

LATVIAN POLICY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION EXPORT

Karīna Svētiņa¹, Rita Kiseļova¹, Ruta Svētiņa¹

¹ University of Latvia, Latvia

ABSTRACT

Attracting international students is carried out by state institutions, higher education institutions and commercial agencies. Therefore, the practice of attraction is considered in the context of the reputation of the state, an added value that has not been reflected in scientific publications on attracting international students. The goal of this research is to present the policy of attracting international students to Latvia in the context of the country's reputation over a period of five years from 2017 to 2022. The research question is to identify changes in the attraction policy. The research method applied involved interviewing representatives of institutions related to attracting international students in 2017 (in person), 2021 and 2022 (remotely). The common goal of the interviews was to clarify the practice of attracting international students of the relevant institution in the context of the country's reputation, cooperation with other institutions involved, institutions' level of involvement, and the division of responsibility. Document analysis was carried out to evaluate the *Agreement on Good Practice of Attracting International Students and Delivering Studies* (published in 2017 and updated in 2022). Latvia's experience in attracting international students will be useful to other countries in the context of reputation. The most important results are related to the promotion of cooperation between the institutions involved, the systematization of procedures, and compliance with high-quality, transparent and ethical principles in the process of attracting international students.

Keywords: *attraction policy, export of higher education, international education, international students, reputation of the state*

Introduction

Latvia is a country in the Baltic region of Northern Europe. Latvia has borders with Estonia, Lithuania, Russia and Belarus. At the beginning of 2020, Latvia had a population of 1,902,000 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2020). The Ministry of Education and Science (hereafter, Ministry) is the leading state administration institution in the Republic of Latvia in the field of education and science. The Bologna Process was launched in Latvia on 19 June 1999. At the beginning of the 2021/22 academic year, there were 53 higher education institutions (hereafter, HEIs) in Latvia. Of these, 32 were founded

by the state, 19 were founded by legal entities, and two were branches of foreign HEIs (Overview of Latvian higher education in 2021. Key statistics, 2023).

Almost imperceptibly and without significant state support or strategic documents, the export of higher education in Latvia has become an important sector of the national economy. In recent years, the number of international students studying for a degree or qualification in Latvian HEIs has increased from 9,797 (in 2018) to 10,764 (in 2019), 9,371 (in 2020) and 9,997 (in 2021), constituting 14% of all students. In the 2021/22 academic year, the largest education import regions were South Asia (India: 14.21%), Central Asia (Uzbekistan: 13.11%), and Central Europe (Germany: 12.07%, Ukraine: 7.35%, Sweden: 6.43%). 68% of international students come from countries outside the European Union (Overview of Latvian higher education in 2021. Key statistics, 2023).

Research regarding financial contributions was conducted in the 2015/16 academic year. In 2015/16, international students paid EUR 28 million in tuition fees. In addition to tuition fees and housing costs, international students also have other expenses. For instance, they use transport and telecommunications services and go to restaurants, cafes, bars, and shopping centres. On average, each international student spends EUR 3,696 per year on other expenses. Relatives and friends of students stay in Latvia for an average of four days during one visit, and each guest spends EUR 405 per visit. In total, this generates EUR 6.1 million per year. Every ten international students in Latvia provides 2.7 jobs, creating a total of 1,474 jobs in the 2015/16 academic year. It was estimated that international students spent EUR 73 million in the 2015/16 academic year. When calculating the added value of higher education using four OECD multipliers, the total impact of higher education on the Latvian economy is estimated at EUR 148 million (0.61% of GDP) (Auers & Gubins, 2016).

The main reasons for international students to go to Latvia: European Union member state (indicated by 64%), convenient living, cheap costs (51%) and low tuition fees (38%). 11% of students note that studying in Latvia was recommended by the agents whom the students approached (Auers & Gubins, 2016). It would be valuable to repeat Auers and Gubins' study of the 2015/16 academic year in order to perform a comparison and draw conclusions.

Concept of Reputation

Reputation is playing an increasingly important role today both in the private and public sectors and at the level of destination. Existing literature, nonetheless, has not achieved any uniformly agreed-upon definition for reputation. Dai (2018) conceptualizes reputation by underscoring two types of social processes that are inherent and essential to reputation's social functions: the production of reputation-related information and individual and collective decision-making activities based on reputation. In the pre-digital age, reputation-related information was collected and disseminated through word-of-mouth, gossip, shared memories and community norms. With the aid of modern technologies, such information can be generated with data collected through computer algorithms (Dai, 2018).

Reputation is different from image since reputation is formed over time and is not just about one's perception of something at a given time. Reputation can be both positive and negative. Reputation refers to what an organization looks like in the performance of its duties, not as others would like to see it (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). The reputation of the destination has primarily been viewed in the context of tourism rather than education in previous scientific theories (Darwish & Burns, 2019; Darwish, 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

The host government should focus on building a positive cognitive image of the country to attract students (Hendriana et al., 2021; Oliveira & Soares, 2016). Hosting international students is employed as a diplomatic tool, a vital means of increasing international recognition, to improve the international image and reputation of the national higher education system (Pan, 2013). Improving HEIs' pools of resources, students, academic staff and financial resources are crucial elements of implementing an internationalization process (Bradford et al., 2017).

The authors use the term "reputation of the state" in this research as this study does not assess the reputation of HEIs individually but in an aggregated format at the state level. By attracting potential students, the state builds a reputation.

Activities to attract international students

There are a number of studies that have highlighted various activities used to attract international students (Belcher, 1987; Bolsmann & Miller, 2008; Gao & Liu, 2020; Haugen, 2013; James & Derrick, 2020; Jokila, 2019; Jokila et al., 2019; Onk & Joseph, 2017). The process of attracting students includes setting requirements, selecting and implementing, concluding a study contract, and integrating them into an HEI (Bolsmann & Miller, 2008).

Prospective students have the perception that higher education quality is offered in countries with a higher reputation. Prospective students tend to choose the state first and only then the educational institution (Briggs, 2006; Cubillo et al., 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2002). These insights indicate that the reputation of the state plays an important role in attracting the most outstanding students.

The promotion of campus resources, open doors, HEI visits, participation in international fairs, online web advertising, use of alums, and word-of-mouth advertising have been highlighted as the most popular attraction activities (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Oliveira & Soares, 2016; Onk & Joseph, 2017; Ozturgut, 2013). Hemsley-Brown (2012) has also identified reputation, future career opportunities, quality of studies, location, family influence, and advertisement of the HEI as important factors. In research by other authors, the reputation of the programme, professors and academic staff are emphasized as important aspects of attraction (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016; Cubillo et al., 2006; Cudmore, 2005; Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Oliveira & Soares, 2016).

. Is it that countries and institutions with worse/less well-known reputations are more reliant on websites, social media and other online platforms. (Constantinides & Stagno,

2011; Lažetić, 2019; Lomer et al., 2016). Teng et al. (2015) observed how students obtain information about studies abroad on online platforms such as microblogs (Twitter and Weibo), social networking sites (Facebook), photo and video sharing sites (Instagram and YouTube) and forums. TikTok has also become more and more popular, and the use of TikTok by universities is inevitable (Berdiieva & Goroshko, 2021). The research confirmed that online peer feedback played an important role in shaping students' perceptions (Teng et al., 2015). The findings of Quijada et al. (2021) suggest that although Instagram does not seem to be decisive in the choice of university, it can help universities gain an online presence and a brand image, precipitating and consolidating students' decisions. In contrast to conventional website marketing, social network communities like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn rely on user-generated content to attract and retain users (Fagerstrøm & Ghinea, 2013).

The most important factor related to a good environment are technological/educational factors in and around HEI campuses: availability of computers, quality of library equipment, availability of quiet space (i.e. classrooms), and availability of self-study space (Cubillo et al., 2006; Cudmore, 2005). Additional marketing elements are particularly relevant to the higher education sector, one of which is premiums – complementary offerings such as accommodation on a campus near the HEI (Ivy, 2008).

In China, HEIs authorized to attract international students developed English study materials as a product of attraction (bilingual programmes, bilingual textbooks, bilingual teaching materials) (Huang, 2006). Scholarships are mentioned as a relatively important factor (Onk & Joseph, 2017; Sheng-Kai, 2015; Aras & Mohammed, 2018).

In Oliveira and Soares' research, the university ranking is a determining factor; however, they admit that students' choice is mostly influenced by the reputation of a certain researcher or a specific scientific area, regardless of the overall position of the institution in international rankings (Oliveira & Soares, 2016). Other researchers have found that the rankings are not the factor that dominates the attraction of international students (Asaad et al., 2014; James-MacEachern, 2018; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

The involvement of commercial agents in attracting international students is very common (see, e.g., Coffey & Perry, 2013; Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016; Huang et al., 2016; Pii-Tuulia & Jussi, 2019). Many of the risks involved are related to the limited ability of education providers to control the behaviour of their agents. Negative practices mentioned in the literature include misinformation provision, a lack of quality, financial fraud, and manipulation of the application process (Gao & Liu, 2020; Pii-Tuulia & Jussi, 2018, 2019; Huang et al., 2016; Teng et al., 2015). Pii-Tuulia and Jussi (2019) concluded that it should be assumed that no monitoring tool can fully disclose the true behaviour of agents.

Some countries have established agreements between policy-makers, education providers and commercial agents in the context of reputation. In Denmark, there exists the *Code of Conduct: Guidelines for Offering Danish Higher Education Programmes to International Students*, and in the Netherlands, there is the *Code of Conduct for International Students in Dutch Higher Education* for education providers. All HEIs in Denmark

have agreed to a set of ethical guidelines for the attraction, admission and education of international students (Code of Conduct: Guidelines for Offering Danish Higher Education Programmes to International Students, 2015). Several countries' agreements are oriented towards commercial agents, such as New Zealand's *Statement of Principles for the Ethical Recruitment of International Students by Education Agents and Consultants* and Australia's *Australian International Education and Training: Agent Code of Ethics*.

It can be concluded that attraction activities vary from country to country, but there are also standard features, the most commonly used of which are information websites, social media accounts and campus resources.

Methodology

The empirical study was developed by descriptive analysis and consists of qualitative scientific research methods (interviews). The goal of the research is to present the policy of attracting international students in Latvia in the context of the country's reputation over a period of five years. The research aims to determine what changes have occurred over the five-year period (2017 to 2021) in the context of attracting international students.

In the first stage of the study, interviews were carried out with representatives of institutions related to attracting international students in 2017 (in person) and in 2021 and 2022 (remotely). In total, 11 respondents were interviewed: one representative from the Ministry of Education and Science in matters of internationalization, one representative from the Academic Information Centre in partnership with Studyinlatvia.eu, three experts from the State Education Development Agency on state scholarships, the chairman of the Higher Education Export Association, four heads of international departments at HEIs, and one commercial agent. The common goal of the interviews was to clarify the practice of attracting international students of the relevant institution in the context of the country's reputation, cooperation with other institutions involved, institutions' level of involvement and the division of responsibility. Respondents were informed that their confidentiality would be respected and that the results would only be available in aggregated form. The interviews were conducted in Latvian and then transcribed. Each transcript was sent to the respondents to confirm that their opinions were accurate. After receiving their clarifications and approval, the content analysis of the interviews was carried out. The analysis involved 1) breaking down data into thematic codes, 2) drawing related codes into categories, and 3) moving towards conceptualizing meaning, i.e., exploring thematic relationships in response to the research question (Galletta & Cross, 2013).

In the second stage, document analysis was carried out to evaluate the *Agreement on Good Practice of Attracting International Students and Delivering Studies* (hereafter, *Agreement*), first published in 2017 and updated in 2022. According to Bowen (2009), documents can serve a variety of purposes as part of a research undertaking and provide a means of tracking change and development. Where various drafts of a particular document are accessible, the researcher can compare them to identify the changes. It

is necessary to determine the authenticity, credibility, accuracy and representativeness of the selected documents. The analytic procedure of documents entails finding, skimming (superficial examination), selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesizing the data contained in the documents. This process combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a form of pattern recognition within the data, with emerging themes becoming the categories for analysis. The reviewer takes a closer look at the selected data and performs coding and category construction. Content analysis is the process of organizing information into categories related to the central research questions (Bowen, 2009).

The latest version of the *Agreement* is available on the Ministry’s official website; the previous version is only available by contacting the Ministry (it is no longer available on the official website). The Ministry is the institution responsible for updating documents, if necessary. While the latest version of the document is being developed, the current version of the document remains on the official website for public viewing; accordingly, this document is considered representative. Documentary evidence is combined with interview data to minimize bias and ensure credibility.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the Latvian public administration organizations involved in attracting international students ranked in order from the most used activity to the least used (the rankings are derived from the interviews). Each activity is marked with an *X* if it is used in Latvia to attract international students and *N/A* if it is not.

Table 1 Activities to attract international students to Latvia

Institution/ Recruitment activity	Very commonly used				Moderately used				Rarely used			
	Official website	Social networking sites, microblogs	Students as ambassadors	Scholarships	Commercial agents	International fairs	Open doors, campus and HEI visits	Academic staff	On-site selection	Bilingual study programmes	Agreement between the parties involved on good practice	Part-time job opportunities
Ministry of Education and Science	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	X	N/A
Study in Latvia	X	X	N/A	N/A	N/A	X	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
State Education Development Agency	X	N/A	X	X	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Higher education institutions	X	X	X	N/A	X	X	X	N/A	X	N/A	N/A	X

As can be concluded from Table 1, the most popular attraction activities in Latvia are using social networking sites, microblogs, official websites, international fairs and students as ambassadors. Among HEIs, using open doors and commercial agents are popular activities. The Ministry's attraction policy is mostly aimed at fair communication and enhancing Latvia's good reputation among foreign stakeholders.

The *Agreement* was drawn up in 2017. When signing the *Agreement*, the HEI undertakes to comply with the criteria and principles included therein, promoting good practice in attracting international students and safeguarding the study process. The *Agreement* largely defines education export policy and reputation guidelines. The *Agreement* also stipulates that an HEI must observe integrity and ethical principles in any marketing activity and advertising for attracting international students, providing only true and clear information. In turn, HEIs are provided with opportunities to participate in organized educational export promotion events, including foreign visits, exhibitions and marketing events and acquisition of external markets at the state's expense. The *Agreement* was revised in 2022 and signed by the Higher Education Export Association, which unites 15 of Latvia's largest HEIs. The changes included in the updated version are reflected in Table 2.

It can be seen that the requirements are stricter and more detailed than before, presenting many challenges for universities with regard to how to organize their work. Despite this, 15 universities have signed the updated *Agreement*. Unlike the original version, which pertained only to universities, responsibilities for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and *Study in Latvia* are also included, which is a positive outcome. Latvia does not have a separate document on reputation, but the *Agreement* largely defines the education export policy and reputation guidelines.

Study in Latvia is a public national body in charge of promoting Latvia's higher education to international students. Its website, www.studyinlatvia.lv, is an official information resource that provides essential information about higher education in Latvia, a database of study programmes and practical information about student life in Latvia for current and prospective international students (Study in Latvia. 2021). Although there is no single definition or strategy explaining the principles of reputation in Latvia as a whole, *Study in Latvia* adheres to honest and transparent communication at all levels as a guiding principle. Table 3 shows the changes in *Study in Latvia's* attraction practices from 2009 to 2021.

It follows from the results of Table 3 that in 2017, the study programme was not as important for students as the tuition fees, admission conditions, and the documents required to arrive in the country. However, the statistics for the most frequently viewed sections of studyinlatvia.lv in 2020 indicate that students are primarily interested in the offers of studies in Latvia rather than opportunities to enter and stay in Latvia, which is positive. In 2021, there was further encouraging news because the section "About Latvia" was also being viewed quite actively, which increases confidence that students are getting to know about Latvian culture and customs responsibly. In 2020, the website studyinlatvia.lv had 50,000 unique visitors, 25% more than in 2019.

Table 2 Comparison between the 2017 Agreement and the 2022 Agreement

2017	2022
1. Number of signatories to the Agreement	
12	15
2. Internationalization strategy	
Not required	Internationalization strategy or working plan for attracting international students to the HEI is required
3. Student application is not considered further	
3.1. Academic success	
The lowest passing grade in one of the profiling study courses	The lowest passing grade in one of the profiling study courses and the average grade in the previous education level is less than 60% of the maximum
3.2. Foreign language skills (according to study programme)	
An internationally recognized certificate is required, or the HEI organizes a foreign language test. (Level is not mentioned.)	B2 level
3.3. Motivation for studies	
Not required	Applicants from the third country must be interviewed in a digital environment
4. Commercial agents	
Not required	HEIs must develop criteria for the selection of agents
Not required	HEIs must publish information with cooperating agents on their website
5. Learning the Latvian language	
HEIs should consider the possibility of offering a course	HEIs must provide the opportunity to learn the Latvian language at least at A2 level
6. Engagement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs	
Not stated	Ministry of Foreign Affairs examines visas on a priority basis within 15 calendar days
Not stated	Ministry of Foreign Affairs will work on expanding the network of visa centres of external service providers in regions that are important to the HEIs that have signed the <i>Agreement</i>
Not stated	HEIs will receive information on visa refusal statistics in an aggregated form
7. The university must inform the relevant authorities if a student from a third country does not attend the university	
“Regularly or long-term”	“For 14 days continuously”
8. Application fee ceiling	
Not mentioned	The fee set by the HEI for examining study applications cannot exceed EUR 250

Table 3 Changes in Study in Latvia practice from 2009 to 2021

	From 2009 to 2018	From 2019 until now
Administration	Academic Information Centre	State Education Development Agency
Direction of activity	In the interests of HEIs	National level
Official website	Studyinlatvia.eu	Studyinlatvia.lv
Criteria for the study programme to be popularized	1) The study programme is implemented in an EU language; 2) the study programme is accredited for a maximum term of up to six years; and 3) full-time international students have already studied on the study programme	The current three points remain valid, and a fourth has been added: the HEI must have signed the <i>Agreement on Good Practice</i>
Activities	Participation in foreign exhibitions, meetings with embassies and commercial agencies	Target markets, priority study directions, admission campaigns and other marketing activities in target markets, digital ambassador programme
Exhibitions	The exhibitions were more coordinated with HEIs	Participation in B2B exhibitions, representing Latvia at the national level and promoting Latvia's image, as well as in student selection exhibitions according to the nationally determined target markets
Most frequently viewed website sections	As of 2017: 1) HEI study fees, 2) necessary documents (for arriving in Latvia), and 3) study programmes	As of 2020: 1) study programmes, 2) admission, 3) universities, 4) tuition fees, and 5) study programme database. The section on visas and residence permits is only the 12th most viewed
Work opportunities emphasized	No	Yes

In 2020, *Study in Latvia's* Instagram profile also increased its audience by more than 50%, and the total number of questions it received from users on social networks increased threefold in a year. The number of unique users from Latvia shows a positive tendency to increase as well, which indicates that the site is also useful for local residents, local institutions and international students already studying in Latvia.

At first, *Study in Latvia* worked more in the interests of HEIs, but now the trend is set for national-level participation in B2B exhibitions, representing Latvia at the national level and promoting Latvia's image. So far, the exhibitions visited have been more coordinated with universities (student recruitment exhibitions).

Work opportunities have not been highlighted as a section so far in order not to stimulate interest in job opportunities in Latvia unnecessarily in the context of third-country nationals, as historical experience has negatively shown that students' primary motivation has often been work rather than studies. In 2021, the website contains only basic information about work opportunities during studies.

Latvia offers scholarships in accordance with bilateral agreements on cooperation in education and science concluded between the Latvian government and other countries. Citizens from countries that have signed an agreement with Latvia or offer scholarships to Latvian citizens (State Education Development Agency Republic of Latvia, 2021) can apply for Latvian state scholarships. The purpose of granting Latvian state scholarships to international students is not only for Latvia to fulfil its obligations in the context of intergovernmental agreements but also to promote Latvia as a study destination. The goal for students is to act as ambassadors, in which guise they will talk about Latvia and create a good image of it in the context of its reputation. Table 4 shows the changes in the procedure for granting Latvian state scholarships to foreigners from 2017 to 2020.

It can be concluded that since 2017, many processes have been made more logical and easier for both students and HEIs, such as the digitalization of documents and the facilitation of residence permits after graduation. As Table 4 shows, the categories of scholarships and the number of scholarships granted have increased in almost all categories, which is positive. Overall, the authors conclude that concerns about international students regarding various risks, such as illegal immigration and illegal employment, were allayed between 2017 and 2021. This indicates the ability to balance the export of education with reputational issues.

The procedure for awarding scholarships is still controversial. For example, no more than 10% of the scholarship funding available for a given year may be allocated to students from one country. It is fair for students from all countries to receive equal opportunities to receive scholarships, although it is possible that the students who show the highest results may all be from the same country.

Table 4 Overview of Latvian state scholarships

	In 2017	In 2021
Administration	State Education Development Agency	
Direction of activity	Latvian state scholarships	
Types of scholarships	1) for international students, 2) for researchers and teaching staff for studies, and 3) for research and participation in summer schools at Latvian HEIs	
Type of document processing	Paper printouts	Digitalized documents
Applications received for scholarships for studies and research	316	391
Scholarships awarded for studies	86	102
Research scholarships awarded	25	24
Scholarships awarded for the organization of summer schools for HEIs	6	8
Scholarship-funded participants in summer schools	60	80

The Latvian commercial agency representative revealed that the source of the agency's profit is student fees and commissions from the HEI for each student enrolled. In order to ensure a high-quality selection of candidates, the commercial agency in Latvia verifies the student's language use and skills using digital means of communication. The relatively smooth circulation of documents on the side of state institutions is mentioned as a positive, but the slow operation of HEIs with student contracts and documents was highlighted as a more negative example that HEIs often use as an excuse for a lack of capacity.

Table 5 outlines interview responses from the heads of international departments at HEIs in the context of the institution's international student engagement policy. Each representative rated each category on a 3-point scale from very important (VI) to least important (LI).

Heads no. 1, 2 and 4 indicate that tactics should be developed in relation to parents of the students, not students as consumers. In Central Asia, the role of parents of the students is clearly expressed both during the application process and at the decision-making stage. Additional pre-existing costs are important for parents – cost of living, home life, etc. Parents care about the possibility for their children of staying in the country and working in it after their graduation. All heads indicate that it is often necessary to consider Latvia through a historical prism because Latvia was also among the Soviet states, although Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are very different from Latvia today. Head no. 3 explains the tendency is for parents from Germany to come to Latvia with students before signing the contract to make sure of the HEI, its environment and its student accommodation. In this respect, EU citizens benefit from the fact that they can easily enter and stay in the country; there is no need for residence permits.

Table 5 HEIs' policies on attracting international students

HEI representative interviewed / recruitment tactic	Communication dedicated to parents	Potential visits for international students to HEI in Latvia	Visiting potential students' secondary schools	Historical relatedness	Inclusion of regional, cultural features in communication, advertising	Participation in international educational exhibitions	Social media networks	Cooperation with commercial agents
Chairman of Higher Education Export Association / head of international department of private HEI (1)	VI	LI	LI	VI	VI	VI	VI	I
Head of state university international department (2)	I	LI	LI	VI	VI	VI	VI	I
Head of state university international department (3)	I	VI	I	VI	VI	VI	VI	LI
Head of state university international department (4)	I	LI	LI	VI	VI	VI	VI	I

VI – very important; I – important; LI – least important

Visits to foreign schools do not work because students are still immature at that time, and many are not motivated to attend informative lectures on studies abroad. Latvia cannot attract students from countries that do not have a representation of the Embassy of Latvia. It is also very expensive for students to complete documents if they need to go to another country where is Latvian embassy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has committed to work on this aspect from 2022, which is a positive innovation. Other disadvantages include tuition fees, which are relatively high in Latvia, considering that in many European countries, higher education is free of charge or available for a symbolic fee, even for students from outside the EU and EEA; however, the cost of living in Latvia is low. All four HEI representatives interviewed believe there is no need for excessive student inflow, as neither their infrastructure nor capacity allows for the admission of large numbers of students, nor are there adequate infrastructure and support measures.

This is inconsistent from a reputational perspective. In this context, HEIs need to monitor student attendance, but it is up to the HEI how student attendance is monitored. Currently, the Immigration Law is being promoted to stipulate that if an international student does not attend an HEI for two weeks and their whereabouts are unknown or unreachable, the HEI must inform the Border Guard and exclude the student from the student register. Some HEIs are conscientious about quality, yet others are more carefree. Interviews to test candidates' English have not been conducted in good faith in all HEIs either. Some HEIs rely on an English language test done by a commercial agent, some of which prepare students by letting them know questions. In the interviews, our experts pointed out that it is important for HEIs to cooperate only with honest and high-quality agents, regularly checking their activities and conducting surveys with students on their experience with agents.

It can be concluded that careful and regular communication with international students is necessary to eliminate various misunderstandings. It is vital for institutions to cooperate, decide how to facilitate processes, make them smoother and reduce bureaucratic burdens both at the institutional level and at the student level while at the same time emphasizing the formation of the country's reputation.

Discussion

Around 2009, Latvian HEIs began to see potential in education export, with the largest HEIs merging in 2011 to form an association that would address the issues of easier entry and residence of international students in Latvia. At the national level, the export of education began to be evaluated and noticed only in 2014 when the Ministry created the official website studyinlatvia.eu with permanent staff. In those years, there was no national-level strategy for education export, internationalization or reputation.

The Ministry does not consider education as an export but as an aspect of internationalization, paying special attention to educational quality and the state's reputation. Therefore, at the end of 2017, the Ministry called for the signing of the *Agreement* by all parties involved in attracting international students.

Attraction activities vary from country to country, but there are also standard features in the case of Latvia, such as the most commonly used search tools by students – information websites, social media accounts and campus resources (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Oliveira & Soares, 2016; Onk & Joseph, 2017). Evaluating the results of the study, the authors have to agree with Constantinides and Stagno (2011), Lažetić (2019) and Lomer et al. (2016) that websites, social media and other online platforms can be considered to be particularly targeted at countries and institutions that do not have a well-known reputation and only develop it.

Various practices related to commercial agents are reflected in studies by Gao and Liu (2020), Pii-Tuulia and Jussi (2018, 2019), Huang et al. (2016), and Teng et al. (2015). Leading countries in the export of education, such as Australia, New Zealand, Denmark and the Netherlands, have stricter requirements in this respect than Latvia. In Latvia, HEIs are solely responsible for the performance of commercial agents.

In response to the research question regarding the changes that have occurred over a five-year period from 2017 to 2022, the following must be listed: listening to partners and agreeing on proportionality of responsibility, cooperation between the institutions involved, systematization of procedures, digitization of documents, and compliance with high-quality, transparent and ethical principles in the process of attracting international students.

Further research should be conducted through large-scale surveys of international students to find out students' satisfaction with the admission process, the most frequently used marketing channels, and the nature of their cooperation with commercial agents. These results should be linked to Latvia's attraction policy. These would provide useful results in making sure that Latvia's reputation is promoted at the highest level.

Conclusions

- During the years under study, there was no national-level strategy for education export, internationalization and reputation, but the new version of the *Agreement* defines the education export policy and reputation guidelines much more specifically. However, the authors would encourage public authorities to indicate the desired reputation in the guidelines and in which direction it is aimed while explaining the importance of a good reputation.
- Besides the *Agreement*, a unified strategy at the national level has not been determined. Such a strategy or work plan is required from HEIs.
- In 2017, HEIs complained that the responsibilities of taking care of high-quality selection, admission, attraction and studies are only assigned to HEIs, while no responsibilities are assigned to supporting institutions. In the new version of the *Agreement* (2021), responsibilities and support have been assigned to other involved parties. This new version includes obligations not only for the HEIs but also for the Ministry, which can be evaluated very positively as this was one of the HEIs' biggest wishes.

- The requirements are stricter and more detailed than before, which presents many challenges for HEIs with regard to how to organize their work. Stricter requirements have been put forward regarding commercial agents, although they are only mediated through HEIs.
- Latvian state scholarships for studies and summer schools should be preserved, as they create a positive image of the country and attract the most outstanding students. They are also a good attraction factor in the perception of all students.
- HEIs have different study programmes, admission requirements, language offers, and target markets. Each HEI will attract international students differently in a way that is effective in a particular HEI. In terms of attracting international students, HEIs do not compete with each other in Latvia because there are differentiated markets and study programmes, including in the language of instruction, and thus students split up.

REFERENCES

- Agreement between The Ministry of Education and Science of The Republic of Latvia and Higher Education Institutions on Good Practice of Attracting International Students and Delivering Studies. (2017). Retrieved from The Ministry of Education and Science in Latvia. <https://www.izm.gov.lv/en/agreement-good-practice-attracting-foreign-students>
- Aras, B., & Mohammed Z. (2018). The Turkish government scholarship program as a soft power tool, *Turkish Studies*, 20(3), 421–441. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2018.1502042>
- Argenti, P. A., & Druckenmiller, B. T. (2004). Reputation and the Corporate Brand. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 6, 368–374. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.387860>
- Asaad, Y., Melewar, T.C., & Cohen, G. (2014). Export market orientation in universities: Bridging the gap between export marketing and higher education. *The Marketing Review*, 14(2), 145–162. <https://doi.org/10.1362/146934714X14024778816878>
- Auers, D., & Gubins, S. (2016). Augstākās izglītības eksporta ekonomiskā nozīme un ietekme Latvijā [*Economic importance and impact of higher education exports in Latvia*]. Domnīca Certus [Think tank Certus]. Politikas pārskats #1 [Policy overview #1]. http://certusdomnica.lv/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Certus_AugstakasIzglitibasPolitikasParskats_2016.pdf
- Bradford, H., Guzmán, A., & Trujillo, M.-A. (2017). Determinants of successful internationalisation processes in business schools. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 39(4), 435–452. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2017.1330798>
- Belcher, J. (1987). The Recruitment of International Students: The British Experience, 1979-1987 and the Way Forward. *Journal of Tertiary Education Administration*, 9(2), 127–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0157603870090203>
- Berdiieva, S. & Goroshko, O. (2021). Use of TikTok Social Media in the Ukrainian University Branding. *Social Communications: Theory and Practice*, 13(2), 171–183. <https://doi.org/10.51423/2524-0471-2021-13-2-7>
- Bolsmann, C., & Miller, H. (2008). International student recruitment to universities in England: discourse, rationales and globalisation. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 6(1), 75–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1476720701855634>
- Briggs, S. (2006). An exploratory study of the factors influencing undergraduate student choice: The case of higher education in Scotland. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(6), 705–722. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070601004333>

- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative research journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. (2020, May 28). *Iedzīvotāju skaits un tā izmaiņas*. [Population and its changes]. Retrieved 26th September 2021, from <https://stat.gov.lv/lv/statistikas-temas/iedzivotaji/iedzivotaju-skaits/247-iedzivotaju-skaits-un-ta-izmainas>
- Chankseliani, M., & Hessel, G. (2016). International student mobility from Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia to the UK: Trends, institutional rationales and strategies for student recruitment. Oxford: The Centre for Comparative and International Education, University of Oxford
- Code of Conduct Guidelines for Offering Danish Higher Education Programmes to International Students. (2015). Retrieved from The Ministry of Higher Education and Science in Denmark, https://studies.ku.dk/masters/pdf/guidelines_for_Offering_Danish_Higher_Education_Programmes_to_International_Students.pdf
- Coffey, R., & Perry, L. M. (2013). *The role of education agents in Canada's education systems*. Council of Ministers of Education Canada. Retrieved 26th September 2021, from <https://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/326/The-Role-of-Education-Agents-EN.pdf>
- Constantinides, E., & Stagno, M. C. (2011). Potential of the social media as instruments of higher education marketing: a segmentation study. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 21(1), 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2011.573593>
- Cubillo, J. M., Cervino, J., & Sanchez, J. (2006). International students' decision-making process. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 20(2), 101–115. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540610646091>
- Cudmore, G. (2005). Globalization, internationalization, and the recruitment of international students in higher education, and in the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 35(1), 37–60. <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v35i1.183491>
- Dai, X. (2018). Toward a Reputation State: The Social Credit System Project of China. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3193577>
- Darwish, A., & Burns, P. (2019). Tourist destination reputation: an empirical definition. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 44(2), 153–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2018.1558754>
- Darwish, A. (2021). Managing Tourism Destination Reputation in the Era of Online Marketing: A Case Study of Egypt [Doctoral dissertation, University of Bedfordshire]. University of Bedfordshire. <https://uobrep.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10547/624935/PhD%20Thesis%20darwish%202021b.pdf?sequence=4>
- Fagerstrøm, A., & Ghinea, G. (2013). Co-creation of value in higher education: using social network marketing in the recruitment of students. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 35(1), 45–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2013.748524>
- Gao, Y., & Liu, J. (2020). International student recruitment campaign: experiences of selected flagship universities in China. *High Education*, 80, 663–678. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00503-8>
- Galletta, A., & Cross, W. E. (2013). Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication.
- Haugen, H. (2013). China's recruitment of African university students: policy efficacy and unintended outcomes. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 11(3), 315–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2012.750492>
- Hemsley-Brown, J. (2012). The best education in the world: reality, repetition or cliché? International students' reasons for choosing an English university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(8), 1005–1022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.562286>
- Hendriana E., Awang, K. W., Nerina, R., & Yusof, R. (2021). The roles of the country's cognitive, affective, and personality aspects in international students' decision-making. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2021.1900486>

- Huang, F. (2006). Internationalization of curricula in higher education institutions in comparative perspectives: Case Studies of China, Japan and the Netherlands. *Higher Education*, 51(4), 521–539. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29734994>
- Huang, I. Y., Raimo V., & Humfrey C. (2016). *Power and control: managing agents for international student recruitment in higher education*. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(8), 1333–1354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.968543>
- Ivy, J. (2008). A new higher education marketing mix: the 7Ps for MBA marketing. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 22(4), 288–299. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540810875635>
- James-MacEachern, M. (2018). A comparative study of international recruitment – tensions and opportunities in institutional recruitment practice. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 28(2), 247–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2018.1471014>
- James, M. A., & Derrick, G. E. (2020). When “culture trumps strategy”: higher education institutional strategic plans and their influence on international student recruitment practice. *High Education*, 79, 569–588. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00424-1>
- Jokila, S. (2019). International Student Recruitment Strategies in Finland and China: An Analysis of Website Content. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education (NJCIE)*, 3(4), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.3426>
- Jokila, S., Kallio, J., & Mikkilä-Erdmann, M. (2019). From crisis to opportunities: justifying and persuading national policy for international student recruitment. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 9(4), 393–411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2019.1623703>
- Lažetić, P. (2019). Students and university websites—consumers of corporate brands or novices in the academic community? *Higher Education*, 77, 995–1013. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0315-5>
- Lomer, S., Papatsiba, V., & Naidoo, R. (2016). Constructing a national higher education brand for the UK: positional competition and promised capitals. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 134–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1157859>
- Marginson, S., & van der Wende, M. (2007). To rank or to be ranked: The impact of global rankings in higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(3–4), 306–329. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307303544>
- Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002). Push-pull factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 16(2), 82–90. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540210418403>
- Oliveira, D.B., & Soares, A. M., (2016). Studying abroad: developing a model for the decision process of international students. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 38(2), 126–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2016.1150234>
- Onk, V. B., & Joseph, M. (2017). International Student Recruitment Techniques: A Preliminary Analysis. *Journal of Academic Administration in Higher Education*, 13(1), 25–34.
- Ozturgut, O. (2013). Best practices in recruiting and retaining international students in the U.S. *Current Issues in Education*, 16(2), 1–22.
- Pan, S.-Y. (2013). China’s approach to the international market for higher education students: strategies and implications. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 35(3), 249–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2013.786860>
- Overview of Latvian higher education in 2021. Key statistics [Pārskats par Latvijas augstāko izglītību 2021. gadā. Galvenie statistikas dati.]. (2023). *Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija: Statistika par augstāko izglītību [The Ministry of Education and Science: Statistics on higher education]*. Retrieved 17.04.2023, from <https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/media/18744/download?attachment>
- Pii-Tuulia, N., & Jussi, K. (2018). Hiring education agents for international student recruitment: Perspectives from agency theory. *Higher Education Policy*, 31, 535–557. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-017-0070-8>

- Pii-Tuulia, N., & Jussi, K. (2019). Monitoring of Education Agents Engaged in International Student Recruitment: Perspectives from Agency Theory. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 24(2), 212–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315318825338>
- Quijada, M. d. R. B., Muñoz, E. P., Corrons, A., & Olmo-Arriaga, J.-L. (2021). Engaging students through social media. Findings for the top five universities in the world. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2020.1841069>
- Sheng-Kai, C. C. (2015). *Higher education scholarships as a soft power tool: an analysis of its role in the EU and Singapore*. EU Centre Singapore. Working Paper, 23. Retrieved 26th September 2021, from <http://aei.pitt.edu/63496/1/WP23-HigherEducation-EUSG.pdf>
- Srikatanyoo, N., & Gnoth, J. (2002). Nation branding: Country image and international tertiary education. *Journal of Brand Management*, 10(2), 139–146. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540111>
- State Education Development Agency Republic of Latvia. (2021, April 23). Publiskie pārskati [Public reports]. Retrieved 26th September 2021, from <https://www.viaa.gov.lv/lv/publiskie-parskati>
- State Education Development Agency Republic of Latvia. (2021, May 18). Latvian state scholarships. Retrieved 26th September 2021, from <https://www.viaa.gov.lv/en/latvian-state-scholarships>
- Study in Latvia. (2021). *About us*. Retrieved 26th September 2021, from <https://www.studyinlatvia.lv/about>
- Teng, S., Khong, W. K., Chong, A. J. L. (2015). Study abroad information in the new media. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 25(2). 263–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2015.1079086>
- Wang, Z., Yang, P., & Li, D. (2021). The Influence of Heritage Tourism Destination Reputation on Tourist Consumption Behavior: A Case Study of World Cultural Heritage Shaolin Temple. *SAGE Open* 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211030275>

About Authors

Karīna Svētiņa

Corresponding author: jansonekarina@inbox.lv; 0037126709882

PhD student

Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art, University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4266-1096>

Rita Kiseļova

Senior researcher

Institute for Educational Research, Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art, University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6536-9982>

Ruta Svētiņa

lecturer, teacher of ESP

Centre for Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia