

IMPORTANCE OF WEBPAGE CONTENT AND DESIGN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION EXPORT

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ABSTRACT

Higher education export is gaining more and more importance taking into account international competition, the benefits offered by the industry and demographic changes in many countries – the number of local students is reducing due to low birth rates and extensive emigration of young people. There are many academic publications on several aspects related to higher education export. The aim of research is to analyse foreign students' evaluation on the importance of different organisations' (universities, agencies dealing with higher education export, ministries) webpage content and design for higher education export. Research methods used: scientific literature review analysis, evaluation of webpages by experts, survey of foreign students (using the evaluation scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means 'do not agree', and 10 – 'fully agree'). Data obtained from the foreign student survey are analysed by indicators of descriptive statistics (arithmetic mean, mode, median, range, standard deviations, standard error of mean), cross-tabulations, correlation analysis and factor analysis. The obtained research results have indicated narrow places and challenges for the information placed in respective webpages and webpage design which could be practically implemented.

KEYWORDS: *higher education export, webpages, organization support, attraction of foreign students.*

JEL CODES: M16, M31, M38.

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Introduction

In the last century, the world began to intensify its attention to the growing demand for higher education in the most prestigious universities in the world (Warwick, 2014: 91). As the demand grows, the universities are constantly working on an appropriate offer for both academic and economic reasons.

Export of higher education in recent years have become particularly relevant because of the international competition and the benefits offered by the industry. Translating and acquiring knowledge, mobilizing talents to support global research is considered to be the benefits of internationalization of higher education (Jibeen, Khan, 2015: 4).

Higher Education Council in Latvia has developed The Concept of Development of the Higher Education Institutions and Universities 2013–2020 where the main strategic goal is: "The establishment of a higher education system, which, based on cooperation between the public, private and academic environments, would ensure the competitive development of the Latvian state, national economy and

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higher education system in the European Common Space” (Council of Higher Education of Latvia, 2014). In order to promote this competitiveness, it is necessary to look globally, taking into account the fact that the attraction of local students is insufficient to raise the country’s prosperity, to promote productivity, growth and to fully ensure jobs for the academic staff.

The aim of research is to analyse foreign students’ evaluations on the importance of different organisations’ (universities, agencies dealing with higher education export, ministries) webpage content and design for higher education export.

The tasks of research:

1. To analyse the findings on higher education export reflected in scientific publications.
2. To analyse the results of foreign students’ views on the importance of different sources of information related to higher education export.

Research methods used: analysis of scientific publications, interviews of foreign students, survey of foreign students, using the evaluation scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means ‘do not agree’, and 10 – ‘fully agree’. Data obtained from the foreign students’ survey are analysed by indicators of descriptive statistics (arithmetic mean, mode, median, range, standard deviations, standard error of mean), cross-tabulations, correlation analysis and factor analysis.

1. Theoretical background. Export of higher education in Latvia and in the world

Looking at the success of foreign institutions in promoting higher education exports, it is evident that the trend that has taken place in the last decade is similar to all countries: they are increasingly striving to seize foreign students to their local higher education institutions. The methods used to attract students are similar in the Baltic States, Europe and all over the world: scholarships, participation in study exchange programs, visa facilitation, marketing activities abroad, higher education institution exhibitions, job offers, etc.

Academic researchers world-wide pay a lot of attention in their research to different aspects of higher education export including conditions and requirements for conducting research and teaching (Kantola, Kettunen, 2012: 11); importance of quality of study programs by the view of students and employers (Lapina, Roga, Mürsepp, 2016: 274), taking into account also different aspects of globalisation (Dickson, 2009: 179), importance of sustainability of higher education for regional development (Rodríguez-Solera, Silva-Laya, 2017: 284), internationalisation as democratic development of higher education (Tang, Tsui, 2018: 32), as well as cooperation between businesses of several countries (Šimanskiene, Burgis, Līduma, Zeltiņa, 2012: 142). Global markets also influence many aspects in each exporting the higher education (Ordonez, 2012: 51). University rankings, quality of higher education programs and internationalisation aspects (Alsharari, 2018: 364) are of a great importance for higher education export (Blanco-Ramírez, Berger 2014: 94). Australia is among the best exporters of higher education (Tian, Martin, 2014: 942) and there among researchers several approaches for higher education export are discussed. The use of webpage as a marketing tool for higher education export is on research agenda among many researchers (Milian, Gurrisi, 2017; Mogaji, 2016).

The US government has facilitated the recruitment of international students by organizing school exhibitions, virtual, live information access opportunities for foreign students, experience exchange visits for higher education experts, professionals, as well as online and individual market research and counselling for students and academic staff.

Since foreign students in the USA are from different parts of the world (mainly China, India and South Korea) and their number is significant, the government supports exports of higher education, considering this support as a public policy issue (Jacob, Gokbel, 2018: 6). Students attracted by educational institutions have a significant economic driving force for many colleges and universities in cities and metropolitan areas. Higher education export industry in 2015 has contributed \$ 30.8 billion to the US economy (International Trade Administration, 2016).

In addition to this, the US Department of State has developed the *EducationUSA* program – hundreds of counselling centres in 170 countries of the world collaborating with US higher education professionals to facilitate the admission of international students to the United States (International Trade Administration, 2016).

Since the late 1980s, the Australian Government has also actively supported national exports of higher education through the use of a designated entity, involvement of national administrations (Bennell, Pearce, 2003: 215).

Australian Education International, a branch of Australian Education Department, acts as a government representative on international coordination in education. *Australian Education International* is responsible for intergovernmental partnerships, international scholarships, student mobility programs and recognition of foreign qualifications, as well as for the data and research in the field of higher education (Hunter, Wit, Howard, Egron-Polak, 2015: 195).

The success and implemented solutions of Australia's higher education exports is based on a developed system, where the number of elements and distribution of responsibilities is very significant. The system is based on the basic elements of the hierarchy, the institutions that oversee the performance of the subordinate institutions, coordinate and decide on the choice of future goals. If an institution has assumed responsibility for the whole industry (in the case of Australia – the Cabinet of Ministers), the delegation of further tasks and the involvement of other organizations is a matter of cooperation that requires resources but also yields a relatively quick return through the country's potential.

Among countries offering higher education for foreign students, Germany is one of those who offers free study opportunities, which could be considered as a significant reason for an increase in international students. In the case of the USA and the United Kingdom, it would not be possible to imagine implementing this kind of policy, given the financial contribution of annual tuition fees for foreign students.

Marijke Wahlers, Head of the International Department of German Rectors' Conference, explained (Wahlers, 2018) that Germans invest a certain amount of money in the education of foreign students, but what they get later is worth more. International students in the future will be Germany's partners in the world. Marijke Wahlers stresses that creating this kind of international network is extremely important.

The internationalization of higher education study by the European Parliament Committee on Culture and Education states that internationalization in Germany is a much more coherent process than in some other educational systems in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Arrangement and division of responsibilities are the result of the support of the five strongest promoters of German internationalization: the German Federal Education and Research Ministry, the German Council for Science and Humanities, the German Rectors Conference, the German Academic Exchange Service and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Hunter, Wit, Howard, Egron-Polak, 2015: 107). The agenda developed by these federal players sets out comprehensive goals, which are carried out at various levels at national and regional level by different agencies, research institutions and academic institutions.

After comparing the experience of Lithuania and Estonia, it can be concluded that Estonia's efforts to attract international students are based not only on a successful coordination with *StudyinEstonia.ee* platform but also on a nationally developed strategy, targeted policy to promote higher education exports, and thus the number of foreign students, thus the contribution of the country is higher.

According to the studies of the Latvian organization *Certus*, its leader, Daunis Auers, said (Auers, 2017): "Estonia and Latvia have made similar progress in attracting foreign students since 2011/2012 study year. However, if Estonian universities have made progress, largely thanks to the country's national strategy, at the same time, Latvian higher education institutions have had to work independently."

Looking at the review of the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science (MES), it can be seen that over the past ten years, the number of foreign students in Latvian universities has increased from around 1500 in the 2006/07 academic year up to 8137 students in the 2016/17 academic year (see Figure 1), which is 26% more than in the previous academic year. In the 2016/2017 academic year, the proportion of foreign students

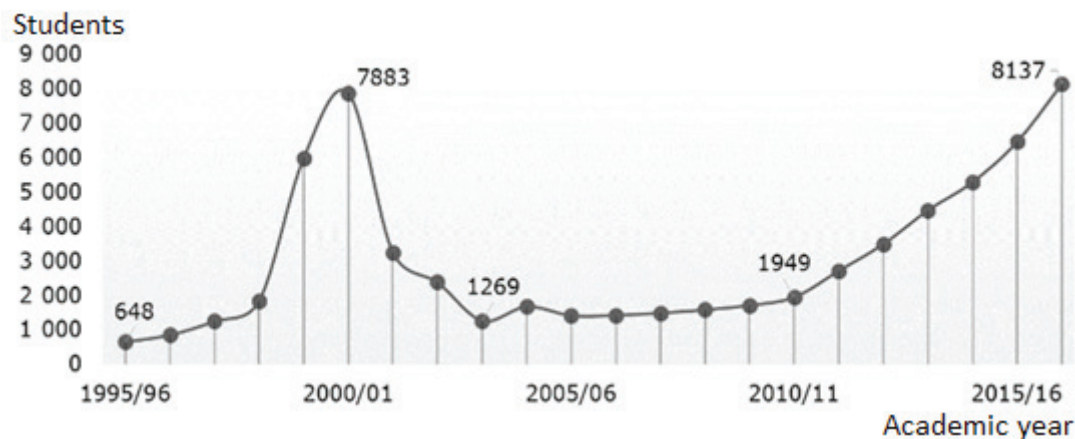


Fig. 1. Number of foreign students in Latvian higher education institutions in the 1995/96–2016/17 academic year

Source: Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Latvia (2018).

has reached 10% of the total number of students in Latvia (Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Latvia, 2016).

The concrete argument of D. Auers and the considerable increase in the number of foreign students suggests the potential benefits of the higher education export industry and the superiority regarding the neighbouring countries if the export capacity of Latvia in a particular sector was intensified by the state itself, its developed policies and organizations.

2. Research results and discussion

Research examines the role of such Latvian institutions in promoting higher education exports as: the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA), the State Education Development Agency (SEDA), the Ministry of Education and Research (MER), the Ministry of Economics (ME) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Information about the activities of these institutions regarding the export of higher education was obtained on the websites of the relevant organizations, as well as being in contact with representatives of the relevant institutions.

Since the 2011/2012 academic year, State Education Development Agency (SEDA) has administrated the Latvian State scholarships for foreigners. Granting scholarships to foreigners is regulated by the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations 2012 “Procedure for Granting Grant for Foreigners” (Cabinet of Ministers, 2012). The representative of SEDA points out that information about Latvian state scholarships is distributed annually before the opening of the application system to foreign partners, Latvian embassies abroad, foreign embassies in Latvia, international education exhibitions; besides, universities distribute information to their cooperation partners.

The SEDA activity for the promotion of higher education exports also takes place within the framework of the *Erasmus+* program. One of the activities devoted to SEDA is the *Erasmus + International Student and Teacher mobility* (since 2015) (SEDA, 2018).

Besides the mentioned activities, SEDA maintains the website www.studyinlatvia.lv, which collects information about all study programs offered by Latvian universities to foreigners. The information in the database is collected and updated by an employee of the SEDA Information and Career Support Department, using the information provided by the higher education institutions, as well as the register of accreditation of educational institutions and study areas.

In its turn, the Ministry of Education and Research (MER) of the Republic of Latvia has provided Structural Fund investments (in the form of Specific Aid Objectives (SAOs)) to promote the internationalization of higher education institutions, which is one of the priorities set out in the Education Development Guidelines (2014-2020) (Jaunrades laboratorija, Ltd., 2018).

It was concluded that the Ministry of Education and Science also supports and finances the AIC activities and (in cooperation with the SEDA) *StudyinLatvia.eu* website, aimed to attract foreign students and promote the growth of higher education exports.

The website of the Ministry of Education and Science provides links of different institutions that offer to a foreign student the necessary information for the choice of the study area, as well as information on visas, residence permits, scholarships and program selection (Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Latvia, 2018).

Although the promotion of the Latvian export sector is in the competence of the Ministry of Economics (ME), which implements the export support policy, international representation of services and products, and provides assistance in acquiring external markets by examining a detailed description of the direction of export promotion, it is concluded that higher education exports are not considered a remarkable sector that needs support. There is no mention of higher education in any of the services export reviews, which could indicate ME's reluctance to take responsibility for this industry.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicates that in order to promote education exports, the MFA cooperates with the Ministry of Education and Science and Latvian higher education institutions and, within the framework of its competence, assists interested institutions in attracting foreign students, including the involvement of diplomatic and consular representations abroad, where applications for foreign citizens interested in studying at higher education institutions of Latvia are accepted.

The MFA's Foreign Economic Relations Division, in the correspondence, informs: "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs holds informational events to promote exports of higher education, for example, on February 5, 2018, the Foreign Ministry, in cooperation with the Latvian Investment and Development Agency, organized a discussion on opportunities for cooperation between Latvia and China in entrepreneurship and education" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

Regarding the attraction of foreign students, the activities of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) are aimed at issuing visas, residence and work permits. The amendments to the Immigration Law made in 2018, which will reduce the administrative burden for foreign students and researchers, are recommended. As stated on the website of the OCMA, with the amendments, it is planned to grant unrestricted access to the labour market for foreigners studying in Master's or PhD programs who have received education in Latvia (Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, 2018).

After examining the responsibilities of institutions with regard to higher education export, it can be concluded that each organization has its own tasks and performing them they often cooperate with other institutions. Upon completion of the tasks, their cooperation will be closed until a new plan emerges foreseeing greater involvement of the institutions. According to the authors of this research, cooperation between institutions needs to be constantly maintained by developing a cooperation mechanism, a scheme that can be found in the existing hierarchy working on promoting higher education exports.

From March till May 2018, 202 foreign students in Latvia were questioned by using a survey prepared by Klinta Krauze. The survey was distributed by using an online platform *QuestionPro*. The results have been summarized and analysed using the *IBM SPSS* software package. The questionnaire questions included both open optional and rating-type questions. Foreign students on the 10-point scale (where 1 meant 'is not important' and 10 – 'is very important') evaluated the impact of various reasons on the decision to choose Latvia as their destination where to study. The survey filled in foreign students from 45 different countries all over the world. Most of the answers were from the students that come from Germany and India.

According to the most frequently given evaluations, modal values, average and average arithmetic, authors found that the majority of foreign students as the main aspects when choosing to study in Latvia see: affordable living costs, the language of study and the fact that Latvia is an EU Member State (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of descriptive statistics of respondents' evaluations on the answers to the question "What were your reasons for choosing to study in Latvia?"

	International recognition of qualifications obtained in Latvia	Language of studies	Latvia is a member of the European Union	Acceptable living costs	Recommendation from a friend/acquaintance	The culture of Latvia	The quality of education	University presence in University Rankings	Tuition fee
Arithmetic mean	5.48	7.68	6.49	8.07	4.87	5.26	6.40	4.59	6.72
Standard error of mean	0.175	0.161	0.190	0.144	0.214	0.182	0.163	0.207	0.196
Median	6	8	7	9	5	5	7	5	8
Mode	5	10	10	10	1	5	7	1	8
Standard deviation	2.490	2.283	2.694	2.051	3.046	2.589	2.310	2.938	2.783
Variance	6.201	5.213	7.256	4.208	9.281	6.702	5.336	8.630	7.746
Range	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Min value	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Max value	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10

Source: created by the authors using Klinta Krauze's conducted foreign student survey in 2018 (March-May).

Note: $n = 202$, evaluation scale: from 1 to 10, where 1 means 'is not important', 10 – 'is very important'.

The results of descriptive statistics also show that a recommendation from a friend or family, as well as the university's presence in university rankings is the least important from the given reasons why respondents choose Latvia as a country for their studies. At the same time for these two reasons (a recommendation from a friend or family, the university's presence in university rankings) the variance of the evaluation is the highest that, in this case, shows also a big difference in foreign students' opinion.

The main indicators of descriptive statistics are included in Table 2. After the factor analysis, it can be seen that the student's decision to choose Latvia as the study destination is influenced by three complex factors (Table 2): the quality factor of education (international recognition of qualifications obtained in Latvia, the quality of education, the university's presence in university rankings, tuition fee), social factor (acceptable living costs, recommendation from a friend/acquaintance) and international, internationalization factor (language of studies, Latvia is a member of the European Union).

In turn, the factors that help a foreign student in the institution selection process are: social media and partner universities, friends and family, as well as a professional study consultant (Table 3). All the mentioned factors show that a positive image of the state, a good reputation, cooperation with partners and universities abroad can create the interest and desire of international students to study in Latvia.

The indicated respondent's age (with the exception of the level of education) does not show a significant correlation with any factor. The relation between age and education level is explained by the current tendency – the older the student, the higher the level of education he has obtained.

The correlation analysis shows that the links between higher education institutions and the future student have a significant impact on the quality of the offered studies, cooperation with partner universities and students' impressions of the state and educational opportunities in Latvia.

Besides, during the interviews, survey and the collection of results, the authors reviewed for comparison three homepages of the Baltic countries that are used as their image: Latvia³, Lithuania⁴, Estonia⁵. The analy-

³ Available at: <http://www.latvia.eu>.

⁴ Available at: <http://www.lietuva.lt/100/en>.

⁵ Available at: <https://www.estonia.ee>.

Table 2. Results of factor analysis of respondents' evaluations on the answers to the question "What were your reasons for choosing to study in Latvia?"

Respondents' evaluation of selected aspects	Component		
	1	2	3
International recognition of qualifications obtained in Latvia	0.704	0.066	.363
Language of studies	0.148	-0.038	.764
Latvia is a member of the European Union	0.040	0.136	.569
Acceptable living costs	0.010	0.754	.236
Recommendation from a friend/acquaintance	0.115	0.708	-.068
The culture of Latvia	0.045	0.356	.298
The quality of education	0.846	0.105	.170
University's presence in university rankings	0.809	0.048	-.046
Tuition fee	0.505	0.500	-.076

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization, Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Source: created by the authors using Klinta Krauze's conducted foreign student survey in 2018 (March-May).

Note: $n = 202$, evaluation scale: from 1 to 10, where 1 means 'is not important', 10 – 'is very important'.

Table 3. Results of factor analysis of respondents' evaluations on the answers to the question "What helped you to choose the right university in Latvia for your studies?"

Respondents' evaluation of selected aspects	Component		
	1	2	3
Family members	0.000	0.777	0.346
Friends	0.166	0.833	-0.200
Information from different websites	0.761	0.090	-0.184
Professional study adviser	0.039	0.074	0.862
Social media	0.790	0.204	0.132
Previous school's staff	0.619	-0.149	0.409

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization, Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Source: created by the authors using Klinta Krauze's conducted foreign student survey in 2018 (March-May).

Note: $n = 202$, evaluation scale: from 1 to 10, where 1 means 'didn't help at all', 10 – 'helped a lot'.

sis is based on a number of common criteria, aspects that are judged by the analysis of each website, taking into account the layout of information, availability, extraction speed (the number of clicks), etc.

It can be concluded that unlike the website representing the image of Latvia, the Estonian and Lithuanian websites that are designed for the same purpose include both study and work opportunities, as well as issues of living and document management (i.e., how to receive a residence permit, visa, etc.). The platform *Latvia.eu* managed and developed by the Latvian Institute does not contain this type of information. In this respect, significant improvements are required in order for the website to serve not only as illustrative material for the country's cultural events and natural landscapes, but also as an informative source for the foreigner, foreign student who arrives.

In the evaluation process, four unrelated experts analysed three websites (*Studyinlatvia.eu/*, *Studyinestonia.ee/*, *Studyinlithuania.lt/*), which offer study opportunities in each of the Baltic countries.

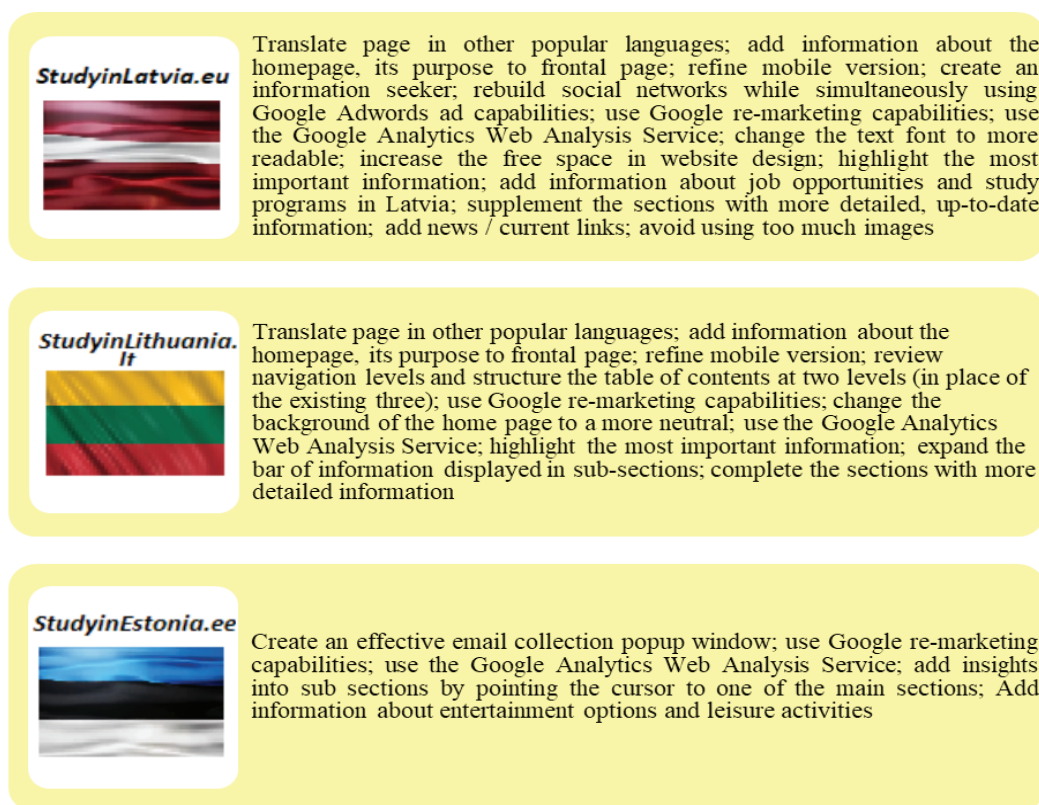


Fig. 2. Summary of four expert recommendations for the webpage improvement on the study opportunities in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia

Source: Klinta Krauze's update of expert views.

According to the assessment of the aspects made by the experts and the author of the research, it can be seen that the Lithuanian and Estonian study websites were rated as slightly more useful, including more successful solutions, compared to the Latvian *StudyinLatvia.eu* homepage.

In order to better reflect the recommendations of experts for the perfection of websites, the authors have developed an image with the proposals for improvement of the all three Baltic countries' websites for the study purpose (Figure 2).

It can be concluded that in order to increase the awareness of the study opportunities, some high-quality and modern platforms for basic information are developed, but in order to ensure the effective attraction of foreign students, it is necessary to focus on the improvement of mobile versions, user interface, the translation of websites into other languages and the amount of information provided. As experts pointed out, it is also important to use existing marketing opportunities that will allow to attract students and repeatedly address them the necessary information.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

The main shortcomings in attracting foreign students to Latvia are the lack of coordination / communicative function from the state institutions, low contribution to the recognition of the image of the state and cities, and the complicated, time consuming process for obtaining visas. There is lack of accountability of certain institutions for a specific sector that would create a hierarchical division of responsibilities regarding higher education export, delegation of tasks, which would be based on cooperation between different organizations within their competencies.

The survey results indicate that the most important factors for choosing to study in Latvia, according to foreign students, are affordable living costs and the language of studies. In addition, the results of the survey show that the fact that Latvia is an EU Member State is also an important reason for the choice of study in Latvia. The decision to choose Latvia as the study destination is influenced by three complex factors: quality factor of education, social factor and international (internationalization) factor. In turn, the choice of a university is influenced by internet resources – various university websites, study portals and social networks, like *Facebook* and *StudyinLatvia* portal. The role of electronic media, partner university instructors, friends and family, as well as a professional study counsellor plays an important role in attracting foreign students.

Based on the research carried out and the conclusions made, proposals were made to promote the higher education export industry in Latvia:

1. It is recommended for the Latvian Institute to improve the website *Latvia.eu* by adding information about study, work and living opportunities, and by redirecting specific questions to responsible institutions.
2. The Academic Information Centre and the State Education and Development Agency are advised to update the website *Studyinlatvia* by developing versions in Russian and German, adding information about career opportunities and also by implementing some successful solutions given in Lithuanian and Estonian websites.
3. The Cabinet of Ministers is recommended to assume its responsibility for the higher education export industry by delegating responsibilities, specific tasks to the ministries and institutions subordinated to or supervised by them.

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TINKLALAPIŲ TURINIO IR DIZAINO SVARBA, SIEKIANT EKSPORTUOTI AUKŠTĄJĄ MOKSLĄ

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Santrauka

Aukštojo mokslo eksportas tampa vis svarbesnis dėl tarptautinės konkurencijos ir daugelio šalių demografinių pokyčių: vietos studentų skaičius mažėja dėl mažo gimstamumo ir jaunimo emigracijos. Apie aukštojo mokslo eksportą yra nemažai akademinės literatūros.

Tyrimo tikslas: išanalizuoti, kaip užsienio studentai vertina interneto svetainių (universitetų, aukštojo mokslo eksporto agentūrų, ministerijų) turinio ir dizaino svarbą aukštojo mokslo eksportui.

Taikomi tyrimo metodai: mokslinės literatūros apžvalgos analizė, ekspertų atliktų tinklalapių vertinimas, užsienio studentų apklausa (vertinimo skalė – nuo 1 iki 10, kur 1 reiškia „nesutinku“, 10 – „visiškai sutinku“). Remiantis užsienio studentų apklausos duomenimis ir statistikos rodikliais, duomenys apdoroti ir analizuojami pateikiant aritmetinius vidurkius, medianą, intervalus, standartinius nuokrypius, standartinę vidurkio paklaidą, atlikta koreliacijos ir faktorinė analizės.

Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad užsieniečius kviečiančiuose studijuoti tinklalapiuose esama nemažai spragų. Remiantis atliktais tyrimais ir padarytomis išvadomis, pasiūlyta Latvijoje skatinti aukštojo mokslo eksportą: rekomenduojama Latvijos institutui patobulinti Latvijos interneto svetainę, įtraukiant informaciją apie studijų, darbo ir gyvenimo galimybes bei konkrečius klausimus nukreipiant atsakingoms institucijoms; akademinės informacijos centrui ir Valstybinei švietimo ir plėtros agentūrai patariama atnaujinti tinklalapį *Studyinlatvia*: sukurti versijas rusų ir vokiečių kalbomis, įtraukti informaciją apie karjeros galimybes ir sėkmingus sprendimus, kuri pateikta Lietuvos ir Estijos svetainėse; Ministrų kabinetui rekomenduojama priimti atsakomybę už aukštojo mokslo eksportą, perduodant pareigas konkrečioms jų pavaldžioms ar prižiūrimoms ministerijoms ir institucijoms.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: *aukštojo mokslo eksportas, tinklalapiai, organizacijos parama, užsienio studentų pritraukimas.*

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