



**EKKA**

# Self-Evaluation Report

## External Review of Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (EKKA)

2012

Translated by Juta Grube



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# Preface

The Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency is a competence centre in the field of external evaluation of both higher education and vocational education in Estonia. Based on legislation of the Republic of Estonia regulating higher education, EKKA's function is to conduct institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups. At the request of the Ministry of Education and Research, EKKA also conducts initial assessments of study programme groups, which higher education institutions must undergo to be granted the right to conduct studies under each study programme group. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Research, taking into account EKKA's long-term effective operation in evaluating higher education, entrusted EKKA with external evaluation of vocational education and training (accreditation of study programme groups in VET) as of 2010.

EKKA acts in accord with agreements and trends in the European higher education and vocational education areas, retains information about trends and best practices also from outside Europe, and applies up-to-date know-how and analyses of the results of external quality evaluations to enhance competitiveness of the Estonian educational system.

The purpose of this self-evaluation report is to assess how EKKA and its activities conform to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Part 1 provides an overview of the development of the quality assurance system for higher education in Estonia as well as EKKA's role, status and key activities. Part 2 contains an analysis of EKKA's compliance with the European standards and guidelines for the external quality assurance of higher education, and Part 3 comprises an analysis of EKKA's compliance with European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies. The report ends with a summary of those compliance analyses and a description of activities planned during and as a result of the self-evaluation process.

The self-evaluation report has been prepared by the staff members of the EKKA Bureau in cooperation with the EKKA Quality Assessment Council. EKKA's main partners — higher education institutions, students, employers and evaluation experts — were also included in this reflection process, and they provided us with constructive feedback and recommendations for improvement activities.

The self-evaluation process motivated us to critically re-evaluate and improve the existing systems; it clearly identified our strengths and gave us an impetus for improvement activities.

**Heli Mattisen**  
Director of EKKA

**Jakob Kübarsepp**  
Chairman of the EKKA  
Quality Assessment Council

## Abbreviations

The documents referred to in the present report can be found online at EKKA's website

[ekka.archimedes.ee](http://ekka.archimedes.ee)

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| EE     | document/material in Estonian  |
| EKKA   | Estonian Higher Education Quality Agenc  |
| ESF    | European Structural Funds  |
| ESG    | Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area |
| HEI    | higher education institution   |
| IA     | institutional accreditation  |
| ProfHE | professional higher education  |
| SPG    | study programme group  |
| VET    | vocational education and training  |

# Part 1: EKKA and Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Estonia

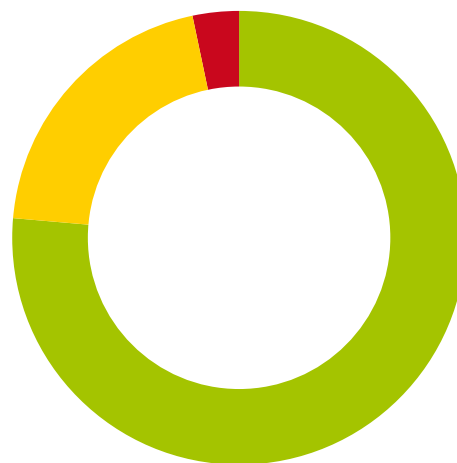
## 1.1 External Quality Evaluation of Higher Education in Estonia in 1996–2012

### 1.1.1 Accreditation of Study Programmes in 1996–2009

Traditions of external quality evaluation of Estonian higher education go back to 1997 when the first study programmes were accredited. The Universities Act imposed the task of organising accreditations on the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council, which had been formed for the first time by a government regulation as early as 11 April 1995. The first international assessment committees were appointed in the second half of 1996. To support the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council, the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre was established on 1 September 1997 as a separate structural unit of the [Archimedes Foundation](#). The Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency, comprised of the Bureau and the Quality Assessment Council, is the legal successor to the Accreditation Centre.

In 1997–2008, the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre organised accreditation of study programmes of all higher education institutions (HEI). A positive accreditation decision on a study programme was a mandatory prerequisite for the higher education institution to issue nationally recognised graduation documents. Accreditation committees were comprised of experienced foreign experts. Possible accreditation decisions included “full accreditation” (for the term of 7 years), “conditional accreditation” (for the term of 3 years), and “negative accreditation” (resulting in the closure of the study programme). Pursuant to law, the Minister of Education and Research by his or her directive was mandated to confirm the decisions of the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council.

Figure 1. The results of accreditation of study programmes in 1997–2009



- 76% full accreditation
- 22% conditional accreditation
- 3% negative accreditation

Institutional accreditation was voluntary during that period. The Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre conducted six institutional accreditations of HEIs.

A total of more than 1400 study programmes were accredited during 1997–2009 in Estonia.

### 1.1.2 Designing Changes in 2006–2008

On 15 November 2006 the *Riigikogu* (the Parliament of Estonia) approved the Estonian Higher Education Strategy for 2006–2015. Action 2 of that strategy, “Quality Assurance”, was to a great extent based on the ESG, and among other things envisaged a change to the system of external evaluation of higher education. Changes were necessitated by the following shortcomings in the then-current accreditation system:

- When starting their studies, students did not have certainty that the diplomas they received would be recognised by the state, because study programmes were accredited when the first students had completed at least two-thirds of their studies; yet, the nationally recognised diplomas were issued only upon completion of accredited study programmes;
- The level of accreditation committees and the thoroughness of their reports were inconsistent;
- Comparability of the accreditation results was not assured, because similar study programmes were accredited at different times by different committees, and the arguments that accreditation decisions were based on, had different weights. While participating in various roundtable discussions, representatives of HEIs voiced the opinion that the effectiveness of the second accreditation period of study programmes had been marginal with regard to the development of teaching and learning;<sup>1</sup>
- It was overly resource intensive to accredit individual study programmes;
- The statuses of the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre (the unit organising external evaluation) and the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council, and their interrelationships were vague;
- Independence of an external evaluation was not sufficiently assured, since both the composition of the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council

and its accreditation decisions were approved by the Minister of Education and Research.

During 2007, involving the parties of higher education the Ministry of Education and Research prepared amendments to the Universities Act; and after having coordinated them with HEIs, it convened a working group with the task to develop a new standard of higher education. The amendments to the Universities Act entered into force on 1 September 2008. The new Standard of Higher Education was approved by the Government on 18 December 2008.

### 1.1.3 Quality Assurance in Estonian Higher Education in 2009+

Amendments to the Universities Act established a transition to a new quality assurance system of higher education:

1. In order to provide higher education, all educational institutions must have the right to conduct studies. An educational institution is granted such right by the Government of the Republic of Estonia in a specific study programme group and in a specific academic cycle (professional higher education, ProfHE; bachelor degree studies, BA; master degree studies, MA; doctoral studies, PhD), which allows the HEI to issue nationally recognised diplomas under all study programmes contained in the corresponding study programme group. Before such right is granted, the study programme group must undergo the initial assessment<sup>2</sup> which the Ministry of Education and Research orders from EKKA.
2. Once in each seven years HEIs must undergo the quality assessment of study programme groups (quality assessment of SPGs) in all the programme groups in which they have been granted the right to conduct studies. The principles and procedures for quality assessment of SPGs are developed and the assessment is conducted by EKKA. Final decisions are adopted by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council.
3. Once in each seven years HEIs must undergo the institutional accreditation. The principles and procedures for institutional accreditation are developed and the evaluation is organised by EKKA. Final decisions are adopted by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council.
4. The functions of the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency and the principles for formation of the Quality Assessment Council are established in § 10 of the [Universities Act](#).

1 The same conclusion was drawn by Birgit Vilgats in her PhD thesis “The Impact of External Quality Assessment to Universities: The Analysis of Estonian Experience”, defended in 2009.

2 Instead of the notion “assessment of the quality of instruction” used in the Universities Act and other legislation regulating higher education, EKKA uses the notion “initial assessment of study programme groups” which

In the new system, pertinent responsibilities are as follows:

| Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)  | The Government of the Republic of Estonia   | Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (EKKA)  |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Strategic management (including internal quality assurance)</p> <p>Internal evaluation</p> | <p>Granting HEIs the right to conduct studies in study programme groups (SPGs) and in academic cycles (ProfHE, BA, MA, PhD). The Minister of Education and Research makes proposals to the Government, based on the results of initial assessments of SPGs conducted by EKKA.</p> | <p>Institutional accreditation (IA)</p> <p>Quality assessment of SPGs</p> <p>Initial assessment of SPGs commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Research</p> |

Principal differences between the new and the old systems:

| 1996–2009  | 2009+   |
|--|---|
| <p>Study programmes were accredited.</p>   | <p>The entire study programme group (SPG) is evaluated.</p>   |
| <p>The quality of a study programme was evaluated (a study programme was accredited) after the study programme had been registered and the education licence had been issued.</p>  | <p>An initial assessment of SPGs is conducted prior to granting a HEI the right to conduct studies. The Government of the Republic grants the HEI the right to conduct studies based on a positive result of the initial assessment of SPG. If the result of initial assessment of SPG is negative, the Minister approves by his or her directive the decision not to grant the HEI the right to conduct studies.</p> |
| <p>When starting their studies, students did not have the assurance that the diplomas they received would be recognised by the state.</p>  | <p>The right to conduct studies in a study programme group (the education licence) ensures that the diploma is recognised by the state.</p>   |
| <p>Institutional accreditation was voluntary.</p>  | <p>Institutional accreditation is obligatory to all institutions of higher education.</p>   |
| <p>Accreditation of study programmes was a predominantly controlling (differential) evaluation — whether or not they met the requirements — and resulted in sanctions (the closure of a study programme in the case of a negative decision).</p> | <p>A controlling evaluation is conducted when issuing an education licence; subsequent institutional accreditation and quality assessment of SPGs are essentially developmental evaluations which are not followed by sanctions.</p>  |
| <p>Accreditation decisions were approved by a directive of the Minister of Education and Research.</p>   | <p>Final assessment decisions regarding institutional accreditation and quality assessment of SPGs are adopted by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council.</p>  |

In 2009, in order to fulfil their functions as assigned by the Universities Act, the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre and the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council were reorganised into the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (EKKA) comprised of the Bureau and the Quality Assessment Council. The main organisational difference compared to the previous structure lies in the fact that the EKKA Quality Assessment Council is a part of the Agency, not of the Ministry, and its composition is approved by the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation. Two out of the three members of the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre continued to work with EKKA and within a year three more employees were added.

EKKA completed accreditation of study programmes in accordance with the old external evaluation system within 2009. The main task of the Agency was then, however, to develop the principles and procedures for the new external evaluation system and to conduct an assessment — the so-called transitional evaluation — which was needed for transition to the new system. One of the characteristic features of the new quality assurance system of higher education lies in an increase of confidence by the state in the HEIs. National recognition that comes with an education licence applies to all study programmes within the corresponding study programme group, including those that did not exist at the time of evaluation. Therefore, the state, before issuing an education licence, needed assurance of not only the quality of instruction in the study programme group and availability of resources, but also of sustainability in assuring the quality of higher education. All HEIs who wanted to continue providing higher education after 1 January 2012 had to submit corresponding requests to the Ministry of Education and Research and undergo the evaluation conducted by EKKA.

## 1.2 Status and Organisational Structure of EKKA

### 1.2.1 Status

As established in § 37 of the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, the provision of education is overseen by the national government. To clearly separate the external evaluation of higher education from governmental structures, the Ministry of Education and Research decided, on the basis of a contract under public law, to authorise this function to be performed by the Archimedes Foundation, the founder of which is the Republic of Estonia with the founder's rights being exercised by the Ministry

of Education and Research. The Foundation was established in 1997 as a legal person governed by private law to process international cooperation programmes in the field of education and research in Estonia. Besides its other units which primarily administer the EU and Estonian cooperation and development programmes, the Foundation comprises the Estonian ENIC/NARIC Centre as well. Since 2006 the Archimedes Foundation has held the ISO 9001:2000 quality management system certification and since 2008, the ISO 9001:2008.

According to clauses 3.3.1.1 and 3.3.5 of the Statutes of the Archimedes Foundation and clause 1.2 of the [Statutes of EKKA](#), approved by the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation, EKKA is a structural unit of the [Archimedes Foundation](#), which performs independent functions and, based on § 10 of the Universities Act, was set up in 2009 to continue the work of the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre and the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council (operating from 1997 to 2008). Based on the laws of the Republic of Estonia, the Supervisory Board of the Foundation also includes representatives of the state, but in order to ensure the independence of assessing the quality of higher education, it has delegated the approval of the EKKA regulations and the adoption of assessment decisions exclusively to the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency. EKKA is independent in developing its principles and procedures for quality assessment and in adopting assessment decisions. The decisions by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council regarding evaluation of the quality of higher education are final.

### 1.2.2 Organisational Structure and Composition

EKKA consists of the EKKA Bureau and the EKKA Quality Assessment Council. The EKKA Bureau comprises eight regular employees, whose areas of responsibility and duties are specified in their job descriptions and described in subsection 1.2.1 of the EKKA Quality Manual. The EKKA Quality Assessment Council includes at least one expert from each broad area of study. Candidates for membership in the Council may be submitted by universities, institutions of professional higher education, research and development institutions, registered professional associations, associations of employers and associations of student bodies, but no more than two members from each may belong to the Council. The composition of the Quality Assessment Council is approved by the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation. According to the Procedure for Formation of EKKA Quality Assessment Council, the Council is composed of 13 members who are selected according to the principle that it would

Figure 2. Organisational structure and areas of responsibility of EKKA within the Archimedes Foundation



include at least one student member and one employer representative, and that universities and professional higher education institutions are both represented.

### 1.3 EKKA's Mission and Key Activities

Subsection 10 (1) of the Universities Act describes EKKA's main functions, according to which EKKA.

- organises and conducts institutional accreditation in educational institutions providing higher education;
- organises and conducts the quality assessment of study programme groups on the level of higher education;
- performs other functions assigned to it by legislation.

EKKA's experiences in the external evaluation of higher education as well as transparency and reliability of its previous activities prompted the Ministry of Education and Research to task EKKA with launching external evaluations also in the field of vocational education and training (VET). In the field of general education, only a mandatory internal evaluation is currently practised in Estonia, but it is not impossible that soon external evaluation will be added to support its internal evaluation, just as in vocational education. Under the contract entered into with the Ministry of Education and Research, EKKA is currently administering the counselling of internal evaluation of educational institutions.

EKKA's mission is, in cooperation with its partners, to promote quality in the field of education and thereby increase the competitiveness of the Estonian society.

EKKA's core process is the external evaluation of educational institutions which includes the following key activities:

1. institutional accreditation of higher education institutions;
2. quality assessment of study programme groups in higher education;
3. transitional evaluation and re-evaluation of study programme groups in higher education;

4. initial assessment of study programme groups in order to grant higher education institutions the right to conduct studies;
5. accreditation of study programme groups in vocational education and training.

#### 1.3.1 Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups

In 2009–2011, Estonia transitioned to a new system for external quality evaluation of higher education. To give all HEIs an opportunity to switch to the new system on a common basis, EKKA conducted evaluations of all study programme groups (total 28) of all the HEIs (total 33) during that period. The purpose of the transitional evaluation was to reach a situation in Estonian higher education where all HEIs had the right to issue nationally-recognised diplomas in the fields in which they operated. According to the amendments to the law passed in 2008, starting from 1 January 2012 studies can be conducted only under the study programmes contained in the study programme group for which a specific HEI has been granted the corresponding right by the Government of the Republic. The transitional evaluation was needed for the government to be assured regarding the quality of instruction, adequacy of resources and sustainability of HEIs. [The results of the transitional evaluation](#) have been presented in a publication that gives an overview of rights to conduct studies by HEIs and by study programme groups.

Compared to a traditional external quality evaluation of higher education in Estonia (and also elsewhere in the world), the transitional evaluation had several substantial differences based on the purpose and context of the evaluation established by a directive of the Minister of Education and Research:

- 1) HEIs did not submit traditional self-evaluation reports, but prepared compliance analyses on learning outcomes of each study programme with those of the Standard of Higher Education; described the organisation of practical training; and submitted data on student and teaching staff mobility, infrastructure and financial resources. The evaluation was based on data submitted by HEIs, national information systems ([Estonian Education Portal EHIS](#) (EE) and [Estonian Research Portal ETIS](#)), background information provided by the Ministry of Education and Research, and additional data gathered during assessment visits. Reason: the transitional evaluation was clearly a compliance evaluation, because the fulfilment of (minimum) requirements established in the legislation were evaluated predominantly on the basis of quantitative indicators.

- 2) Assessment committees were comprised of local experts only. Reasons: involvement of foreign experts is not essential when an evaluation is based on predominantly quantitative indicators; information systems and data submitted by HEIs were in the Estonian language; and experts could, among other things, also rely on reports by international accreditation committees from the previous accreditation period.
- 3) EKKA Quality Assessment Council made its decision not on a study programme, but on the entire study programme group. Reason: a change in the system for external evaluation of higher education.
- 4) Some decisions of the Council were made without an assessment visit, solely on the basis of submitted data. Reason: experts could rely on the reports of international accreditation committees — based on a directive of the Minister of Education and Research, a simplified proceeding (evaluation without a site visit) was possible if 80% of students of a study programme group under evaluation were enrolled in study programmes that had received full accreditation by international experts. These decisions could only result in a proposal for an open-ended education licence.

#### 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, who received training by EKKA, took part in the evaluation process
- 254 assessments were conducted: 130 standard proceedings and 124 simplified proceedings
- Results: 185 open-ended education licences, i.e., the right to conduct studies for an unspecified term;

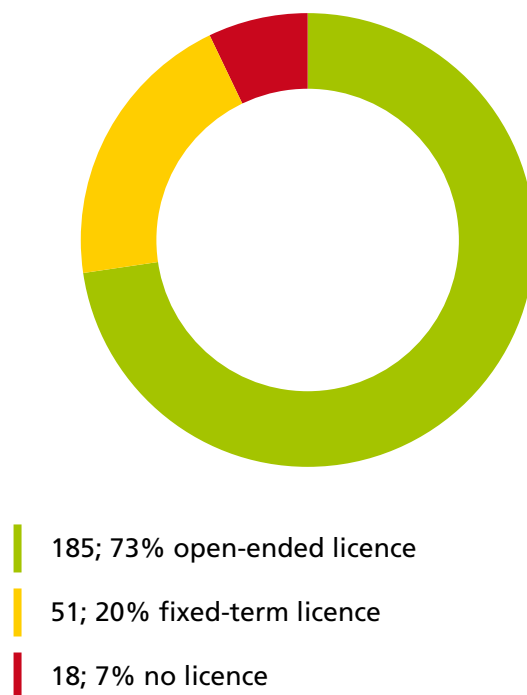
51 fixed-term education licences, i.e., the right to conduct studies for a specified term;

18 negative decisions, i.e., the right to conduct studies was not granted

Studies in all three cycles of higher education were evaluated by the following factors:

- 1) the quality of conducting studies — the learning outcomes, study programme development,

Figure 3. Breakdown of transitional evaluation decisions by type of education licences



organisation 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.

A more comprehensive analysis on the results of transitional evaluation and feedback thereof is provided in an EKKa publication *Transitional Evaluation: [A Special Case of External Evaluation of Higher Education in Estonia 2009-2011](#)*.

The HEIs who were granted the right to conduct studies in their study programme groups for a specified term only, must undergo a re-evaluation of similar procedures and criteria within two to three years. Most of the re-evaluations will take place in 2013–2014. According to the law, a HEI may be granted the right to conduct studies for a specified term for a second time as well, but not for the third time — in that case the studies in that study programme group must be terminated. Thus, re-evaluations may continue until 2017. So far, two re-evaluations have been undertaken.

### 1.3.2 Institutional Accreditation

The EKKa Quality Assessment Council approved the [Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation](#) on 1 April 2011.

Institutional accreditation (IA) is an external evaluation in the course of which EKKa assesses the compliance of the management, administration, academic and research activity, and academic and research environment of universities and institutions of professional higher education (i.e., higher education institutions) with the legislation, as well as with the purposes and development plans of institutions of higher education. The purpose of IA is to support the development of strategic management and culture of quality in HEIs, inform stakeholders of the outcomes of the main activities thereof, and enhance the reliability and competitiveness of Estonian higher education. IA includes four assessment areas: 1) organisational management and performance; 2) teaching and learning; 3) research, development and/or other creative activity; and 4) service to society. HEIs have an obligation to undergo IA at least once in seven years. Costs related to the evaluation are incurred by the state budget. According to

the approved timetable, all HEIs undergo the first round of the IA in the period 2011–2016.

The final decision on institutional accreditation is made by the EKKa Quality Assessment Council. Based on the self-evaluation report of the HEI, component assessments by the committee, comments by the HEI and additional materials submitted by the institution at the request of the Quality Assessment Council, the Quality Assessment Council provides an assessment as to whether the management, administration, academic and research activity, and academic and research environment, are consistent with the requirements, and makes a well-considered and reasoned decision on accreditation either for seven years, or for three years (if there are some minor deficiencies). In the case of major deficiencies, the Council may decide not to accredit the institution.

In its assessment report, an assessment committee may recognise an exceptionally outstanding practice in process management or development activity in one or several assessment areas with an additional note of 'worthy of recognition'. The latter does not affect the formation of the final decision for or against the accreditation, but allows the committee to recognise and highlight innovative initiatives/approaches, thereby supporting the development of the organisation.

In autumn 2011, EKKa conducted a pilot phase of institutional accreditation in a state institution of professional higher education (The Estonian Academy of Security Sciences) and in spring 2012 in a public university (The Estonian University of Life Sciences). Based on the acquired experience and feedback, important changes were made in both the conditions and the procedure of IA as well as other processes thereof (e.g., the decision-making process). In the autumn of 2012, there will be accreditation visits to three more HEIs.

#### [Timetable for Institutional Accreditations](#)

### 1.3.3. Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups

EKKa Quality Assessment Council adopted conditions and procedures for [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#) on 13 June 2012.

According to the Universities Act, quality assessment of study programme groups is an external evaluation which assesses the compliance of study programmes, including their delivery and

instruction-related development activities—measuring them against legislation as well as national and international standards and trends, with the aim to provide recommendations for improving the quality of instruction. HEIs must undergo the quality assessment of SPGs at least once in each seven years. The starting point for calculating the time for a subsequent assessment of a specific study programme group is the date when the right to conduct studies was granted (i.e., the date of entry into force of a regulation of the Government of the Republic). Therefore, the HEIs which were granted the right to conduct studies at the end of 2009 should undergo the quality assessment of the same study programme group no later than by the end of 2016. As the definition reveals, quality assessment of SPGs focuses on study programmes, the content of studies and on instruction-related development activities within a study programme group. These aspects are not evaluated in the course of institutional accreditation. Self-evaluation and assessment are conducted in five assessment areas: 1) study programme and study programme development; 2) resources; 3) teaching and learning; 4) teaching staff; and 5) students. Each assessment area specifies standards based on the Standard of Higher Education, the ESG and other Estonian legislation that regulates quality assurance in higher education. Upon developing the requirements for quality assessment of SPGs, EKKA took into consideration the practices and results of transitional evaluation.

In autumn 2012, quality assessment of SPGs will be tested to assess the quality of the Informatics and Information Technology study programme group at two universities.

#### **1.3.4. Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups**

Initial assessment of study programme groups (initial assessment of SPGs) occurs when an educational institution wants to provide higher education under a new study programme group, or when an institution that does not yet have the right to provide higher education applies for such right. According to the Universities Act, the Ministry of Education and Research involves the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency in the initial assessment of SPGs. The transitional evaluation conducted over the period 2009–2011 basically represented a similar kind of evaluation, the difference being that only the already existing study programme groups were evaluated. Unlike other external evaluations, costs of the initial assessment of SPGs are incurred by an applicant. EKKA forwards the

results of initial assessment of SPG to the Minister of Education and Research; the decision on granting a HEI the right to conduct studies is made by the Government of the Republic of Estonia. In the course of initial assessment it is judged whether the qualification requirements for the teaching staff, as determined by the educational institution, are sufficient, and whether the actual qualifications of the teaching staff involved with the new study programme group are adequate; whether the available resources needed for conducting studies are adequate; whether the described learning outcomes are achievable by a given study programme and whether they are in conformity with the requirements for conducting studies at the level of higher education.

In 2011–2012, EKKA conducted 17 initial assessments of SPGs in five higher education institutions. The evaluations were conducted in seven study programme groups. In seven cases professional higher education studies were evaluated and in ten cases master degree studies were under evaluation. In three cases the Quality Assessment Council adopted decisions that the quality of instruction conformed with requirements (based on that decision the Government of the Republic of Estonia granted the HEIs the right to conduct studies for an unspecified term); in ten cases decisions were adopted that the quality of instruction partially conformed with requirements (the Government of the Republic granted the HEIs the right to conduct studies for a specified term); and in four cases the Quality Assessment Council decided that the quality of instruction did not conform with requirements (the Minister of Education and Research subsequently decided by his directive not to grant the HEIs the right to conduct studies).

#### **1.3.5. Accreditation of Study Programme Groups in Vocational Education and Training**

According to the Development Plan for the Estonian Vocational Education and Training System for 2009–2013, approved by the Government of the Republic on 11 September 2009, the Estonian quality assurance system for vocational education and training (VET) includes an independent external evaluation — accreditation of SPGs in VET — the organisation of which has been entrusted with EKKA.

Principles for the accreditation of SPGs in VET were developed, and they are implemented within the framework of the ESF programme entitled “Substantive Development of Vocational

Education 2008–2013”, promoted by the Innove Foundation. Since August 2010, EKKA has partnered with the programme promoter to organise and conduct accreditations of SPGs in VET.

Accreditation of SPGs in VET is an external evaluation, which relies on an internal evaluation and is carried out by independent experts according to study programme groups.

Evaluation is conducted in five assessment areas: educational process; leadership and management; management of human resources; cooperation with stakeholders; management of resources. At the heart of the evaluation is the educational process in both its current and development views. Possible outcomes of the accreditation process include the following decisions: to be accredited for six years, to be accredited for three years, or not to be accredited. According to a new draft of the Vocational Educational Institutions Act, the positive accreditation decision will be the basis for the right to conduct studies granted by the Minister of Education and Research.

In 2011, EKKA conducted a pilot phase of accreditations of SPGs in VET.

The pilot phase in numbers:

- accreditation was conducted in two study programme groups: Hotel and Catering, and Building and Construction, constituting 15% of the total number (250) of accreditations;
- 24 VET institutions participated;
- a total of 37 proceedings was conducted: at 18 institutions in the Hotel and Catering study programme group, and at 19 institutions in the Building and Construction study programme group;
- 41 experts participated in evaluations, including 17 employer representatives; results: 18 full accreditations for six years and 19 conditional accreditations for three years.

In 2012, EKKA will be conducting accreditations in five study programme groups:

- Computer Sciences;
- Management and Administration;
- Crop and Livestock Production;
- Electricity and Energy;
- Motor Vehicles, Aircraft and Ship Technology.

In the first half of 2012, altogether 47 experts worked in 27 committees. As of September 2012, the Quality Assessment Council for VET has made 27 accreditation decisions. The accreditations of VET study programme groups in 2011–2012 will comprise 35% of all planned external evaluations. In 2011–2012, EKKA has trained 79 VET accreditation experts.

## 1.4 Internal Quality Assurance

In its everyday work, EKKA follows the regulations of the Archimedes Foundation for the ISO 9001:2008 quality management system. To assure the quality of its core process — the external evaluation of HE and VET —, EKKA has developed regulations for each type of evaluation separately. The principles and procedures for quality assurance of the core process are described in detail in the [EKKA Quality Manual](#).

## 1.5 National and International Cooperation

### 1.5.1 National Cooperation

EKKA has defined educational institutions under evaluation, the Ministry of Education and Research, and individuals who continue to pursue education as its key stakeholders, i.e., those toward whom EKKA's activities are most directly targeted ([EKKA Development Plan for 2012–2016](#)).

In addition, EKKA involves educational institutions, student organisations, ministries, professional associations, employers' organisations and other quality assurance agencies as partners in its development activities.

EKKA has involved the representatives of HEIs, students, employers and ministries in the process of developing of all its procedures for external quality evaluation, e.g., principles for institutional accreditation and quality assessment of SPGs. While developing the conditions and procedure for institutional accreditation, EKKA also conducted a survey among pupils of upper secondary schools, i.e., future students of HEIs, to learn about their expectations for the quality of HEIs and for quality assessment. Also, the Ministry of Education and Research has invited

EKKA representatives to participate in developing strategic documents in its working groups (e.g., working groups for preparing a self-evaluation of qualifications framework, implementing the higher education reform, developing performance indicators) and has included EKKA in the legislative process. EKKA cooperates closely with the Estonian Research Council as well, standardising the principles for evaluation of research and doctoral programmes. Regular meetings are held with leaders of universities and professional higher education institutions, e.g., twice a year EKKA participates in meetings of vice rectors for academic affairs where trends in higher education and quality assurance are discussed. The Federation of Estonian Student Unions has invited EKKA to give a talk during its Summer Days. According to its 2012 action plan, EKKA intends to meet with student representative organisations of all major universities to introduce, among other issues, quality indicators that serve as bases for external evaluations.

In 2010, EKKA organised a trip to Singapore for rectors of HEIs and representatives of the Ministry of Education and Research (total of 22 people) with the aim to learn about trends in strategic management and internationalisation. In the autumn of 2012, an EKKA representative will participate in a quality-management-related study tour to Portugal, organised by the Estonian Rectors' Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences.

### 1.5.2 International Cooperation

One of the critical success factors in implementing EKKA's mission and vision according to the EKKA Development Plan for 2012–2016 is cooperation and visibility on an international level. Compliance of its activities with international standards, ability to learn from the best practices and capability to contribute to developing the field of quality assurance of higher education will enhance EKKA's reliability in the eyes of the HEIs that are evaluated and will enable EKKA to contribute to promoting the quality of higher education.

The following activities serve as evidence of international cooperation:

- EKKA has involved foreign experts in institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups, and has made inquiries and received recommendations on experts from quality assurance agencies in Europe, USA and Australia (see the expert database);

- EKKA staff members and members of the Quality Assessment Council have participated in evaluation processes organised by other quality assurance agencies (e.g., in Lithuania, Latvia, Russia);
- when developing the principles for institutional accreditation, EKKA used training trips and other ways to learn about best practices used by foreign agencies, such as WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) and MSCHE (Middle States Commission on Higher Education) from the United States; AUQA/TEQSA from Australia; and the following agencies from European countries: QAA from the United Kingdom, FINHEEC from Finland, NVAO from the Netherlands and Flanders, and SKVC from Lithuania;
- the Director and the Development Manager of EKKA visited the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) to familiarise themselves with its organisation of work and participated in a training for experts of institutional accreditation, organised by WASC, with the purpose of developing a format for the EKKA expert trainings (April 2012);
- an active participation in international conferences and seminars (presenting papers, presiding over working groups, etc.), e.g., the EQAF (European Quality Assurance Forum) 2011 and 2012, the INQAAHE 2012 Forum; participation in international projects such as the Finland-Estonia-Kosovo joint project called "Improved Education in the Public Safety and Security Sectors" and the LLP Project (Erasmus Multilateral projects) entitled "Transparency of European higher education through public quality assurance reports" coordinated by ENQA;
- sharing quality assessment experiences with Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kosovo, and Bahrain representatives.

EKKA is a member of the following organisations:

- INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education)
- ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), candidate member
- CEENQA (Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education)
- EKKA will host the INQAAHE Forum in 2014.

- EKKA staff members participate in the following ENQA working groups:
- IQA (Internal Quality Assurance)
- Excellence
- Stakeholders' Involvement

Also, regular EKKA and FINHEEC joint seminars are held every other year alternately in Finland (2010) and Estonia (2012); and starting from 2011, on EKKA's initiative, annual tripartite seminars involving the Baltic States — Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania — have been held to discuss the main trends in external quality evaluation (the 2011 seminar was held in Estonia, the 2012 seminar in Latvia).

In the summer of 2012, EKKA signed a cooperation agreement with the National Center of Public Accreditation (NCPA), Russia; on establishing, among other things, the mutual use of evaluation experts, conducting joint research, providing development opportunities for their employees, etc.

## 1.6 Resources

The EKKA office is located in central Tallinn at Toompuiestee 30. Its space of 185m<sup>2</sup> comprises five workrooms, one conference room for 15 people, one common room and utility rooms. The conference room is furnished with up-to-date video equipment and accommodates sessions of the EKKA quality assessment councils as well as working meetings of the assessment committees.

Pursuant to law, the Estonian state finances a regular external evaluation of higher education (IA and quality assessment of SPGs). In consultations with HEIs and the Ministry of Education and Research, EKKA prepares a long-term projection of expected external evaluations, and based on that requests funds for external evaluations from the state budget. Appropriations from the state budget cover both the costs directly associated with the external evaluations and the costs connected with a broader quality development of higher education (trainings, conferences, seminars, publications of results, analyses). The transitional evaluation in 2009–2011 that resulted in granting HEIs the right to conduct studies was also conducted using

public funds. Educational institutions which were granted the right to conduct studies for a specified term (up to three years) will have to undergo re-evaluation, the costs of which will also be incurred by the state budget.

The increase in the EKKA office costs over the period 2009–2011 was due to the increase in the number of evaluations, including the addition of accreditation of VET. In 2012, development expenditures rose dramatically and expenditures on external evaluations of higher education decreased, because an intensive evaluation period of higher education — the transitional evaluation — was completed and EKKA focused on developing policies and procedures for quality assessment of study programme groups and on implementing a pilot phase of institutional accreditation. Development costs could partially be covered by the funds of the ESF programme entitled "Development of the Quality of Estonian Higher Education" (EkkA), which EKKA is implementing over the period 2009–2013, and the purpose of which is to develop a new system for external quality evaluation of higher education.

Accreditation of SPGs in VET in 2010–2014 is being funded by the European Union structural funds. It is being financed within the framework of a major ESF programme entitled "Substantive Development of Vocational Education 2008–2013", in which EKKA participates as a partner.

A reduction in state budget funds in 2012 was caused by a sharp decline in the number of external evaluations of higher education due to the completion of transitional evaluations and launch of the pilot phase of institutional accreditations. At the same time the number of accreditations involving VET increased dramatically.

A higher education institution that wants to launch studies in a new study programme group covers the costs of the corresponding review itself. The rates and the calculations thereof are publicised on the EKKA website; HEIs have the obligation to pay the bill before the evaluation process begins. The rates include all costs related to the review.

Figure 4. Expenditures of EKKA in 2009–2013

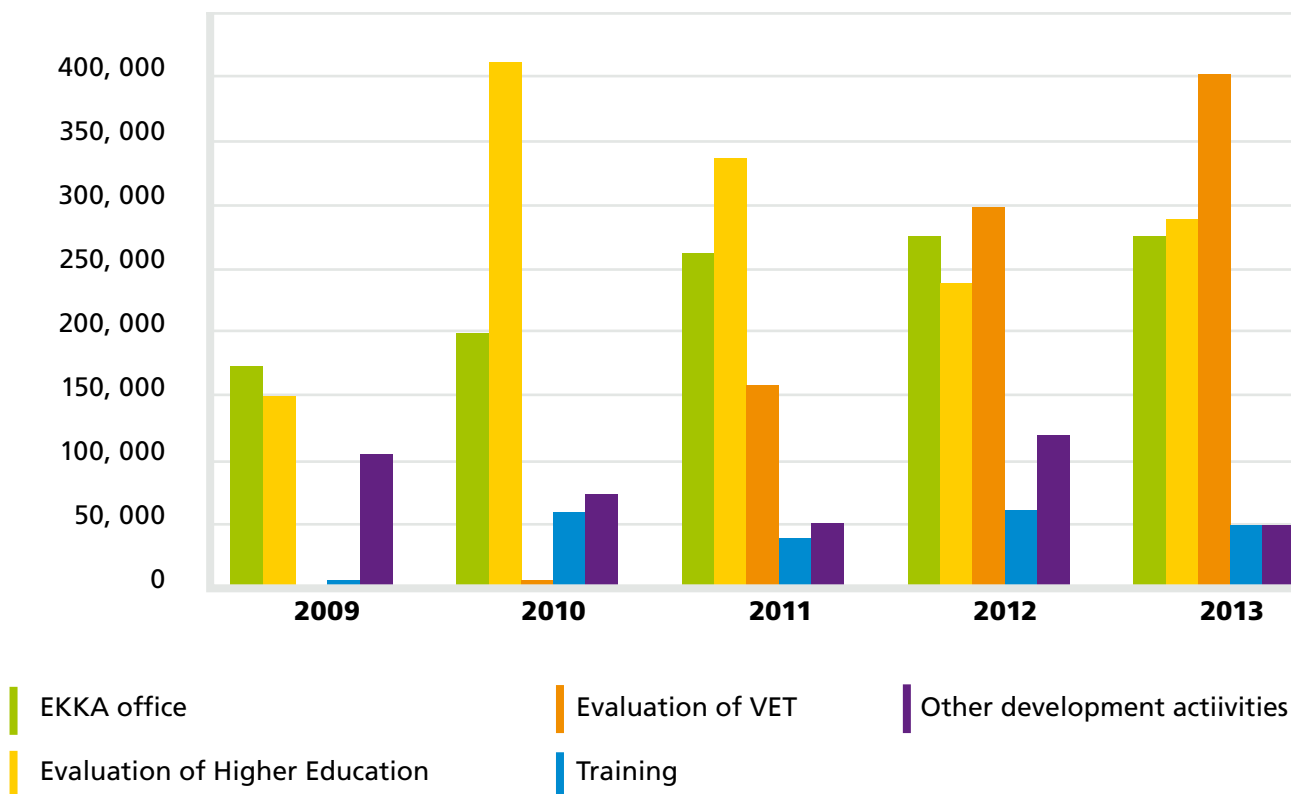
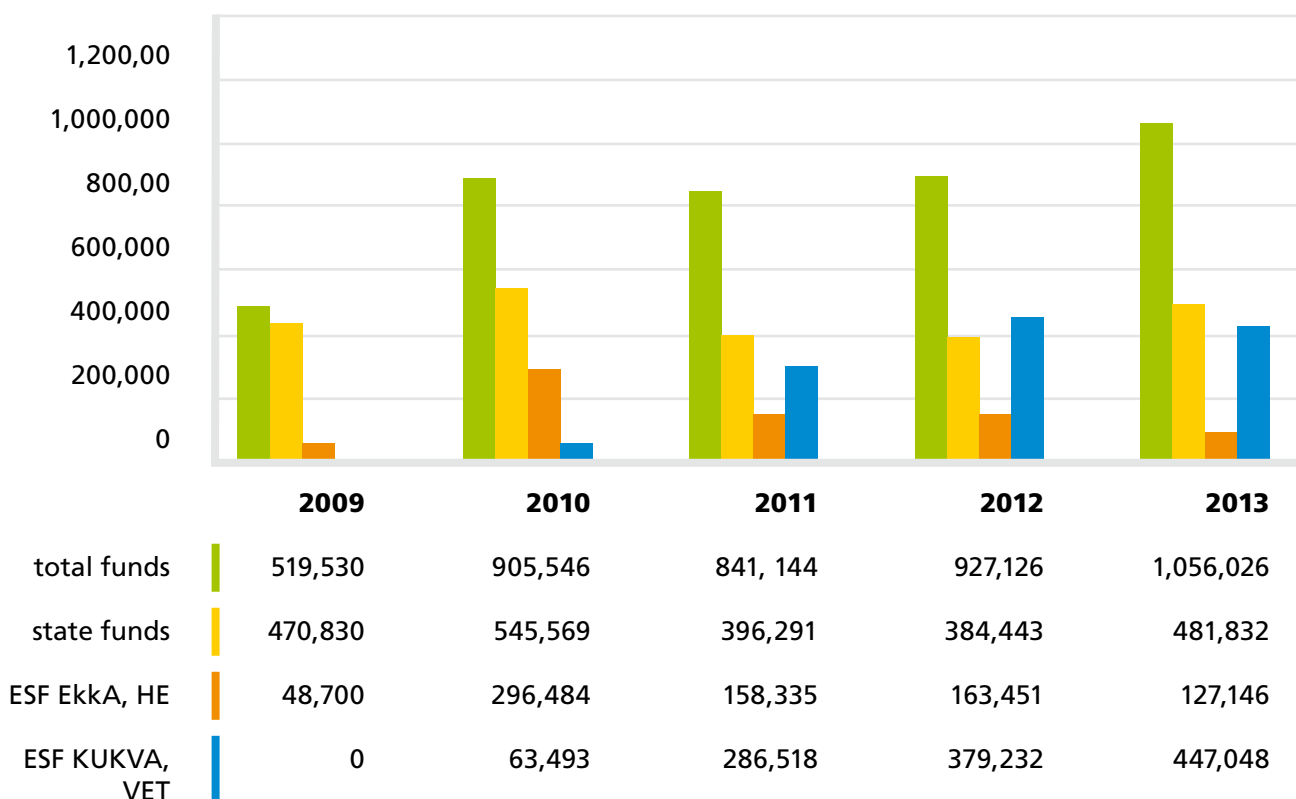


Figure 5. Funding Sources of EKKA in 2009–2013



# Part 2: EKKA's Compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for the External Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ESG Part 2)

## 2.1 Use of Internal Quality Assurance Procedures

### 2.1.1 Standard:

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

### 2.1.2 Guidelines:

The standards for internal quality assurance contained in Part 1 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. It is important that the institutions' own internal policies and procedures are carefully evaluated in the course of external procedures, to determine the extent to which the standards are being met.

### 2.1.3 EKKA's Compliance

Based on clause 2.2 of the EKKA Statutes, one of the main functions of EKKA is, in cooperation with Estonian educational institutions providing higher education and other partners, to foster Estonian higher education, as well as to promote and disseminate the best quality assurance practices. As of 2012, EKKA is conducting four types of evaluations: 1) institutional accreditation, 2) quality assessment of study programme groups, 3) initial assessment of study programme groups in order to grant a higher education institution (HEI) the right to conduct studies, and 4) transitional evaluation and re-evaluation of study programme groups; the assessment criteria of which also take into account efficiency of internal quality assurance processes. All regulations for evaluations are based on the Universities Act, the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act,

the Private Schools Act, the Republic of Estonia Standard of Higher Education, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EGS) and other legislation and normative documents regulating quality assurance in higher education. EKKA's basic principles of external evaluation are described in the EKKA Quality Manual (see Introduction, Initial Principles of External Evaluation).

In their feedback HEIs have positively emphasised that EKKA does not evaluate the quality system per se, but has organically integrated it with the evaluation of core processes of HEIs.

The table below links the European standards for internal quality assurance within HEIs with specific requirements and standards in EKKA regulations for evaluations.

| Standard  | EKKA evaluation criteria that take into consideration the standard   |
|---|--|
| 1.1 Policy and procedures for quality assurance                       | <i>Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation</i> , requirements for sub-areas 7.1.1 (General management) and 7.3.3 (Student research supervision and doctoral studies); <i>Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups</i> , requirements for sub-area 7 (Requirements for the quality of instruction). <i>Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups</i> , requirements for sub-areas 7.1 and 7.3 (Assessment of the quality of conducting studies; Students).   |
| 1.2 Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards | <i>Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation</i> , requirements for sub-areas 7.2.2 (Study programme development); <i>Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups</i> , requirements for sub-area 7 (Requirements for the quality of instruction); <i>Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education</i> , standards for sub-area 5.2.1 (Study programme and study programme development); <i>Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups</i> , requirements 7.2 (Study programme development and requirements for teaching staff). |
| 1.3 Assessment of students  | <i>Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation</i> , requirements for sub-areas 7.2.3 (Student academic progress and student assessment); <i>Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education</i> , standards for sub-area 5.2.3 (Teaching and learning); <i>Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups</i> , requirements for sub-area 7.1 (Assessment of the quality of conducting studies).   |
| 1.4 Quality assurance of teaching staff                               | <i>Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation</i> , requirements for sub-area 7.1.2 (Personnel management); <i>Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups</i> , requirements for sub-area 8 (Teaching staff); <i>Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education</i> , standards for sub-area 5.2.4 (Teaching staff); <i>Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups</i> , requirements for sub-areas 7.2 and 8.1 (Study programme development and requirements for teaching staff; Resources/Teaching staff).                       |
| 1.5 Learning resources and student support                            | <i>Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation</i> , requirements for sub-area 7.1.3 (Management of financial resources and infrastructure); <i>Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups</i> , requirements for sub-area 9 (Resources); <i>Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education</i> , standards for sub-area 5.2.2 (Resources); <i>Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups</i> , requirements for sub-area 8 (Assessment of the resources for conducting studies).   |

1.6 Information systems *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*, requirements for sub-areas 7.1.3 and 7.2.4 (Management of financial resources and infrastructure; Support processes for learning); *Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups*, requirements for sub-area 9 (Resources); *Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education*, standards for sub-area 5.2.2 (Resources); *Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups*, requirements for sub-area 8.3 (Assessment of the resources for conducting studies / Teaching and learning environments).

1.7 Public information *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*, requirements for sub-areas 7.1.1 and 7.1.2 (General management, Personnel management); *Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups*, requirements for sub-area 9 (Resources).

**Evidence:**

- [Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation](#)
- [Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups](#)
- [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#)
- [Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups](#)
- [Decisions by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council \(EE\)](#)
- [EKKA Quality Manual](#)

## 2.2 Development of External Quality Assurance Processes

### 2.2.1 Standard:

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

### 2.2.2 Guidelines:

In order to ensure clarity of purpose and transparency of procedures, external quality assurance methods should be designed and developed through a process involving key stakeholders, including higher education institutions. The procedures that are finally agreed should be published and should contain explicit statements of the aims and objectives of the processes as well as a description of the procedures to be used.

As external quality assurance makes demands on the institutions involved, a preliminary impact

assessment should be undertaken to ensure that the procedures to be adopted are appropriate and do not interfere more than necessary with the normal work of higher education institutions.

### 2.2.3 EKKA's Compliance

According to §§ 10–12<sup>2</sup> of the Universities Act, §§ 21–21<sup>1</sup> of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act and § 14 of the Private Schools Act, EKKA's function is to organise and conduct institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups. Over the years 2010–2012 EKKA, involving different stakeholders, developed regulations for those evaluations. All regulations include clear aims and descriptions of procedures which have been coordinated with partners and are published on the EKKA website.

The following substantive phases could be identified in the development processes:

1. In 2009 EKKA visited all Estonian higher education institutions informing them of the planned transitional evaluations, introducing trends in the system of external evaluation of higher education and mapping out the expectations of HEIs for a new system of external evaluation.
  2. While developing the principles for quality assessment of SPGs, EKKA conducted seven focus group interviews with members of the Quality Assessment Council, employers, heads of academic affairs, and students, to identify stakeholder expectations of the purpose of external quality evaluation as well as of the content and procedures thereof. Also, vice rectors for academic affairs were asked to provide opinions on how to evaluate study programme groups and who should do it. In the course of developing rules for institutional accreditation, EKKA conducted 14 focus group interviews to learn what different stakeholders (members of Quality Assessment Council, rectors of HEIs, employers, members of teaching staffs, students, and pupils of upper secondary schools, i.e., future students) considered to be the quality characteristics of a HEI and the purpose of institutional accreditation.
  3. While preparing an initial draft of the regulation, EKKA formed content teams (one for each case) that included EKKA employees and some outside experts, i.e., representatives of HEIs and the Ministry of Education and Research, to carry out a background analysis and develop basic principles.
  4. After the content teams had prepared initial working materials, EKKA convened steering groups which represented stakeholders of the external evaluation — the state, the market and HEIs, including students — who, after meeting regularly, prepared drafts of regulations. EKKA sent them along with explanatory memoranda to stakeholders (all institutions of higher education, students, pupils, employers, employers' representative organisations, professional associations and governmental authorities — a total of 45 organisations) asking for their feedback. Also, the Director and the Development Manager of EKKA met with all university leaderships and the Rectors' Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences.
  5. EKKA improved its drafts based on the feedback, informed those who had provided feedback of all amendments and improvements, coordinated the final versions with the steering groups, and subsequently sent them to the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for approval.
  6. The EKKA Quality Assessment Council approved the regulations, which EKKA communicated to all stakeholders by means of its public minutes. Regulations with explanatory memoranda are made publicly available on EKKA's website.
  7. At the same time when EKKA forwarded the regulations to the Quality Assessment Council, Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, an institution of professional higher education, started to prepare its self-evaluation report within the framework of pilot phase of institutional accreditation, and underwent the evaluation in November 2011 (the decision was adopted by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council in its session of 13/06/2012). In spring 2012 the evaluation of the Estonian University of Life Sciences was conducted (the decision was adopted by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council in its session of 29/08/2012). In the course of those evaluations EKKA tested the effectiveness of the regulation. Based on feedback from different stakeholders, EKKA has already supplemented and amended the document entitled *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation* and the amendments were approved by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council in its session of 13/06/2012.
- In a similar way, in the autumn of 2009 EKKA tested transitional evaluation procedures at three HEIs.
- EKKA will also conduct a pilot phase of quality assessment of SPGs to test the electronic formats of its self-evaluation and assessment forms. This test will involve the Informatics and Information Technology study programme group at the University of Tartu and the Tallinn University of Technology in November 2012.
- Prior to each external evaluation, EKKA provides training to the HEIs to be evaluated where it explains the principles of the review and the procedures thereof.
- EKKA's policies for developing regulations and planning for evaluation periods are described in the EKKA Quality Manual (see 2.1, *Designing core activities*).

**Evidence:**

- [Universities Act](#)
- [Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act](#)
- [Private Schools Act](#)
- [EKKA Quality Manual](#)
- [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#)
- [Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation](#)
- [Summary results of focus group interviews \(EE\)](#)
- [EKKA Quality Assessment Council's minutes of the proceedings \(EE\)](#)
- Materials created by the content teams and steering groups

## 2.3 Criteria for Decisions

### 2.3.1 Standard:

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

### 2.3.2 Guidelines:

Formal decisions made by quality assurance agencies have a significant impact on the institutions and programmes that are judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, decisions should be based on published criteria and interpreted in a consistent manner. Conclusions should be based on recorded evidence and agencies should have in place ways of moderating conclusions, if necessary.

### 2.3.3 EKKA's Compliance

EKKA's regulations for evaluation processes contain explicit criteria based on laws and other documentation in the field of education (including the ESG), and take into consideration stakeholder expectations. The regulations contain descriptions of decision-making procedures, including an obligation to base assessments on the predetermined criteria and evidence.

- The regulations for evaluation processes are published on the EKKA website, and EKKA updates them on a regular basis in accordance with the changes. Also, assessment reports and decisions by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council are made available on the EKKA website, allowing all interested parties to compare the outcomes of reviews.
- For uniform implementation of the evaluation criteria, before each external review EKKA organises trainings for experts during which it explains the content of requirements and the

principles of evaluation. According to contracts for services, it is mandatory for all experts to undergo such training and it is a prerequisite for participating in the evaluation. EKKA office performs a supporting role in the evaluation process. Among other things, it reviews draft assessment reports at the different stages and requires experts to supplement or clarify them, if necessary, to ensure a uniform quality of assessment reports.

- As it is important that HEIs would also understand what is expected of them during different types of evaluations, EKKA provides trainings upon request, e.g., basic trainings for preparing self-evaluation reports for institutional accreditation, or extra trainings for a fee.
- EKKA always sends the draft assessment reports to the HEIs who then may submit their comments on the assessment reports within a specified time after receipt as determined by the relevant regulation. Committees work through the comments received and, if necessary, give them consideration in the final assessment reports. Also, after site visits EKKA requests written feedback from HEIs about the apparent preparation of committee members, relevance of their questions and other important issues. EKKA takes feedback survey results into consideration while selecting committee members for future evaluations.
- Final assessment reports should be consensual or in exceptional cases contain reasoned dissenting views of committee members. The EKKA Quality Assessment Council interprets assessment reports and adopts the subsequent decisions in a consistent way, making similar decisions when comparable circumstances are

present. For assessment committees it is mandatory to justify their decisions and to identify the essential areas for improvement, as needed. If the Quality Assessment Council finds that assessment reports contain contradictions or are not adequately justified, the Council has the right to return such report to the assessment committee to be reviewed and clarified. For example, during transitional evaluation, the Quality

Assessment Council returned reports to assessment committees to be supplemented or clarified on 20 occasions (8% of the proceedings).

- EKKa's policies for ensuring the quality of decisions of the Quality Assessment Council are described in detail in the EKKa Quality Manual (see 2.2, *Designing core processes, Quality of decisions by the Quality Assessment Council*).

#### **Evidence:**

- [The EKKa database](#) (assessment reports, decisions by the Quality Assessment Council)(EE)
- [Reports and decisions regarding the IA, on the EKKa website](#)
- [Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation](#)
- [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#)
- [Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups](#)
- [Transitional Evaluation: A Special Case of External Evaluation of Higher Education in Estonia, 2009–2011](#)
- [Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups](#)
- Summaries of feedback received from higher education institutions
- Agendas and materials for assessment expert trainings
- Agendas and materials for workshops on preparing self-evaluation reports of higher education institutions for institutional accreditation

## 2.4 Processes Fit for Purpose

### 2.4.1 Standard:

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

### 2.4.2 Guidelines:

Quality assurance agencies within the EHEA undertake different external processes for different purposes and in different ways. It is of the first importance that agencies should operate procedures which are fit for their own defined and published purposes. Experience has shown, however, that there are some widely-used elements of external review processes which not only help to ensure their validity, reliability and usefulness, but also provide a basis for the European dimension to quality assurance.

Amongst these elements, the following are particularly noteworthy:

- insistence that the experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;
- the exercise of care in the selection of experts;

- the provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts;
- the use of international experts;
- participation of students;
- ensuring that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached;
- the use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review;
- recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality.

### 2.4.3 EKKa's Compliance

In its evaluation activities, EKKa uses the procedures appropriate for the purpose, based on good practice of external evaluation and the concept that defines quality as "continuous improvement". EKKa includes competent experts

in all its reviews considering them the most important resource to ensure adequacy/relevance, credibility and impact of the external evaluation processes, and giving special attention to their selection and training.

### Experts

- Since 1997 foreign experts have been used in external evaluation of Estonian higher education. Committees who accredited study programmes were primarily composed of foreign experts, only occasionally local experts were included. As a result of transitional evaluation, a pool of local experts has been formed who know the local circumstances (as well as the international context) and have enough experience in the evaluation process, and whose expertise we use in both institutional accreditation and quality assessment of SPGs, including them alongside foreign experts in our assessment committees.
- In conducting IA or quality assessment of SPGs, EKKA includes international experts, employer representatives and students in its assessment committees.
- For initial assessment of SPGs and re-evaluation of SPGs, EKKA may exclusively use national experts when the required expertise can be found within Estonia.
- All EKKA regulations for external evaluations include a) the principles for forming assessment committees (e.g., clause 10 of the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*) and b) the requirements for members of an assessment committee (e.g., clause 11 of the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*); the first defines objective parameters for forming a committee (whom EKKA seeks), and the second defines specific requirements for the competence of experts (which candidate EKKA selects). Both criteria may vary depending on the type of external evaluation.
- EKKA maintains an electronic database regarding both local and foreign experts. Opinions of fellow committee members, assistants and coordinators are added to the information about the experts who have participated in evaluations. EKKA takes that feedback into consideration when forming future assessment committees. The expert database continues to grow.
- EKKA coordinates a preliminary composition of the expert committee with the HEI under

evaluation, taking into consideration its justified requests for replacing any committee members.

- EKKA informs experts of the requirements set for them and the content of the evaluation process during a training, before the review. Participation in that training is mandatory for all experts and serves as a prerequisite to be included in the evaluation process. Also, representatives of the EKKA Bureau support the experts throughout the evaluation process.
- After site visits EKKA requests written feedback from HEIs about the apparent preparation of committee members, relevance of their questions and other important issues. When the evaluation process is completed, EKKA will request feedback from committee members about the chairperson and from the chairperson about committee members' input. EKKA makes the corresponding notes in its expert database and takes the results of feedback surveys into consideration for selecting experts for future evaluations.
- To help experts maintain and improve their competencies, EKKA organises the so-called refreshment trainings for them and counsels them before and during the review. The assessment coordinator sends a summary of feedback from HEIs to experts and offers them an opportunity to participate in future trainings.
- The EKKA Quality Manual describes in detail the principles for selecting and training experts (see 1.2, *Personnel management*, 2.2, *Implementation of core processes*, *Assessment committees*).

### Processes

- EKKA's key activities — institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups — are based on the concept of quality as continuous development. By its definition, the IA is a conformity assessment, but we also try to motivate HEIs toward continuous self-improvement and recognise them for their strengths. For example, experts may recognise sub-areas where a HEI has shown outstanding results and/or initiatives, with an additional note of 'worthy of recognition'. If the whole assessment area has received such recognition, the Quality Assessment Council will cite the recognition in its decision (see clause 40 of the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*). The purpose of quality assessment of SPGs is to support the internal evaluation and self-development of HEIs.

- In the case of IA and quality assessment of SPGs, EKKA completely follows the self-evaluation / site visit / preliminary report / follow-up evaluation model. For more information about the specific assessment procedures see the evaluation regulations (*Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation; Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education*). See details about preparing for assessment visits and conducting them in the EKKA Quality Manual (clause 2.2, *Implementation of core processes, Assessment visits*).
- In the case of an initial assessment of SPGs or a re-evaluation, EKKA conducts evaluations based on written data submitted by higher education institutions and assessment visits. In this case EKKA presents the Ministry of Education and Research an expert assessment as to whether or not the minimum requirements for the right to conduct studies in the corresponding study programme group were met. On the basis of that assessment or relying on it, the Minister of Education and Research subsequently makes a proposal to the Government to grant (or not to grant) the HEI the right to conduct studies. For more information about specific evaluation procedures see evaluation regulations (*Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation; Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education*).
- While during transitional evaluations experts were to primarily evaluate compliance with minimum requirements, EKKA regulations foresaw under certain circumstances the possibility of making a decision based on written data only — without a site visit, by using a simplified proceeding (see clauses 20, 22 of the *Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups*). Such proceedings in justified cases lessened the workload of both the experts and HEIs and enabled the experts to concentrate on more complicated cases.
- Reasonable flexibility is also built into the decision-making process of the IA: If the Quality Assessment Council weighs between two accreditation decisions (to accredit for seven years or to accredit for three years) and finds that if the HEI were to satisfy certain conditions, a more positive decision would be possible, the Quality Assessment Council may make that decision as a secondary condition that the HEI must meet by a specified date (see clause 48.7 of the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*). Such solution is practical, for example, in a situation where the problems exist in only one assessment area. Thus, the Council does not always need to decide to undertake an expensive and time-consuming re-evaluation in three years, but as an alternative it can prescribe areas for improvement to the HEI, the fulfilment of which the Council will subsequently verify. If the HEI does not fulfil the secondary condition, the Council may later annul the accreditation decision.
- In Estonia, evaluation of research organised by the Estonian Research Council is conducted alongside the external evaluation of higher education. To avoid duplication, the plan is to combine external evaluations of doctoral studies with evaluations of research, in cooperation between EKKA and the Estonian Research Council.
- Final assessment decisions are adopted by the Quality Assessment Council, whose duty is to analyse whether an assessment report contains assessments of all criteria, whether the assessments are based on evidence and adequately justified, and whether the recommendations are based on the context. Therefore the competence of members of the Quality Assessment Council, related to the higher education system and its trends as well as to external quality assurance is as important as the professionalism of experts. The majority of the members of the EKKA Quality Assessment Council have experience in external evaluation of higher education (9 out of 13) and/or they have been participating for years in the development activities in the field of higher education quality. EKKA offers trainings to the members of the Quality Assessment Council related to higher education quality, includes them in trainings for experts, provides opportunities to participate and present papers in international thematic conferences, etc.
- EKKA publishes institutional self-evaluation reports on its website in accord with HEIs. This means that, based on a justified reason provided by the HEI, a self-evaluation report may be published partially or not published at all. EKKA assumes that such approach motivates HEIs to also integrate sensitive information into their self-evaluations, for example, specific development activities that their competitors may be greatly interested in. This approach increases the fitness of the self-analysis as a method for use in external evaluation.

**Evidence:**

- [Evaluation regulations by EKKA](#)
- [Assessment reports and self-evaluation reports published on the EKKA website](#)
- [Competitions for assessment experts \(EE\)](#)
- [EKKA Quality Manual](#)
- [Compositions of assessment committees](#)
- Agendas and materials for assessment expert trainings
- EKKA's database on experts
- Summaries of expert committee feedback
- Summaries of feedback from higher education institutions regarding assessment visits

## 2.5 Reporting

### 2.5.1 Standard:

Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

### 2.5.2 Guidelines:

In order to ensure maximum benefit from external quality assurance processes, it is important that reports should meet the identified needs of the intended readership. Reports are sometimes intended for different readership groups and this will require careful attention to structure, content, style and tone.

In general, reports should be structured to cover description, analysis (including relevant evidence), conclusions, commendations, and recommendations. There should be sufficient preliminary explanation to enable a lay reader to understand the purposes of the review, its form, and the criteria used in making decisions. Key findings, conclusions and recommendations should be easily locatable by readers. Reports should be published in a readily accessible form and there should be opportunities for readers and users of the reports (both within the relevant institution and outside it) to comment on their usefulness.

### 2.5.3 EKKA's Compliance

Clause 2.2.9 of the Statutes of EKKA establishes that one of EKKA's main functions is to publish the principles, regulatory documents, results, international standards and good practice, as well as other relevant information related to evaluation in the field of education. EKKA publishes all assessment reports on its website. EKKA has produced standard forms for

assessment reports for all evaluation processes ensuring a uniform structure and comparability of reports.

- EKKA has developed standard assessment report forms for all evaluation processes taking into consideration the following principles:
- At the beginning of a form committees must summarise the most important conclusions by assessment areas, including assessment decisions (in the case of conformity assessments), commendations (see the *Form for Institutional Accreditation*) and recommendations. If the experts propose different assessment decisions, each has an obligation to justify that decision.
- Evaluation criteria or standards are presented in separate cells. Next to each criterion experts present their analyses: the most important conclusions depending on the type of a review (decisions, commendations, recommendations, shortcomings); the arguments that have led them to those conclusions; and evidence to substantiate their claims.
- EKKA created an electronic platform where both self-evaluation reports and assessment reports for quality assessment of SPGs are produced on the basis of predetermined structure.
- To ensure a uniform quality of assessment reports, EKKA has been given a certain period of time to review the draft report. EKKA is entitled to make recommendations to committees in regard to the style and language, evidence to be clarified and obvious inaccuracies to be

eliminated. EKKA does not interfere with committees' substantive assessments. HEIs have an opportunity to present comments on the reports, which committees have to study carefully. When it comes to conformity assessment and the Quality Assessment Council finds that there are contradictions in a report or it is not adequately justified, the Council may return the report to the assessment committee to be reviewed and clarified (see, e.g., clauses 41–43, 47 of the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*). EKKA publishes the assessment reports on its website after the Quality Assessment Council has adopted the final decision based on the corresponding report and that decision has been communicated to the HEI concerned.

- EKKA improves the assessment forms based on feedback received from experts and HEIs, as needed. The forms for assessment reports in electronic format are available on the EKKA website. Assessment reports are accompanied by a decision of the Quality Assessment Council, containing an aggregate of the strengths and areas for improvement / recommendations produced by the assessment committee.
- EKKA composes a press release to inform the general public of the findings of a review, including a summary of the main strengths and areas for improvement, among other things, and refers to its website for more detailed information.
- EKKA publishes institutional self-evaluation reports on its website to the extent agreed upon with HEIs. As for quality assessment of study programme groups, EKKA does not publish self-evaluation reports. We expect HEIs to make their self-evaluation reports available at least to their own memberships.
- In the case of the IA and initial assessment of SPGs, the coordinator asks a higher education institution (the administration, contact person, members of the working team who compiled the self-evaluation report) to provide feedback about the whole process of self-evaluation and assessment within ten working days after the Quality Assessment Council has adopted its decision. If the HEI wants to discuss the assessment results and report with the Director of EKKA, the chairperson of the Quality Assessment Council and the coordinator, EKKA will request feedback from the HEI in the course of the discussion, using the method of a focus group interview.

The process of drafting assessment reports is also described in the EKKA Quality Manual (see 2.2, *Implementation of core processes, Assessment reports*).

For more information about communicating the outcomes of evaluations see the EKKA Quality Manual 3.1, *Informing the general public of the processes and results of evaluations*.

#### **Evidence:**

- [Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation](#)
- [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#)
- Standard forms of assessment reports–  
[institutional accreditation, quality assessment of study programme groups](#)
- [The platform for self-evaluation and assessment reports for study programme groups](#)
- [EKKA Quality Manual](#)
- [EKKA's website](#)
- [EKKA' database \(assessment reports, self-evaluation reports\) \(EE\)](#)
- [Press releases \(EE\)](#)

## 2.6 Follow-up Procedures

### 2.6.1 Standard:

Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

### 2.6.2 Guidelines:

Quality assurance is not principally about individual external scrutiny events: it should be about continuously trying to do a better job. External quality assurance does not end with the publication of the report and should include a structured follow-up

procedure to ensure that recommendations are dealt with appropriately and any required action plans drawn up and implemented. This may involve further meetings with institutional or programme representatives. The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged.

### 2.6.3 EKKA's Compliance

EKKA's follow-up plan is based on a general assumption that the responsibility for resolving the problems indicated in assessment reports, and for continuous improvement activities, lies with the higher education institutions themselves. At the same time, EKKA's regulations provide for a number of follow-up procedures, the content and format of which depend on the specific review and assessment decision.

- Currently the study programme groups where HEIs had been granted the right to conduct studies for one to three years (as a result of transitional evaluation), are undergoing re-evaluation. For example, in 2010, while evaluating professional higher education studies in the Personal Service study programme group offered by the Estonian School of Hotel and Tourism Management, the assessment committee provided its component assessments for all assessment areas as "partially conforms to a required standard"; therefore the EKKA Quality Assessment Council made a proposal to the Minister of Education and Research to grant that school the right to conduct studies in the corresponding field for a specified term of two years. In the spring of 2012, the same study programme group in the same academic cycle was evaluated by a re-evaluation committee who concluded that the school had eliminated the main problems in its study programmes, teaching staff qualifications and resources. Based on new component assessments, in its session of 13/06/2012, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council decided to make a proposal to the Minister of Education and Research to grant the school the right to conduct studies in that study programme group for an unspecified term.
- As a result of institutional accreditation, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council adopts administrative decisions, and may also impose a secondary condition on its decision regarding the accreditation of a HEI. If the Quality Assessment Council has imposed a secondary condition on its decision, a subsequent follow-up procedure will take place within three years, when the EKKA Quality Assessment

Council will evaluate the developments in that area (see clause 55 of the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*). If the secondary condition is not met, the Council may then annul the accreditation decision. In that case participation in follow-up activities organised by EKKA is mandatory for the HEI concerned.

- In the case of institutional accreditation and initial assessment of SPGs, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council may decide that the aspects under evaluation conform only partially to a required standard and re-evaluation will therefore be undertaken within a shorter period of time. As to quality assessment of study programme groups, in the case of certain major non-conformities and based on a decision by the EKKA quality Assessment Council, the subsequent review may also be conducted within a shorter period of time. In the course of re-evaluations, assessment committees examine how HEIs have addressed the deficiencies and which improvement activities they have implemented, all of which the Quality Assessment Council will take into account when making a new assessment decision.
- As not all recommendations by the Quality Assessment Council lead to a conditional decision and the subsequent evaluation may therefore be undertaken only after seven years, EKKA intends to organise regular workshops where HEIs that have undergone the evaluation, will introduce planned activities based on the results and recommendations contained in the assessment reports; and provide feedback to EKKA on the evaluation process and its impacts (see, e.g., clause 46 of the *Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education*).
- In order to support HEIs in their improvement activities, EKKA offers them opportunities to meet the Director of EKKA, the chairperson of the Quality Assessment Council (or a member of the Council delegated by the chairperson) and the assessment coordinator to discuss issues regarding assessment reports and future activities. Both higher education institutions which underwent institutional accreditation (Estonian Academy of Security Sciences and Estonian University of Life Sciences) used that opportunity.
- For more information on how EKKA designs and carries out impact assessment see the EKKA Quality Manual (2.3, *Review of core processes, feedback and improvements, Impact assessment in the course of follow-up*).

**Evidence:**

- [Conditions and Procedure of Institutional Accreditation](#)
- [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#)
- [EKKA Quality Manual](#)
- [Decisions of the Quality Assessment Council \(including the decision on institutional accreditation of the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences\)](#)

## 2.7 Periodic Reviews

### 2.7.1 Standard:

External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

### 2.7.2 Guidelines:

Quality assurance is not a static but a dynamic process. It should be continuous and not 'once in a lifetime'. It does not end with the first review or with the completion of the formal follow-up procedure. It has to be periodically renewed. Subsequent external reviews should take into account progress that has been made since the previous event. The process to be used in all external reviews should be clearly defined by the external quality assurance agency and its demands on institutions should not be greater than are necessary for the achievement of its objectives.

### 2.7.3 EKKA's Compliance

Based on legislation, all external evaluations by EKKA are conducted on a cyclical basis. Within the framework defined by law, EKKA takes into consideration the possibilities and needs of higher education institutions while drafting a timetable for reviews.

- According to subsection 12 (1) of the Universities Act, subsection 21 (2) of the

**Evidence:**

- [Universities Act](#)
- [Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act](#)
- [Private Schools Act](#)
- [Conditions and Procedure of Institutional Accreditation](#)
- [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#)
- [Decisions regarding institutional accreditation](#)
- Decisions regarding transitional evaluation (EE)
- [Timetable for re-evaluations of transitional evaluation \(EE\)](#)

Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act and subsection 14 (2) of the Private Schools Act, higher education institutions have obligations to ensure that EKKA performs the institutional accreditation at least once in each seven years or within a shorter term as decided by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council. The terms and procedures for institutional accreditation (including the requirements for HEIs) are defined in the document, approved by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council, and entitled *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*.

- According to subsection 12<sup>2</sup> (1) of the Universities Act, subsection 21<sup>1</sup> (2) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act and subsection 14 (7) of the Private Schools Act, higher education institutions or their organising bodies have obligations to ensure that EKKA assesses the quality of their study programme groups at least once in each seven years or within a shorter term as decided by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council. The standards and procedures for the quality assessment of study programme groups are defined in the document, approved by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council, entitled *Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education*.

## 2.8 System-wide Analyses

### 2.8.1 Standard:

Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc.

### 2.8.2 Guidelines:

All external quality assurance agencies collect a wealth of information about individual programmes and/or institutions and this provides material for structured analyses across whole higher education systems. Such analyses can provide very useful information about developments, trends, emerging good practice and areas of persistent difficulty or weakness and can become useful tools for policy development and quality enhancement. Agencies should consider including a research and development function within their activities, to help them extract maximum benefit from their work.

### 2.8.3 EKKA's Compliance

According to clause 2.2.10 of the EKKA Statutes, one of EKKA's main functions is to analyse the evaluation results and to make recommendations for improvement to both the educational institutions and the Ministry of Education and Research. In addition to producing full analyses of each evaluation period, EKKA considers that it is also important to study various stakeholders' expectations for higher education quality evaluation and the impact of the external evaluation process.

- By 2012 EKKA transitioned from one system of external quality evaluation of higher education to another, for which it had conducted a special external evaluation (the so-called transitional evaluation) of study programme groups of higher education institutions. The process was implemented over the period 2009–2011 and included all Estonian higher

education institutions. Since 1 January 2012 HEIs have the right to conduct studies only under those study programme groups that have undergone the transitional evaluation. As it was a very specific type of external evaluation, at least on a Europe-wide scale, EKKA paid much attention to the analysis and publication of the evaluation results; among other things, the EKKA Bureau produced an analysis entitled *Transitional Evaluation: A Special Case of External Evaluation of Higher Education in Estonia, 2009–2011* which describes the context of transitional evaluation, its process, results, feedback and conclusions for the future. The document is available on the EKKA website.

- EKKA is committed to following a similar principle for analysing the outcomes of its new types of external evaluations (institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups) and publishing thereof. For more information on how EKKA designs its analyses of evaluation periods, see the EKKA Quality Manual (2.3, *Review of core processes, feedback and improvements, Summary analyses of evaluation periods, Reporting*).
- Over the period 2010–2012, in connection with launching the new evaluation system, EKKA has been intensely engaged in identifying the expectations of different stakeholders and has published research articles on this subject. At the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAP) in 2011, an EKKA representative introduced the analysis of possible quality indicators based on the results of focus group interviews conducted while drafting institutional accreditation procedures. A PhD thesis is being prepared on the same topic — stakeholder expectations for external quality assessment of higher education.

#### Evidence:

- [Bauman, Hillar; Mattisen, Heli \(2011\). Transitional Evaluation: A Special Case of External Evaluation of Higher Education in Estonia, 2009–2011.](#)
- Udam, Maiki (2011). Ootused kõrghariduse kvaliteedihindamiseks. *Haridus*, 4, 20 - 25.
- Udam, Maiki; Vilgats, Birgit (2011). Expectations of State, Market and Academia to the Aims of External Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Estonia. Curtu, I; Floroiu, M; Ivanescu, M; Stanciu, M. D; Florescu, M; Raileanu, M. (Toim.). *Proceedings of 3rd International Conference. Institutional Strategic Quality Management in Higher Education ISQM 2011.* (389 - 398). Rumeenia: Editura Universitatii Transilvania din Brasov
- Udam, Maiki (2011). Development of Institutional Accreditation Model: Case of Estonia. In: *Proceedings: Higher Education International Conference, HEIC 2011, Oct 31 - Nov 2, Beirut, Lebanon. Modern University for Business and Science, 2011, 285 - 296.*
- [Heidmets, Mati \(2012\). Dupleerimine ülikoolides – hea või halb? Postimees, 06.02.2012 \(EE\)](#)

# Part 3: EKKA's Compliance with European Standards and Guidelines for External Quality Assurance Agencies (ESG Part 3)

## 3.1 Use of External Quality Assurance Procedures for Higher Education

### 3.1.1 Standard:

The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

### 3.1.2 Guidelines:

The standards for external quality assurance contained in Part 2 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. The standards reflect best practices and experiences gained through the development of external quality assurance in Europe since the early 1990s. It is therefore important that these standards are integrated into the processes applied by external quality assurance agencies towards the higher education institutions. The standards for external quality assurance should together with the standards for external quality assurance agencies constitute the basis for professional and credible external quality assurance of higher education institutions.

### 3.1.3 EKKA's Compliance

The previous part of this document describes how EKKA's procedures for external quality assurance take into account the processes of external quality assurance contained in Part 2 of the ESG, and the effectiveness thereof.

## 3.2 Official Status

### 3.2.1 Standard:

Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance, and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

### 3.2.2 EKKA's Compliance

According to § 37 of the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, the provision of education is overseen by the national government. To clearly separate the external evaluation of higher education from governmental structures, the Ministry of Education and Research decided, on the basis of a contract under public law, to authorise this function to be performed by the Archimedes Foundation, the founder of which is the Republic of Estonia with the founder's rights being exercised by the Ministry of Education and Research. The Foundation was established in 1997 as a legal person governed

by private law to process international cooperation programmes in the field of education and research in Estonia. Besides its other units which primarily administer the EU and Estonian cooperation and development programmes, the Foundation comprises the Estonian ENIC/NARIC as well.

According to clauses 3.3.1.1 and 3.3.5 of the Statutes of the Archimedes Foundation and clause 1.2 of the Statutes of EKKA, approved by the Supervisory Board of the Foundation, EKKA is a structural unit of the Archimedes Foundation, which performs independent functions and, based on § 10 of the Universities Act, was set up in 2009 to continue the work by the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre and the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council (operating from 1997 to 2008).

**Evidence:**

- [The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia](#)
- [Universities Act](#)
- [Standard of Higher Education](#)
- [Regulation by the Ministry of Education and Research \(transitional evaluation\)](#)
- [Statutes of the Archimedes Foundation \(EE\)](#)
- [Statutes of EKKA](#)
- [Contract under public law between Ministry of Education and Research and the Archimedes Foundation](#)

Based on the laws of the Republic of Estonia, the Supervisory Board of the Foundation also includes representatives of the state, but in order to ensure the independence of assessing the quality of higher education, it has delegated the approval of the EKKA regulations and the adoption of assessment decisions exclusively to the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency. EKKA is independent in developing its principles and procedures for quality assessment and in adopting assessment decisions. The decisions by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council regarding evaluation of the quality of higher education are final.

EKKA bases its activities on the law, Minister of Education and Research regulations and other normative documents in the field of education; and performs the functions assigned to it by § 10 of the Universities Act and clause 2 of its Statutes.

## 3.3 Activities

### 3.3.1 Standard:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

### 3.3.2 Guidelines:

These may involve evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities and should be part of the core functions of the agency.

### 3.3.3 EKKA's Compliance

Subsection 10 (1) of the Universities Act describes the main functions of EKKA, based on which EKKA:

- organises and conducts institutional accreditation in educational institutions providing higher education;

- organises and conducts the quality assessment of study programme groups on the level of higher education;
- performs other functions assigned thereto by legislation.

Based on §§ 12–12<sup>2</sup> of the Universities Act, §§ 21–21<sup>1</sup> of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act and § 14 of the Private Schools Act, all higher education institutions (universities) have obligations to undergo institutional accreditation and quality assessment of their study programme groups on a regular basis. See also standard 2.7.

In mutual cooperation and including experts, the EKKA Bureau and the EKKA Quality Assessment Council perform the functions of EKKA.

**Evidence:**

- [Universities Act, Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act, Private Schools Act](#)
- [Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation](#)
- [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#)

## 3.4 Resources

### 3.4.1 Standard:

Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.

### 3.4.2 EKKA's Compliance

The Government of the Republic of Estonia has allocated enough resources to EKKA to employ an adequate number of qualified employees, invest in training and development of employees of the Bureau and members of the Quality Assessment Council, include top-quality experts in the field of external evaluation and implement various development activities aimed at quality assurance of higher education.

#### Human Resources

The Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency comprises

- the Bureau of the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency which currently employs 8 people
- the Quality Assessment Council of the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency which is composed of 13 members, the activities of which are coordinated by the chairperson of the EKKA Quality Assessment Council and the functions of which are laid out in clause 3.7 of the EKKA Statutes (See also the *Rules of Procedure of EKKA Quality Assessment Council*)

The Agency is presided over by the Director of EKKA whose duties are described in clause 3.5 of the EKKA Statutes.

All EKKA employees have Master's degrees, the Director of EKKA has a PhD. The Development Manager and the Information Manager of EKKA

are engaged in doctoral studies; the topics of their doctoral theses concern the quality evaluation of higher education and the impact of information culture on the effectiveness of an organisation, respectively.

The duties of EKKA employees are determined by job descriptions and further specified by EKKA annual action plans. The Director of EKKA conducts a recorded development interview with each employee at least once a year where the employee's more essential goals and development needs for the coming year are identified, and the implementation of which will be analysed during the next interview. The EKKA employees regularly attend trainings to develop their professional competencies. The Director of EKKA prepares a training plan based on the results of development interviews and EKKA's own action plans. The completed trainings are reflected in employee training sheets in electronic format.

To fulfil its functions and depending on their nature, EKKA involves different experts under separate contracts for services. Within the framework of transitional evaluation, over the period 2009–2011, EKKA entered into service contracts with a total of 158 experts. Depending on the number of evaluations during a specific period and to support the work of assessment committees, EKKA may include temporary assistants who also have an obligation to undergo assessment trainings. A total of 7 assistants participated in the transitional evaluation under service contracts. The number of qualified employees is currently adequate for performing EKKA's functions. As the number of evaluations increases, the intention is to create a new analyst position in 2014.

The EKKA Quality Manual contains a detailed description of the principles and procedures for selecting, developing and motivating EKKA regular employees (see 1.2, *Personnel management*).

## Financial Resources

In the Estonian legal system the state has an obligation to fund the external evaluations required of higher education institutions by law; therefore the funding of EKKA's activities is guaranteed by the government.

The Government of the Republic of Estonia, through the budget of the Ministry of Education and Research, allocates funds for external quality evaluations to EKKA. The Director of EKKA prepares a long-term quantitative estimate of EKKA's main activities (regular external evaluations) for five to seven years and coordinates it with the sponsor. Subdivision 1.6 of the Part 1 of this self-evaluation report gives a more detailed overview of EKKA's financial resources.

EKKA shares some support services with the Archimedes Foundation (accounting, personnel accounting, document management, and IT support services). The Foundation buys IT support services from the AS Datel company, but all

its units order software developments based on individual needs and available funds. According to the Internal Rules of the Archimedes Foundation, all its structural units cover their own costs related to activities and management.

EKKA has financed its development activities relating to the launch of the new external quality evaluation system over the period 2009–2012 using ESF funds within the framework of the Estonian higher education quality development programme entitled "Ekka". In the new programming period, EKKA intends to apply for EU funds to support the culture of quality and internal evaluation in HEIs. The Director of EKKA has discussed the concept of this project with the Department of Higher Education at the Ministry of Education and Research and received their initial support.

More information about resources is available in the EKKA Quality Manual (1.3, *Resource management*).

### Evidence:

- [Statutes of EKKA](#)
- [Rules of Procedure of EKKA Quality Assessment Council](#)
- [EKKA Quality Manual](#)
- [Jobs descriptions \(EE\)](#)
- [Training plans \[schedules\] \(EE\)](#)
- Minutes of development interviews
- Employee training sheets
- Employment contracts
- Contracts for services
- EKKA's budget
- Estimated budget
- EKKA's annual action plans and reports on the implementation of action plans (including the ESF programmes)

## 3.5 Mission Statement

### 3.5.1 Standard:

Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

### 3.5.2 Guidelines:

These statements should describe the goals and objectives of agencies' quality assurance processes, the division of labour with relevant stakeholders in higher education, especially

the higher education institutions, and the cultural and historical context of their work. The statements should make clear that the external quality assurance process is a major activity of the agency and that there exists a systematic approach to achieving its goals and objectives. There should also be documentation to demonstrate how the statements are translated into a clear policy and management plan.

### 3.5.3 EKKA's Compliance

EKKA's mission and main functions are based on the Universities Act and are formalised by its Statutes that are publicly available on the EKKA website, and that serve as a basis for the EKKA Development Plan for 2012–2016. The development plan contains EKKA's self-definition, core values, vision for 2020 and key objectives for 2012–2016. The development plan is also made available for the general public on EKKA's website.

EKKA's mission is to promote quality in the field of education in cooperation with its partners and thereby increase the competitiveness of the Estonian society.

[The EKKA Development Plan for 2012–2016](#), approved by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council, provides EKKA's self-definition:

- The Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency is a leading competence centre in the field of external evaluation of educational institutions in Estonia. EKKA acts in accordance with agreements and trends in the European Education Area, also retaining information about trends and best practices outside Europe; applies up-to-date know-how tailored for a local context; and employs analyses of the results of external evaluations to enhance the competitiveness of the Estonian educational system.

EKKA's principal objectives for 2016 are as follows:

#### **Evidence:**

- [Statutes of EKKA](#)
- [EKKA's Development Plan for 2012–2016](#)
- [EKKA's annual action plans \(EE\)](#)
- [EKKA Quality Manual](#)
- Minutes on reviews of action plans

- EKKA's activity will have contributed to the improvement of quality in the fields of higher education and vocational education and training
- EKKA will be a reliable partner for the HEIs under evaluation and the Ministry of Education and Research
- Public awareness of the quality of Estonian higher education and vocational education and training (in international comparisons) will have increased
- EKKA will be internationally recognised

To plan necessary actions for achieving the objectives in its development plan, EKKA will produce an action plan for each calendar year. The action plan for 2012 is currently effective. EKKA evaluates the implementation of the planned development and supplements the plan twice a year, as necessary. The development and action plans are publicly available on EKKA's website.

The principles for planning EKKA's development and activities are described in the EKKA Quality Manual

(see 1.1, *Planning of the development and activities*).

For EKKA's historical background and the division of work among relevant stakeholders see chapter 1.1.

## 3.6 Independence

### 3.6.1 Standard:

Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

### 3.6.2 Guidelines:

An agency will need to demonstrate its independence through measures, such as:

- Its operational independence from higher education institutions and governments is guaranteed in official documentation (e.g., instruments of governance or legislative acts).

- The definition and operation of its procedures and methods, the nomination and appointment of external experts and the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence.
- While relevant stakeholders in higher education, particularly students/learners, are consulted in the course of quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agency.
- The responsibility for legal accuracy of administrative decisions on external quality evaluations lies with the EKKA Quality Assessment Council. The Council is comprised of representatives of HEIs and employers who, before they start working, each sign a declaration of confidentiality and independence confirming that they are independent in their activities and do not represent either the interests of the organisation who presented their candidacy or the interests of their employers. If a member's relationship with his or her employer changes, that member will be obliged to immediately notify the Director of EKKA of this in writing. Rectors and vice rectors may not be members of the EKKA Quality Assessment Council (clauses 1.3 and 2.5.3 of the *Procedure for Formation of Quality Assessment Council of Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency*).

### 3.6.3 EKKA's Compliance

EKKA is independent in carrying out its key activities, while it is the exclusive responsibility of the EKKA Quality Assessment Council to establish the principles and procedures for external quality evaluation processes and adopt assessment decisions.

- According to clauses 3.3.1.1 and 3.3.5 of the Statutes of the Archimedes Foundation and clause 1.2 of the Statutes of EKKA approved by the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation, EKKA is the Foundation's structural unit, performing independent functions and being independent in making quality assessment decisions. To actually ensure EKKA's independence in the field of external evaluation from the Ministry of Education and Research (whose employees are represented on the Supervisory Board of the Foundation), the Supervisory Board has approved EKKA's Statutes — where clauses 3.7.1 and 3.7.3 authorise the EKKA Quality Assessment Council to provide the final approval of regulations for evaluations (establishing evaluation criteria and procedures), and to adopt final administrative decisions on institutional accreditation and on quality assessment of study programme groups. EKKA is accountable for the outcomes of the quality assurance processes described in § 10 of the Universities Act.
- EKKA has adopted the following measures to avoid conflicts of interest in employing external experts: a) the regulations concerning external evaluations approved by EKKA Quality Assessment Council reveal in detail the cases in which a conflict of interest is presumed to be present ( see, for example, clause 15 of the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*); b) the educational institution under evaluation may raise reasoned objections to the planned composition of a committee, and make a request for additional members or for the removal of members (see clause 12 of the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*); and c) experts confirm the absence of conflicts of interest by signing their service contracts.

A member of the EKKA Quality Assessment Council who is affiliated with the educational institution under evaluation will leave the session room for the time of the discussion and decision making.

#### Evidence:

- [The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia](#)
- [Universities Act](#)
- [Statutes of the Archimedes Foundation \(EE\)](#)
- [Statutes of EKKA](#)
- [Procedure for Formation of Quality Assessment Council of Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency](#)
- [The Declaration of Confidentiality and Independence \(EE\)](#)
- [Contracts for Services of experts](#)
- [Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation](#)

### 3.7 External Quality Assurance Criteria and Processes Used by the Agencies

#### 3.7.1 Standard:

The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be predefined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;
- an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;
- publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;
- a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.

#### 3.7.2 Guidelines:

Agencies may develop and use other processes and procedures for particular purposes. Agencies should pay careful attention to their declared principles at all times, and ensure both that their requirements and processes are managed professionally and that their conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even though the decisions are formed by groups of different people.

Agencies that make formal quality assurance decisions or conclusions which have formal consequences should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of each agency.

#### 3.7.3 EKKA's Compliance

In designing EKKA's main activities in the field of higher education (institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups), all four principles contained in the ESG are taken into account:

1. HEIs submit their self-evaluation reports to EKKA before the review;

2. Both are external evaluations where expert committees are used including national and international experts, a student and an employer. Site visits are integral parts of the evaluation processes.
3. After final decisions have been adopted, EKKA publishes the assessment reports along with the decisions by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council on its website.
4. Follow-up procedures are in place for observing how the HEIs have addressed the recommendations made by experts and which improvement activities had been implemented to eliminate shortcomings.

The institutions under evaluation have the right to submit comments on the assessment reports before their final approval, which the assessment committees will take into account when justified, and which will be made available to the EKKA Quality Assessment Council before it makes its decision. In order to make the best possible decisions, the Council has the duty to thoroughly analyse assessment reports. In case of contradictions or inadequate justifications in a report, the Council has the right to return it to the assessment committee to be clarified or supplemented. Experts' work is considered to be completed only after the Quality Assessment Council has made its decision based on their report.

EKKA has introduced an appeals procedure for all external evaluation processes, the nature of which depends on the outcome of the concrete process. In cases of evaluation processes where the EKKA Quality Assessment Council makes final administrative decisions (institutional accreditation and quality assessment of SPGs), all EKKA's procedures and/or decisions may be challenged by filing a challenge with the Council. Final decisions by the Council can also be challenged/appealed in the courts (see clauses 52-53 of *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation* and clauses 41-42 of *Quality Assessment of Study Program Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education*). In case of re-evaluation of study program groups where the EKKA Quality Assessment Council's decision results in a proposal to the Minister of Education and Research, the procedures conducted by

EKKA may be challenged by filing a challenge to the Management Board of Foundation Archimedes. The final assessment by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council may be disputed after adoption of the corresponding administrative decision by the Minister (see clauses 47-48 of *Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups*). In the case of initial assessment of SPGs where the EKKA Quality Assessment Council acts solely as an expert body, a possibility is provided for persons concerned to file an appropriate request for explanation or memorandum to

Director of EKKA and then to the Management Board of the Archimedes Foundation if he or she has a doubt that EKKA or an assessment committee has not followed the rules described in the *Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study program Groups* when organising and conducting an expert analysis (see clauses 31-33 of the mentioned Guidelines).

EKKA's principles for ensuring the quality of its core processes are also described in the EKKA Quality Manual (see chapter 2, *EKKA's core processes and their quality assurance*).

#### Evidence:

- [Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation](#)
- [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#)
- [EKKA Quality Manual](#)
- [Self-evaluations](#)
- [Assessment decisions](#), also [EKKA's database \(EE\)](#)
- Challenges/appeals, judicial decisions

## 3.8 Accountability Procedures

### 3.8.1 Standard:

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

### 3.8.2 Guidelines:

These procedures are expected to include the following:

1. A published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself, made available on its website;
2. Documentation which demonstrates that:
  - the agency's processes and results reflect its mission and goals of quality assurance;
  - the agency has in place, and enforces, a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts;
  - the agency has reliable mechanisms that ensure the quality of any activities and material produced by subcontractors, if some or all of the elements in its quality assurance procedure are subcontracted to other parties;
  - the agency has in place internal quality assurance procedures which include an internal

feedback mechanism (i.e., means to collect feedback from its own staff and council/board); an internal reflection mechanism (i.e., means to react to internal and external recommendations for improvement); and an external feedback mechanism (i.e., means to collect feedback from experts and reviewed institutions for future development) in order to inform and underpin its own development and improvement.

3. A mandatory cyclical external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years.

### 3.8.3 EKKA's Compliance

EKKA bases its activities on its mission and main functions as provided for in legislation, and consistently implements the principles of the so-called quality circle (PDCA).

- Based on its mission, EKKA has identified its role in Estonian higher education and declared its core values and vision for the year 2020. EKKA has accordingly identified its principal objectives for the period 2012–2016 in its development plan, reviews them regularly, plans improvement activities and implements

those (see the EKKA Quality Manual). The principal objectives set out in the development plan serve as the basis for preparing annual action plans, for designing longer-term development activities, and for use in EKKA's employee development interviews.

- The initial principles of EKKA's external evaluation processes are described in the EKKA Quality Manual and are taken into consideration in the development of regulations for external evaluation procedures. See, for example, *Initial principles used in the development of procedures for quality assessment of SPGs (Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education, Explanatory Memorandum)*.
- The procedure for EKKA's internal quality assurance is detailed in the EKKA Quality Manual which consists of three parts (*Management and Operation of the Organisation, Quality assurance of the core process and Communication*); the Quality Manual is available on the EKKA website.
- The Archimedes Foundation follows the ISO 9001 quality management system and EKKA therefore undergoes regular internal and external audits of its compliance with standards, which as a rule focus on its documentation and documentation management. Between December 2011 and February 2012 Ernst & Young Baltic AS, an auditing firm, conducted an internal audit at EKKA, and at EKKA's request it focused on the following aspects: 1) The compliance of EKKA's operations with its own rules of procedure, Estonian legislation and international standards; and 2) EKKA's internal quality management within the framework of its core processes. We discussed the auditor recommendations at an EKKA meeting. The two more important recommendations implemented by EKKA in the first half of 2012 were: 1) to describe quality assurance procedures for all core processes (external evaluation processes) in a separate document (e.g., in a quality manual) — the procedures have now been described in detail in the EKKA Quality Manual; and 2) to clarify and unify the appeals procedures for the processes and decisions of external evaluations in different regulations — the regulations have now been amended accordingly. Using electronic surveys after each review, EKKA gathers feedback from the experts (on the chairperson), and from the HEIs on the apparent preparation of committee members; and subsequently takes the results into consideration when choosing experts. At the end of an evaluation period, EKKA requests feedback from HEIs on the impact of the evaluation process and takes this feedback into consideration for improving its work.
- The Director of EKKA requests feedback from the employees of the EKKA Bureau during annual development interviews, where the more important goals and development needs for the coming year are identified for each employee and the achievement of which will be analysed during the next interview. To solve ongoing issues, the employees can make suggestions at weekly meetings of the EKKA Bureau.
- Once a year the chairperson of the Management Board of the Archimedes Foundation conducts a development interview with the Director of EKKA, in the course of which the Director of EKKA receives feedback on EKKA activities and gives feedback to the Management Board on the general management and the effectiveness of support processes.
- The members of the Quality Assessment Council give feedback on an ongoing basis in their sessions, as a rule. Once a year EKKA's development and action plans are reviewed by the Quality Assessment Council. At the end of the election period, the members of the Quality Assessment Council give feedback using the format of a consultation workshop, a summary of which EKKA then sends to all members of the Quality Assessment Council taking it into consideration when planning its subsequent activities.
- To avoid conflicts of interest when using experts, EKKA has taken the following measures: a) the regulations for evaluation processes approved by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council describe in detail the cases when a conflict of interest may be present (see, e.g., clause 15 of the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*); b) the educational institution under evaluation may raise reasoned objections to the planned composition of a committee, and make a request for additional members or for the removal of members (see clause 12 of the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*); and c) the experts confirm the absence of any conflicts of interest by signing their contracts for services.
- EKKA's regulations foresee procedures for the cases when HEIs want a competent

foreign quality assurance agency to conduct the review. The prerequisite for using a foreign agency will be an approval of the suitability of such foreign agency by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council. If the EKKA Quality Assessment Council approves the use of that assessment authority, EKKA will conclude a tripartite contract with the HEI and the assessment authority, providing the rights and responsibilities of the parties during the evaluation process and the procedure for reimbursement for expenses. The EKKA Quality Assessment Council must make sure that the given assessment report allows them to make a final decision that is consistent with Estonian legislation (for more information on those procedures see

chapter X of the *Conditions and Procedures for Institutional Accreditation* and chapter IX of the *Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups*).

- The Director of EKKA reports to the Management Board of the Archimedes Foundation on EKKA activities and the results thereof on a quarterly basis. In the end of each calendar year the Director of EKKA prepares annual activity and financial reports which form integral parts of the Foundation's annual report and which are approved by the Supervisory Board of the Foundation.

EKKA undergoes the ENQA external evaluation every five years.

**Evidence:**

- [Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation](#)
- [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups](#)
- [EKKA Quality Manual](#)
- [EKKA Development Plan](#)
- Summaries of development interviews
- Summary of the internal audit by Ernst & Young Baltic AS
- Minutes of EKKA's meetings
- Feedback from higher education institutions and experts
- Experts' contracts for services
- Quarterly reports to the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation
- Annual activity and financial reports
- Summary of feedback from the members of the Quality Assessment Council

# Summary and Reflections

In 2006–2012, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), as well as good internal and external evaluation practices and general trends, have significantly influenced the processes within the Estonian higher education quality assurance system. The Estonian Higher Education Strategy for 2006–2015, approved by the Parliament of Estonia in 2006, already contained initiatives which aimed at further developing the quality assurance system based on the agreed standards in the ESG. In subsequent years, in consultations with various stakeholders amendments to the Universities Act were prepared and a new Standard of Higher Education was produced, in the development of which the ESG was one of the reference documents.

The amendments to the Universities Act in 2008 laid the legal foundation for the independent external quality evaluation which in the previous system had existed in practice but not de jure. The requirements for higher education studies in the new Standard of Higher Education cover most of the standards and guidelines described in Part 1 of the ESG. EKKA's role was to clarify and further develop legal provisions to an external quality evaluation system which will value the development of the culture of quality of higher education institutions.

EKKA started its self-evaluation process underlying this report in the summer of 2011, in parallel with producing its development plan for the period 2012–2016. Compliance with the ESG is a prerequisite for gaining international recognition which is, according to EKKA's development plan, one of its principal objectives for the period 2012–2016. As a result of the SWOT analysis that preceded the production of the development plan and subsequent discussions, we implemented the following important improvement activities during the period between autumn 2011 and spring 2012:

- Unified and clarified the procedures in different regulations (e.g., follow-up, conflict-of-interest and appeals procedures)
- Produced a quality manual (systematised the procedures for feedback and the analysis of results)
- Changed communications on assessment results to be more target-group oriented
- Made a proposal to the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation to specify the powers of the EKKA Quality Assessment Council in the Statutes of EKKA

Subsequently, by the time we started to produce this self-evaluation report between May and June 2012, we could state that in our opinion our activities complied with all Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

To test the relevance of the content and the format of EKKA's self-analysis, we convened a reference group on 13/08/2012 which included the representatives of our principal partners — universities, professional higher education institutions, the Ministry of Education and Research and employers. Among other things we asked the reference group to indicate EKKA's strengths and areas for improvement.

Based on discussions of the reference group, feedback on different evaluation processes, the SWOT analysis conducted before producing the development plan and this self-evaluation report, the following EKKA *strengths* can be identified:

1. openness, and transparency of its activities;
2. inclusion of those under evaluation (i.e., representatives of higher education institutions),

and other stakeholders in higher education, in the development of regulations for external quality evaluations and in other development activities;

3. communication: expedited information flow during evaluation processes and the publication of evaluation results;
4. in a short period of time a significant number of local experts have been trained who can be recommended to other agencies and who contribute to enhancing the culture of quality at their work places, among other things;
5. the activities are evidence based; applied research was conducted when developing the procedures for institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups, the findings of which have been introduced to the world as well;

The **areas for improvement**, as identified in the reference group discussions, and in the process

of self-analysis, clearly match the principal objectives and associated evaluation criteria in the EKKA development plan:

1. to periodically evaluate the impact of external quality evaluations (objectives I. and II.);
2. to increase visibility beyond the higher education area, to use the potentials of social media (objective III.);
3. to increase activities on an international level (objective IV.);
4. to communicate the best practices highlighted in assessment reports to higher education institutions, and to organise thematic trainings (objective I.).

In conclusion, the self-evaluation process showed us that EKKA's activities are in compliance with the ESG, and both the principal objectives and evaluation criteria of the EKKA Development Plan are relevant.

# Appendix 1

## The Estonian Higher Education System

### Appendix 1 The Estonian Higher Education System

#### General Overview

General legislation for higher education in Estonia is detailed in the following legal acts: Republic of Estonia Education Act, Universities Act, Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act, Private Schools Act, Vocational Educational Institutions Act, and Standard of Higher Education.

Starting from the 2002/2003 academic year, higher education comprises three cycles, following the bachelor-master-PhD model of the European Higher Education Area.

Universities provide bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programmes, but may also offer professional higher education in their colleges. Professional higher education institutions and some vocational education institutions offer professional higher education. A professional higher education institution may also provide master's programmes. As to the form of ownership, educational institutions may be state, public, or private.

Figure 1. Higher education system in Estonia

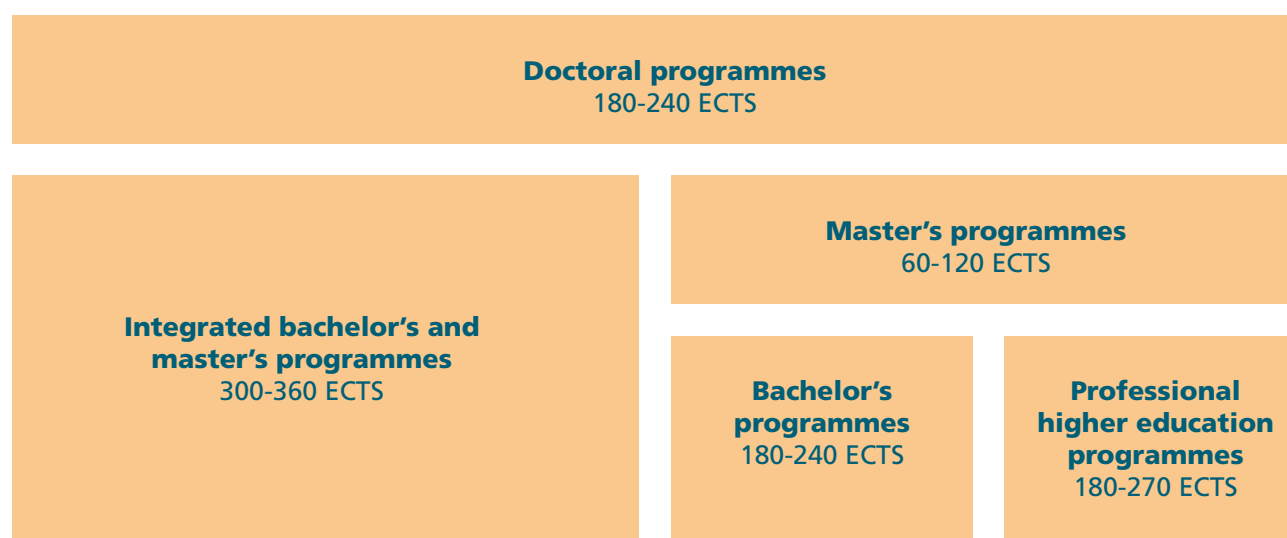


TABLE 1. Student and educational institution numbers in the 2011/2012 academic year

|   | Number of educational institutions | Number of students |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Public universities                                       | 6                                  | 48,408             |
| Private universities                                      | 1                                  | 2,411              |
| State professional HE institutions                        | 10                                 | 10,247             |
| Private professional HE institutions                      | 11                                 | 5,020              |
| Vocational education institutions providing HE programmes | 2                                  | 1,521              |
| <b>TOTAL</b>  | <b>30</b>                          | <b>67,607</b>      |

### Admission Requirements

The requirement for access to higher education is secondary education, certified by *Gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus* (Certificate of General Secondary Education), *Lõputunnistus kutsekeskhariduse omandamise kohta* (Certificate of Vocational Secondary Education), the corresponding qualifications of earlier systems, and foreign qualifications that give access to higher education. The certificate of general secondary education is issued after 12 years of schooling (9 years of basic education and 3 years of general secondary education). In order to complete the general secondary school programme, it is necessary to take national examinations.

The higher education institution may introduce specific admission requirements, such as entrance examinations, national examination minimum scores, interviews, etc.

### Credit System

Student workload is measured in credits. Effective from the 2009/2010 academic year the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

(ECTS) has officially been in use. One ECTS credit corresponds to 26 hours of work by a student. The workload of one academic year is 1560 hours that corresponds to 60 ECTS credits.

### Estonian National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (NQF-HE)

The Estonian NQF-HE includes four qualifications, of which two — the bachelor's degree and professional higher education diploma — differ in respect to their profile, although both correspond to the first cycle of the Qualifications Framework of European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA); the master's degree corresponds to the second cycle of the QF-EHEA and the doctorate to the third cycle. All degrees offered by Estonian higher education institutions are currently end-of-cycle degrees, meaning that the learning outcomes achieved through obtaining a given degree are at the same level as the corresponding level in the NQF-HE. This implies that there are no intermediate degrees in the Estonian higher education system.

Figure 2. Correspondence between levels/cycles of Estonian and European qualification frameworks

| Estonian National QF for HE  | QF for EHEA | Estonian QF for LLL | EQF for LL |
|--|-------------|---------------------|------------|
| PhD level  | 3rd cycle   | Level 8             | Level 8    |
| Master's level (including Integrated Bachelor's and Master's programmes) | 2nd cycle   | Level 7             | Level 7    |
| Bachelor's level,<br>Professional HE level                               | 1st cycle   | Level 6             | Level 6    |
|  | Short cycle | Level 5             | Level 5    |
|  |             | Level 4             | Level 4    |
|  |             | Level 3             | Level 3    |
|  |             | Level 2             | Level 2    |
|  |             | Level 1             | Level 1    |

Higher Education in Estonia

### Professional Higher Education Programmes

Professional higher education is higher education of the first cycle, the purpose of which is to acquire the competencies necessary for working in a certain profession or for continuing studies at the master's level. The standard period of study is 3 to 4 years (180-240 ECTS). Midwifery studies and specialised nursing studies last 4.5 years (270 ECTS). The qualification awarded upon completion of the programme is *Rakendus kõrgharidusõppe diplom* (Professional Higher Education Diploma). The qualification gives access to master's programmes.

### Bachelor's Programmes

Bachelor's programmes are first-cycle higher education programmes. The purpose of bachelor

degree studies is to broaden the scope of general education, to develop the basic knowledge and skills required for a certain field of study necessary for continuing at the master's level or for access to the labour market. The standard duration of the programmes is generally 3 years (180 ECTS); as an exception, it may be up to 4 years (240 ECTS). The qualification awarded upon completion of the programme is *bakalausekraad*. This qualification gives access to master's programmes.

### Master's Programmes

Master's programmes are second-cycle higher education programmes. The purpose of master

degree studies is to develop the knowledge and skills required for a certain field of study and to acquire the necessary competences in order to enter the labour market or to continue studies at the doctoral level. The access requirement is a first-cycle higher education qualification. The standard duration of the programmes is 1 to 2 years (60-120 ECTS), but together with the first-cycle studies it is at least 5 years (300 ECTS). The qualification awarded upon completion of a master's degree programme is *magistrikraad*. This qualification gives access to doctoral programmes.

### Integrated Bachelor's and Master's Programmes—long cycle degrees (equal to master's degree)

Integrated bachelor's and master's programmes comprise both basic and specialised studies. Such long-cycle programmes are offered in the fields of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, architecture, civil engineering, and class-teacher training. The standard duration of medical studies and of veterinary studies, effective from the 2002/2003 academic year admissions, is 6 years (360 ECTS). The standard duration of other integrated programmes is 5 years (300 ECTS).

The qualification awarded upon completion of an integrated study programme in the fields of pharmacy, architecture, civil engineering, and class-teacher training is *magistrikraad*; the other qualifications are *arstikraad* (in medicine), *hambaarstikraad* (in dentistry), and *loomaarstikraad* (in veterinary medicine). These qualifications give access to doctoral programmes.

### Doctoral Programmes

Doctoral programmes represent higher education of the third cycle, the purpose of which is to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for independent research, development, or professional creative work. The access requirement for doctoral studies is a *magistrikraad* or a corresponding qualification. The standard period of study is 3 to 4 years (180-240 ECTS). The qualification awarded upon completion of doctoral studies is *doktorikraad*. *Doktorikraad* is a research degree obtained after the completion and public defence of a dissertation (*doktoritöö*) based on independent scientific research or creative work.

### Governance and Financing of Higher Education

Higher education institutions operate under the administrative jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Research, except the Estonian National

Defence College and the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences (both being professional higher education institutions) which operate under the administrative jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Internal Affairs respectively.

The Ministry of Education and Research has a key role in shaping the Estonian higher education policy. Its main areas of responsibilities are: 1) to allocate state-funded student places amongst educational institutions; 2) to allocate funds to professional higher education institutions; 3) to approve the development plans of professional higher education institutions; and 4) to fulfil the function of state supervision. The Estonian Government and Parliament determine general development trends for the Estonian higher education system, including the level of funds to be allocated to higher education and research.

Estonia, like other countries in the region, has experienced an increase in student numbers. In addition to publicly funded higher education, the private sector and the tuition-sponsored student places at public higher educational institutions also absorb some of the demand for higher education. Universities also operate the so-called "open universities" to meet demand for higher education, and to obtain additional revenue. Students at these open universities are usually admitted without entrance examinations and are required to pay tuition (Eurydice, 2005). Until 2012, there has been a dual track tuition system in Estonia. The students who score above a certain cut off point on the entrance examinations are admitted to state-funded student places at public higher education institutions. In general the Ministry of Education and Research sets the number of state-funded student places at higher education institutions according to predicted needs in the labour market. Those students who are admitted beyond this quota have to pay tuition. Private university-type higher education institutions are financed by their own means. Yet, the state may participate in financing certain study programmes if there is a public demand for the qualifications provided by this institution.

In 2011 the Estonian Government initiated significant reforms in the financing of higher education. The main changes are related to the state-funded student places, and to the financing of higher education institutions from the state budget in general. The aim is to increase the fairness of the higher education system and the efficiency of studies, reduce the inequities among the various fields of higher education and increase the accountability of institutions of higher education to ensure the quality of education.

All students who have fully satisfied the requirements of their curricula will be able to study for free in Estonian-language curricula as of the *2013/2014 academic year*. In order to retain their free student places, the students will have to meet the requirements of their curricula in full each semester. If a student is unable or unwilling to meet the requirements of the curriculum in full, the institution of higher education will have the option of demanding compensation for the study costs by the student up to the maximum limit established by the Government of the Republic (€ 50 per 1 ECTS). For various reasons, students are usually unable to meet the requirements of their curricula in full while studying abroad; and in order to promote mobility, the law provides exceptions in regard to the study period spent abroad.

A significant change involves the abolition of the concept of state commissioned education and the complicated mechanism of coefficients and basic costs of a student place that served as its basis. According to the reform, institutions of higher education will, in the future, receive performance support from the state budget for providing higher education as such. Institutions of higher education who will receive state funding will make decisions regarding the number of student places created for each field based on their profile and function. Should the state have a specific shortage of graduates in a certain field, it can establish its needs through **performance contracts**.

The new financing model will have a three-year transition period. From 2016, 70–75 per cent of funds shall be calculated for the support of

activities connected with the **extent, quality and efficiency of provision** and 25–30 per cent from the amount of allocated funds shall be calculated for the **support of activities which provide instruction of national importance**.

The extent, quality and efficiency indicators are as follows: the number of students admitted, the number of students studying at foreign educational institutions, the number of foreign students studying at the university, the number of foreign teaching staff employed as ordinary teaching staff and the number of full-time students (*extent*); achievement of objectives established in the previous performance agreements, previous study results of enrolled students, continuation of studies at the next academic level and the employment of graduates (*quality*); and the number of graduates from a university, and the number of graduates in broad groups of studies of national importance (*efficiency*). Indicators will create different proportions (for example, the number of graduates influences the funding much more than the number of foreign teachers).

The current system will still remain effective for funding doctoral studies. Private institutions may also apply for state support, but if the state grants their requests, they will lose the right to charge their students full tuition fees.

The following sums have been assigned for the implementation of the law in the corresponding action programme of the Government of the Republic: € 6.1 million in 2013, € 18.8 million in 2014 and € 33.0 million in 2015.

# Appendix 2

## The Main Documents and Resources in English

### **Estonian higher education legislation**

- [The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia](#)
- [Universities Act](#)
- [Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act](#)
- [Private Schools Act](#)
- [Standard of Higher Education](#)
- [Conditions and Procedure for Transition to Evaluation of Study Programme Groups of Educational Institutions Providing Higher Education \(Ministerial Directive\)](#)
- [International documents](#)
- [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(2009\)](#)
- [INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice in Quality Assurance \(2007\)](#)

### **EKKA regulations**

- [Statutes](#)
- [Development plan for 2012-2016](#)
- [EKKA Quality Manual](#)
- [Procedure for Formation of EKKA Quality Assessment Council](#)
- [Rules of Procedure of EKKA Quality Assessment Council](#)
- [Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation, Explanatory Memorandum](#)
- [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#)
- [Explanatory Memorandum](#)
- [Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups](#)
- [Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups](#)
- [Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation](#)

### **Useful links**

- [Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency](#)
- [Archimedes Foundation](#)
- [Estonian Ministry of Education and Research/Higher Education](#)
- [Estonian Research Portal ETIS](#)
- [Transitional Evaluation: A Special Case of External Evaluation of Higher Education in Estonia 2009-2011](#)
- [The platform for self-evaluation and assessment reports for study programme groups](#)



