

## Overview of the Conceptual Plan Development Process

In accordance with the Universities Act, the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) conducts institutional accreditations of all higher education institutions in Estonia at least once every seven years. By the end of 2017 the first round of accreditations will have been completed and, before starting a new period, it is necessary to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of the current approach and to plan changes if needed.

It is not practical to look at institutional accreditation separately from the whole system of quality assessment of higher education. It is therefore necessary to first analyse the functioning and effectiveness of the whole system and then to plan for a long-term course of action.

To develop proposals for reorganising the system of quality assessment in higher education, as well as to develop principles and procedures for the institutional accreditation process for the next cycle, EKKA formed the **Institutional Accreditation Development Team (IA Development Team)** composed of representatives delegated by the main stakeholders of quality assessment in higher education (higher education institutions, the student body, employers, the Ministry of Education and Research, EKKA):

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**Paavo Kaimre**, Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs at the Estonian University of Life Sciences (Estonian Rectors' Conference)

**Volli Kalm**, Rector of the University of Tartu (Estonian Rectors' Conference)

**Tiit Kerem**, Telora-E AS, Estonian Association of Architectural and Consulting Engineering Companies (Estonian Employers' Confederation)

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Proposals by the IA Development Team provide input into updating higher education legislation, planned to be completed in 2019. When weighing different solutions, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area should also be taken into account, being the basis for international recognition of Estonian higher education.

### Tasks of the IA Development Team:

- 1) To weigh the alternative solutions for the external quality assurance system proposed by EKKA, and to map the impacts of such options;

- 2) To coordinate the conceptual plan for updating the external quality assurance system, and to forward it to the steering group on higher education legislation for further development;
- 3) To discuss the principles and procedures for the new period of institutional accreditations and to make amendment proposals;
- 4) To agree upon the principles and procedures for institutional accreditation before the document is disseminated for wider discussion.

#### Timeline and activities:

January	Analysis, problems and possible solutions of the current quality assessment system: discussion within the IA Development Team took place on 17.01.2017.
February	EKKA develops a new conceptual plan for quality assessment in higher education, based on the version that had the strongest support from the IA Development Team. The conceptual plan was sent to the Team for inspection on 7.03.2017.
March	A discussion within the IA Development Team about the new conceptual plan for quality assessment took place on 14.03.2017. EKKA amended the conceptual plan and forwarded it to the Team for review.
April	EKKA introduced minor amendments based on feedback from the Team and sent the final version along with a feedback summary to the Team for information. The amended conceptual plan is sent to the sub-groups who work on the higher education legislation.
May	A discussion within the Team about the principles and procedures for the new period of institutional accreditations.
June	A discussion about the principles and procedures for the new period of institutional accreditations at the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education, forwarding them for a round of consultations.
August	Summarising the feedback resulting from the round of consultations and, if necessary, coordinating the amendments with the IA Development Team.
October	Approval of the conditions of and procedures for institutional accreditations of the new period at the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education.

#### Amendment Proposals in Brief:

1. From 2020 onward, the main method of assessing the quality of higher education will be **institutional accreditation** which assesses, inter alia, the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system. The effectiveness of the system will be assessed on a sampling basis (2–3 study programme bundles or study programme groups).
2. **Quality assessment of study programme groups** in its current form (where all study programme groups along with all cycles of higher education are assessed at least once every seven years) **will be discontinued**. **Thematic evaluations** are planned as follow-up activities aimed at supporting development in the system-wide *areas for improvement* revealed by the previous assessment results.

## CONCEPTUAL PLAN FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR 2020

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## 1. Principles for Quality Assessment of Higher Education in Europe and Their Implementation in Estonia

### The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

(ESG; in Estonian EKKSS, but the English abbreviation 'ESG' is also used)

The ESG constitute a transnational agreement on the requirements for quality in higher education. The content of this agreement was developed by and coordinated with representative organisations for universities, professional higher education institutions, students, employers, and quality assurance agencies; and approved by the ministers responsible for higher education at their conference in Yerevan on 14-15 May 2015. In essence this is a revision of the document that had entered into force in 2005.

A key goal of the ESG is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching across borders and among all stakeholders<sup>1</sup>. They have played and will continue to play an important role in the development of national and institutional quality assurance systems across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as well as cross-border cooperation. Engagement with quality assurance processes, particularly the external ones, **allows European higher education systems to demonstrate quality and increase transparency, thus helping to build mutual trust and better recognition of their qualifications, programmes and other activities.**

The ESG are based on the following four principles for quality assurance in the EHEA:

- Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
- Quality assurance responds to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students;
- Quality assurance supports the development of a quality culture;
- Quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society.

The full text of the ESG is available [here](#).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) and quality assurance agencies use the ESG as a reference document for internal and external quality assurance systems in higher education. Moreover, this document is used by the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), which is responsible for the register of quality assurance agencies that comply with the ESG. EKKK has been included in EQAR since 2013. After the adoption of an updated version of the ESG, some amendments have been made to the EKKK regulations, in particular with regard to the learner-centred and learning-centred approaches in the new ESG (but also in the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy).

### The quality assurance system in higher education in Estonia

Since 2012, only the HEIs that have passed an assessment of the quality of their teaching may offer higher education in Estonia. In Estonia, studies at the higher education level may only be conducted if the Government of the Republic has issued the so-called 'education licence' – the right to conduct

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, in this document stakeholders are understood to cover all actors within a higher education institution, including employees and students, as well as external stakeholders such as employers and external partners of the institution.

studies in a given study programme group and in a given cycle of higher education (bachelor's, professional higher education, master's, integrated or doctoral studies). It is accompanied by the right to issue state graduation documents. The basis for granting a right to conduct studies is the peer review, which the Ministry of Education and Research orders from EKKA. Higher education institutions that have been awarded the right to conduct studies are required, at least once every 7 years, to undergo:

- [Institutional accreditation](#) – an external evaluation assessing the compliance of the management, administration, academic and research activity, and academic and research environment of the higher education institution, with the legislation, along with the purposes and development plans of that institution.

Moreover, at least once every 7 years, each study programme group must undergo:

- [Quality assessment of the study programme group](#) – an external evaluation assessing the compliance of study programmes as well as the instruction and instruction-related development based on them, with legislation, national and international standards and trends, with the aim to make recommendations for improving the quality of instruction.

Until 2009, international expert committees accredited all study programmes of higher education. To change from the old study programme accreditation system to a new supportive assessment, in 2009–2011 the evaluation of study programme groups of all educational institutions, the so-called transitional evaluation, was carried out. The transitional evaluation resulted either in granting the right to conduct studies or in an obligation to terminate provision of instruction. The study programme groups which, during their transitional evaluations, were granted the right to conduct studies for specified terms, will undergo [re-evaluations](#) until 2017.

In addition to institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups, the Estonian Research Council conducts [regular evaluations and targeted evaluations of research](#), in accordance with the Organisation of Research and Development Act. A positive result of the regular evaluation will give a R&D institution the right to compete for national research funding, and for a university the right to offer doctoral studies. The status of a university is limited to those higher education institutions that offer education in all three cycles of higher education.

## 2. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Current Quality Assessment System

The impact of the current quality assessment system cannot be assessed on an evidence basis, as all HEIs have not yet completed the first round of any forms of assessment of the quality of higher education. However, the institutional accreditation is close to the finish line – with the Estonian Academy of Arts and two small private higher education institutions remaining. The quality assessment of study programme groups is still halfway, and one must be careful about drawing definitive conclusions.

As regards the external evaluation of research, regular evaluations are an exception since they are carried out in all fields of research within a six-month period (all fields are assessed by committees of 16 members, committee visits to the R&D institutions taking place within one week), as provided by the Organisation of Research and Development Act. Assessments of doctoral studies, sharing common elements with the regular evaluations, will be carried out during this year and the next.

Despite the above, however, it is possible to make an initial summary of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and risks of the current system on the basis of opinions by various parties (managements of HEIs, staffs, students and assessment committees, including employer representatives) and analyses carried out by EKKA. The table below lists opinions on assessments that are conducted on a regular basis – institutional accreditation (IA), quality assessment of study programme groups (quality assessment of SPGs), and regular evaluation of research. For the sake of clarity, evaluations for entering the higher education system (establishing a new higher education institution, applying for the right to conduct studies in a study programme group) are not included here.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The quality assessment system for higher education enables feedback on the management and functioning of the HEI as a whole, including basic processes (IA); as well as on the development of curricula and the implementation of academic activities at the grass-roots level, i.e. implementation of the strategic goals and principles within academic units (quality assessment of SPGs).</li> <li>• Self-evaluations at the institutional level are useful, help to organise the management system, force collection and analysis of data on a regular basis, and also can provide valuable inputs for analysing the implementation of development plans and for designing new ones.</li> <li>• Institutional accreditation is a useful management tool that helps to carry out necessary (though sometimes unpopular) changes. An outsider’s objective view is also useful when it confirms that the HEI is doing the right thing and doing it correctly.</li> <li>• Quality assessment of SPGs is clearly oriented towards recommendations for their development – most self-evaluation reports by HEIs are openly critical; experts have an opportunity to make recommendations that do not involve sanctions on the HEI.</li> <li>• Regular evaluations of research have an impact on the functioning of the entire system of higher education, since their positive outcomes give the HEIs access to national research funding and to the provision of doctoral studies.</li> <li>• Employers are interested both in participating in the work of assessment committees and in the outcomes of assessments in areas with a clear relevance to the labour market (medicine, IT, aviation, teacher training, etc.).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At certain periods the load of assessments is too large for HEIs, involving too many different types of assessments. For example, in 2018 the major universities will undergo regular evaluations, quality assessments of doctoral studies and quality assessments of several study programme groups all at the same time.</li> <li>• In the case of institutional accreditation, self-evaluations are generally focused on the managerial level and central administrative units; management at the academic unit levels has been sidelined, and implementation of institutional-level decisions at the middle-management levels are not addressed.</li> <li>• In the case of smaller HEIs, the second assessment area of the institutional accreditation – teaching and learning – overlaps with the quality assessment of SPGs.</li> <li>• Quality assessment of SPGs is very labour intensive for both the HEI and the assessment committee, and its perceived effectiveness for teaching staff is sometimes insignificant.</li> <li>• In the case of smaller HEIs, it is difficult to distinguish between the analysis levels of the general part and of the study programme group.</li> <li>• There is not enough time for meaningful discussions with experts at the study programme level. In the case of large study programme groups, feedback remains relatively superficial.</li> <li>• The results of the first round of regular evaluations of research are expressed in very generic terms and do not provide a segmented evaluation, which is why experts in assessing doctoral studies need to evaluate the quality of research underlying each individual doctoral programme.</li> </ul>
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EKKA is able to combine different assessments to reduce the assessment burden for HEIs (joint assessment of vocational and higher education at the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, institutional accreditation and quality assessment of the SPG at the Estonian Academy of Arts).</li> <li>• Quality assessment of SPGs provides a comparison</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some HEIs are thinking of survival rather than development, and so in their eyes the evaluators appear to be judges rather than critical friends.</li> <li>• The structure of HEIs is not based on the logic of the study programme groups, and the division into study programme groups does not support interdisciplinarity. Therefore, assessment by study programme group is</li> </ul>

<p>between HEIs and, at the study programme level, also comparisons within an HEI. Such assessments guide participants to learn from one another within an institution and among institutions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality assessment of SPGs supports the dissemination of a culture of self-evaluation at different unit levels within an HEI (staff, students, study programme, study programme group).</li> <li>• In the second round of regular evaluations, changes have been planned to ensure that experts assess the research underlying each doctoral programme, but it is unclear as to which consequences will be accompanied by a negative evaluation.</li> </ul>	<p>sometimes considered artificial by both HEIs and experts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As quality cultures and mastery of the self-evaluations are improving, the benefits of outsiders' views will be lessening for both types of quality assessment – institutional and study programme group assessments.</li> <li>• Coherence of research and the process of learning and teaching remains without sufficient attention within several different types of assessment.</li> </ul>
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Therefore, the main problem is the plurality of evaluations and their partial overlapping. HEIs do not contest the areas for improvement identified in the assessment reports, but they are of the opinion that due to frequent assessments they do not have enough time to deal with the problems.

Quality assessment of study programme groups is a supportive (formative) assessment based on an honest self-evaluation at the study programme level. However, this kind of 'looking in the mirror' at the level of a study programme or study programme group (or bundle of study programmes) is still not a standard approach in most HEIs, and therefore the underlying value of the quality assessment of study programme groups is that HEIs must perform internal quality evaluations, which should become a regular practice in every HEI. The table above provides a number of strengths and opportunities for the quality assessment of study programme groups that should be retained in the quality assessment system, while reducing the burden of the assessments on HEIs.

### 3. Quality Assessment in Higher Education for 2020

#### The purpose and principles of quality assessment

**The purpose: To support the development of a quality culture that values learning-centeredness, creativity and innovation, and an increase in the impact by academic, research and development activities of the higher education institutions on social development.**

The following principles need to be taken into account when updating the concept of quality assessment in higher education:

- 1) To maintain continuity – improve the existing system by developing strengths, eliminating weaknesses and managing risks.
- 2) To support the development of a quality culture at HEIs by updating the assessment requirements and procedures, to stimulate creativity and innovation, as well as increasing the impacts of teaching, research and development on society.
- 3) To achieve the best results with optimised resources – by reducing the load of different assessments, and by focusing on the most important areas of the HEI itself as well as of the state and the working world.
- 4) To take into account the expectations of various stakeholders, while also respecting the rights and obligations of the HEIs to be responsible for the quality of their academic,

research and development activities, to set goals related thereto and to ensure achievement of those goals.

- 5) To take into account the requirements set out by the ESG, including the importance of learner-centred and learning-centred approaches.
- 6) To plan for the so-called positive discrimination, keeping in mind that one of the requirements for an effective external evaluation is a (positive) outcome – for example, when entering the higher education landscape, an HEI's assessment is related to granting the right to conduct studies; a positive assessment decision grants the university the right to apply for research funding and apply for the launch of a new study programme group; a commendable result leads to additional funding; etc. The precise outcomes can be defined after discussions in the sub-groups working on the higher education legislation.

The EKKA IA Development Team proposes for the new assessment period:

- 1) to combine institutional accreditation with assessment of selected study programmes/study programme groups, and
- 2) to launch thematic evaluations that focus on bottlenecks identified during the previous assessments and on national priorities.

## Institutional Accreditation

The purpose is to support the development of strategic management and a quality culture that values learning-centredness, creativity and innovation in HEIs, as well as to increase the impact of academic, research and development activities of the higher education institutions on social development.

Institutional evaluations keep stakeholders informed of the outcomes of the core activities of HEIs and enhance competitiveness of Estonian higher education.

### Standards and Guidelines (Examples of Good Practice):

#### 1. Strategic management of the HEI and development of a quality culture

*Standard:*

**Development planning of the HEI is purposeful, systematic and broad based. The HEI regularly evaluates the achievement of its objectives and the impact of its activities. The HEI's internal assessment system supports strategic management and the development of a quality culture.**

*Examples of good practice/guidelines:*

The HEI has formulated its objectives and the key results of its core activities – learning, teaching, research, development and creative activities – taking into account national priorities and the needs of society. The HEI is managed in accordance with its mission, vision, core values, and objectives which are set on the basis of those principles. Achievement of the objectives and the impact of activities are regularly evaluated. Both core and support activities support creativity and innovation.



Membership (including students) and external stakeholders of the HEI are involved in developing and implementing its development plan and action plans. The HEI members share the core values that serve as a basis for the institution's development plan.

Regular internal assessments, mutual learning, comparisons with other HEIs of the results and means for their achievement, sharing of best practices, analyses of the results of internal assessments and quality improvement activities – are carried out at all HEI levels. The planning and implementation of activities are based on the following key questions in quality management:

- What do you want to do, and why? *Shown in: the mission, vision and objectives, including the national and international positioning of the HEI, etc.*
- How do you want to do it? *Shown in: the development plans, procedures, etc.*
- How do you know that the activities are effective and have the desired impacts? *Shown in: the feedback systems, analyses, etc.*
- How do you manage the quality improvement activities? *Shown in: the strategies, action plans, decisions, resources, etc.*

## 2. Academic ethics

*Standard:*

**The HEI has defined its principles for academic ethics, has a system for disseminating them among its members, and has a code of conduct including guidelines for cases of non-compliance with these principles. The HEI has a functioning system for handling complaints.**

*Examples of good practice/guidelines:*

The HEI values its members and ensures that all its employees and students are treated according to the principle of equal treatment.

Employees of the HEI follow the principles of academic ethics in all their activities.

The HEI supports its students in understanding and responding to ethical issues.

Teaching staff and students do not tolerate academic fraud, including cheating and plagiarism, and they will respond immediately upon any occurrence.

Management of complaints from HEI members is transparent and objective, ensuring fair treatment of all parties.

## 3. Management of resources

*Standard:*

**Staff development at the HEI and the management of tangible and financial resources are systematic and sustainable. Internal and external communications of the HEI (including marketing and image-building) are targeted and managed.**

*Examples of good practice/guidelines:*

The HEI has an effective staff development system. The principles and procedures for employee recruitment and development are based on the objectives of the HEI development plan, are fair and transparent. The career model of academic staff motivates young researchers to start their academic careers, creates opportunities for progress, and ensures sustainability. The principles of remuneration and motivation of employees are clearly defined, available to all employees, and uniformly followed.

The allocation of financial resources of the HEI is based on the objectives of the HEI development plan. The management and development of infrastructure (buildings, laboratories, classrooms, IT systems) are economically feasible. Sufficient resources are available for updating the infrastructure for education and research and/or a strategy exists enabling the HEI to acquire them.

Publicly offered information about HEI activities (including the study programmes) is clear, correct, objective, up to date and easily accessible. The HEI has an effective system for popularising its core activities.

Internal communications are appropriate for target groups. The HEI members are informed of the decisions relevant to them in a timely manner.

Employee satisfaction with the management, working conditions, information flow, etc., is regularly surveyed and the results used in quality improvement activities.

#### **4. Teaching staff**

*Standard:*

**Education is delivered by professionally competent teaching staff who support the development of learners, and value their own continuous self-development.**

*Examples of good practice/guidelines:*

Teaching staff systematically engage in developing their professional and teaching skills, improve their supervision competence, and share best practices with one another.

Teaching staff's participation in research, development and/or creative activities supports the teaching process and ensures the competence needed for supervising students' theses (including doctoral theses).

Teaching staff collaborate in fields of teaching, research and/or creative work within the HEI and with partners outside the HEI, e.g. with field practitioners, public sector organisations, companies, other R&D institutions, and lecturers from other Estonian or foreign higher education institutions. Qualified visiting lecturers and practitioners participate in the teaching process.

When assessing the work of teaching staff (including their evaluation), the effectiveness of their teaching as well as of their research, development and creative activities is taken into account, including student feedback, the effectiveness of their student supervision, development of their teaching and supervisory skills, international mobility, and entrepreneurial experience or other work experience in their fields of speciality outside the HEI.

## 5. Study programme development

*Standard:*

**Study programme development is systematic. All stakeholders, including students and employers, are involved in the design and development of study programmes. The content of study programmes is developed in accordance with the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme, taking into account international best practices, current professional standards and trends in the field. The competence acquired upon completing the study programme is in accord with the requirements for the relevant level in the Estonian Qualifications Framework.**

*Examples of good practice/guidelines:*

The planning of study programmes and student places by the HEI is based on its objectives and the needs of the labour market, and takes into account national strategies and the expectations of society.

The objectives of study programmes, the expected learning outcomes as well as entry and graduation requirements are clearly spelled out. The study programmes support creativity and entrepreneurship as well as the development of other general competencies.

Expected student workloads defined in the study programmes are realistic and consistent with the calculation that 1 ECTS credit = 26 student learning hours.

Theoretical learning and practical learning are interconnected. The content and organisation of practical trainings support the achievement of learning outcomes of the study programme and meet the needs of the parties.

Regular reviews of and improvements to study programmes ensure their continuing relevance.

## 6. Learning and teaching

*Standard:*

**The HEI systematically implements a learning-centred approach that guides students to take responsibility for their studies and career planning, and supports creativity and innovation. Graduates of the HEI, with their professional knowledge and social skills, are competitive both nationally and internationally.**

*Examples of good practice/guidelines:*

The teaching process takes into account the students' individual abilities and needs, and supports their development. Organisation of independent work and classroom teaching motivates students to take responsibility for their studies.

The teaching methods and learning aids used in the teaching process are modern, appropriate and effective, and support the development of a digital culture.

Students are motivated to learn, and contribute to improving the quality of their studies by providing meaningful feedback on both the learning process and the organisation of studies.

The HEI analyses the reasons students withdraw from studies or drop out, and takes steps to increase the effectiveness of the studies.

Doctoral students plan their studies as well as their R&D activities in collaboration with their supervisor(s), setting specific objectives for each year and assuming responsibility for achieving those objectives.

## **7. Student assessment**

*Standard:*

**The HEI ensures that assessments of students, including recognition of their prior learning and work experiences, support learning and are consistent with expected learning outcomes. The objectivity and reliability of student assessments are ensured.**

*Examples of good practice/guidelines:*

Assessment methods are versatile and relevant, and support, inter alia, the development of general competencies.

If possible, more than one staff member is involved in the development of assessment tasks and student assessments. Along with assessments, students receive feedback that supports their individual development.

The HEI supports development of the teaching staff's assessment competencies.

The evaluation of doctoral students is transparent and impartial. Its purpose is to support the development of doctoral students, to assess the effectiveness of the current work of doctoral students and to evaluate their ability to complete doctoral studies on time as well as to successfully defend their doctoral theses.

When recognising prior learning and work experience towards the completion of the study programme, the results obtained through the studies and work experiences are assessed rather than the workload or types of previous studies or work experiences. The reliability and objectivity of assessments are ensured.

Students are aware of their rights and obligations, including the procedures for challenges regarding assessments.

## **8. Learning support systems**

*Standard:*

**The HEI provides students with academic, career and psychological counselling. Students' individual development and academic progress are monitored and supported.**

*Examples of good practice/guidelines:*

The HEI supports the student in developing an individual study programme based on the student's special needs as well as educational abilities and preferences.

The HEI advises students on finding practical training facilities as well as jobs. Students are aware of where to get support in the case of psychological problems.

The HEI has an effective system to support and advise international students which, inter alia, helps them integrate smoothly into the membership of the HEI and Estonian society.

The HEI supports student participation in non-curricular activities and civil society initiatives.

The HEI monitors student satisfaction with the counselling services provided and makes changes as needed.

## **9. Research, development and/or other creative activities (RDC)**

*Standard:*

**The HEI has clearly defined its objectives and foci in the field of RDC, based on the HEI's self-determination and mission, taking into account the expectations of society, and the trends and future needs of the labour market, as well as ensuring sustainable development of its areas of responsibility.**

*Examples of good practice/guidelines:*

The HEI values the role and responsibilities of the field of RDC in society, evaluates the results of its RDC activities, their international visibility and social impact.

The HEI responds flexibly to the current needs of society and the labour market in terms of its research, and plans its research in collaboration with enterprises and public sector institutions.

The teaching staff introduce students to their research results as well as the latest scientific achievements in the specialty, and involve students in research and development projects where possible.

The organisation and management of RDC are clear and functional, and take into account thematic differences.

The HEI is an attractive workplace for R&D activities and contributes to the popularisation of academic careers.

## **10. Internationalisation**

*Standard:*

**The HEI has set clear objectives for internationalisation and regularly assesses the attainment of these objectives. The HEI has created an environment that encourages international mobility of students and teaching staff, supporting the development of learning, teaching and RDC activities as well as the cultural openness of the HEI members and Estonian society.**

*Examples of good practice:*

Academic recognition for both student admission and credit transfer corresponds to the quality requirements set by the HEI, is systematic and consistent with the expected learning outcomes and supports international student mobility.

The HEI creates opportunities for international student exchanges by offering study programmes and/or modules taught in English. The learning environment at the HEI supports internationalisation and cultural openness.

The organisation of studies at the HEI facilitates student participation in international mobility. The HEI has agreements with foreign higher education institutions and guides its students to study and undertake practical training abroad by means of international exchange, providing comprehensive support for this. The teaching staff encourage students to participate in international mobility.

International teaching staff participate in the process of teaching and supervising doctoral theses.

The HEI supports and recognises the participation of its teaching staff in international research and creative projects, as well as personal development at higher education institutions abroad.

## **11. Service to society**

*Standard:*

**The HEI contributes to the general welfare of the community and supports lifelong learning.**

*Examples of good practice:*

The HEI contributes to the development of the community's well-being by sharing its resources (library, museums, sports facilities, etc.), by providing consulting and advisory services, and by organising concerts, exhibitions, shows, conferences, fairs and other events.

The HEI involves alumni in the activities aimed at the development of the HEI and the knowledge society.

The HEI employees participate in the work of professional associations and in other community councils and decision-making bodies as experts, directing society's development processes as opinion leaders. The impact of academic staff on society is taken into account when evaluating their work.

The HEI has defined the objectives for in-service training, and measures their implementation. In-service training is planned in accordance with the needs of target groups.

### **Assessment method**

1. Assessment period.

Institutional accreditation shall take place once every 5–7 years. The HEI can choose the most suitable time, informing EKKK of it 2 years in advance.

2. The HEI may compile its self-evaluation report in a form that best suits its needs and use analyses designed for other evaluations or reports.

3. In order to assess the extent to which the principles and regulations established at the institutional level have been implemented in the learning and teaching process, and assess the effectiveness of the internal assessment system, study programmes are also reviewed within the framework of institutional accreditation, on a sampling basis. Assessments of 1–6 study programmes or (in the case of universities) study programme "bundles" (BA+MA+DOC), are undertaken. The following aspects shall be taken into account to determine an appropriate sampling: 1) the number of study programmes and study programme groups at the HEI; 2) the results of previous assessments of the study programme groups; 3) a reasoned proposal by the HEI.

4. Assessment committees:

- In smaller HEIs where education is provided in a maximum of three study programme groups (e.g. professional higher education institutions, creative universities), usually one assessment committee shall be formed and the assessment visit shall be carried out within one week. The assessment committee is formed on the basis of the specific nature of the HEI being assessed. The committee always includes experts with experience in managing similar types of higher education institutions (at least 2); experts from foreign higher education institutions in the areas being assessed, preferably with experience in managing a higher education institution or an academic unit (depending on the number of study programmes); representatives of the working world (usually from Estonia, based on a sampling of study programmes); and at least one student. The committee consists of at least 5 members (if there are 1–3 study programmes in one study programme group at the HEI), but on average consists of 7 members.

For example, in the spring of 2017, institutional accreditation and quality assessment of a study programme group is being carried out at the Estonian Academy of Arts in an integrated manner. The committee consists of 9 members (see <http://ekka.archimedes.ee/en/universities/institutional-accreditation/assessment-committees/>)

In professional higher education institutions where vocational training is also provided, joint committees are formed that evaluate the learning and teaching process as a whole, and which represent all the significant employers. For example, a joint assessment of study programme groups of higher education and vocational education was carried out in 2016 at the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences. The committee consisted of 10 members, see

<http://ekka.archimedes.ee/en/universities/quality-assessment-study-programme-group/assessment-committees/>

The committee's assessment visit to the HEI generally lasts 4 days. The committee is subdivided into subcommittees based on their areas of competence and responsibility. Two months prior to the assessment visit, the committee shall receive a self-evaluation report, divide the areas of responsibility and do the necessary preliminary work. The committee shall have a maximum of six weeks to prepare its assessment report. The committee's workload is calculated based on the number of days worked in Estonia, and it includes, inter alia, the preliminary work and the preparation of a report. As a rule, this consists of 6 calculated working days (1 introductory, 4 for the visit, and 1 for outlining the report).

- In large universities (with 3+ study programme groups), it will be appropriate to form 2–3 different committees or one committee with several sub-committees, in order to gain an adequate insight into the learning and teaching process, and to provide feedback that would benefit the university. In any case, the assessment at a large university would also take place within a six-month period, and the Quality Assessment Council would make only one decision. The main committee would be mostly comprised of experts having managerial experience at a similar type of university (rectors, vice rectors, heads of academic units); also one expert with managerial experience at a company of similar magnitude; and one student – (on average) a total of 5 members. At study programme levels, the committee(s) would be comprised of leading members of teaching staff in the specialities of the sampling, who have experience in the fields of both teaching and research; at least one representative of the working world; and one student.
5. In its decision, the Quality Assessment Council shall point out the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations; and decide whether to accredit the HEI for a maximum period (7 years), for 3 years (if the committee identifies some non-conformities to the standards in its report), or not to accredit. The Quality Assessment Council may also impose secondary conditions for the maximum period and provide a shorter deadline for their fulfilment. If the Quality Assessment Council decides not to accredit the HEI, the Ministry of Education and Research will initiate the process of revoking the right to conduct studies or the merger of the HEI with another institution of higher education, or provides a deadline for eliminating deficiencies and for completing a new institutional accreditation (similar to the current system).
  6. A proposal to the working group on the relationship between the Organisation of Research and Development Act and the higher education legislation to consider the possibility of linking the positive outcome of the institutional accreditation of the university to the decision on the evaluation of research: Insofar as R&D plays an important role in the assessment of any university, the positive result of the institution's assessment could confirm the university's right to apply for national research funding and conduct doctoral studies. This proposal could be considered in future consultations. A regular evaluation would retain its threshold character as the primary evaluation of a field of research. Once a university has already proved that it exceeds the threshold, the university's self-regulation could be trusted, especially as institutional accreditation evaluates the management of its RDC activities and the existence of a self-assessment system. The possibility to intervene, where some of the research fields in a university indicate problems, should definitely be written into the law. This is one of the topics that could be further discussed in the working group on the relationship between the Organisation of Research and Development Act and the Higher Education Act, after the objectives of regular and targeted evaluations have been reviewed.

## **Thematic Evaluation**

**Purpose:** To support changes in the system-wide quality improvement areas that have been identified based on existing evaluation findings.



Thematic evaluations allow mapping of the trends and existing circumstances in the system-wide quality improvement areas in Estonian higher education, sharing best practices with one another and receiving independent feedback and recommendations from experts.

#### Evaluation method:

Thematic evaluations shall be conducted by EKKA in some or all of the higher education institutions. The topics must, at least for the first evaluations, be related to the system-wide quality improvement proposals made during the external assessments of the study programme groups (Purposefulness and up-to-dateness of teaching methods; Student assessment; Development of students' key competencies; Involvement of students from all cycles of higher education in RDC activities; etc.).

All interested parties – the Ministry of Education and Research, Estonian Rectors' Conference, Estonian Rectors' Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences, the EÜL, employers' representative organisations – can have a say in choosing topics.

Thematic evaluation planning: EKKA shall form an Advisory Council comprised of representatives of interested parties (the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, higher education institutions, students, employers) which, based on the analyses of evaluation results, OSKA reports, interim reports on the implementation of Lifelong Learning Strategy, and other analyses, provides the Ministry of Education and Research with a 3–5-year plan along with preliminary tasks. The Advisory Council shall review the plan every year and make amendments as necessary. Based on advice from the Advisory Council, the Ministry of Education and Research approves the plan for the thematic evaluations.

Thematic evaluations predominantly use a research-based assessment method.

- 1) Thematic evaluations can be sampling based, but preferably include all of the HEIs (also the vocational education institutions, if appropriate).
- 2) EKKA shall establish a panel of experts whose task will be to develop an investigative instrument, to carry out the investigation and to prepare a report. If necessary, foreign experts may be involved.
- 3) Thematic evaluations do not require preparation of a traditional self-evaluation report, but a survey that involves different parties may include aspects of self-evaluation. In parallel with surveys, focus group interviews are conducted.
- 4) The EKKA Quality Assessment Council shall confirm the expert report or, if necessary, return it to the expert panel for modification. No final decision is made by the Quality Assessment Council.
- 5) After the expert report is completed, a public presentation of the findings and a discussion will take place (similar to the targeted evaluation).
- 6) The strengths and areas for improvement presented in the findings will also become an input for planning further activities as well as trends for both higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education and Research.
- 7) A year after the evaluation results have been disclosed, the participating HEIs will provide the Quality Assessment Council with an overview of the quality improvement activities undertaken/implemented.

## **4. Quality Assessment When Entering the Higher Education System**

### **Establishment of a new higher education institution**

When there is a plan to establish a new HEI in Estonia, the founder must first apply for the right to conduct studies in the study programme group in which it wants to offer education. According to current legislation, the Government of the Republic of Estonia grants such rights; however, this decision could be left to the level of the Ministry of Education and Research. That right is granted based on an initial assessment carried out by EKKA. The result of an initial assessment can be: 'conforms to a required standard', 'partially conforms to a required standard' and 'does not conform to a required standard'. The right to conduct studies can be for an unspecified term (similar to an open-ended employment contract, the termination of which, however, is possible under certain conditions); or for a specified term (for 1–3 years). When establishing a new HEI, the result of the initial assessment of the study programme group is, as a rule, for a specified term. In the case of a specified-term decision, a re-assessment will follow.

During the initial assessment, the emphasis is on assessing the study programme group, but during the re-assessment process, in contrast to the current practice, attention also has to be paid to the functioning of the HEI as an institution. The right to conduct studies without conditions (for an unspecified term) means essentially that the HEI has received a vote of confidence and will be subject to a standard quality assessment system.

### **Quality assessment when opening a new study programme group in an existing HEI**

When an existing HEI wishes to begin providing education in a new study programme group, an initial assessment of the study programme group will take place similar to the one described above. The difference lies in the fact that, within the framework of an initial assessment, the institution's operation is not assessed if the HEI has already undergone institutional accreditation with a maximally positive result.

## **5. Transition from the existing quality assessment system to the new system**

In the case of HEIs where the previous evaluation results were conditional, the current system will apply until the requirements are fulfilled (for example, Euroacademy, the Personal Services study programme group in different HEIs, etc.).

For all these HEIs whose quality assessment results were maximally positive (IA for 7 years, all study programme groups for 7 years without any secondary conditions), the new external quality assessment system will be applied starting from 2020. When planning an institutional accreditation in a specific HEI, the results of its previous assessments will be taken into account (regular evaluations, targeted evaluations, quality assessments of study programme groups, past institutional accreditations).

In the case of HEIs with an institutional accreditation deadline prior to 2020, it is possible to apply the new institutional assessment (accreditation) methodology, as the definition in the current

Universities Act allows for flexibility. The institutional accreditation awarded to the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences and the Estonian University of Life Sciences will be valid until 2019.

## **6. Periodic Monitoring Based on Statistics and Performance Indicators**

Performance indicators of HEIs are available in the public information system (both statistics and the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy related performance indicators). These data make it possible to analyse a large part of the input and output and, if necessary, to interfere in a case of deviations (this could be a task for the Ministry of Education and Research; EKKA can perform periodic analyses and conduct additional surveys as needed). Additional information can be obtained from performance indicators related to the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy; in addition, satisfaction surveys are carried out. Experiences from the transitional evaluation process show that conformity assessments can be carried out on a large scale without bringing a lot of extra work to HEIs.

Compiled by Heli Mattisen, Maiki Udam, Liia Lauri, Lagle Zobel

Amended based on consultations and feedback from the IA Development Team.

## Appendix 1. Results of Quality Assessments 2011–2016

The charts below summarise the outcomes of all quality assessments conducted during 2011–2016. Green segments depict *full results* (7 years in the cases of institutional accreditations and quality assessments of study programme groups, and the right to conduct studies for an unspecified term in the cases of initial assessments and re-assessments); gray segments depict *full results with secondary conditions* where a deadline is set for the HEI to satisfy the conditions (no secondary conditions are imposed for initial assessments or re-assessments); yellow segments depict the so-called '*partial results*' (3 years in the cases of institutional accreditations, 3–5 years in the cases of quality assessments of study programme groups, and the right to conduct studies for up to 3 years in the cases of initial assessments and re-assessments).

Numbers in the charts represent the number of assessment decisions, where a unit of assessment is an HEI up for *institutional accreditation* (e.g. Euroacademy), or a study programme group along with the cycle of higher education up for *quality assessment of study programme groups* (e.g. the Social Sciences Study Programme Group in the first and second cycles of higher education at Tallinn University; the Physical Sciences Study Programme Group at the level of the doctoral studies at the University of Tartu). Assessment decisions regarding *initial assessments* and *re-assessments* are made separately for each cycle of study; for example, professional higher education studies in Informatics and Information Technology at TUT, or bachelor degree studies in Business and Administration at TUT, or master degree studies in Transport Services at TUT, or doctoral degree studies in Life Sciences at TUT.

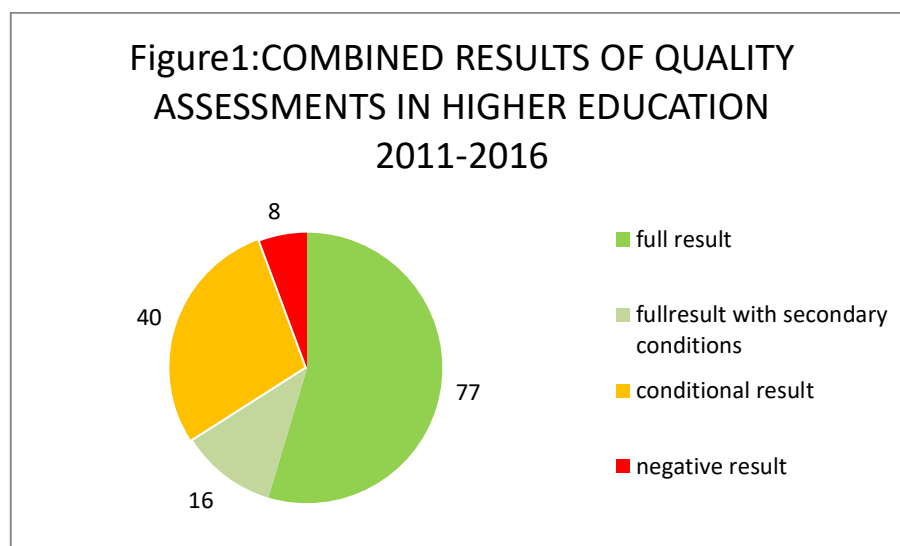


Figure 2: Institutional accreditation of HEIs 2011-2016

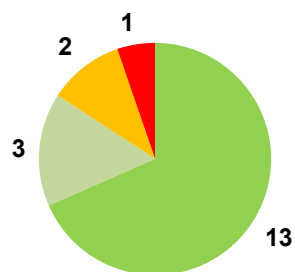


Figure 3: Quality assessment of study programme groups in HE 2011-2016

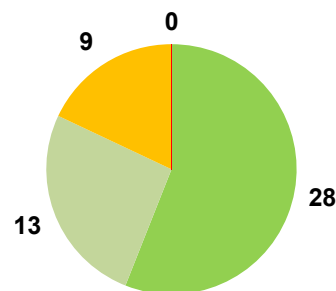
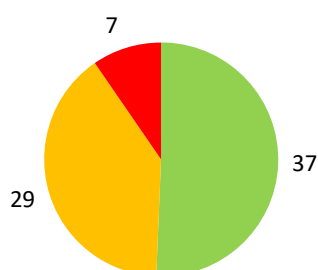


Figure 4: Initial assessment and re-assessment



### The main strengths and bottlenecks of Estonian higher education on the basis of existing evaluation results

The table below lists the main strengths of and challenges for Estonian higher education, based on the analyses of the results of institutional accreditations and quality assessments of study programme groups. An aggregate analysis of the existing results of institutional accreditations has been published in the *Estonian Journal of Education*, and an interim analysis of quality assessments of study programme groups is available [here](#) (EE).

INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION	
<b>STRENGTHS</b>	Management, staff development Interconnectedness between theory and practice Modern learning environment Use of IT in teaching and learning Process of study programme development Graduates are valued in the labour market
<b>AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT</b>	Lack of focus Risk management Student assessment, supervision Internationalisation Research, development and creative activities (mainly at professional higher education institutions) The feedback system, mainly the use of feedback results Student dropout rates
QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF STUDY PROGRAMME GROUPS	

STRENGTHS	<p>Strong scientific basis of teaching</p> <p>Involvement of practitioners in the teaching process</p> <p>Good cooperation with employers</p> <p>Very good learning environment and learning aids</p> <p>Committed teaching staff</p> <p>Employers are satisfied with graduates' skills and knowledge</p>	AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT	<p>Paucity of students and the continuing decline</p> <p>High dropout rates</p> <p>Insufficient international mobility</p> <p>Restraints on credit transfers</p> <p>Insufficient development of teaching skills of teaching staff</p> <p>Limited use of modern and effective teaching methods</p> <p>Individual work by students needs objective-setting and feedback</p> <p>Students need more challenges in the learning process</p> <p>Assessment of students' learning outcomes and key competencies is irrelevant</p> <p>Significant cooperation between universities is insufficient</p> <p>Large workloads of teaching staff do not leave them time for research</p>
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To date the majority of HEIs have undergone institutional accreditation; however, accreditations of two private HEIs operating in the Theology study programme group are still outstanding. About two-thirds of the quality assessments of study programme groups are now completed. The remaining assessments (including quality assessments of doctoral studies) will take place during 2017–2018.

## Appendix 2. Feedback from HEIs on Previous Assessments and Proposals for Development

After each assessment process, EKKA organises a discussion seminar at the HEI to obtain its feedback on the whole process and recommendations for further development. The following is a summary of the results of such feedback seminars at HEIs during 2012–2016.

Positive	Problems, proposals for amendments
The self-evaluation process is very useful.	The whole process is long and time consuming. Quality assessment of SPGs is resource intensive in the case of large study programme groups.
Clarity of requirements and guidelines, and EKKA's support (by means of self-evaluation trainings as well as throughout the process).	Partial overlap between different types of assessments (institutional accreditation, quality assessment of SPGs, evaluation of research).
Quality assessment as a management tool. A good argument for making changes.	Evaluations fell into a period of major structural changes. The HEI itself could decide more, when and what to evaluate.
An outsider's view confirms that we are doing the right thing and doing it correctly. The encouraging feedback received right after the site visit is very positive.	Time allotted for the committee's visit is very short – there is not enough time for meaningful discussions.
External pressure forces us to analyse ourselves, collect data on a regular basis and systematise the documents.	There is no point in recommending what is beyond the abilities of the HEI (for example, increasing funding).
An outsider's critical view is useful – the more critical, the better.	We know what needs to be changed. We need suggestions on how to implement those changes.
Interviews with experts during the site visit are very helpful, more time should be planned for such interviews.	A general problem – we are thinking more of survival rather than development, therefore the evaluators appear to be judges rather than critical friends.
	It is complicated at a large university to do teamwork in a large study programme group.
	The evaluation process could be carried out in two stages: firstly, experts will get access to our information systems, documents, etc. Then additional questions will be asked and then, to apply the finishing touches, we will meet with the experts.

In the spring of 2014, EKKA conducted a study on the attitudes of employees of HEIs towards external evaluations. By combining the quantitative and qualitative methods, the positive and negative effects of external evaluations as perceived by employees of HEIs were investigated, and also the effects at the levels of both the system and the individual were analysed. Assessments and their underlying requirements will always have a greater or lesser impact on those being evaluated. However, due to the interaction between the different internal and external factors, the impact of external evaluations on HEIs is difficult or even impossible to measure objectively. On the other hand, it is possible to study the attitudes of the employees of HEIs towards external evaluation – i.e.

the subjectively perceived effects of external evaluations. The study enabled us to demonstrate that, along with the subjectively perceived positive and negative effects of external evaluations, it is also important to distinguish between the system-, organisation- and personal-level impacts of external evaluations (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Perceived impact of external assessment at the organisation and employee levels. The figure is simplified, for details see <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-016-0001-4>**

