

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this Assessment is to prepare an extended initial assessment of Specific Objective (henceforth SO) 8.2.1 and to design recommendations for the implementation of SO 8.2.1 to reduce fragmentation of study programmes when developing study programmes in languages of the European Union, except Latvian (hereinafter referred to as EU languages) and joint doctoral study programmes.

Six specific objectives of the priority axis "Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning" of the Operational Programme "Growth and Employment" are aimed at the improvement of higher education: SO 8.1.1 "To increase the number of modernised STEM, including medical and creative industry, study programmes"; SO 8.1.4 "To improve the learning environment of STEM, including medical and creative industry, studies of the first level professional higher education in colleges"; **SO 8.2.1 "To reduce fragmentation of study courses and to strengthen sharing of resources"**; SO 8.2.2 "To strengthen academic staff of higher education institutions in areas of strategic specialisation"; SO 8.2.3 "To ensure better management in higher education institutions"; SO 8.2.4 "To provide support to the EQAR agency in the fulfilment of the set requirements".

**The intervention of SO 8.2.1 is closely related to the other five SOs**, and its effect on the field of education – improved equality and competitiveness of higher education – should be viewed in the context of all the related SOs. It is recommended to do further evaluations of all the related SOs altogether. Within the scope of SO 8.2.1, it is planned to provide support for the development, approbation and accreditation of study programmes in EU languages and joint doctoral study programmes, incl. to cover the costs of accreditation in international professional organisations, and international publicity of the developed and accredited study programmes.

The funding of SO 8.2.1 (10,815 million EUR) accounts for 9% of the total funding of the European Social Fund intended for higher education institutions. When evaluating the planned financial return on investments in SO 8.2.1 or the effect on higher education institutions due to the increase in the number of foreign students, it was calculated that financial benefit of all the higher education institutions gained from tuition payments of foreign students will reach almost 59 million EUR in the realistic scenario and 177 million EUR in the optimistic scenario. The impact of SO 8.2.1 will also be observed at the macroeconomic level, and it is expected that the students attracted in addition will influence the national economy in the following way: with their direct contribution to the Latvian national economy as they spend their finances on daily products during studies, pay for accommodation in Latvia and attract additional tourists; create jobs in education and customer service sectors; incorporate new companies in Latvia after graduation and create new jobs; return home after graduation, incorporate a company and establish cooperation with Latvian companies, as well as expected social impact in terms of diversity management, promoting intercultural interactions.

Overall, **SO 8.2.1 resolves problems affecting fragmentation and overlapping of doctoral study programmes, as well as insufficient competitiveness of study programmes of all levels**. The review of the supply of study programmes and its internationalisation concentrating resources on a smaller number of qualitative studies,

and shared use of resources by several higher education institutions forming scientific research based doctoral study programmes will serve as the basis for the improvement of quality and competitiveness of higher education.

The Assessment is based on the logic model analysis of intervention using the following methods: the development of a conceptual roadmap of intervention, cabinet research, online survey, interviews with experts, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis and cost-benefit analysis.

In the context of SO 8.2.1, **the existing situation as higher education institutions implement study programmes in EU languages (except Latvian) and all doctoral study programmes**, incl. joint doctoral study programmes, was analysed focusing both on study programmes supply trends, indicators characterising students and academic staff and essential aspects related to further development of these study programmes. The reporting period covers the situation in 2011-2016.

Since 2011, the number of students<sup>1</sup> in Latvian higher education institutions and colleges has dropped by 14% (97,035 students on 1 October 2011, 82,914 – on 1 October 2016), including the number of foreign students who are studying to get a degree or qualification has almost tripled (2202 students on 1 October 2011, 6314 – on 1 October 2016), the number of exchange students has also grown three and a half times (515 – on 1 October 2011, 1823 – on 1 October 2016). In the reporting period, targeted activities of higher education institutions have considerably increased the number of students from Uzbekistan, Germany and India (students from these countries account for 37% of all the foreign students as at 1 October 2016).

It should be noted that in the reporting period the number of local students has fallen sharply (by 20% in six years) and the attraction of foreign students allows higher education institutions partially compensating the drop in the number of local students.

In terms of the supply of study programmes – in the last six years – the number of study programmes has reduced relatively slightly (only by 2%), which evidences of the need to review both the supply of the programmes and the resources necessary for the implementation of the study programmes in the context with the number of students.

It should be evaluated positively that the number of academic staff with scientific degrees in main jobs and the number of visiting professors, visiting assistant professors and visiting lecturers has increased over the last few years considerably influencing the quality of the study process in a positive direction. In several higher education institutions, local teaching staff faces problems with foreign language skills, as well as the attraction of Latvian nationals, who studied abroad, as a teaching staff is still an untapped resource.

In order to increase internalisation rates and quality, it is necessary to ensure the evaluation, targeted improvement of professional activity of teaching staff and a motivating payment system, as well as to plan teaching staff mobility measures in a more targeted way.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the data published on the website of the Ministry of Education and Science: Report on Latvian higher education in 2016 and Report on Latvian higher education in 2011.

The considerable investments from structural funds in the infrastructure of higher education institutions (renewal of study and common use premises, libraries, upgrading of equipment, fostering availability for people with functional disorders) made in 2011 – 2015 have provided a more attractive and modern environment and equipment for the study process, especially in STEM areas.

This Assessment covers the study programmes, which are offered in EU languages, and all the doctoral study programmes (regardless of the language of implementation). The total scope is 306 programmes, which are implemented as full-time studies, accounting for about one third of all the study programmes.

It should be noted that since 2011 the **supply of study programmes in EU languages** has grown by 6% and almost every fifth programme in state higher education institutions and each second study programme in higher education institutions established by legal entities are offered in EU languages. In 2013, in a study conducted by the Higher Education Council<sup>2</sup> it was recommended to internationalise 220 study programmes in 19 higher education institutions, which has been done only partially in the reporting period. Therefore, it can be concluded that the internationalisation potential from the supply side has not been fulfilled yet.

As the number of foreign students in higher education institutions increases, it becomes more and more topical not only to provide the study process, but also to provide social support and integration services for students and foreign teaching staff. Higher education institutions should consider that it is necessary to create a supply of these services well before the attraction of foreign students – by improving information resources (for example, the website in English) and by preparing jointly with partners a supply of safe and modern accommodation solutions, health insurance offers, integrating activities, etc.

Taking into account the number of foreign students in higher education institutions and in specific study programmes, it was concluded that only a few higher education institutions have prerequisites for the creation of an international environment (as at 1 October 2016, over 100 foreign students, who are studying to get a degree or qualification, were only in 3 higher education institutions – RSU, RTU, LU – and 6 in higher education institutions established by legal entities – BAT, TSI, BSA, ISMA, RISEBA, REA).

In terms of study programmes, more than 25 mobile (incl. foreign) students are study 42 study programmes, where social sciences, business and law thematic areas are dominating. In order to foster intercultural skills and promote internationalisation, it would be necessary to promote studies in mixed groups rather than in separate flows. It should be noted that no foreign students study in many offered study programmes in EU languages. These are mainly those programmes, which have appeared in supply in EU languages quite recently – from 2015, and, it was concluded in the study that results are reached within 2-3 years when targeted foreign student attraction activities are started.

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<sup>2</sup> Overview of the results of assessment of HE study programmes and recommendations for further improvement, upgrading, development, consolidation, closing of study programmes grouped in study areas for the purposes of efficient use of resources and financing from state budget funds; Higher Education Council, Riga, 2013

Although EU initiatives envisage upskilling and preparation of new specialists in STEM areas, in the Latvian situation the supply of STEM study programmes in English attracts rather small number of foreign students (every tenth), the supply of higher education institutions and the choice of foreign students (almost every second) focus on social sciences, especially – on the management and administration thematic area, which is explained by a relatively easier attraction of students and by economic benefits of implementation of these programmes for higher education institutions. It should be noted that almost every third foreign student has chosen studies in health care programmes.

The most important problems in the implementation of study programmes in an EU language are related to provisions of the Law on Institutions of Higher Education, which states that the graduation, bachelor and master thesis should be in the official language, as well as the existing regulation does not support the increase in the share of foreign academic staff. However, despite these restrictions, in the reporting period state higher education institutions have increased their supply of study programmes by one fourth, and the number of foreign students, who are obtaining a degree or a qualification, has tripled, thus, having generally intensified competition between higher education institutions in the attraction of foreign students.

In order to maintain and improve the quality of study programmes, it is necessary to improve the selection of potential foreign students, ensuring that only properly prepared students are enrolled and reducing the administrative burden on the Academic Information Centre and the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, as they examine prospectless applications.

The biggest share of **doctoral study programmes** should consist of original research work, the thematic link of which with research priorities of the higher education institution and/or scientific institutions being part of it is one of ways of targeted use of resources and perfection of higher education institutions.

Most doctoral study programmes are provided by LU, RTU and LLU, which together amounts to almost 60% of the total supply of doctoral study programmes in the country. LU implements 24, RTU – 21 and LLU – 13 full-time doctoral study programmes and it is natural that these higher education institutions attract more scientific funding.

It is envisaged that the link between doctoral studies and research will strengthen the research priorities approved in state higher education institutions in 2016. The newly developed research strategies of higher education institutions emphasise the commitment to attract more international project funding (for example, DU), to involve doctoral students in State research programmes and professor research programmes (for example, RSU), to expand even more cooperation with businesses (for example, RTU), to extend cooperation with local governments for conducting research in humanities and social sciences (for example, LU).

In practice, the link between doctoral study programmes and research programmes is a bidirectional process: higher education institutions are interested in selection of doctoral students, whose topics are in synergy with the research platforms defined by the higher education institution, as well as doctoral students should be able to get involved in the projects going on within research programmes. In order to promote this bidirectional process, it would be recommended to create research jobs on wage,

where doctoral students would be employed, as this is already being implemented in several countries (Estonia, Denmark, Netherlands), whose experience is studied within the scope of this Assessment.

In each third doctoral study programme, it is possible to study also in English, and, as at 1 October 2016, 238 mobile students, who are studying for a degree, study doctoral study programmes, of which every second student studies in LU, each tenth – in RTU or ISMA. Mobile students have most frequently chosen doctoral study programmes in Management and Administration thematic group. Each fifth mobile student has chosen doctoral studies in STEM and medical areas (47 doctoral students).

**Latvian higher education institutions implement a small number of joint doctoral study programmes.** These are Business Management (BA, RISEBA, University of Applied Sciences Kaiserslautern), E-study Technologies and Management (LiepU, RTU), Modelling of Sociotechnical Systems (ViA, RTA), Linguistics (Latvian diachronic and synchronic linguistics, applied linguistics and comparable and compatible linguistics) (LiepU, VeA), International and European Law (RJA, University of Copenhagen). The existing joint doctoral study programmes are not thematically diverse, and those were formed by combining existing similar doctoral study programmes, which means that Latvian higher education institutions still do not have experience in creation of interdisciplinary joint doctoral study programmes.

Recommendations of the study of the Higher Education Council (2013) in respect of joint doctoral study programmes or establishment of mutual cooperation between doctoral study programmes have been fulfilled partially. No recommendation with regard to the creation of a joint study programme has been implemented in full, however, in almost all the cases its creation was replaced with other forms of cooperation/shared use. More successful was the implementation of those recommendations, which recommended doctoral study programmes the establishment of joint cooperation or internal restructuring. During the Assessment, two types of motivation for the implementation of a shared study programme were identified – the need to combine academic resources, specialisations or infrastructures and the need to increase interdisciplinarity and international cooperation in the future.

It is positive that 3 projects envisaging the creation of joint degree programmes (for the time of the project) received support from within the framework of H2020, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions in the last few years. All the three projects were implemented in LU, on the Faculty of Social Sciences (projects – PUREFOOD, SUSPLACE, CHIBOW). Such projects have a high potential to considerably increase the quality of doctoral studies. It should be noted that Latvian education and research institutions have no experience in the implementation of Erasmus Mundus joint doctoral study programmes.

It is concluded in the Assessment that higher education institutions face several considerable obstacles and difficulties in the course of creation and implementation of a joint doctoral study programme.

Potential partners should be able to agree on integration of all aspects of study programmes and their details, envisaging joint enrolment conditions, quality insurance system, programme content principles, compatibility of courses, scope of mobility,

settlement procedure, payment to teaching staff, promotion implementation approach and matters related to awarding diplomas.

When sharing and creating an interdisciplinary study programme, the need for equalizing the level of knowledge of students should be considered. The experience of the programme evidences that students from different higher education institutions may have a different knowledge base.

The process of licencing and accreditation of shared doctoral study programmes is administratively burdensome and may be quite long. The decision on the creation of study programmes is approved by Senates of higher education institutions: each part of a joint study programme is licensed and accredited (within the existing accredited field) separately. If a higher education institution has submitted a doctoral study programme for licencing, an opinion of the Latvian Council of Science is also required (according to Section 16(7) of the Law on Scientific Activity). If the composition of partners changes, the decision-making by the Senate and accreditation is required again.

SO 8.2.1 plans to support accreditation of study programmes in international professional organisations. Overall, the international professional accreditation procedure in a study programme is similar regardless of the represented thematic area, the level and the type of the study programme, however, the study programme should have an implementation experience of several years. The procedure for the accreditation of a study programme, which is implemented jointly and awards two diplomas, is similar and the duration of the accreditation procedure is 3-5 years.