

**TRANSITIONAL
EVALUATION:
A SPECIAL CASE OF
EXTERNAL EVALUATION
OF HIGHER EDUCATION
IN ESTONIA 2009–2011**





ESTONIAN HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY AGENCY

Transitional Evaluation:
A Special Case of External Evaluation of
Higher Education in Estonia
2009-2011

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2011

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Foreword

Between the covers of this publication, you will find a summary by the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (*Eesti Kõrghariduse Kvaliteediagentuur; EKKA*) of an atypical quality assessment in Estonian higher education, the so-called transitional evaluation that took place during the transition from one system of external assessment of quality to another.

Compared to traditional external assessment of quality in Estonia (and also elsewhere in the world), transitional evaluation had four substantial differences:

1. higher education institutions did not submit self-evaluation reports; the evaluation was based on written data submitted by higher education institutions, background information at the Ministry of Education and Research, and additional data gathered during assessment visits;
2. assessment committees were comprised of local experts only;
3. the decision was made not on a study programme, but on the entire study programme group;
4. some decisions were made without an assessment visit, solely on the basis of written data.

We describe the legislative background, reasons and procedures of transitional evaluation, stop at length on the results and give an overview of the feedback gathered during the process. We hope that the following provides interesting and useful information to higher education institutions who participated in this evaluation, the public sector (primarily institutions directing the development of higher education), as well as quality assurance agencies in other countries. The information stored during transitional evaluation is expected to provide valuable source material for researchers in the field of education and is an evidence-based foundation for development activities in quality assurance.

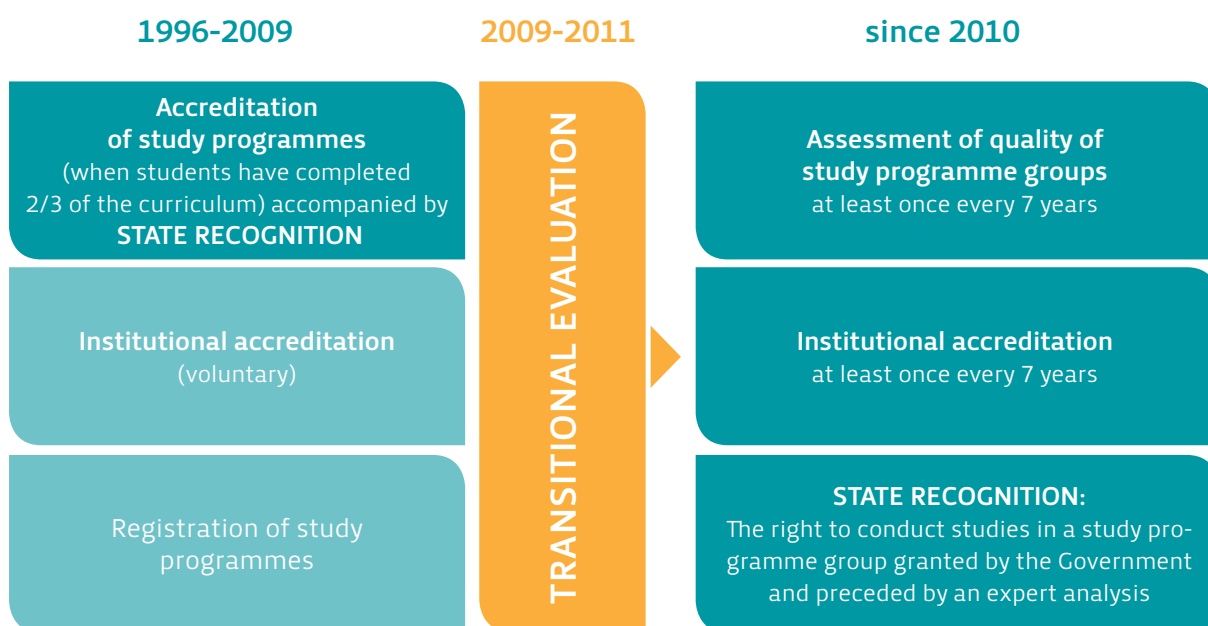
Transitional evaluation in figures

- conducted during the period from autumn 2009 to autumn 2011
- 33 higher education institutions participated
- 28 study programme groups that included 670 study programmes were evaluated
- 158 Estonian experts took part in the evaluation process
- 254 assessments – 130 standard proceedings and 124 simplified proceedings – took place
- results: 185 open-ended education licences, i.e., the right to conduct studies for an unspecified term
 - 51 fixed-term education licences, i.e., the right to conduct studies for a specified term
 - 18 negative decisions, i.e., the right to conduct studies was not granted
- cost of 640,000 euros that counts for 2520 euros per proceeding and 955 euros per study programme
- 89% of the representatives of higher education institutions agreed (51%) or partially agreed (38%) that transitional evaluation has increased the reliability of Estonian higher education

CONTEXT

The need for transitional evaluation in Estonia resulted from the changes in the national system of quality assurance in higher education.

Figure 1. ESTONIAN QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN HIGHER EDUCATION



Differences between the old and the new system

1996-2009

Study programmes were accredited.

The quality of a study programme was assessed (a study programme was accredited) after the study programme had been registered and the education licence had been issued.

When starting their studies, students did not have the certainty whether the diploma they receive would be recognized by the state or not.

Institutional accreditation was voluntary.

Accreditation of study programmes was a predominantly controlling (differential) evaluation – whether they meet the requirements or not – and resulted in sanctions (the closure of a study programme in the case of a negative decision).

Accreditation decisions were approved by a directive of the Minister of Education and Research.

since 2010

The entire study programme group is assessed.

An expert analysis of the quality of a study programme group is conducted prior to the issue of the education licence. After the expert analysis of the study programme group, the right to conduct studies is granted by the Government of the Republic, the rejection thereof is confirmed by a directive of the Minister.

The right to conduct studies in a study programme group (the education licence) ensures that the diploma is recognized by the state.

Institutional accreditation is obligatory to all institutions of higher education.

A controlling evaluation is conducted when issuing an education licence, subsequent institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups are essentially developmental evaluations.

Final assessment decisions regarding institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups are made by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council.

According to the legislation, the implementation period for transition to a new system was 2009–2011. As of 1 January 2012, the higher education institutions may conduct studies only in study programmes that belong to the study programme group holding the corresponding right issued by the Government of the Republic. Therefore, the Government had to make its decisions on existing study programme groups and study cycles of all operating institutions of higher education before January 2012. Transitional evaluation had the role of a bridge connecting the new and the old system –re-evaluating the Estonian higher education during the transition from one system of quality assurance to another.

One of the distinctive features of the new system of quality assurance in higher education is the state's increased trust in higher education institutions. State recognition associated with an education licence applies to all study programmes of the study programme group, including those that did not exist at the time of assessment. Thus, the state, before issuing an education licence, needed confirmation of not only the existing quality of studies and recourses in the study programme group, but also the sustainability of the quality of higher education. Due to the time pressure of transitional evaluation (2009–2011) and given its controlling rather than developmental character, the Ministry of Education and Research considered it necessary and possible to launch transitional evaluation in the Estonian language and therefore to use local experts. The Directive No. 367 of the Minister of Education and Research of 6 May 2009 and the Directive No. 1077 of the Minister of Education and Research of 2 November 2009 approved the Conditions and Procedure for Transition to Evaluation of Study Programme Groups that assigned the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (EKKA) to conduct transitional evaluation. On 10 June 2009, according to the directive by the Minister, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council approved the Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation describing the requirements and procedures in detail.

PROCESS

Who was evaluated?

A total of 33 institutions providing studies at a higher education level participated in transitional evaluation: 6 public universities, 4 private universities, 10 state institutions of professional higher education, 11 private institutions of professional higher education, and 2 state institutions of vocational education.

Higher education institutions participating in transitional evaluation

Public universities	Estonian Academy of Arts (<i>Eesti Kunstiakadeemia</i>)	EKA
	Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (<i>Eesti Muusika- ja Teatriakadeemia</i>)	EMTA
	Estonian University of Life Sciences (<i>Eesti Maaülikool</i>)	EMÜ
	Tallinn University (<i>Tallinna Ülikool</i>)	TLÜ
	Tallinn University of Technology (<i>Tallinna Tehnikaülikool</i>)	TTÜ
	University of Tartu (<i>Tartu Ülikool</i>)	TÜ
Private universities	Estonian Business School	EBS
	Euroacademy (<i>Euroakadeemia</i>)	EA
	Institute of Theology of EELC (<i>EELK Usuteaduse Instituut</i>)	UI
	University Nord (<i>Akadeemia Nord</i>)	AN
State institutions of professional higher education	Estonian Academy of Security Sciences (<i>Sisekaitseakadeemia</i>)	SKA
	Estonian Aviation Academy (<i>Eesti Lennuakadeemia</i>)	ELA
	Estonian Maritime Academy (<i>Eesti Mereakadeemia</i>)	EMA
	Estonian National Defence College (<i>Kaitseväe Ühendatud Õppeasutused</i>)	KÜÕA
	Lääne-Viru College (<i>Lääne-Viru Rakenduskõrgkool</i>)	LVRK
	Tallinn Health Care College (<i>Tallinna Tervishoiu Kõrgkool</i>)	TInTK
	Tallinn Pedagogical College (<i>Tallinna Pedagoogiline Seminar</i>)	TPS
	Tartu Art College (<i>Tartu Kõrgem Kunstikool</i>)	TKK
	Tartu Health Care College (<i>Tartu Tervishoiu Kõrgkool</i>)	TrtTK
	University of Applied Sciences (<i>Tallinna Tehnikakõrgkool</i>)	TTK
Private institutions of professional higher education	Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary (<i>EMK Teoloogiline Seminar</i>)	TS
	Computer Science College (<i>Arvutikolledž</i>)	AK
	Estonian-American Business Academy (<i>Eesti-Ameerika Äriakadeemia</i>)	EAÄA
	Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences (<i>Eesti Ettevõtluskõrgkool Mainor</i>)	EEKM
	The Estonian Information Technology College (<i>Eesti Infotehnoloogia Kolledž</i>)	EITK
	Estonian School of Hotel and Tourism Management (<i>Eesti Hotelli- ja Turismikõrgkool</i>)	EHTK
	Institute of Economics and Management (<i>Majanduse ja Juhtimise Instituut</i>)	MJI
	Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences (<i>Sotsiaal-Humanitaarinstituut</i>)	SHI
	Tallinn College of Business Administration (<i>Tallinna Ärijuhtimise Kolledž</i>)	TÄK
	Tallinn School of Economics (<i>Tallinna Majanduskool</i>)	TMK
	Tartu Academy of Theology (<i>Tartu Teoloogia Akadeemia</i>)	TTA
State institutions of vocational education	Tartu Theological Seminary (<i>EEKBL Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar Theological</i>)	KUS
	Võru County Vocational Training Centre (<i>Võrumaa Kutsehariduskeskus</i>)	VKHK

Higher School “I Studium” decided not to participate in transitional evaluation.

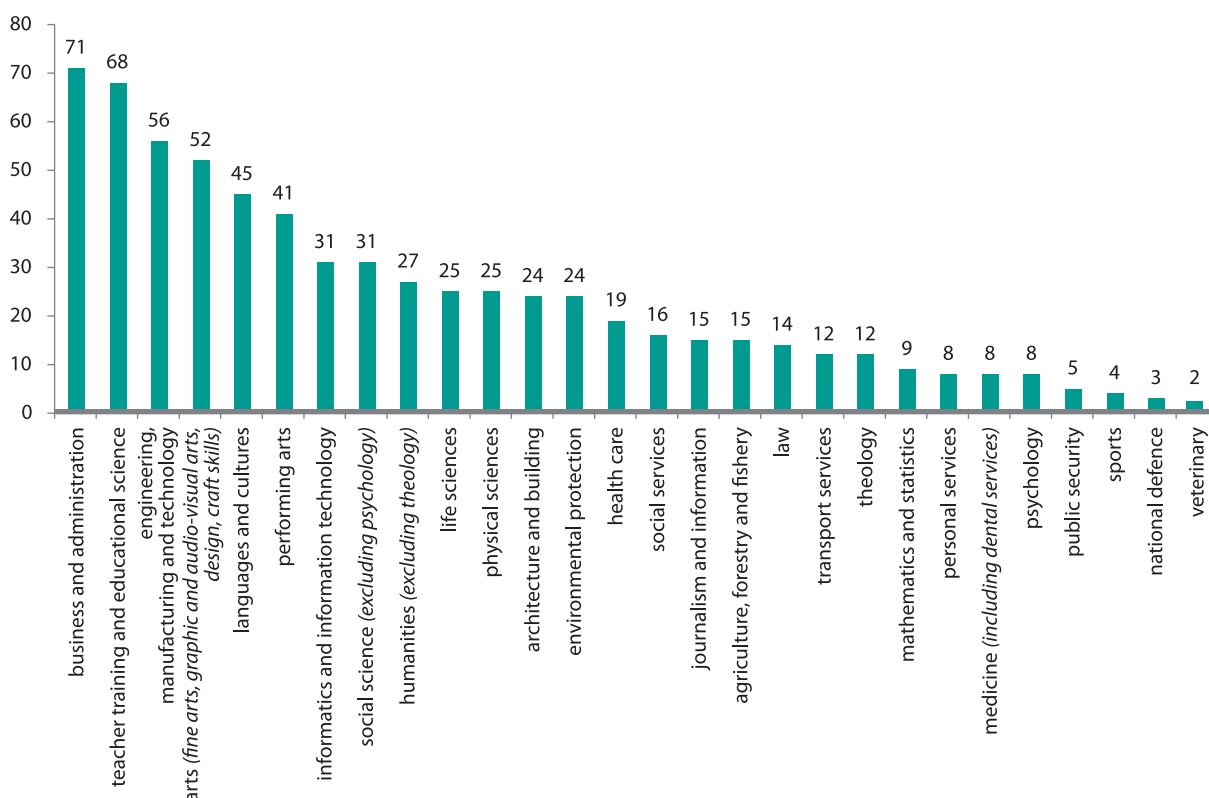
What was evaluated?

A total of 28 study programme groups, including professional higher education (PHE), bachelor degree (BA), master degree (MA) and doctoral degree studies (PhD), and integrated study programmes of bachelor and master degree studies (INT) were evaluated by the following aspects:

1. the quality of conducting studies – the learning outcomes, study programme development, organization of work practice, qualifications of the teaching staff, student counselling, etc.
2. the resources necessary for conducting studies – the availability of ordinary qualified teaching staff, adequacy of financial resources, suitability of infrastructure for the needs of the study programme group, etc.
3. the sustainability of conducting studies – trends in the number of students and graduates and the finances, planning for development, etc.

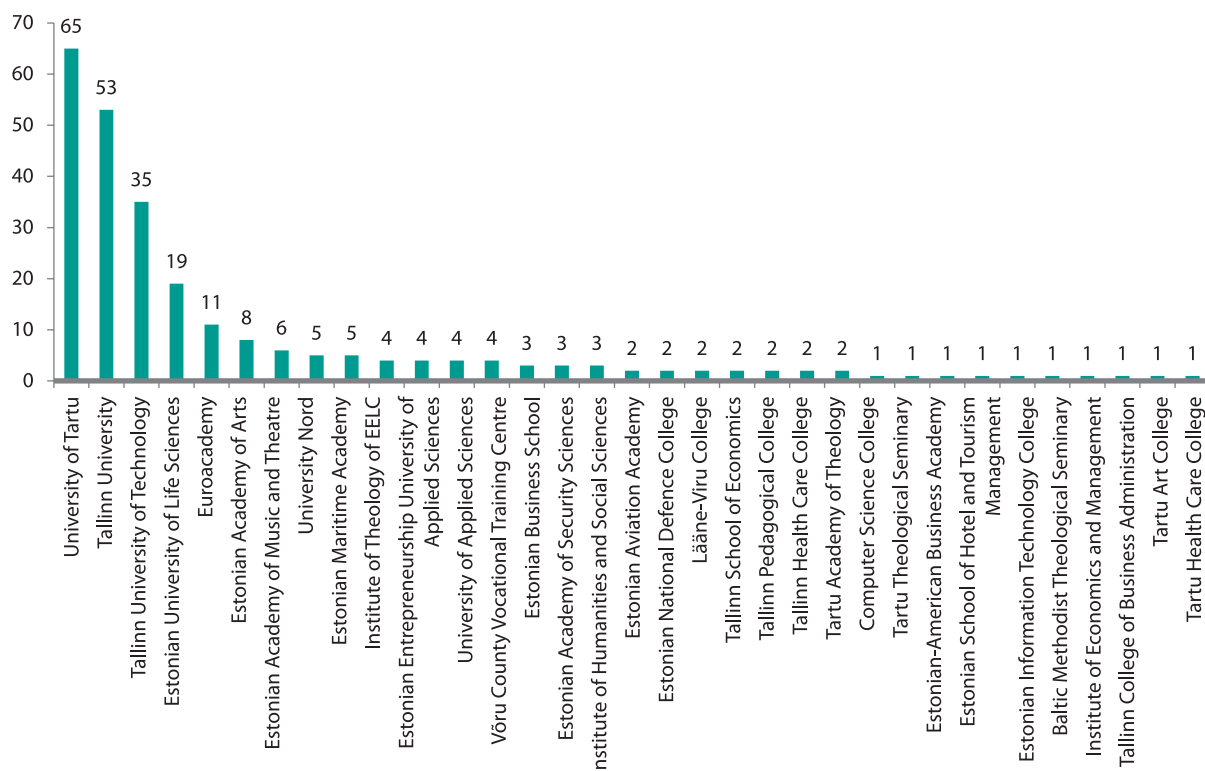
The quantity of study programmes within each study programme group varies greatly. The number of study programmes as well as the number of higher education institutions providing them is the largest in business and administration (71 study programmes in 17 higher education institutions). 62 out of the 68 study programmes in teacher training and educational science are divided between the University of Tartu and Tallinn University.

Figure 2. Number of study programmes by study programme groups



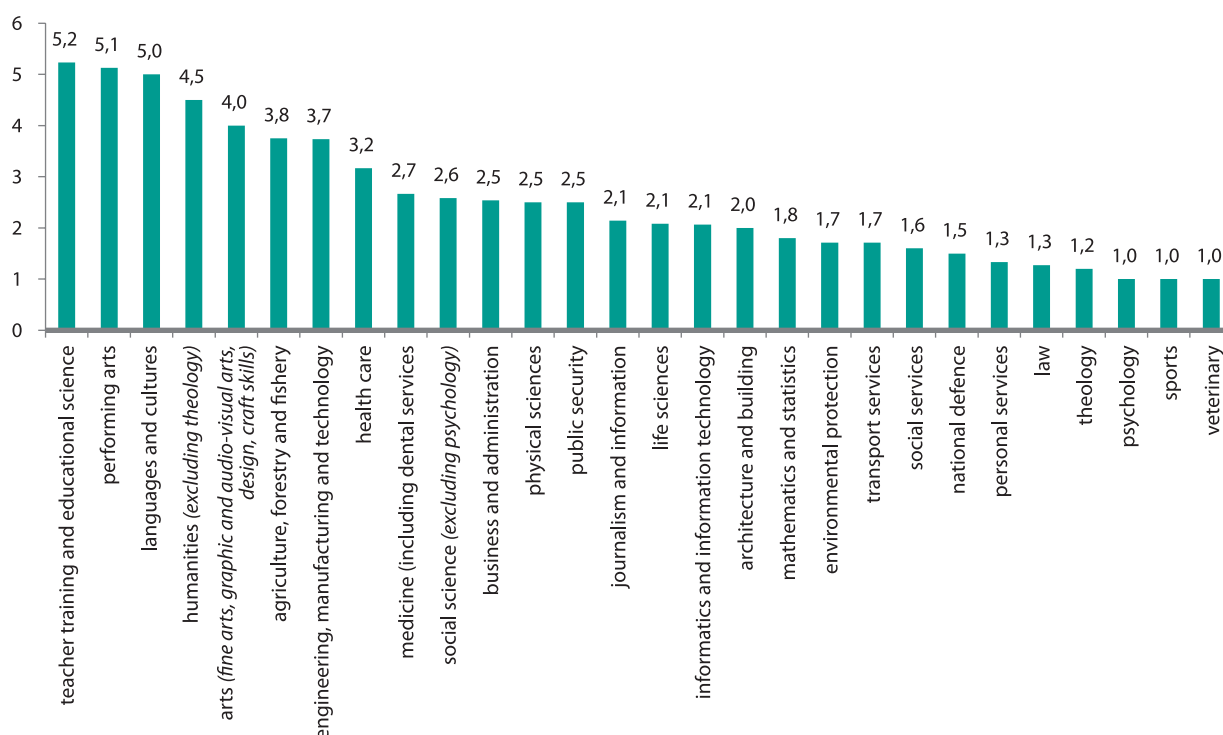
The volume of evaluations (the number of proceedings) by higher education institution depended on the number of study programme groups and different study cycles (PHE, BA, MA, INT, PhD) in that higher education institution. As shown in the following figure, the largest number of proceedings took place in universities. The reason lies in the plurality of study programme groups, as well as in the availability of different study cycles (in a university all five cycles may be represented). 10 higher education institutions provide professional higher education in only one study programme group.

Figure 3. Number of evaluation proceedings by higher education institution



In the course of one proceeding, committees had to assess an average of 2.6 study programmes. The work volume of an assessment committee in each case depended on the number of study programmes in the study programme group which could range from one (common case for professional higher education in business and administration) to more than 20 (master degree studies in teacher training and educational science in Tallinn University).

Figure 4. The average number of study programmes per proceeding by study programme group



Who evaluated and how?

Considering the Estonian recent tradition of assessing higher education, transitional evaluation was exceptional in many ways:

1. Higher education institutions did not write a report on study programme groups, their input was limited to submitting data through the Estonian Education Information System (*Eesti Hariduse Infosüsteem, EHIS*).
2. Under certain conditions, an assessment committee could make a decision without visiting the higher education institution, using the so-called simplified proceeding. In the case of a simplified proceeding, the assessment was based solely on the written data. A standard proceeding involved the conventional assessment visit. The breakdown of simplified and standard proceedings was quite equal in the end, the proportion of standard proceedings being 51%.
3. Assessment committees were comprised of local experts only (previously only foreign experts were used).
4. In addition to the members of the teaching staff of higher education institutions, an assessment committee also included a student and an employer representative from outside higher education institutions.

Figure 5. Transitional evaluation process



To form the assessment committees, EKKA announced a public competition. There were more than 500 candidates, from whom EKKA selected 158 people. The Director of EKKA approved the specific committees after having coordinated the committee compositions with the higher education institutions to be evaluated.

Any assessment is to some extent subjective, but the degree of subjectivity can be decreased by establishing various procedural rules. The rules of transitional evaluation were as follows:

- The composition of a committee was calibrated (five members from different organizations, including at least one expert from outside higher education institutions and one student).
- All committees underwent a two-day assessment training.
- The assessment was evidence-based (i.e., decisions were based on clear evidence) and, to ensure comparability of the results, detailed evaluation forms were prepared.
- The committee sent its preliminary report to the higher education institution for comments and formed its conclusions after the receipt of the comments from the higher education institution.

- The committees were predisposed to adopt decisions by consensus (done in 99% of the cases). If a committee did not reach consensus, decisions were made by a simple majority, and the decisions together with the reasons of the committee members of a dissenting opinion were included.
- The evaluation was a two-step process: on the basis of the component assessments by the committees, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council provided the final decision; if necessary, the Quality Assessment Council returned the component assessments to the committee to be reviewed and clarified (3% of the cases).

If certain formal conditions were met (at least 80% of students are enrolled in fully accredited study programmes, the lack of negative accreditations in recent five years, etc.), the assessment committee could make a decision by the simplified proceeding – without visiting the higher education institution. Past accreditation reports of study programmes formed one basis for transitional evaluation, but it was not always possible to consider them without reservations for the following reasons:

1. The education licence is issued for a study programme group that may include study programmes with very different accreditation terms and status.
2. Some study programmes were accredited seven years ago, and there could have been changes in the quality of the studies and resource sufficiency in the higher education institution.
3. Accreditation of the study programmes did not address the aspect of sustainability, an aspect that is an essential requirement under transitional evaluation to grant the right to conduct studies for an unspecified term.
4. The level of accreditation committees and the thoroughness of their reports were uneven.

For the reasons above, the simplified proceeding took place in only 49% of the cases, although the formal conditions to use it were met in 75% of the cases. As discussed below, there have been five cases under transitional evaluation where a previously fully accredited study programme received a negative decision: the professional higher education programme in Hydrography at the Estonian Maritime Academy, the bachelor degree and master degree programmes in Psychology at University Nord, the master degree programme in Art History at Euroacademy, the professional higher education programme in Business Administration at the Tallinn College of Business Administration.

RESULTS

The aggregate results of transitional evaluation are shown in Figures 6–8.

Figure 6. Breakdown of decisions by type of education licenses

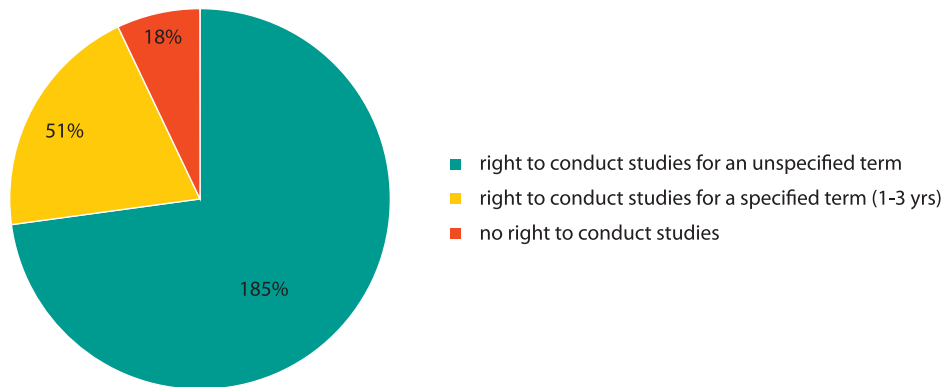


Figure 7. Breakdown of decisions by study cycle

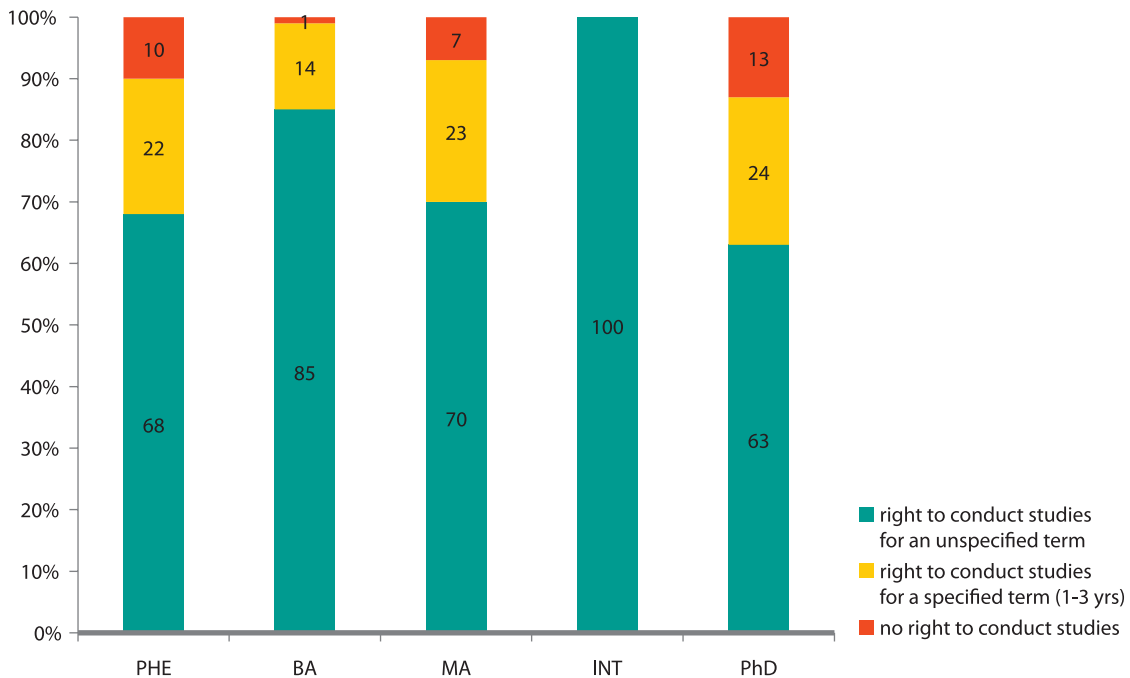
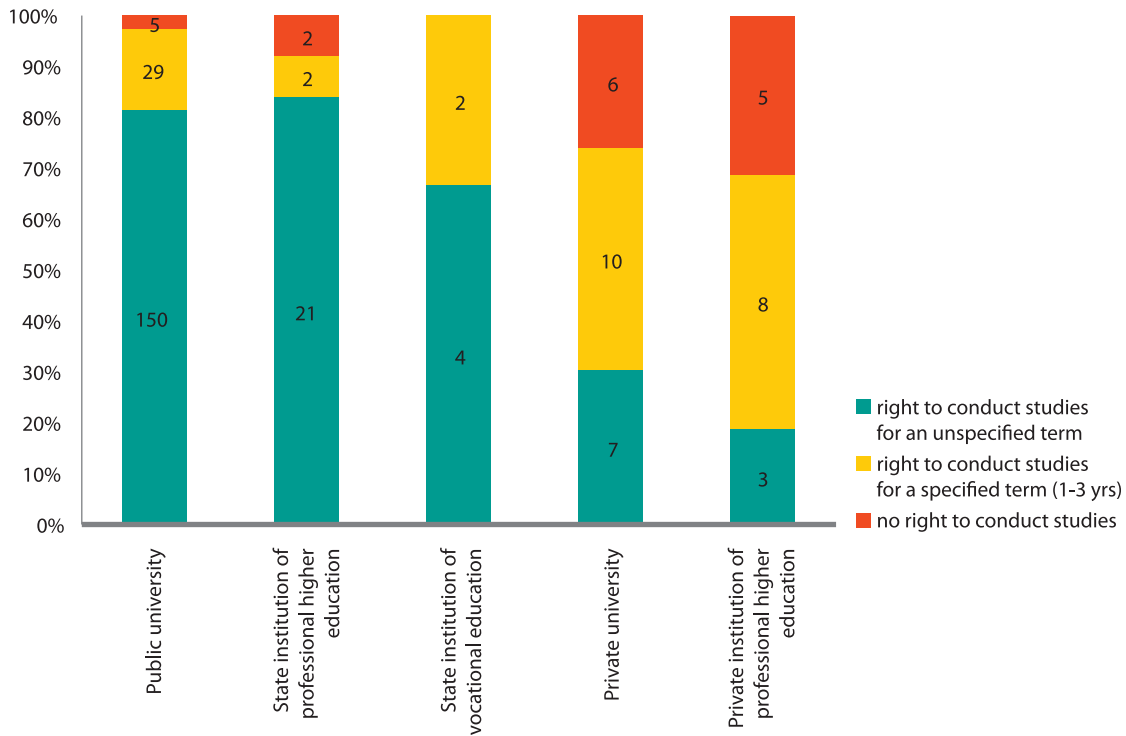


Figure 8. Breakdown of decisions by type of educational institutions



In absolute terms, there was an equal number of negative decisions in both professional higher education and doctoral degree studies (6 in each), but the percentage of negative decisions, as well as decisions granting rights for specified terms, was the highest in doctoral degree studies. It is noteworthy that one doctoral degree programme (Environmental Protection and Environmental Policy at Euroacademy) was registered just before the start of transitional evaluation and two new doctoral degree programmes (Law at TLÜ and TTÜ) were registered during transitional evaluation, all of which were given negative decisions under transitional evaluation.

The largest number of decisions granting rights for specified terms was made in master degree studies – 18, and in doctoral degree studies – 11.

Of types of educational institutions, more problems were found with private institutions of professional higher education, two of which (SHI and TÄK) did not get an education licence in any study programme groups. The only private university to continue in 2012 is EBS, as EELK UI and EA did not get the education licence in doctoral degree studies and University Nord merged with TLÜ during the period of transitional evaluation.

The following figure explains the assessment results best (for abbreviations see p 6)

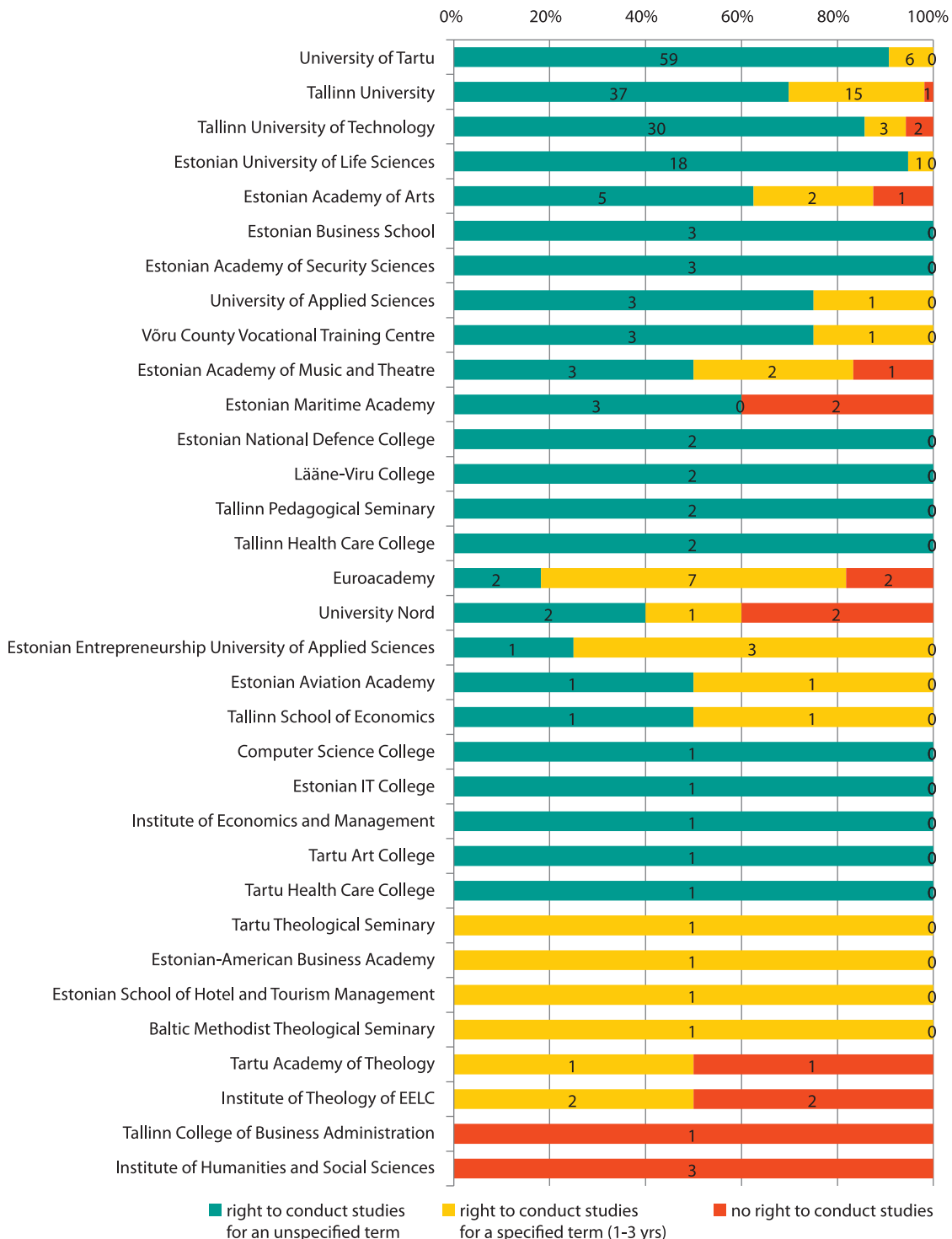
Figure 9. Summary table of the results of transitional evaluation by higher education institution, study programme group and study cycle

Agriculture, forestry and fishery	EMÜ			EMA											
	BA	MA	PhD	PHE											
Architecture and building	TTÜ					EMÜ			EKA			TTKK			
	PHE	BA	MA	INT	PhD	BA	MA	INT	MA	INT	PhD	PHE			
Arts (fine arts, graphic and audio-visual arts, design, craft skills)	TÜ			TLÜ			EKA			EA		EEKM			
	PHE	BA	MA	PHE	BA	MA	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PHE			
Business and administration	TÜ			TLÜ		TTÜ			EMÜ		EEKM		EA		
	PHE	BA	MA	BA	MA	PHE	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PHE	MA	BA	MA
	AN	EMTA	SHI	SKA	TMK	VKHK	LVRK	EBS		MJI	EAÄA	TÄK			
Engineering, manufacturing and technology	TÜ			TTÜ			EMÜ		EKA		TTK		EMA		
	BA	MA	PhD	PHE	BA	MA	PhD	PHE	BA	MA	PhD	MA	PHE	PHE	VKHK
Environmental protection	TÜ			TLÜ		TTÜ		EMÜ		EA		TTKK			
	PHE	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	BA	MA	BA	MA	BA	MA	PhD	PHE	
Health care	TÜ		TLÜ		TlnTK	TrtTK									
	BA	MA	BA	MA	PHE	PHE									
Humanities (excluding theology)	TÜ			TLÜ											
	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD									
Informatics and information technology	TÜ			TLÜ			TTÜ			EEKM		AK	EITK		
	BA	MA	PhD	PHE	BA	MA	PhD	PHE	BA	MA	PhD	PHE	PHE	PHE	
Journalism and information	TÜ			TLÜ											
	PHE	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD								
Languages and cultures	TÜ			TLÜ			EA								
	PHE	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA						
Law	TÜ			TLÜ		TTÜ		AN		SHI	TMK				
	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PHE	PHE		
Life sciences	TÜ			TLÜ			TTÜ		EMÜ						
	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD			
Mathematics and statistics	TÜ			TLÜ											
	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA										
Medicine (including dental services)	TÜ		TlnTK												
	INT	PhD	PHE												
National defence	KÜOA														
	PHE	MA													
Performing arts	TÜ			TLÜ		EMTA									
	PHE	BA	MA	BA	MA	BA	MA	PhD							
Personal services	TÜ	TLÜ	TLÜ	TTÜ	VKHK	EHTK									
	PHE	BA	MA	PHE	PHE	PHE									
Physical sciences	TÜ			TLÜ		TTÜ		EMA							
	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD	PHE					
Psychology	TÜ			TLÜ		AN									
	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA							
Public security	SKA														
	PHE	MA													
Social science (excluding psychology)	TÜ			TLÜ			TTÜ		EA						
	BA	MA	PhD	PHE	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA			
Social services	TÜ			TLÜ			SHI	TPS	UI	LVRK					
	PHE	MA	PHE	BA	MA	PhD	PHE	PHE	MA	PHE					
Sports	TÜ			TLÜ											
	BA	MA	PhD	BA											
Teacher training and educational science	TÜ			TLÜ			TTÜ	EMTA	EKS	TPS					
	BA	MA	INT	PhD	BA	MA	INT	PhD	MA	MA	PhD	MA	PHE		
Theology	TÜ			UI	TTA	TTA	KUS	TS							
	BA	MA	PhD	BA	MA	PhD	PHE	MA	PHE	PHE					
Transport services	TTÜ		TTK	EMA		ELA									
	BA	MA	PHE	PHE	MA	PHE	MA								
Veterinary	EMÜ														
	INT	PhD													

The highest percentage of negative decisions and decisions granting rights for specified terms is in the study programme groups of theology as well as teacher training and educational science. Regarding theology, the main problem is probably the fragmentation of resources. Leaving aside the Faculty of Theology at the University of Tartu, the average number of students per institution of theological education is 80 (the smallest number of students is 53 and the largest is 107).

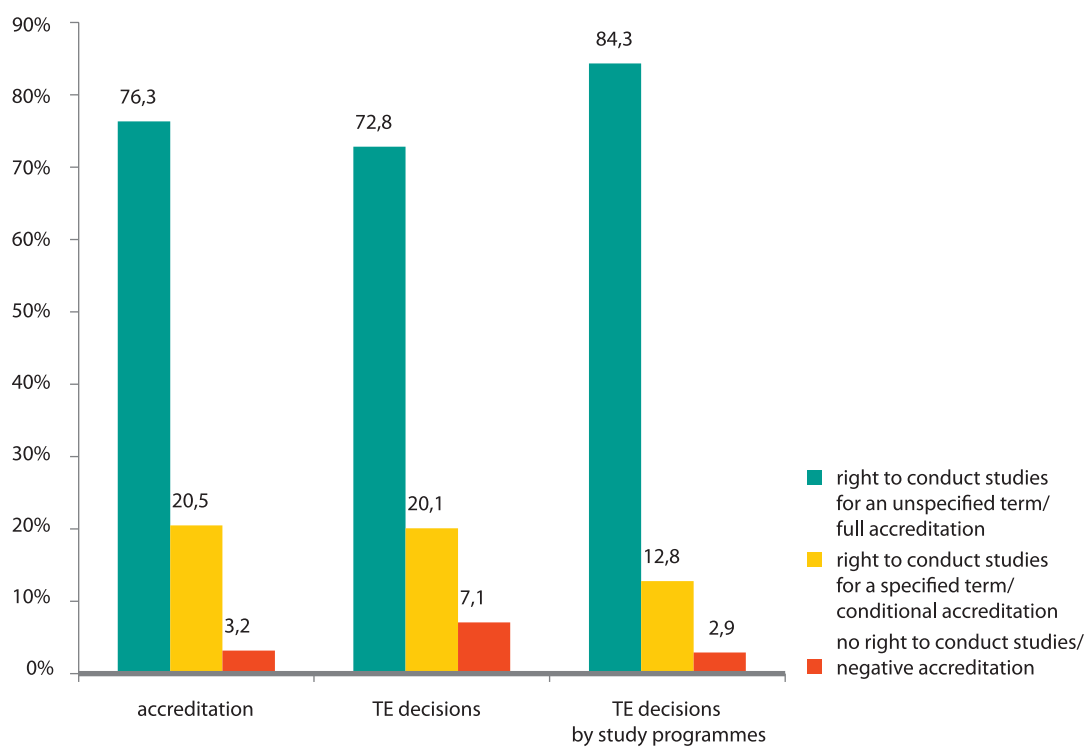
The following figure, where the sequence of higher education institutions is based on the number of open-ended education licences, presents a comprehensive picture of the results of transitional evaluation by institution of higher education – and of the Estonian higher education landscape as well.

Figure 10. Breakdown of decisions by higher education institution



When comparing the results of transitional evaluation to the results of accreditation in the previous system, it appears that the proportion of different decisions has not changed much. Figure 11 is based on the results of accreditation of study programmes conducted in 1997–2009 (full accreditation for 7 years, conditional accreditation for 3 years, negative accreditation, i.e., not to accredit).

Figure 11. Comparison of the results of transitional evaluation (TE) and accreditation of study programmes



Frequently recurring problems by study cycle encountered in transitional evaluation

PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION



- The learning outcomes promise more than the study programme actually makes possible
- The study programme does not address all the requirements of the professional standard
- Studies are too theoretical, without enough practical assignments
- Links with the working world and professional associations are too weak
- Lack of specialized teaching labs, etc.
- Teaching staff lack practical work experience in areas related to their specialities
- Lack of a critical mass of ordinary teaching staff of specialty programmes
- Teaching staff are working for several employers (often having more than a double normal workload each)
- Distribution of teaching staff by age is not balanced, lack of young successors
- Teaching staff are not engaged in self-development, international mobility is low or nonexistent
- Foreign teachers are not being involved in educational activities
- Student admissions are declining
- International mobility of students is very low or nonexistent
- The higher education institution lacks sufficient financial resources for development (including for staff development)
- Financial resources are inadequate and the trend is declining, dependence on donations
- Practical international cooperation is nonexistent
- There is no specific action plan to solve the problems outlined by previous external evaluations

BACHELOR DEGREE STUDIES



- The title of a study programme is not consistent with the content
- The number of ordinary teaching staff of specialty programmes is inadequate, most teachers work part-time at the higher education institution
- The needs of the labour market are not given adequate weight, professional associations are not involved in the development of study programmes
- The proportion of practical assignments in study programmes is small
- Lack of special classrooms (labs, studios)
- Distribution of teaching staff by age is not balanced, lack of young successors
- Formal qualifications of the teaching staff do not meet the requirements of the Standard of Higher Education (a professor does not hold a doctoral level degree)
- A large part of the teaching staff does not participate in research and development
- Student admissions as well as graduation rates have been declining
- Students do not participate in international mobility programmes

- The higher education institution lacks sufficient financial resources for development activities (including staff development, study programme development)
- Solutions to the problems outlined in previous assessment reports have not been found nor sought after

MASTER DEGREE STUDIES



- The study programme does not address all the requirements of the professional standard
- The academic degree awarded does not meet the requirements of the Standard of Higher Education
- The proportion of work practice in a study programme is small
- The number of teaching staff of specialty programmes is inadequate, lack of full-time teaching staff
- Distribution of teaching staff by age is not balanced, lack of young successors
- The needs of the labour market are not given enough weight, the teaching staff lack practical work experience in areas related to their specialities
- Lack of necessary lab resources for research-led studies
- Research of international quality is either inadequate or nonexistent
- The higher education institution does not have enough financial resources to finance development (including staff development, mobility support, etc.)
- Student admissions are declining, graduation rates are low, the number of students per study programme is very small
- Finances coming through the state-commissioned education do not cover the expenses made for conducting studies (the state orders specialists, but does not adequately finance them)
- International mobility as well as domestic mobility of students is low
- Solutions to the problems outlined in previous assessment reports have not been found nor sought after

DOCTORAL DEGREE STUDIES



- The title of a doctoral degree programme is not consistent with the content
- Topics of doctoral theses are not related to the study programme group
- The study programme group lacks research projects (external funding) to support doctoral degree studies
- The number of qualified ordinary teaching staff is small – there is no critical mass to ensure sustainability
- Supervisors' research activities are low, the level and/or the number of their publications is inadequate
- Supervisors' research works are not related to the research works of their doctoral students
- Supervisors have little experience in (successful) supervision
- The previous performance of supervisors and the level of their research are not sufficiently

taken into account when assigning doctoral students to them

- The efficiency of defence of doctoral theses is very low or nonexistent
- Long-term international mobility of doctoral students is low or nonexistent
- The proportion of state-commissioned education in a study programme group is very small, no emergence of a critical mass of doctoral students
- Cooperation with other universities is inadequate
- The specifics of creative disciplines and the requirements for graduation are not clearly defined

In conclusion, we can highlight three main problem areas in higher education in Estonia:

1. **Naked ambition** – the fragmentation and insufficient human and financial resources
2. **Not enough cooperation** – between higher education institutions and the working world; competition between higher education institutions that excludes cooperation
3. **Lack of outward focus** – despite the priority given, internationalization is progressing at a snail's space

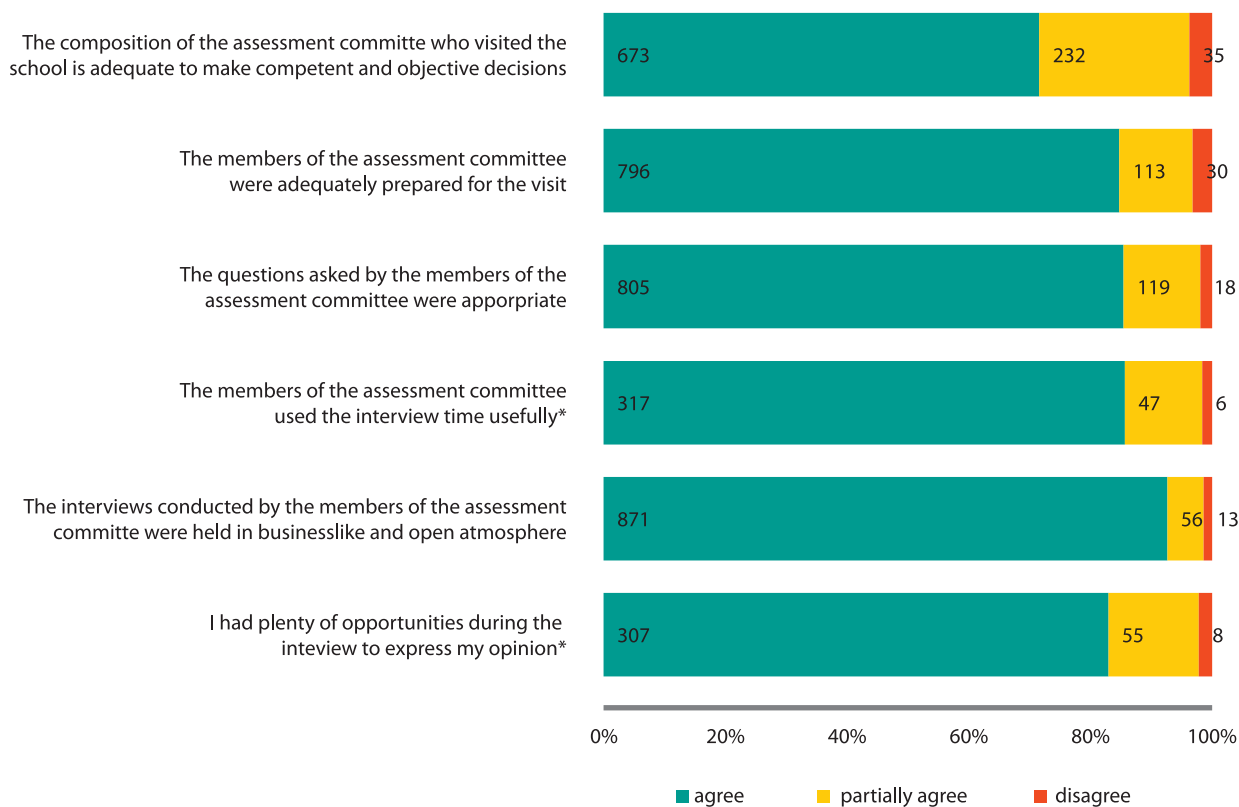
FEEDBACK

The feedback of higher education institutions on assessment visits

EKKA asked the institutions of higher education to give feedback on the assessment visits. Questionnaires were sent out immediately after the visit to all people who had met with assessment committees, and we asked the forms back before the institutions received the preliminary assessment results (so that the answers would not be influenced by the decisions).

We received back 940 questionnaires. The questionnaires give information on standard proceedings only. As the study programme groups of medicine, sports and veterinary underwent only simplified proceedings, we got feedback on the visits regarding 25 study programme groups.

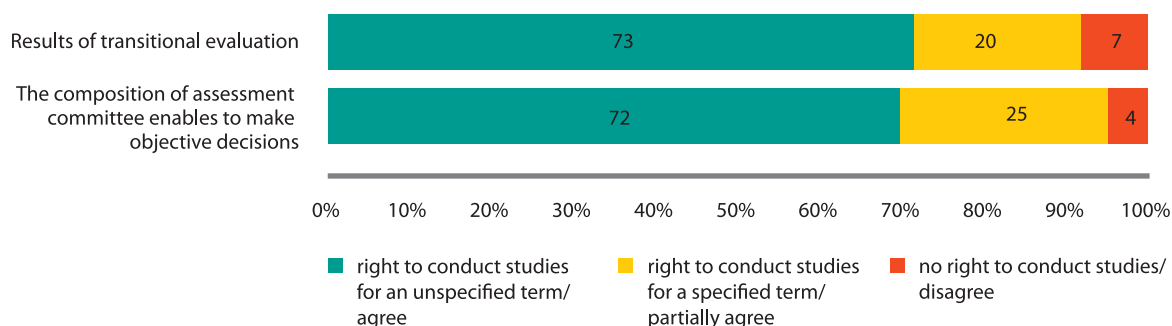
Figure 12. Summary of feedback on assessment visits



*the statements with an asterisk were included in the 2011 questionnaire only

Feedback received is undoubtedly recognition of the committees' work. Besides the opinions, the answers included many comments that repeatedly pointed out the amicable attitude and constructive approach of the committee members.

The similarity in the proportion of the answers “agree, partially agree, disagree” to the first statement and decisions to grant the right to conduct studies for an unspecified term, specified term and not to grant the right, is noteworthy:



The smallest number of respondents (20–30%) agreeing with the first statement were from the study programme groups of journalism and information as well as mathematics and statistics. At the same time, 80% of the representatives of both above mentioned study programme groups agreed that the interviews with committee members were held in businesslike and open atmosphere.

Based on the comments, it may be claimed that the problems fall into two broad categories:

1. The committees included representatives from competing institutions of higher education; therefore, in respondents' opinion, the results cannot be objective, in principle (66 comments).
2. As the study programme groups were assessed, the committees were short of specialists in specific fields (94 comments).

Scarcity of professional competence was written into the process of transitional evaluation, since the committees were to assess sometimes quite heterogeneous study programme groups not individual study programmes. The lack of experts with narrower qualifications could be a problem when assessing the content of a study programme. Here the committees could build on past accreditation reports and instead evaluate the system of quality assurance of the study programme in the higher education institution (consideration of the needs of the labour market, cooperation with stakeholders, self-analysis, etc.).

The positive comments most frequently pointed out the practicality, benevolence and constructiveness of the committee. One specific example of recognition: “It was a big surprise that the members of the committee had a very positive attitude and they were relatively open. Always put competent and positive people into committees😊”.

Among other things, feedback gave EKKK information on the effectiveness of the training of experts and led to an increase in the proportion of interview techniques in assessment training.

Feedback from assessment committees

At the end of each assessment period (semester) we asked the members and assistants of the committees for feedback on preparation of the process (training, evaluation forms), organization of work of committees, and each other's contribution. 95% of the respondents found the prior assessment training useful. 94% of the respondents considered the organization of work appropriate, 80% were satisfied with the evaluation forms. We asked the committee members to evaluate the work of the chairman, and the chairman and assistant to evaluate the work of the members. We shall save these opinions in the expert database and consider them in forming future committees.

The interim workshop of traditional evaluation (in November 2010) that launched some new activities (e.g., EKKA’s newsletter about the results of transitional evaluation and its dissemination at the youth information and education fair *Teeviit*) and emphasized the importance of involving local experts in external evaluations of higher education, proved to be even more useful than written feedback from the experts.

Feedback from higher education institutions on transitional evaluation

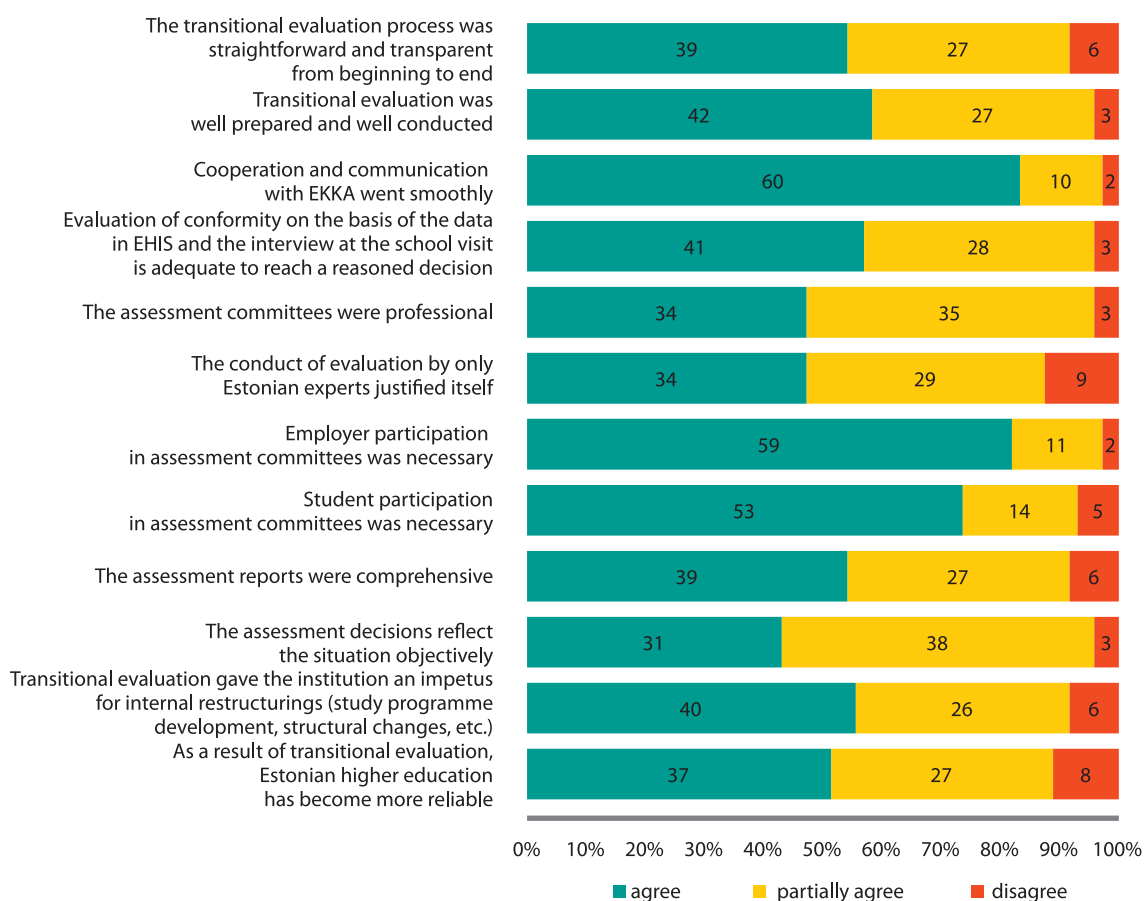
Transitional evaluation is a special case of external evaluation of higher education and not likely to be repeated in Estonia in the same form. However, it should be mentioned that following Estonia’s example and using our experience, Latvia has initiated a similar process. Due to the exceptional nature, transitional evaluation included several novel aspects that we wanted to get feedback on from the higher education institutions.

In September 2011 we sent out 150 questionnaires. The sample consisted of top managers of the higher education institutions, leaders of the basic academic units (faculties, institutes, colleges), heads of the offices of academic affairs, quality managers, contact persons of transitional evaluation.

72 people (48%) filled in the questionnaire: 27 rectors/vice-rectors, 29 basic unit leaders, 9 heads of offices of academic affairs, 2 quality managers and 6 individuals holding some other position.

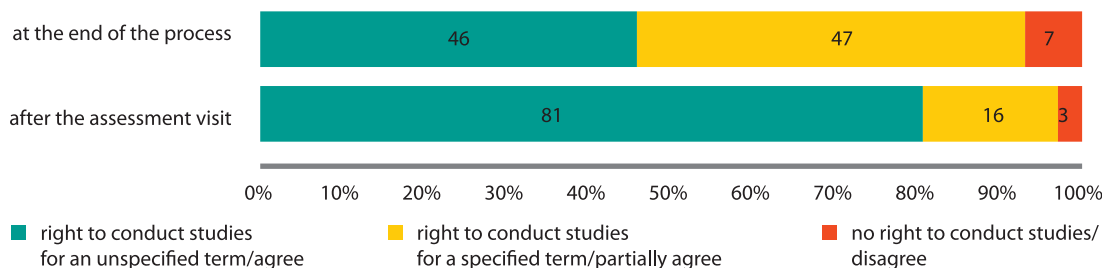
There were 33 respondents from public universities and 21 from state institutions of professional higher education; we received 11 responses from private institutions of professional higher education and 7 responses from private universities.

Figure 13. Summary of feedback from the representatives of the higher education institutions



At the end of the process, the opinions about professionalism in the work of committees (professional and assessment-related competence) were most disapproving. When comparing the results of the questionnaire conducted immediately after the assessment visit to those at the end of the process, it becomes obvious that the evaluation results have significantly influenced the opinions about the committees' professionalism:

Figure 14. The opinions about committees' professionalism in comparison



In this comparison, we used three statements from each questionnaire that contained an assessment of the academic and/or assessment competence of the committee:

1. The composition of the assessment committee who visited the institution is adequate to make competent and objective decisions; the questions asked by the members of the assessment committee were appropriate; The members of the assessment committee were adequately prepared for the visit.
2. The conduct of evaluation by only Estonian experts justified itself; The assessment committees were professional; The assessment decisions reflect the situation objectively.

The leaders of academic units (deans, directors of institutes and colleges) see the biggest problem in the lack of foreign experts – 24% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that the use of only Estonian experts justified itself – however, only one respondent among top managers disagreed. Some examples of the comments that challenge the involvement of Estonian experts, but do not eliminate it (partially agree):

- Involvement of international experts would have made the process fairer and more impartial. Estonia is a society containing too many corporate ties. An international view would have been fresher and more objective.
- It is difficult to guarantee the impartiality where the one who is assessed is also a competitor.
- It was a practical decision that allowed transitional evaluation to be carried out in a short time and with relatively limited resources. However, there is no certainty that evaluation conducted by Estonian experts was entirely unbiased.

One should certainly agree with the last statement – the format of transitional evaluation had definite boundaries and time frame, and the entire process had to fit into it. However, only three respondents (4%) thought that the results of transitional evaluation did not reflect the situation objectively. It is appropriate here to disclose a comment by a respondent belonging to the top management of a public university: "An old folk wisdom: 'If the forests are cut, the chips fly' seems to be suitable to characterize transitional evaluation. I believe that the assessment decisions are generally fair, but, at a study programme level, because of the rules of play, some strong and well functioning study programmes received a fixed-term education licence and some weaker ones an open-ended licence."

The biggest challenge of transitional evaluation lay in the question – to which extent the decision regarding the entire study programme group should depend on its weakest link. Assessment experiences suggest that if a study programme group contained more than five study programmes, the weaknesses of a weak link were shadowed by strong links and the final decision was positive. On the other hand, if the study programme group consisted of only one study programme, the latter was not forgiven even half of the weaknesses of the weak study programme belonging into a bigger group. This is unfair to an individual study programme, but inevitable from the viewpoint of evaluating a study programme group, because, after the education licence is granted, next to the single weak study programme several other weak ones may emerge to which state recognition will immediately apply.

WHAT IS NEXT?

Transitional evaluation will formally end in 2011, but the assessment (the so-called re-evaluation) of the study programme groups that received fixed-term education licences may continue until 2017. That is, if there are higher education institutions that will be granted a fixed-term education licence in some study programme groups for a second time and they make a third attempt. The conclusion of the second re-evaluation can be either the issue of an open-ended education licence or termination of studies in that study programme group, because the fixed-term education licence is not granted for the third time.

When a higher education institution wants to start to conduct studies in a new study programme group, it has to undergo a similar procedure to transitional evaluation – assessment of the quality of studies. Unlike transitional evaluation, the proposed studies are assessed, not the studies actually taking place, and the higher education institution will cover the expenses of the expert analysis conducted by EKKA.

Considering that the period of expansionary development in higher education is over and the key to the survival of higher education in Estonian lies in focusing and internationalisation, EKKA is not expected to be too much engaged in assessment of the quality of studies in the near future. We hope to focus on the main activities of EKKA – on institutional accreditation and assessment of the quality of study programme groups.

We certainly keep in mind the following lessons of transitional evaluation:

- International expert analyses are definitely necessary in evaluating higher education, but it is practical to involve Estonian experts as well.
- Involving potential employers and students adds value to the result.
- In the case of a controlling evaluation, in certain conditions, it is appropriate to waive self-evaluation reports and evaluate conformity on the basis of written data only.
- Alongside a predominantly developing function, assessment of the quality of study programme groups that hold open-ended education licence must also have a controlling function in order to be able to answer two main questions: (1) have the problems identified in the course of transitional evaluation been addressed; and (2) have all the requirements of legislation been met in the case of study programmes opened after transitional evaluation. This kind of controlling evaluation could be similar to the simplified proceeding of transitional evaluation which involves local experts and the results of which are evidence-based. Building on the latter, EKKA and the higher education institution agree to the emphases on evaluating the study programme group; and based on those emphases, EKKA forms a committee that is mainly comprised of international experts, whose main role is to support the development.

And finally – one of the most valuable results of transitional evaluation is that there is a critical mass of higher education evaluation experts in Estonia, most of whom have acquired an expressive assessment experience within a short period. By now, EKKA is much more than the Bureau and the Quality Assessment Council – it is also 158 Estonian experts. We shall definitely use many of the transitional evaluation experts for future institutional accreditation and assessment of the quality of study programme groups and recommend them to foreign agencies. Annual training days will ensure that the lines of student experts are not decreasing and there will be additions from the fields of employers and teachers.

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