programme are oriented towards the development of the study field and are clear.
6. Decision-taking is efficient.
7. Regular and anonymous satisfaction surveys are organized, and lecturers are presented with the results, if necessary, discussing the improvement of work results.
8. Student admission requirements and systems are efficient.
9. There is a mechanism for developing students' weak skills in the study process, and special extra tasks for developing skills are included in the study process.
10. There is a focus on the professional development of professional digital skills.
11. The strategic goal of Alberta College is effectively realised.
12. Plagiarism detection tools are effective and included in students' agreements.
13. There is developed the Ethical and Academic Integrity Code of Alberta College.
14. The information published on the website of the higher education institution/ college is regularly updated and published and there is high quality and efficient system for updates.

#### Weaknesses

1. There is a small number of students – 13 graduates in 2018 / 2019 in comparison to 2013/2014 when there were 33.
2. The focus is on pure public relations, and there is a weak integrated approach to communication.
3. The Development Council of Alberta College is an independent institution that acts autonomously. Upon necessity, representatives of the strategic partner, EKA (UCEC), can be involved. But for the ad hoc regime, no regularity was seen in the documents. For example, a meeting every two months. When this ad hoc regime becomes relevant? As far as is known, meetings of The Development Councils' in higher education institutions are regular, for example, at least once a month.
4. Some students have weak skills, such as writing, etc., that is mentioned in SWOT and confirmed by teachers in meeting with experts panel.

## 2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System

### Analysis

2.1 Alberta College has provided information about their Quality Assurance Policy and its implementation through documentation and discussions with management, academic staff, and students. Alberta College has established a Quality Assurance Policy, which is publicly available on the college website [https://www.alberta-koledza.lv/upload/AK\\_Quality\\_Assurance\\_Policy\\_SPEKA\\_no\\_20190715.pdf](https://www.alberta-koledza.lv/upload/AK_Quality_Assurance_Policy_SPEKA_no_20190715.pdf).

The Alberta College Quality Assurance Policy was developed in 2019 by the Alberta College Board with the involvement of the College director, heads of study fields and study programme directors and was approved by a Board decision of 15 July 2019. The Alberta College Quality Assurance Policy was presented at the College's general meeting of 28 August 2019, and implementation of the policy commenced on 1 September 2019.

The development of a quality assurance policy and the implementation of a unified quality system used Latvian and international standards and guidelines, laws and regulations and quality management models, such as: Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015); Latvian Qualification Framework (LQF and EQF); Latvian laws and regulations; guidelines and methodologies of the Quality Agency for Higher Education and Academic Information Centre, and Principles of the UN program Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME).

The Quality Assurance Policy manual is the main document of the Alberta College quality assurance system. It includes quality policy, assurance system, processes, indicators and complies with relevant national laws and regulations. Compliance with all procedures described in the quality assurance policy is based on the College's core principles: Social and legal responsibility, leadership and involvement, efficiency and goal-orientation, regular internal and periodic external assessment, continuous improvement towards greatness, and communication and notification. The quality assurance policy also ensures the achievement of the College's mission and vision and the aims and learning outcomes of the study field and the study programmes. The policy ensures continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance, which is evident from detailed discussion of such processes as accomplishing a student-centered approach in the study process, conducting regular monitoring, supporting students and graduates, ensuring that teachers' qualifications are raised, and ensuring the availability of information. The policy ensures efficient performance of the study field and the relevant study programmes through the previously mentioned process of internal evaluations and external assessments.

2.2 The procedures for the development and review of the study programmes are clearly explained in the quality assurance policy and are governed by College Regulations which are also available on the College's website.

Development of a new study programme must align with the Development Strategy of the College, taking into account global development and labour market trends, national and European Union priorities, external and internal regulatory requirements, and availability of College resources. A working group including the Director of the Study Programme, industry professionals and employers, lecturers, students and alumni develop clearly defined objectives, tasks, learning outcomes, and other information before any final decision is made by the Board after approval of the College Council. This vigorous process ensures that any new study programmes have a strong likelihood of success.

Reviews of study programmes are also explained in the Quality Assurance Policy. Systematic internal monitoring is performed at the College, field of study and study programme levels, as well as within each study course. Lecturers, students, alumni and employers are involved in the process through meetings and surveys. According to discussions with the management of the College, the director of the study programme, academic staff, graduates, and current students, the evaluation process is highly visible. Feedback to students is provided through the use of different communication tools and channels – the public and private sections of the website, the study programme news forum on Moodle, e-mail, WhatsApp groups, meetings, phone calls, etc. Programme directors also address specific issues with individual students as needed. Students confirm that the information provided is logical and efficient and changes based on evaluations and feedback are evident.

2.3 Regular reviews are important to the success of study programmes and the College as a whole. The College has developed several databases to ensure better management of information and the analysis of trends, including the required statistics on students and graduates. This information is used in the self-evaluation reports for the College and study programmes. At the end of each study year, the College Director prepares a self-evaluation report. In addition, head of the study field and study programme directors prepare self-evaluation reports. Data is collected and analysed for trends and reports are prepared on the performance of the field of study, with recommendations for



improvements. Lecturers, students, alumni, and employers are involved in this process and provide input on content, teaching methods, quality of staff work, and study environment, both physical and virtual. In discussions with academic staff, employers, students, and alumni, it was clear that this process is highly regarded and is seen as an important activity not just for improving the study programme and study field, but also for maintaining engagement with these important stakeholders. The report for the annual self-evaluation is published in Latvian on the College's website, along with the annual report (in English) for the United Nations' Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) programme.

2.4 The ESG Part 1 standard are integrated into the Quality Assurance Policy and related documents, such as the College Strategy documents and other regulations. As mentioned earlier, the College takes a student-centered approach and pays extra attention to the quality of the study process, which is referred to specifically in the policy. While there were positive comments during discussions with management, staff, and students about involvement in the quality process, there was little actual data to show the extent of this engagement. Although the revised quality assurance policy was recently implemented, it is important that active engagement is monitored to achieve a high level of involvement in the review and decision-making processes. During discussions, management expressed concern about the challenges facing the need for continuous development of modern learning resources and funding for research work. As the lecturers in the programme are working professionals, time and inclination for research is limited. Funding is also an issue as the College relies on students' fees and founders' investments, so securing funds from other partners and sources is of vital importance.

## **Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses**

Alberta College has a recently revised Quality Assurance Policy that contributes to the achievement of the aims and learning outcomes of the study programme and the study field. The policy ensures continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field and the study programme. The procedures for the development and review of the study programme of the study field and the feedback mechanisms (including feedback to students, employers, and graduates) have been defined and they are logical, efficient, and available for all stakeholders. The College collects and analyses the information (statistics) on the study programme and the study field on a regular basis and uses it to improve the study field. The College has identified the standards set forth in Part 1 of the ESG, which require special attention. The College has aims and measures, which are integrated in a joint quality assurance system. Overall, Alberta College complies with Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

Strengths:

1. Compliance with national and international laws and regulations, including European and Latvian guidelines for the quality assurance of higher education.
2. Regular assessment of student satisfaction with the teaching and learning processes as defined by the Quality Assurance Policy
3. Process of continuous improvement is supported and implemented throughout the study programme and study field

Weaknesses:

1. Little documentation on level of engagement in review process with vital stakeholders
2. Financial pressures that limit funding for research and development of resources which are included in the Quality Assurance Policy

## **3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field**

### **Analysis**

3.1. The College has developed a budgeting methodology. Based on this methodology, by November of each year, the College Board prepares and approves the College's annual budget. This budget considers the number of students, planned income and expenditure, including the research group applications, required development investment, and funding requests to upgrade the material base and increase library stock. The system is effective as confirmed during meetings with students and academic staff who confirmed that their requests, for instance, for relevant books, are taken into account. The College allocates resources for scientific research. For instance, an elected docent indicated that he was entitled to six months paid sabbatical leave during his PhD. Similarly, another elected lecturer, admitted that the College supported her when she applied for PhD studies, although she did not pursue the studies for personal reasons at that moment. The College also provides the possibility to attend the joint conference with EKA without any fees and supports professional cooperation.

The primary source of income is tuition fees and funding for various projects and Erasmus+. However, the number of students is very small. Annex No 26 of the self-assessment report shows that the number of admitted students: in 2016/2017 there were 28 part-time students and 4 full-time students; in 2017/2018 there were 18 part-time students and 0 full-time students; in 2018/2019 there were 13 part-time students and 0 full-time students. But the interest in full-time studies within the study program has increased over the last two study years. Numbers of matriculated students in the last two years were as follows - 2019/2020 study year - 6 full-time students and 9 part-time students and 2020/2021 study year - 6 full-time students and 11 part-time students. Thus, it is vital to continue to increase students' number, particularly in this study field, to ensure the programme's sustainability. Besides, taking the number of decreasing students, the College had to increase the tuition fee (Annex No 30 self-assessment report), with the highest increase of 14,3 % planned for part-time students admitted from 2020.

These issues are addressed in Development Strategy for Alberta College Study Direction "Information And Communication Sciences", 2019-2024. The strategy mentioned above sets various tasks to improve the situation, for instance, to organise public relations events in Latvian secondary schools (e.g., lectures, career events, creative projects or competitions within each study programme); to promote the opportunities and offers for external students by attracting such external students from cooperation partners, graduates and students, Latvians living abroad, etc.

Experts also appreciate that to stimulate additional resources; the College attracted eight external mentors, including two foreign mentors helping develop a strategy to improve the situation. As indicated by board member, the College cannot reveal the strategy itself, but it was meant to identify the problematic aspects and find appropriate solutions to them. Moreover, two out of the three main problems are already resolved. For instance, the College introduced additional learning modules - courses - for an external audience. These courses had great demand, and 200 people have already applied.

The infrastructure of the premises is in order. The study process takes place at 22 Skolas Street, Riga. The College is located on three floors (750 sq.m.). Besides, students can use:

- rooms of the strategic cooperation partner EKA, based on the cooperation agreement,
- Riga Business School (RBS) auditorium equipped with a video conferencing system, based on a lease agreement;
- Riga Technical College (RTK) premises and laboratories.

If the number of students increases, there might be a need to expand the premises. Due to a large number of students on Saturdays before the pandemic, the director, indicated that room allocation was planned very carefully. However, this need might be postponed because face-to-face classes are cancelled during the Covid 19 pandemic.

Students can work in the computer rooms and library of the College and use the Internet. Wireless (Wi-Fi) Internet is available throughout the College. All lecture- rooms are equipped with computer hardware allowing the usage of multimedia projectors during the classes. For students' convenience,

lounges are available in the halls and the library, as well as a coffee machine. The College is using the Moodle system with the Big Blue Button Video Lecture System. All materials are up to date. Based on meeting with students, the experts concluded that academic staff is well-educated about the use of technologies.

Based on the self-assessment report, the library lists over 4 000 books, 691 of them in information and communication sciences (including 182 in English, 103 in Russian), not including periodicals. As established during the library visit, students' English and Russian language level is not always sufficient to use foreign resources. The students can get scanned pages based on requests. The experts recognized that there is a lack of Latvian substitutes. The students can place book orders. Various books may be taken for work outside the library. Working hours of the library are convenient, and the librarian is forthcoming, for instance, it is possible to receive books during holidays. The College has a fee for returning books late; however, it is not imposed in practice.

Nevertheless, the study field's methodological and informational support, especially access to databases and provision of e-books, could be improved. It is recommended since many students are studying remotely and the College plans to expand the number of students by attracting Latvians living abroad, who would require remotely accessible resources. To provide students and staff with access to databases, mainly the collaboration agreements with other organizations and institutions (e.g., National Library of Latvia, EKA) are used. However, as representatives of the College indicated, EKA does not have such study field, thus, their priorities might vary, based on the actual need of their students. This question was also discussed during the meeting with students; however, the opinions of students differed. Some found that the library resources are sufficient, considering the external possibilities; some expressed the view that they could be improved. Overall, as indicated in the Part I Point 3.1 of experts' opinion, students and academic staff's recommendations are taken into account.

3.3. The academic personnel are elected in an open competition following the "Regulation of Alberta College on Academic and Administrative Posts", which sets out requirements (such as education, teaching experience, professional experience, research or creative achievements, digital skills, foreign language skills) and describes the application and selection procedures for candidates. The academic personnel consist of academics and practitioners. When attracting new academic personnel, the College often offers them initially the positions of guest lecturers to evaluate their suitability in practice. The legal framework is respected; for example, the College may elect a person with a doctorate or master's degree, as well as with a university degree without a scientific degree, provided that in this case, a person has at least five years' practical experience and teaching experience relevant to the study course. The competition for academic positions is publicly announced at least one month before the election through a notice published in the official newspaper "Latvijas Vēstnesis" and posted on the College website under the section "Vacancies".

Database E-nexus and the College website provide staff with access to all internal regulations and video tutorials, including those on work safety and working in the e-environment. The staff gets a Moodle system profile, which gives access to the "Alberta College Administration" section. The academic staff also have access to the lectured study course e-courses and video conferencing system with a personalised video lecture room with relevant materials about the work organisation. Besides, various events are organized to increase the competence of academic staff, including conferences and language courses.

The academic staff salary and bonuses are calculated according to Alberta College Staff Remuneration Regulations. Thus, the academic staff are motivated to keep their materials in Moodle updated. The academic staff's workload includes developing and updating study courses, including e-courses, lecturing and conducting seminars, organising study excursions, consulting, applying exams and tests, and research work. There are 18 lecturers involved in implementing the study programme, and none of them works full time. During the meeting with management, it was established that lessons are cancelled very rarely, mainly due to health or other personal reasons.

The academic staff plan their time very well, and they also receive prior reminders about upcoming lessons. During the meeting with academic personnel, the experts concluded that academic staff are satisfied with their employment at the College. For example, an elected docent, emphasised that she values the flexibility of schedules, the College's location, appropriate and equipped auditoriums, including computers and projectors, the fact that auditoriums are suitable for group work, and, finally, good technical support. During the meeting with students, it was confirmed that students are delighted with lectures and practical inputs they can receive at the College.

The academic staff members take part both in outgoing and incoming mobility. The College management indicated that it is challenging to find large national universities in the EU interested in collaborations with the College; they fixed the problem by expanding the geographical scope and finding partners in Kazakhstan. During the last three years, the College has implemented the European Union Erasmus+ Programme KA107 project "Higher education student and staff mobility between Programme and Partner Countries", and several academic staff members enrolled in the programme and participated in outgoing lecturing or learning mobility at the cooperation partner - L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. During the meeting with academic staff, an elected lecturer, shared her experience about visiting Kazakhstan and found it inspiring (see also Part I Point 4 of experts' opinion.). In May 2019, the College established cooperation with CTL Eurocollege in Cyprus.

3.4. The College provides students with informative and methodological and financial support for studying, including working in the e-environment, finding an internship, pursuing a career, starting their own business, and mentoring for studies and self-development. For example, the College tuition fee can be waived for up to nine students - orphans and members of large families; there are tuition fee discounts for collaboration partners and their children and discounts for students with higher education. Both students and College management stressed an open-door policy - the Director is easily accessible. Besides, there are various channels of communication, including Moodle and WhatsApp. Numerous students indicated that the College helped them find an internship, even though it is the student's responsibility (for instance, helping with contact information (Citadele, Valsts nekustamie īpašumi, etc)). Students also indicated that lecturers are easily accessible and respond promptly. Students have anonymous surveys where they can express their opinions, and they believe that their opinions have been taken into account. Necessary amendments were made (for example, the College rarely had situations when Moodle materials were not updated, but the situation was solved quickly).

## **Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses**

The College aims to attract additional funding and has been successful so far. The College has hired external mentors working to improve PR and marketing strategy and attract additional financing. The College provides students with informative and methodological and financial support for studying. The academic staff members take part both in outgoing and incoming mobility.

Strengths:

1. The College is committed to attracting academic personnel with both an academic degree and practical experience in the field and has successfully done so.
4. The academic personnel not only meet the legal requirements but are passionate about work at the College.
5. Support system for students has been developed, and the students have highly appreciated it. Students agree that they receive an individual approach, and all problems are solved very quickly.

Weaknesses:

1. The current number of students is very low for sustainability and cost-effectiveness.
2. Methodological and informational support of the study field, particularly the access to databases and provision of e-books, could be improved, taking into account that many students study remotely

and need access to electronic resources. Currently, the College is relying, for instance, on EKA however, EKA does not have similar study field; thus, EKA does not have a similar need for e-books on PR.

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

##### **Analysis**

4.1. The principal objectives in the field of research for the College are identified in the “The Strategy for the Development of Research and Innovation for year 2019-2024”. Understanding of scientific research as a principal instrument of the advancement of the competitiveness of the College and its study programmes could be considered a strategically reasonable decision, as the attractiveness of the College among the prospective students is based on the organic ties between theoretical and practical teaching. However, the idea of professional studies without a formal academic degree offered by the College could hardly be compatible with high aspirations in the field of research.

The ambitions of the College: (1) to become “the leader among Latvian colleges in terms of the development of science and research”, and (2) to “come as close as possible to the university level” looks rather realistic and achievable, as the College is the only institution of this sort in Latvia which provides study programme in the field of Public Relations. The close cooperation and even integration of research with university level institutions (EKA) serves as a reasonable basis for the second objective.

4.2. The basic topics of research identified under the strategy of the College reveals the aspirations to deal with broad topics (understanding and social trends of public relations, application of integrated marketing communications in the work of a public relations specialist), and simultaneously to concentrate on specific issues (involving influencers in brand communication, digital communication in public relations work). The organic links between the topics of research and the compulsory study courses are apparent. It demonstrates the priority of practical training in the College, which corresponds with the idea and mission of College.

4.3. The international cooperation in the field of scientific research is principally based on the wise use of advantages of the Erasmus+ programme. The College established a vital relationship with L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University in Kazakhstan, which stimulated not only exchange of students and staff, but joint visits, conferences, comparative study and research projects. In May 2019, the College established cooperation with CTL Eurocollege in Cyprus. Taking into account the good practice of cooperation with Kazakhstan, it could be assumed that, despite the Covid-19 challenges to the mobility of students and staff, the College in Cyprus could become a strategic institutional partner.

4.4. As a modest study-oriented institution, the College has no special department or official responsible for the field of science and research. All the responsibility for the development of scientific activities is delegated to the heads of study fields and study programme directors. Such a situation enables the economical use of human and financial resources and encourages informal scientific cooperation. However, this could have some negative impacts as well, which are most clearly revealed by a very modest quantity of research publications, mostly published in the proceedings of local scientific conferences.

The College implements the practice of sabbatical leaves for the most prospective members of the staff, which could help to solve the problems of quantity and quality of research outcomes in a short term. The permanent support for staff members studying in doctoral programmes could be seen as a long perspective solution for the same problems.

4.5. Every year during the assessment period, students have an opportunity to participate in research projects, which were implemented with the help of close cooperation of the College and business or state institutions. The topics of the projects cover a broad field of communication

activities, and the results of the research projects were promoted in student conferences.

4.6. The innovations of the study processes in the College are concentrated on the broad use of new digital technologies. The idea of access to “virtual auditoriums from anywhere in the world, participate in online video lectures, as well as communicate with the lecturer and classmates both individually and in groups” looked attractive during the whole assessment period. However, the College acknowledges the lack of scientific databases available in the library (SWOT analysis of the study field, Annex 3, p. 7). This is a permanent challenge for successful virtual studies. It should also be taken into account that during the Covid-19 period, this digital trend became a mainstream of higher education and the undisputed advantages of the College are weakened.

## **Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses**

The College ambitions in the field of scientific research are clearly expressed in the strategy of the institution and closely bound to the study direction. International cooperation is wisely used as an accelerator for study and research improvement, the College encourages staff research activities and inclusion of students into the research process. Innovations in the study process are concentrated in digitalization.

### **Strengths**

1. The field of PR studies in Latvia at College level is not crowded, and College has established its place in the area.
2. Strong and organic relationships with practice and studies create opportunities for applied research.
3. Close relationship with university-level institutions (EKA) and exchange of staff with them strengthens the research potential of the College.
4. Strategically targeted international cooperation encourages interdisciplinary and practice-oriented research.
5. Permanent support for the staff members studying in doctoral programmes encourages their dedication to the institution.

### **Weaknesses**

1. The scheme “Structure of Alberta College” (Annex\_02\_AK\_administration\_structure\_edited.pdf) identifies six fields (Management science, Economics, Communication, Law, Information technologies, Tourism). It is not clear, if the Tourism field is closed, when the Economics field will be transferred to Management science.
2. Limited scope of research, which is published in journals without broader international impact.
3. Ability to attract researchers from other higher education institutions is not translated into quality of research.

## **5. Cooperation and Internationalisation**

### **Analysis**

5.1. The College has multiple points of contact with industry professionals. First of all, many representatives of the teaching staff also are practitioners, as well as participants in the Latvian Association for Public Relations Practitioners. Secondly, employers who offer internships to students. Third, practitioners also are invited to participate as guest lecturers, as well as reviewers of the students’ qualification works and internship projects. During the online meetings with employers, practitioners also mentioned that they are invited to participate in the creation and improvement of the content of the programme, sharing their experience in the framework of the guest lectures.

Wise cooperation with practitioners gives students deeper knowledge about the actual issues of the

public relations field, as well as the possibility to train their practical skills. Positive practice is the invitation to practitioners as participants of the students' papers and internships projects defense commissions. This is a way to make practitioners deepen into the works created by students and give them valuable feedback

The College cooperates with different institutions from Latvia and abroad. According to Self-evaluation report (P.29), with the aim of limiting plagiarism in students' individual assignments, the College also cooperates with University of Latvia, Daugavpils University, EKA, RISEBA University of Applied Sciences, Rīga Stradiņš University, Rezekne Academy of Technologies, Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies, and Liepāja University.

5.2. During the visit representatives of the administration mentioned cooperation with Ireland institutions in the framework of the conference, as well as cooperation with Kazakhstan educational institutions that helped to attract students from abroad and exchange the academic experience. In addition, according to Self-evaluation report (P.55.), since 2014, the College has been collaborating with UCEC, Walsh College (USA) and the University of Economics in Katowice (Poland) to organize the International scientific conference etECH (Emerging Trends in Economics, Culture and Humanities). In the 2018/2019 study year, participants of the conference were both College and UCEC teaching personnel, as well as other participants from Latvia, as well as representatives from the USA, Poland, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Bulgaria and other countries. During the visit and online meeting with stakeholders, the fruitful cooperation with Turība University was also mentioned.

Taking into account that the study programme is being implemented only in Latvian, this limits the college's ability to attract large numbers of students from abroad, but becomes a good possibility for Latvians living in other countries.

5.3. A common system for the provision of traineeships and the organization thereof has been developed within the study direction. According to a self-assessment report (P.61), the organization of the internships offered to students is implemented in compliance with College "Guidelines on Independent Assignments". College student internships are an integral part of the study process. The internship is divided into two parts: the study internship and the qualification internship. The internship is intended for students of the last two semesters of college. During the online meetings with graduates, they have emphasized that administration and teaching staff of the College helps students on an individual level to find good internships places.

During the online meetings employers evaluated the College's students positively, mentioning that they get stable basic knowledge and skills needed for public relations specialists, emphasizing that with every year the quality of the education that students get is getting even better. As a space for improvement, employers mentioned lack of students' literacy and more in-depth knowledge of the local issues and cases, as well as better links between theoretical and empirical parts and conclusions in their surveys.

As mentioned during the meeting with the administration of the College, strategic cooperation with EKA ensures the College with significant additional resources and capacity (teaching staff, library, etc).

During the online meetings with graduates, it was mentioned that the college-level diploma is compensated with a developed practical approach. They also mentioned that additional valuable knowledge and skills that they would appreciate to add to programme content would be the training on how to communicate with clients and employers.

During the online meetings, representatives of the academic staff of Alberta College mentioned that they receive support from the College for attending different training, as well as work on their academic papers. Teaching staff expressed satisfaction with the opportunities to influence the processes in Alberta College, as well as improve the content of the study programme.

#### 5.4. Not applicable

### **Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses**

The College actively develops its cooperation with practitioners and different academic and practitioners organizations of the communication field, that allows students to find out more about the actual trends and cases of the field.

The College works systematically on the attraction of the teaching staff and students from abroad within the study direction, but they are limited with Latvian as the only teaching language.

A system for the provision of traineeships developed by the College includes individual approach.

Overall, the College shows a strategic and systematic approach to cooperation and internationalisation issues. The study programme fully complies with the prescribed requirements.

#### Strengths

1. College shows a strategic attitude to cooperation with different institutions from Latvia and abroad. Strategic partnership with EKA allows College to strengthen its studies from a scientific point of view.
2. Wise cooperation with practitioners.
3. Supportive attitude from College staff regarding the mastering of new skills and knowledge deserves a positive evaluation.
4. The College is strong in its distance education equipment which allows cooperation with educational organizations in other countries, as well as gives a space for development in attracting foreign students.
5. A strong side of the College is the individual attitude of the management of the College and study programme, helping students to find good places for internships, as well as endorsing students to apply for PR specialist positions. This is a very strong support for the students' careers.

#### Weaknesses

1. Literacy of the students, as well as need of even deeper analysis of the actual Latvian case studies, the ability to use a theoretical base for the empirical surveys, drawing conclusions and developing their communication skills with clients and employers.
2. Latvian as the only teaching language.

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

#### **Analysis**

6.1 During the previous accreditation of the study field in 2013, the expert panel made three recommendations regarding different aspects of the study programme, including labour market requirements, narrowing course content, and considering a relocation. Based on discussions with management and academic staff, two of the three recommendations were implemented and the third was considered but not acted on.

The earlier expert commission had emphasized the need to review national labour market data in order to ensure employment opportunities for graduates and that study programme content remains relevant. Members of the national professional association, employer representatives from the state



examination commission, guest lecturers from companies in the industry, as well as business representatives who hosted teaching trips and guest lecturers were all involved in establishing labour market requirements. This data is reviewed regularly to understand labour market requirements and trends.

The second recommendation requested changing the programme's content to a narrower specialization with fewer theoretical elements. As part of the College's annual review and in line with labour market requirements in Latvia, the scope and content were updated to include more practical assignments, connection to the real labour market, and competences necessary to a public relations specialist (the qualification obtained). The College, employers and practitioners had previously agreed on the standards for this qualification.

The third recommendation suggested moving to a more appropriate location to accommodate possible growth. This recommendation was considered but not implemented as the current facilities are considered adequate as most of the potential growth for the College is likely to be through online provision of courses. A strategic partnership agreement with the EKA provides the opportunity to use their facilities, materials and technical resources, library, etc., therefore mitigating the need for larger facilities in the shorter term.

## Conclusions. Strengths and weaknesses

All of the recommendations from the 2013 review were addressed successfully. During an onsite visit, the expert panel received evidence about the implementation of relevant plans.

Strengths:

1. The previous accreditation recommendations were considered and implemented as appropriate following the previous accreditation process.

Weaknesses:

1. Not identified.

## 7. Assessment of the Requirements for the Study Field

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** The College has ensured continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field whilst implementing their internal quality assurance systems.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** The College has a clear and well-implemented Quality Assurance Policy and procedures which support the study field and study programme in maintaining continuous development and student satisfaction.

- 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

**Justification:** In order to fulfil the aim and results of the study field, the head of the study field cooperate with teachers of the College, directors of other study programmes and the College Director. In this cooperation has been developed the 2019-2024 Development Strategy for Alberta College Study Direction "Information and Communication Sciences", which has been approved by the College Council. The study direction has regular collaborations with other Latvian and foreign higher education institutions, employers and non-governmental organizations

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** Programme development actively involves its management, personnel, students and partners. Based on such Quality Assurance Policy framework principles as social and legal responsibility, leadership and involvement, efficiency and result-orientation, regular internal and cyclic external assessment within the College practice, the College Board develops strategic documents and makes decisions with the support of the Development Council.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** Relevant procedures have been developed and implemented. See Part I Point 3. of experts' opinion.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** The College has surveys for graduates and students. The students believe that their opinion is taken into account. Bonuses are available to motivate academic personnel. See Part I Point 3. of experts' opinion.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** There is a regular review of the study programme and study direction through both formal and informal means, in line with the established quality assurance policy. Feedback is used to improve and develop the programme to ensure its performance meets the needs of its business sector.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** There is regular cooperation with other Latvian and foreign universities, employers and NGOs in the study field, for example with the EKA, Turība University, Rīga Stradiņš University, RISEBA University of Applied Sciences, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Baltic International Academy, CTL Eurocollege (Cyprus), Kauno kolegija/ Kaunas University of Applied Sciences (Lithuania), AKDENIC University (Turkey) etc

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** The modest scope of research, published in journals without broader international recognition.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** Recommendations were taken into account.

## 8. Recommendations for the Study Field

## Short-term recommendations

1. It is recommended to continue to attract more students, focusing not on pure social relations but an integrated approach to communication.
2. Regular work and strategic meetings of The Development Council of Alberta College are recommended. Not in ad hoc mode.
3. Additional attention should be paid to the literacy of the students, as well as even deeper analysis of the actual Latvian case studies. Experts highlight the need to analyse more practical cases of Latvian communication campaigns, showing students how the field works in our reality.

## Long-term recommendations

1. It is recommended to expand library resources, including electronic books and databases.
2. Additional attention should be paid to students' ability to use the theoretical base for the empirical surveys, as well as drawing conclusions and developing their communication skills with clients and employers. During the meetings with experts there was mentioned, that in students works theoretical and empirical parts often exist separately from each other (there is a summary about of theoretical approaches and then practical survey without any references to theories), so the recommendation is to make a bigger emphasize, explaining students how to structure their papers, basing empirical research on theoretical basis.

## II. "Public Relations" ASSESSMENT

### II. "Public Relations" ASSESSMENT

#### 1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme

##### Analysis

1.1. The first level professional higher education study programme "Public Relations" (classification code 41321) is the only study programme of this level in Latvia, which offers a public relations specialist's qualification. The graduates are awarded a "Public Relations Specialist" qualification. The compliance of the qualification with the professional standard of "Public Relations Specialist" is ensured. The purpose of the study programme is "to prepare qualified, competent and competitive public relations specialists in line with the level four (EQF – level 5) professional standard of a public relations specialist who can enter into the labour market successfully and is oriented towards further training".

The study programme "Public Relations" is included in the study direction "Information and Communication Sciences", which is appropriate.

The professional qualification to be acquired, the aims, objectives, learning outcomes, and admission requirements are interrelated.

Based on a self-assessment report, the learning outcomes of the study programme are the following. The student must:

- know and understand general facts and specialized facts consistent with the public relations industry, as well as theories, correlations and technologies;
- be able to perform practical tasks in the public relations profession on the basis of an analytical approach;
- be able to demonstrate skills that allow one to find creative solutions to public relations problems,

discuss and provide arguments for practical issues and solutions with colleagues, clients and management;

- be able to learn further independently, thus developing one's competences;
- be able to work individually and as a team, to plan and organize, as well as assess and improve their own and other's work in order to perform specific tasks in the public relations profession;
- be able to formulate, describe and analyse practical problems in the public relations profession, as well as is able to select and use various types of information for problem-solving;
- be able to contribute to the development of the public relations industry, demonstrating an understanding of the role of the public relations profession in a broader social context.

The admission requirements do not include any prior specialization knowledge. Admission to studies at the College takes place with no additional entry examinations. It is based on the successful results of passed mandatory centralized exams proving general secondary education's acquisition (please see Part I Point 1.3. of experts' report).

The content of the study programme complies with a professional qualification. The experts believe that the College has created the prerequisites for the achievement of the learning outcomes. The studies are focused on practical aspects to help students in their daily life after graduation.

## **Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses**

It is the only study programme of this level in Latvia, which offers a public relations specialist's qualification. Namely, the graduates are awarded a "Public Relations Specialist" qualification. The compliance of the qualification with the professional standard of "Public Relations Specialist" is ensured. The content of the study programme complies with a professional qualification. The programme is included in the study direction "Information and Communication Sciences", which is appropriate.

Strengths:

1. The professional qualification to be acquired, the aims, objectives, learning outcomes, and admission requirements are clearly interrelated.

Weaknesses:

Not identified.

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

### **Analysis**

2.1 The descriptions of the study courses comply with the College's Quality Assurance Policy which follows national and European regulatory enactments. The descriptions for all aspects of the courses are of high quality and include all the required information, e.g., course aims, learning outcomes, course content and planned hours, recommended literature and additional sources of information, organisation of independent studies, assessment methods, and course value in credit points and ECTS. The descriptions of the internship and qualification internship and qualification paper are also of high quality and provide all the required information, in line with the other courses in the study programme.

Although course descriptions are very good, some of the sources of information listed are quite dated and should be brought into line with more recent content to ensure that students are learning about up-to-date practices and principles. Furthermore, course content should clearly differentiate between theory and best practice, as the actual theory content of the course does not reflect prominent studies and principles. When asked, students could not recall a single public relations theory, although they were very forthcoming about the best practices and "how-to" guidelines. The

programme would also benefit by benchmarking content against established international standards, such as those available from the International Communication Consultancy Organisation (ICCO), the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC).

The programme has been developed in cooperation with national public relations industry employers and practitioners, including involvement from the Latvian Public Relations Association (LASAP) and the Latvian Association of Public Relations Professionals (LAPRP), who participated in the development of the professional standard for the public relations specialist qualification. The programme's learning outcomes have been mapped to this standard, demonstrating the programme's relevance to the labour market and the wider business community. This standard ensures that the content of study courses meets the needs of the public relations industry.

Although the programme is professional, it has a good focus on research and business practices, which is justified by industry needs. Two-credit study modules on research methods, project management and other business topics are included in the ten courses which make up the General Study component of the study programme, ensuring that the programme meets the scientific trends very well. All study courses are relevant and complementary and comply with the aims of the study programme and ensure the achievement of stated learning outcomes.

2.2 The study implementation methods, including evaluation methods, are diverse and interesting. Academic staff mentioned lectures and seminars, video case studies, practical work, presentations, and small group work, using both national and international content, as well as digital platforms and modern software. Course content is shared using the Moodle platform. Evaluation methods of each study course are indicated in the study course description and are also diverse. Evaluation methods mentioned include essays, classroom seminars, tests, presentations, and exams in which students can demonstrate the skills learned during the course. Both formative and summative assessments are used. All assessment activities are related to and cover course learning outcomes. Composition of the evaluation is specified in the course description and is a combination of independent work, presentation of exam work, and participation. Provision is made for full-time and part-time students. The director of the programme appears very motivated and passionate and has very good contact with the students. Other academic staff were also enthusiastic about the programme and their interactions with students. Student-centred education principles are at the very centre of Alberta College's mission and are implemented across its programmes. Although the number of students in this programme is lower than other programmes offered by the College, enrollment has been increasing slightly, both for on-campus and online students. The study programme also supports distance learning for students who cannot physically attend classes at the college. The use of virtual learning expands the reach of the study programme, making it accessible to a wider student cohort. During the visit of the expert panel, several students and graduates commented about the importance of the distance learning option in helping them with their studies, adding that this is a good option and that it is easy to get information and contact faculty through the platform.

2.3 Student surveys take place after each study course and academic year. The results of the surveys are discussed with faculty members individually and in meetings. Results are made available to students and other interested parties. Employers' needs are taken into consideration since they are involved in the programme development. From discussions, it is evident that the outcomes of the surveys and other feedback from students are used to improve the quality of the programme and the student experience. Comments from employers and graduates are also very complimentary about the programme and its impact on their business and their careers, respectively. During the meeting with graduates, it was also established that many students continue their studies at bachelor level without any difficulties. This was also confirmed during the meeting with employers since several were representatives of different higher education institutions. For example, a docent and head of master's study programme at Rīga Stradiņš University - confirmed that the College's students who continue their studies there are well

prepared.

2.4 The programme has a good record of outgoing mobility among students completing the course. Students commented that they are supported in finding mobility opportunities and that the learning outcomes achieved during such mobility activities are recognised. Indeed, internships are a required component of the programme, both as coursework and as the final examination for earning the course qualification.

### **Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses**

The descriptions of the study courses and the qualification internship and paper are of high quality and comply with the provisions set forth in the regulatory enactments. The content is relevant and complementary, and it complies with the aims of the study programme, ensures the achievement of the learning outcomes, and meets the needs of the relevant industry and the scientific trends, although some revision is needed to bring content in line with current practices, principles, and standards.

Programme study implementation methods, including the evaluation methods, contribute to the achievement of the aims and learning outcomes of the study courses and the study programme. Student-centred learning and teaching principles are taken into account.

The outcomes of surveys and other feedback activities conducted among the students, employers and graduates are used to improve the quality of studies. The students avail themselves of the incoming and outgoing mobility opportunities, and the learning outcomes achieved during such mobility are recognised.

Strengths:

1. Unique study programme in Latvia.
2. Academic staff includes industry professionals to ensure content is relevant.
3. Excellent level of cooperation between the study programme and public relations industry.
4. The relevant stakeholders admit that College students' knowledge level is adequate to continue further studies at bachelor level without difficulties.
5. Good incoming and outgoing mobility for students.

Weaknesses:

1. Some content and resources are dated and should be replaced with more recent material.
2. Wider benchmarking against international industry standards is needed to ensure the programme is providing relevant content and preparing students for working in a rapidly changing industry.

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

#### **Analysis**

3.1. Only one study programme “Public Relations” is implemented within the College study field “Information and Communication Sciences”. For the more detailed assessment of resources and provision, see Part I, Point 3 of experts’ report.

The infrastructure of the premises is in order. The study process takes place at 22 Skolas Street, Riga. The current premises are suitable for studies and aesthetically very pleasing. However, if the number of students increases in the future, there might be a need for additional premises, especially on Saturdays.

The College uses the Moodle system with integrated Big Blue Button, and all relevant materials are available and up to date. All stakeholders admit that technical support is excellent. Besides, E-Coordinator carries out internal administrative coordination to organize, improve, develop, and adequately function the e-environment. Based on the self-assessment report, the College aims to

"raise" students as digital citizens, providing the use of modern and effective teaching methods and digital solutions in everyday life.

Based on the self-assessment report, the library lists over 4 000 books, 691 of them in information and communication sciences (including 182 in English and 103 in Russian), not including periodicals. The students can get scanned pages based on requests. Nevertheless, methodological and informational support, mainly access to databases and provision of e-books, could be improved. Namely, to provide students and staff with access to databases mainly the collaboration agreements with other organizations and institutions (e.g., National Library of Latvia, EKA) are used. This is vital since many students are studying remotely and the College also plans to expand the number of students by attracting Latvians living abroad.

The primary source of income is tuition fees and funding for various projects and Erasmus+. However, the number of students is small. For instance, in 2017/2018 the College admitted only 13 part-time students and 0 full-time students. At the same time the interest in full-time studies within the study program has increased over the last two study years. Numbers of matriculated students in the last two years were as follows - 2019/2020 study year - 6 full-time students and 9 part-time students and 2020/2021 study year - 6 full-time students and 11 part-time students. Nevertheless, the current number of students is still very low for sustainability and cost-effectiveness. The experts appreciate that the College aims to attract additional funding and has been successful so far. For instance, the College has hired external mentors to improve PR and marketing strategy and attract additional financing.

The experts believe that the College has created the prerequisites for the achievement of the learning outcomes.

3.2. N/A

### **Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses**

The College aims to attract additional funding and has been successful so far. The College has hired external mentors working to improve PR and marketing strategy and attract additional financing. The experts believe that the College has created the prerequisites for the achievement of the learning outcomes.

Strengths:

1. The College is an advanced user of digital tools. For example, it uses the Moodle system with integrated Big Blue Button, and all relevant materials are available and up to date. All stakeholders admit that technical support is excellent.

Weaknesses:

1. The current number of students is still very low for sustainability and cost-effectiveness.  
2. Methodological and informational support of the study field, particularly the access to databases and provision of e-books, could be improved, taking into account that many students study remotely and need access to electronic resources. Currently, the College is relying, for instance, on EKA however, EKA does not have similar study field; thus, EKA does not have a similar need for e-books on PR.

## **4. Teaching Staff**

### **Analysis**

4.1. The principal challenge for the academic staff involved in the implementation of the study

programme is to find the right balance between theoretical knowledge and practical activities. The composition of docents and lecturers (no assistants are involved in the implementation of the programme) provides clear evidence that the problem is clearly understood and, to a great extent, solved. A modest majority (55 per cent) of the teachers are College employees, while others are guest lecturers, coming from other academic institutions or practical activities. The comparison of academic staff from 2013/14 and 2019/2020 (annexe 34) shows the increase from five to seven persons in the most valued position of elected docent. However, the lack of differentiation between the teachers with doctoral degrees and students at doctoral level creates the impression that the changes could be artificial. The ability of the College to attract the best practitioners from the field of PR serves as clear evidence of the vitality of the study programme.

4.2. The College has no clear guidance for appointment to academic positions. "Regulation of Alberta College on Academic and Administrative Posts" ([https://www.alberta-koledza.lv/upload/AK\\_Regulation\\_on\\_Academic\\_Administrative\\_posts\\_SPEKA\\_20191126.pdf](https://www.alberta-koledza.lv/upload/AK_Regulation_on_Academic_Administrative_posts_SPEKA_20191126.pdf)) provides the criteria for appointment to docent, lecturer or assistant positions; however the criteria for all three positions are identical. The self-evaluation report shows the tendency to equate doctoral degree with studies at the doctoral level. The policy of promotion without clear credentials could serve as a tool for encouragement for the staff; however, it could diminish the motivation for academic achievements.

4.3. The involvement of the teaching staff in scientific research is rather modest. The lack of one or two strategic directions for research, which could unite all the research potential of the College, leads towards the dispersion of the efforts, which is translated into moderate results.

The College is able to create a favourable working environment; the so-called "open door policy" works well with the staff, as well as with the students. The loyalty of the staff to the institution helps to solve problems of teacher migration between different institutions, which is common in the Baltic states.

4.4. The staff of the College is to a certain degree involved in scientific research on both national and international level. The international cooperation is based on the potential of Erasmus+ programme, the national research is closely related to the practical needs of different Latvian state organizations or business entities. Certain attempts to search for interdisciplinary research should be noted.

4.5. The College is developing sensible social partnerships, which influence research and study processes and has a positive impact on students and partners. The fact was well mentioned during discussions with the students and employers, who have a warm relationship with the institution.

## **Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses**

The College was able to create a stable and innovative teachers community, which is loyal to the institution and is well connected with the professional environment. The staff is loyal to the institution and is ready to elaborate on improvements.

### **Strengths**

1. Organic ties with the market and the ability to attract teachers from the practice.
2. Positive atmosphere inside the institution and loyalty of the staff to the College.

### **Weaknesses**

1. Lack of clear system and criteria for evaluation and promotion of teaching staff.
2. Moderate involvement of the teaching in scientific research.

## **5. Assessment of the Compliance of the Study Programme "Public Relations"**

### **Requirements**



- 1 1. The sample of the diploma to be issued for the acquisition of the study programme complies with the procedure by which state-recognised documents of higher education are issued.  
**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant  
**Justification:** The legal requirements are met. The diploma has been added as an annex and experts have revised it.
- 2 2. Documents confirming that the higher education institution/ college will provide the students with the options to continue the acquisition of education in another study programme or at another higher education institution/ college (a contract with another accredited higher education institution/ college), in case the implementation of the study programme is discontinued.  
**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant  
**Justification:** The respective agreements have been concluded and added as Annex No 21.
- 3 3. Document confirming that the higher education institution/ college guarantees to the students a compensation for losses if the study programme is not accredited or the licence of the study programme is revoked due to the actions of the higher education institution/ college (actions or failure to act) and the student does not wish to continue the studies in another study programme.  
**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant  
**Justification:** The requirements are fulfilled. The College guarantees indemnification of losses to students if the study program does not get accredited due to the actions (activity or lack thereof) of the College or if the study program license is revoked and the student does not wish to continue their studies in any of the other study programs.
- 4 4. The teaching staff members involved in the implementation of the study programme are proficient in the official language in accordance with the regulations on the level of the official language knowledge and the procedures for testing official language proficiency for performing professional duties and office duties.  
**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant  
**Justification:** Language proficiency is confirmed in the provided documents.
- 5 5. The teaching staff members to be involved in the implementation of the study programme have at least B2-level knowledge of a related foreign language, if the study programme or any part thereof is to be implemented in a foreign language.  
**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant  
**Justification:**
- 6 6. At least five teaching staff members with a doctoral degree are among the academic staff of an academic doctoral study programme, at least three of which are experts approved by the Latvian Science Council in the respective field of science. At least five teaching staff members with a doctoral degree are among the academic staff of a professional doctoral study programme in arts.  
**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant  
**Justification:** Not applicable.
- 7 7. The academic staff of the academic study programme complies with the requirements set forth in Section 55, Paragraph one, Clause 3 of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.  
**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant  
**Justification:** Not applicable.
- 8 8. The sample of the study agreement complies with the mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement.  
**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant  
**Justification:** The requirements are fulfilled. Respective agreements have been added in Annex no 25.

- 9 9. The descriptions of the study courses and the study materials have been prepared in all languages in which the study programme is implemented, and they comply with the requirements set forth in Section 56.1, Paragraph two and Section 56.2, Paragraph two of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education.

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** The study programme is implemented only in Latvian. The descriptions of the study courses are in Latvian. The legal requirements are fulfilled.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** The study programme complies with the valid professional standard (Public relations specialist, version of 11.12.2019.)

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

**Justification:** Not applicable.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** The study programme complies with the Professional Higher Education Standard. Compliance is monitored through the College's Quality Assurance Policy.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

**Justification:** Not applicable.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** Academic staff members have the required amount of publications or practical experience.

- 15 P5 - Overall rating

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** The study programme complies with legal requirements.

## Requirements (R6-R8)

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

**Justification:** Databases and electronic resources could be improved. See Part II Point 3.

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

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

**Justification:** Complies, the legal framework is respected.

- 3 R8 - The study programme leading to the master or doctoral degree is based on the advances and findings in the relevant field of science or artistic creation.

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

**Justification:** Not applicable.

### **Conclusions by specifying the strengths and weaknesses**

Almost all related legal requirements are fulfilled. Methodological and informational support of the study direction, particularly the databases and provision of e-books, could be improved. Some members of the staff provided only lists of professional publications, published on popular websites. There are no identified deficiencies, which cannot be eliminated within short term.

### **Evaluation of the study programme "Public Relations"**

Evaluation of the study programme:

Good

### **6. Recommendations for the Study Programme "Public Relations"**

#### **Short-term recommendations**

1. It is recommended to update the research strategy of the College, may be identifying one or two research areas, where most of the teaching staff of all study programmes could cooperate.

#### **Long-term recommendations**

1. It is recommended to expand library resources, including electronic books and databases.

2. It is recommended to revise some content and resources in line with more recent materials to reflect changes in principles and best practices.

3. It is recommended to benchmark the programme's standards against established international standards for the public relations 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>
Pursuant to Section 5, Paragraph 21 of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education, the higher education institution/ college shall ensure continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study direction whilst implementing their internal quality assurance systems:	Fully compliant			The College has ensured continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field whilst implementing their internal quality assurance systems.
R2 - The cooperation with different organisations from Latvia and abroad implemented within the study direction ensures the achievement of the aims of the study direction.	Fully compliant			There is regular cooperation with other Latvian and foreign universities, employers and NGOs in the study field, for example with the EKA, Turība University, Rīga Stradiņš University, RISEBA University of Applied Sciences, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Baltic International Academy, CTL Eurocollege (Cyprus), Kauno kolegija/ Kaunas University of Applied Sciences (Lithuania), AKDENIC University (Turkey) etc
R3 - Compliance of scientific research and artistic creation with the development level thereof (if applicable).	Fully compliant			The modest scope of research, published in journals without broader international recognition.
R4 - Elimination of the shortcomings and deficiencies identified during the previous assessment of the study direction, if it has been conducted, or the implementation of the provided recommendations.	Fully compliant			Recommendations were taken into account.

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

<b>No.</b>	<b>Study programme</b>	<b>R5</b>	<b>R6</b>	<b>R7</b>	<b>R8</b>	<b>Evaluation of the study programme (excellent, good, average, poor)</b>

<b>No.</b>	<b>Study programme</b>	<b>R5</b>	<b>R6</b>	<b>R7</b>	<b>R8</b>	<b>Evaluation of the study programme (excellent, good, average, poor)</b>
1	Public Relations (41321)	Fully compliant	Partially compliant	Fully compliant	Not relevant	Good

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

Experts don't have any additional comments