

Board of ENQA  
Avenue de Tervuren, boîte 4  
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Belgium

28 February 2020

### ***Progress Report Regarding External Review of EKKA***

Dear Colleagues,

We have carefully considered the recommendations made by the external review panel to our Agency in 2017. We are pleased to report on the changes implemented and actions taken in EKKA since the review with regard to two criteria of ESG, which were found to be substantially compliant by the review panel.

Additionally, we would like to provide some comments on suggestions for further development that were made by the review panel, including those that have been especially highlighted by the ENQA Board.

#### **1. ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS – SUBSTANTIAL COMPLIANCE**

**Panel's recommendations and suggestions for further improvement:** EKKA needs to put in place a more structured approach to the dissemination and utilization of thematic analyses and to demonstrate more systematically how it uses the outcomes of these analyses. EKKA should consider conducting a thematic evaluation on improving methods for eliciting student and expert feedback, utilising that feedback and providing evidence of the impact/changes directly taken as a consequence of that feedback. The context of this thematic analysis should be an increased focus on student-centred learning in the quality assurance policies and processes of the system. Other thematic evaluations should be scheduled on a regular basis over the next five years.

**EKKA's comment:** The use of thematic analyses has become more systematic since the previous ENQA review. The following are a few examples of such systematic activity.

- 1) One type of thematic analyses is, for instance, thematic evaluations. The findings of thematic analyses are used as input for selecting topics for thematic evaluations. Thematic evaluations are now conducted by EKKA on a regular basis according to the Higher Education Act (in force since 01.09.2019). The first draft of the guidelines for thematic evaluations in higher education along with the proposal for the topics drafted by EKKA has been sent to various stakeholders for feedback. The guidelines specify that

in order to present the results of thematic evaluations, EKKA conducts discussions on evaluation results with various stakeholder groups, such as HEIs, employers and students. The format of the discussions depends on the topic of evaluation. In addition, EKKA is planning follow-up activities of thematic evaluations after a certain period of time to monitor developments on the topic and to bring stakeholders together to discuss the situation and future developments.

- 2) The findings of thematic analyses drafted by EKKA are introduced at annual gatherings of vice-rectors for academic affairs of HEIs, and at the meetings of the Rectors' Conference (public universities) and the Rectors' Conference of the Professional Higher Education Institutions.
- 3) The summaries of thematic analyses drafted by EKKA are included in annual publications which are compiled by the Ministry of Education and Research on external evaluations in the educational system.
- 4) Based on the findings of thematic analyses in the area of higher education, VET and continuing education, the summaries of strengths and weaknesses have been drafted as an input into the development of the new Estonian Education Strategy 2035.

## 2. ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE – SUBSTANTIAL COMPLIANCE

**Panel's recommendations:** EKKA must reconsider its approach to reviewing institutional compliance with the ESG standards on internal quality assurance in the three areas omitted from its mapping. The gaps in its framework in relation to **information management and reporting** on the new guidelines for Ph.D. Study Programmes should be addressed. On initial assessments, the approach should address comprehensively all of ESG, Part 1, particularly on Teaching and Learning (Standard 1.3).

**EKKA's comment:** Currently, there are two types of assessments in higher education: institutional accreditation, and initial assessment (i.e., expertise conducted by EKKA for granting the HEI the right to conduct studies). EKKA no longer conducts the quality assessment of study programme groups neither at the level of first and second cycles of higher education nor at PhD level; therefore, there is no need to change the guidelines for study programme group assessment at PhD level.

With regard to addressing Standard 1.3 in ESG (*Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment*) on initial assessments: on September 1, 2019, a new Higher Education Act entered into force in Estonia and a new Higher Education Standard was adopted. As a result, we have also changed the criteria for the initial assessment of study programme groups. The criteria covering the meaning of ESG standard 1.3 are as follows:

Standard 2. Learning Teaching:

(Criterion 2.3.) The proposed learning methods motivate the learner to take responsibility for their own learning and to achieve learning outcomes.

(Criterion 2.4.) Appropriate methods have been devised for the assessment of learning outcomes, the assessment is transparent and objective and supports the learner's development.

(Criterion 2.6.) The academic staff involved have sufficient teaching skills to encourage the learner's sense of autonomy and to provide adequate and competent guidance.

The HEQAC will adopt the new version of the Guidelines for Initial Assessment on March 18, 2020.

### **3. ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE – FULL COMPLIANCE**

**Panel's suggestion for further development:** EKKA should consider establishing a Stakeholder Advisory Board which would, inter alia, provide oversight of strategic planning, act as a conduit of information about key EKKA activity to a wide range of stakeholders and bring timely and relevant external activity to the attention of EKKA.

**EKKA's comment:** This suggestion will be implemented in the near future. The Estonian Ministry of Education and Research has launched a merger of several organisations in the field of education, which EKKA will be a part of. This new organization will be effective of autumn 2020. The draft statutes of the joint agency foresee the creation of a Supervisory Board for EKKA, which is composed of representatives of various stakeholder groups, incl. students, and the tasks of which include 1) the election of members of EKKA Quality Assessment Councils (both higher education and VET), members of the Appeals Committee, and EKKA director 2) the approval of EKKA development plan and annual report, and 3) providing guidance with regard to EKKA development activities.

### **4. ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE – FULL COMPLIANCE**

### **5. ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES – FULL COMPLIANCE**

**Panel's suggestion for further development (3.3):** In considering the next cycle of quality assurance processes, the panel suggests a much stronger focus on follow-through and more oversight of the implementation of recommendations.

The panel suggests that the working relationship with the Research Council be a focus for inter- institutional collaboration, including system-level thematic analysis. As the relationship between EKKA and the Research Council strengthens, it may be worth considering in the future if these two agencies could operate on a similar legal basis or if they could be part of a single umbrella foundation.

**Panel's suggestion for further development (2.3):** The balance between assessment, feedback and implementation of recommendations should be reviewed so that more

attention is focused on the implementation of assessment recommendations.

**EKKA's comment:** Indeed, there is more focus on the follow-up activities. There is a discussion with the representatives of the institution after the assessment, where we discuss the findings of the assessment panel and ask for feedback from the institution on the whole assessment process. Also, the institution reports within two years after the assessment on the improvement activities that have been made based on the assessment panel's recommendations and gets a feedback from the HEQAC. Since 2018 we have decided that in case a secondary condition has been set by EKKA Quality Assessment Council, some of the members of an assessment panel will be involved in follow-up assessment and, on the basis of the report submitted by the institution, EKKA in consultation with panel members will decide whether to evaluate the fulfilment of the secondary condition by analysing the presented documents, or to make a site-visit. In the new institutional accreditation procedure, the study programme sampling is based on the analyses of previous evaluation results. Additionally, the improvement areas that have been identified in the assessment reports, are also addressed in thematic evaluations, which we started to conduct since 2018; normally, the topics that are analysed in these evaluations do not concern only one but several or all higher education institutions. Such thematic evaluations help to generate new, innovative solutions and provide a better understanding of the situation in the given area.

Since 2019, we no longer conduct the quality assessment of study programme groups at doctoral level, so there is less risk of two agencies conducting similar evaluations. R&D is one standard (out of 12) in institutional accreditation, and in evaluating this standard, our committees use the results of research evaluation and the data in the science information system. There is no overlapping between the evaluations anymore.

## **6. ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT – FULL COMPLIANCE**

**Panel's suggestion for further development:** EKKA should review the methodology used to elicit feedback from experts on their experience of the process. It might be useful to send to them a summary of comments made at the final de-briefing meeting and to use this document as a basis for gathering any additional reflections that may arise over time. This might encourage a higher response rate. EKKA itself displayed a strong commitment to using feedback from experts as a basis for continuous improvement of its policies and processes. Experts should be provided with feedback on the institutional and agency evaluation of the experts' performance. Experts should also be provided with an update on the impact of their recommendations, should they request this follow up.

As HEQAC plays such an important role in the agency, a systematic programme aimed at developing the skills and competencies of members of HEQAC should be introduced

as a regular part of the enhancement activity of the agency.

**EKKA's comment:** Summary of the institution's feedback on the site visit is provided to experts after the assessment report has been finalized and submitted to EKKA. We always ask feedback from experts on the whole assessment process (see questionnaire here: <https://ekka2018.limequery.org/225841>) after their work is finished, and whenever asked the experts are also informed about how their suggestions have been taken into consideration in improving the assessment processes in EKKA. The assessment coordinators will also provide experts with a summary of the feedback from HEIs following the evaluation visit.

EKKA Quality Assessment Council for higher Education (HEQAC) is elected for 3 years. After every election period EKKA provides training for Council members. The members will be informed about the general functions and working rules of the Council, tasks of the members, as well as the ESG and standards and criteria adopted in Estonia based on ESG. We do not believe that there is a need for a special training programme for all members, since the members have different backgrounds and experiences. Therefore, we rather prefer to take an individual approach, where, according to the need, Council members have a possibility to take part in the training of experts and participate as an observer in assessment visits. Once a year, all members participate in the joint meeting of the two Councils (i.e., council for higher education and council for VET) where the challenges are discussed and best practices are shared with each other. We have also allocated additional funds for Council members' participation in various conferences, seminars, and trainings. Unfortunately, since the members of the Council are extremely occupied with their main job and related development activities, it is difficult for them to find time to take advantage of the additional opportunities offered by EKKA.

## **7. ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE – FULL COMPLIANCE**

**Panel's suggestion for further development:** The review panel acknowledges the good suggestion from EKKA on the need to streamline assessment procedures in order to eliminate duplication of activity for both the HEIs and EKKA. This suggestion should be implemented in the next cycle of assessments. Approaches to integration of assessment types should be explored more fully.

**EKKA's comment:**

This suggestion by the review panel has already been implemented. EKKA no longer conducts the quality assessment of study programme groups on the first, second and third cycles of higher education after one cycle of assessments was completed. Since spring 2019, the main tool for external evaluation in higher education is institutional accreditation, which includes the assessment of some study programmes on a sampling basis during the accreditation procedure. In those professional higher education

institutions that also provide vocational education and training (VET), the institutional accreditation has been combined with the quality assessment of VET programmes. Thus, the number of assessment types has been reduced, and where possible different assessments have been integrated.

#### 8. ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS – FULL COMPLIANCE

**Panel's suggestion for further development:** As the Appeals Board (in relation to decisions of HEQAC) has only been in existence for a short period of time, it would be good practice to appraise regularly its operation and to consider making its findings binding on HEQAC. The panel understands that this may require a legal change.

**EKKA's comment:** At the moment, there is no legal basis for making the Appeals Committee opinions binding on the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council (HEQAC), as the Appeals Committee is only a consultative body. Indeed, it requires a legal change in order to make the decisions binding, but it is not in EKKA's capacity to enforce this change.

Please feel free to contact us, should there be any further questions or comments.

Sincerely,



Heli Mattisen  
Director of EKKA