

Guidelines for Accreditation of Study Programmes

Approved by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education on 19.05.2020. Amended on 31.03.2022.

Amended by the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education on 14.06.2022.

I. General provisions

1. This document outlines the assessment framework and the general procedure for accreditation of higher education programmes as applied by the Estonian Quality Agency Education (HAKA). It is meant to serve as a practical guide for higher education institutions applying for accreditation of their study programmes.
2. Each educational programme for which an institution seeks accreditation must be consistent with national legal requirements. Furthermore, the programmes should be in line with the central requirements of the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area, the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG) and the ECTS Users' Guide. The following assessment framework is therefore based on these key documents of the European Higher Education Area.
3. Achieving an international accreditation certifies that the individual programme complies with the quality standards of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Upon successful completion of the procedure, universities will receive a certificate as well as report on the quality of the programme.
4. Depending on national regulations, an international accreditation may be obtained in addition to a national accreditation or it may substitute national requirements.
5. An international programme accreditation is also a quality enhancement tool; external reviews from experts outside the national higher education system provide expertise and guidance. The focus is thus put on quality enhancement and the further development of programmes.
6. An international accreditation may also increase international acceptance of degrees and foster mobility of students, staff, and research activities. A positive result may have effects on the scope and composition of cooperation projects as well as on the general visibility of the higher education institution. By raising the profile of a programme an increase in student numbers and projects may be envisaged.

7. HAKA offers programme accreditation at Bachelor, Master and PhD-level across all disciplines.

II. Assessment areas and criteria for the accreditation of study programmes

8. HAKA shall assess the study programmes in five assessment areas: study programme and its development, teaching and learning, teaching staff, students, and resources.

9. Study programme and its development

9.1. Launching and developing of the study programme is based on the Development Plan of the higher education institution, national legislation, international trends and standards that regulate the professional field and if professional standard exists, takes into consideration the acquisition and implementation of the knowledge and skills described therein.

9.2. The structure and content of modules and courses in a study programme support achievement of the objectives and designed learning outcomes of the study programme.

9.3. The objectives and learning outcomes of a study programme are in line with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The content of the study programme is internationally comparable.

9.4. The modules/courses of the study programme are presented in a logical succession. Different parts of the study programme form a coherent whole.

9.5. Development of a study programme takes into consideration the needs of the labour market.

9.6. The study programmes support creativity, entrepreneurship, and development of other general competencies.

9.7. The study programme includes practical training, the content and scope of which are based on the planned learning outcomes of the study programme.

9.8. Study programme development is a continuous process which, among others, involves feedback from students, employers, and other relevant stakeholders.

9.9. The information about study programme on the website of the higher education institution is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.



10. Teaching and learning

- 10.1. The organisation of studies is unambiguously regulated and information thereof publicly available. In course of study management development, the results of feedback surveys and the analysis of learning activities are taken into account.
- 10.2. The process of teaching and learning supports learners' individual and social development and motivate learners to take charge of their studies and achieve learning outcomes.
- 10.3. Teaching methods and learning tools used in the teaching process are modern, appropriate and effective, and support the achievement of learning outcomes, including general competences.
- 10.4. Organisation of internship is clearly regulated, the requirements for the completion of internship are determined, the instructions for conducting the internship are available and the supervision of students in work environment is ensured.
- 10.5. Appropriate methods are used for the assessment of learning outcomes; assessment is transparent, objective and supports the development of students. Where necessary, digital technologies among other means are used for assessment. Members of teaching staff cooperate in defining assessment criteria and apply similar approaches in assessments.
- 10.6. The higher education institution has in place rules for academic recognition as well as for recognizing prior studies and work experience.
- 10.7. Practical training (in doctoral studies applied professional activities) is regulated, requirements for the completion of practical training have been laid down and preliminary agreements concluded with organisations offering opportunities for practical training.
- 10.8. Students are involved in research and development activities, the supervision of student research papers (seminar papers, applied projects, final theses) is well organised and the satisfaction rate with the quality of supervision is high.
- 10.9. Systematic analysis of achievement of learning outcomes is performed and improvement measures are undertaken. Regular internal assessment is conducted in the study programme group, including the analysis and taking into account of feedback from various stakeholders (students, alumni, employers, academic staff).

11. Academic staff

- 11.1. The number and qualification of full-time teaching staff complies with the requirements established by legislation.
- 11.2. Distribution of full-time teaching staff by age and the percentage of young members of the teaching staff ensure the sustainability of studies in a higher education institution and a study programme.



- 11.3. The total number and qualification of teaching staff is – based on their responsibilities, workload, and the number of supervised students – sufficient and adequate for achieving the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme.
- 11.4. The academic staff members have adequate teaching and digital competences in order to support the autonomy of students and ensure adequate and professional supervision.
- 11.5. The staff development system is effective: members of teaching staff have opportunities for self-improvement and engage in the improvement of their teaching methods.
- 11.6. Visiting members of teaching staff (including from foreign higher education institutions) are involved in teaching in the study programme under assessment.
- 11.7. The full-time teaching staff members of the higher education institution regularly develop their skills at foreign higher education institutions and participate in international networks.
- 11.8. The level and volume of research, development and creative activities of academic staff is sufficient to provide instruction and supervise academic work by students in the appropriate cycle of higher education. Teaching staff are involved in national and international research projects and participate in forums, national and international scientific conferences.
- 11.9. Members of teaching staff present their research results as well as the latest scientific achievements in their areas of specialisation to the students and involve students in their R&D projects where possible.
- 11.10. Assessment of the work by members of teaching staff (including staff evaluation) takes into account the quality of their teaching as well as of their research, development and creative work, including development of their teaching skills, and their international mobility.

12. Students

- 12.1. Conditions for admission and graduation are clear and transparent and ensure fair access to higher education and the formation of a motivated student body; requirements to prospective students stem from prerequisites for the completion of the study programme.
- 12.2. The student counselling system (including study, career, and psychological counselling) is targeted and effective. The HEI has a functioning system to support and advise international students.
- 12.3. Students participate in international mobility programmes. The percentage of students participating in student mobility is stable or growing.



- 12.4. Students are involved in the decision-making process at different levels of the higher education institution.
- 12.5. Fair and transparent rules for dealing with complaints are used in the study programme group.
- 12.6. A system has been established for the detection and prevention of academic fraud.
- 12.7. The higher education institution has a tracking mechanism of graduates' employment and monitors the evolution of graduates' career.
- 12.8. A system is in place for monitoring academic progress. Effective measures are implemented to reduce drop-out rates.

13. Resources

- 13.1. The financial resources of the higher education institution are adequate for conducting studies, development activities related to studies and supporting the development of teaching staff.
- 13.2. Trends in the number of students and graduates of the higher education institution in the last three to five years indicate sustainability.
- 13.3. There are facilities (lecture rooms, labs, seminar rooms, rooms for independent work by students etc.) available for studies and study-related research, development and creative activities; these are adequately furnished and equipped with up-to-date equipment needed for achieving the objectives of the study programmes.
- 13.4. State of the art and fit for purpose information and communication technological solutions, including study information system, document management system, online learning environment support learning and teaching. Digital learning and teaching as well as IT support is available to students and teaching staff.
- 13.5. A library supports the conduct of studies ensuring that up-to-date information sources (including electronic databases) are available and provides students with opportunities for independent work.

III. Self-evaluation of study programmes

14. The higher education institution shall conduct self-evaluation of the study programmes under five assessment areas and prepare a self-evaluation report following the *Template for the self-evaluation report*.
15. The HEI shall submit its self-evaluation report in electronic format to HAKA no later than three months prior to the agreed assessment visit.
16. HAKA shall review the self-evaluation report within two weeks after receiving it and, if necessary, return it to the HEI for amendments. The HEI shall send the enhanced report back to HAKA within two weeks.



17. The coordinator shall send the self-evaluation report to the committee no later than two months prior to the assessment visit.
18. HAKA shall provide training in preparing self-evaluations of study programmes to higher education institutions.

IV. Formation of expert panels

19. Expert panels (hereinafter *panels*) shall have four to six members. A panel shall comprise at least two academic representatives and one student representative who is a student at the time of applying. In addition, a member from outside the higher education sector (employer representative) is involved whenever possible. The actual number of panel members depends on the number of study programmes to be accredited.
20. Requirements for members of an expert panel:
 - 20.1. members of an expert panel shall be independent, they shall not represent neither the interests of their employer, nor the interests of any other third parties;
 - 20.2. members of the panel shall confirm by signature an obligation to maintain the confidentiality of information that has become known to them by way of membership in the panel and the lack of conflicts of interest. A conflict of interest is presumed to be present in the following cases:
 - an expert has an employment or other contractual relationship with the higher education institution under evaluation at the time of assessment, or he or she has had an employment relationship with that higher education institution within three years prior to the assessment visit;
 - an expert is participating in the work of a decision-making or advisory body of the higher education institution under evaluation at the time of assessment;
 - an expert is studying at the higher education institution under evaluation, or graduated from it less than three years ago;
 - a person closely related to an expert – spouse or life partner or a family member – is working in the higher education institution under evaluation.
 - 20.3. members of an expert panel shall know the functioning of the higher education system and the legislation that regulates it in the respective country, and they are familiar with the ESG as well as trends in higher education in the European Union and worldwide;
 - 20.4. members of an expert panel (excluding the student) shall have past experience of management and/or development in the area of a given study programme, and/or they have undergone training related to external quality evaluation and they shall preferably have past experience in external evaluation of higher education;



- 20.5. members of an expert panel (excluding the student) shall preferably have experience in teaching or supervising in a higher education institution;
 - 20.6. members of a panel shall have the necessary teamwork skills to conduct the assessment;
 - 20.7. members of a panel shall be proficient in the working language of the assessment;
 - 20.8. the student member of a panel has preferably participated in the process of study programme development or in the work of decision-making bodies at a higher education institution.
21. Duties of members of a panel include the following:
- 21.1. reviewing the self-evaluation report of the higher education institution;
 - 21.2. examining documents that regulate the accreditation of study programmes;
 - 21.3. completing an assessment training provided by HAKA;
 - 21.4. participating in the meetings and discussions of the panel;
 - 21.5. contributing to the drafting of the assessment report before the assessment visit;
 - 21.6. participating in the drafting of recommendations and the assessment report;
 - 21.7. examining the comments of the higher education institution on the assessment report and considering them when drafting the final assessment report;
 - 21.8. performing other tasks related to assessment activities according to the division of tasks among the members of a panel;
 - 21.9. adhering to the agreed deadlines.
22. Duties of the chairperson of a panel include the following:
- 22.1. chairing the meetings of the panel;
 - 22.2. dividing tasks among the members of the panel;
 - 22.3. chairing the panel during the visit;
 - 22.4. after the visit, giving an overview of preliminary conclusions of the panel to the higher education institution;
 - 22.5. preparing and confirming the assessment report.
23. HAKA shall notify the higher education institution of the composition of the panel, and the educational institution may present its standpoint on it, furthermore, it may request to exclude a panel member or to include an additional member to the panel, which is treated as a memorandum or request for explanation as defined in clause 46 of this document.



24. The Director of HAKA shall approve the final composition of a panel by his/her decision and appoint a chairperson of the panel and an assessment coordinator.
25. An assessment coordinator (hereinafter *coordinator*) is a support person of a panel and an administrator of the assessment process whose main duty is to ensure the smooth functioning of the assessment process on the basis of the requirements and the timeframe provided in this document.
26. The working language of a panel shall be English. If the HEI wants to use interpretation services, it shall coordinate the selection of an interpreter with the assessment coordinator at least one week prior to the assessment visit. HAKA hereby sets out the following requirements for an interpreter: the interpreter has the necessary preparation for consecutive or simultaneous interpretation (bachelor's or master's degree in interpreting, in-service training in interpreting, interpreting as an additional specialty, etc.), past experience in consecutive or simultaneous interpretation, and commands higher education terminology. The interpreter shall not be a staff member of the HEI under evaluation. Costs of interpretation services shall be borne by the HEI under evaluation.
27. HAKA shall enter into contracts for services with members of a panel and reimburse travel and accommodation costs related to performing their duties to the members of a panel.

V. Organisation of the work of expert panels

28. HAKA and the HEI shall agree upon a week for the assessment visit no later than six months prior to the planned visit. The higher education institution shall appoint a contact person who ensures the smooth communication between HAKA and the higher education institution.
29. An assessment visit to a higher education institution shall last two to three days. The coordinator shall prepare a schedule of the visit in cooperation with the higher education institution and the chairperson of the expert panel.
30. For the duration of the assessment visit, the higher education institution shall make an adequately furnished room available to the members of the panel and allow them to:
 - 30.1. access statutes and normative documents which provide for and govern the activities of the higher education institution and its structural units;
 - 30.2. interview employees and students of the higher education institution at the choice of panel members;
 - 30.3. access information related to teaching, learning and students; educational materials; and the study information system;
 - 30.4. access information related to teaching staff, including their CVs, information on their work load, methodological work and research activities;
 - 30.5. examine the internal quality assurance system for teaching and learning;
 - 30.6. examine the condition of the infrastructure of the higher education institution;



- 30.7. access course syllabi as well as instructional documents related to the content of teaching and learning;
 - 30.8. access students' final papers;
 - 30.9. access information related to financing of the higher education institution;
 - 30.10. visit any forms of contact learning (lectures, seminars, laboratory work, etc.);
 - 30.11. if necessary, obtain other information related to teaching, learning and research.
31. Within five workdays after the visit, HAKA shall ask the higher education institution for feedback on the preparedness of members of the panel, the relevance of their questions and other pertinent issues according to the feedback form created by HAKA.
 32. The panel shall provide separate assessments for each of the five assessment areas: the study programme and its development, teaching and learning, teaching staff, students and resources.
 33. The assessment report shall include a description and analysis underpinning the assessments on the five assessment areas.
 34. Assessment areas shall be evaluated on a scale of three values: "conforms to requirements", "partially conforms to requirements" and "does not conform to requirements".
 35. The panel shall submit an assessment report to HAKA by the end of the fourth week after the visit, and HAKA shall forward it to the higher education institution within one week after receipt of the report.
 36. The higher education institution shall have the opportunity to submit their comments about the assessment report within two weeks after receipt of the report. The panel shall review the comments received and consider them while preparing its final report.
 37. The chairperson of the panel shall forward the electronic version of the final assessment report to HAKA no later than by the end of the ninth week after the visit. HAKA will immediately send the final assessment report to the higher education institution under evaluation.
 38. It is recommended that judgements shall be adopted by consensus. If consensus is not reached, the decision shall be made by a simple majority of members of the expert panel and the dissenting view(s) together with the reasons shall be included in the assessment report. In the case of an equal division of votes, the vote of the chairperson of the panel shall be decisive.
 39. HAKA shall forward the panel's assessment report and the comments by the higher education institution to the HAKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education.



VI. Final assessment by the HAKA Quality Assessment Council

40. The HAKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (hereinafter *the Assessment Council*) shall adopt a final assessment decision on the study programme at its session according to the document *Rules of Procedure of the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education*. The Assessment Council shall examine an assessment report within three months after receipt of the report.
41. The Assessment Council shall base its final decision on the assessments of the five assessment areas presented by the expert panel, and the comments by the higher education institution received within the set deadline, as well as additional materials submitted at the request of the Assessment Council.
42. In case of contradictions in assessments of the five assessment areas by the expert panel or inadequate justification, the Assessment Council shall have the right to return the assessment report to the panel to be reviewed and clarified; the panel shall review the assessment report within two weeks after their receipt and return them with additional explanations and reasons to HAKA.
43. The Assessment Council shall make a final decision on study programme accreditation based on the following principles:
 - 43.1. If all five assessment areas are deemed to “conform to requirements”, the Assessment Council shall decide to accredit the study programme for a period of five years.
 - 43.2. If at least one of the assessment areas is deemed to “not conform to requirements”, the Assessment Council shall decide not to accredit the study programme.
 - 43.3. If all the five assessment areas are deemed to “partially conform to requirements”, the Assessment Council shall analyse the strengths and areas of improvement of the study programme and decide to accredit the study programme for a period of three years, or not to accredit the study programme.
 - 43.4. If three or four of the assessment areas are deemed to “partially conform to requirements”, the Assessment Council shall decide to accredit the study programme for a period of three years.
 - 43.5. If one or two assessment areas are deemed to “partially conform to requirements, the Quality Assessment Council shall analyse the strengths and areas of improvement of the study programme and decide to accredit the study programme for a period of five years or for a period of three years.
 - 43.6. If the Assessment Council weighs between two accreditation decisions and finds that if the HEI were to satisfy certain conditions, a more positive decision would be possible, the Council may adopt a decision with a secondary condition, as defined in § 53 of the Administrative Procedure Act 43¹.1.
 - 43.6.1 If the Assessment Council adopts a decision that contains a secondary condition, the Assessment Council shall list in its decision the specific shortcomings underlying the imposition of the secondary condition and shall



set a deadline by which the provider shall submit a report on the progress on the shortcomings underlying the secondary condition.

- 43.6.2 HAKA shall involve 2-3 experts to evaluate the progress made on the secondary condition. HAKA shall conduct an assessment of progress made on the secondary condition within two months of the deadline set in the decision by the Council.
 - 43.6.3 Experts assessing the progress made on the secondary condition, shall judge in their report whether the shortcomings identified in the secondary condition have been 'fully eliminated'; 'substantially eliminated'; 'partially eliminated'; or 'have not been eliminated'.
 - 43.6.4 If all shortcomings have been fully or substantially eliminated, the Assessment Council shall adopt the decision that the secondary condition has been met. If all shortcomings have been partially eliminated, the Assessment Council shall analyse the gravity of the shortcomings and shall adopt the decision, that the secondary condition has not been met; or shall adopt the decision that the secondary condition has been met. If at least one of the shortcomings has not been eliminated, the Council shall adopt the decision that the secondary condition has not been met.
 - 43.6.5 If the Council adopts the decision that the secondary condition has not been met, the Assessment Council can, based on §53 (3) of the Administrative Procedure Act, repeal the primary assessment decision; or impose a new secondary condition. According to §66 (2) and (3) of the Administrative Procedure Act, an administrative act which was lawful at the moment of issue may be retroactively repealed if an additional duty was related to the administrative act and the person has failed to perform it.
44. HAKA shall forward the assessment decision by the Assessment Council to the higher education institution, and the members of the expert panel within ten working days after its adoption.
45. Within two weeks after a decision and an assessment report were forwarded to the higher education institution, HAKA shall publish both the decision and the assessment report on its website.

VII. Follow-up activities

46. HAKA assumes that the responsibility for resolving problems pointed out in the assessment reports and for continuous improvement activities lies with the provider institution. HAKA requests that, one years after the accreditation decision was made by the Council, the provider who was granted accreditation for five years submit a written overview of its activities, planned and implemented based on recommendations in the assessment report, along with the results of such activities.



VIII. Contestation of assessment proceedings conducted by HAKA and the assessment decision by the Assessment Council

47. If a person concerned has a doubt that HAKA or an expert panel has not followed the rules described in these Guidelines when organising and conducting an assessment, he or she may file an appropriate request for clarification or memorandum with the Director of HAKA who shall provide a reasoned written response within 30 days of the date of registration of the request.
48. A person who finds that his or her rights have been violated or his or her freedoms have been restricted by assessment procedures conducted by HAKA or by a decision made by the Assessment Council may file a challenge pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Administrative Procedure Act. The challenge shall be filed with the Assessment Council within thirty days after the person filing the challenge became or should have become aware of the contested finding.
49. The Assessment Council shall forward the challenge to its Appeals Committee who shall provide an unbiased opinion in writing regarding the validity of the challenge to the Assessment Council, within five days after receipt of the challenge. The Assessment Council shall resolve the challenge within ten days of its receipt, taking into account the reasoned opinion of the Appeals Committee. If the challenge needs to be investigated further, the deadline for its review by the Assessment Council may be extended by a maximum of thirty days.
50. The final decision by the Assessment Council may be challenged within thirty days after the delivery of the final decision, filing an action with the Tallinn courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court.

