

Guidelines for Quality Assessment of Study Programme Group (SPG) Experts

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Purpose

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.

Based on ISCED97, a [study programme group](#) is a new classification of study programmes in Estonia, which has been established in an Appendix to the Standard of Higher Education, and which comprises the characteristics of both fields of study as well as the groups of study programmes.

The principles of and the procedure for quality assessment of study programme groups is established by EKKA Quality Assessment Council. [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#).

Quality assessment is focused on assessing the quality of studies provided on the basis of study programmes and **its objective is** to support the self-evaluation and self-development of higher education institutions. Quality assessment of study programme groups is not followed by sanctions; expert opinions are considered recommendations.

Quality assessment results in an assessment decision and concrete recommendations how the educational institution can improve the quality of studies.

Quality assessment of study programme groups takes place at least once in seven years.

The purpose of these guidelines is to specify and clarify the role and tasks of SPG quality assessment experts before, during, and after the assessment visit.

Assessment areas

Quality assessment of SPG has **five assessment areas**:

- study programme and study programme development
- resources
- teaching and learning
- teaching staff
- students

Each assessment area has been divided into 4-5 standards. Please see [Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education](#) where the standards are listed. Each assessment area specifies standards based on the Standard of Higher Education, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, and other legislation regulating quality assurance in higher education.

Selection of experts

EKKA starts forming an assessment committee (hereinafter 'committee') no later than five months prior to the assessment visit. Often, EKKA chooses experts among the individuals who are recommended by other quality assurance agencies or higher education institutions (especially concerning students' representatives) or employers' associations (especially concerning employers' representatives). However, interested individuals are always welcome to apply for becoming an expert via EKKA's homepage. Persons with suitable CV are invited to annual trainings and can be involved in the work of an assessment committee.

A committee has a minimum of three members. When selecting individuals for assessment committees, EKKA aims to assure that a committee comprises experts in the field of the study programmes under evaluation both from higher education institutions and from outside of higher education institutions. It is equally important to ensure that a committee includes experts who have participated in the development of similar study programmes at recognised higher education institutions and are aware of the latest trends in the European and world higher education areas.

Committees generally include both Estonian and foreign experts. Each committee includes at least one member from outside of higher education institutions (an entrepreneur, public official, representative of a professional association or employers' organisation, etc.) and at least one person who is currently enrolled as a student at the moment of approving the committee.

Upon forming a committee, EKKA, where appropriate, considers reasoned proposals by higher education institutions regarding member candidates as well as topics to be focused on.

Some committee members come from outside of Estonia, which mandates the use of English as a working language and which also indicates that higher education institutions must submit their self-evaluation reports in English.

The chair of the committee is selected by EKKA while composing a committee. The coordinator sends an invitation to the person chosen to act as a chair. Should it become evident that the chair does not discharge his/her duties during the preparatory period of the assessment visit, EKKA has right to dismiss him/her and replace with another member of the committee.

Every committee has an assessment coordinator, who is not a member of the committee. As a rule, coordinator is one of the employees of EKKA, and it is their task to help to organize the committee's work; however, the coordinator does not act as a secretary of the committee.

After the composition of a committee has been approved by EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education as well as the institution(s) under accreditation, the Director of EKKA issues an order appointing the membership of the committee, its chair and coordinator. The institution may request to replace or add some experts. In some rare cases, when the arguments have been well justified, EKKA has accepted such requests.

The members of a committee are expected to be independent and unbiased in their assessments (avoid the *conflict of interest*). They should have necessary teamwork skills and proficiency in both spoken and written English.

After the committee has been approved, the coordinator will send the committee members contracts for services. The experts are to sign the contracts and send them back to EKKA by regular

mail. According to the contract, remuneration is paid to the committee members upon the completion of the final assessment report by the committee.

Conflict of interest

A conflict of interest is presumed to be present in the following cases:

- A committee member 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.
- A committee member is participating in the work of a decision-making or advisory body of the higher education institution under evaluation at the time of assessment.
- A committee member is studying at the higher education institution under evaluation, or graduated from it less than three years ago.
- The membership connected with the study programme group of the higher education institution under evaluation includes a person closely related to a committee member (spouse or life partner, child or parent).

Tasks of the assessment committee members and coordinator before the visit

Before the assessment visit, the committee members are expected to fulfil the following work tasks:

- examine documents regulating SPG assessment and complete assessment training provided by EKKA;
- review the self-evaluation report of HEI, fill in the assessment report according to the tasks divided between the committee members, and prepare and submit to the coordinator a list of topics/questions to be focused on in the course of assessment visit by assessment areas and sub-areas as well as a list of additional materials they would like to get from the institution;
- participate in the meetings and discussions of the committee;
- participate in the preparation of the visit;
- perform other tasks related to evaluation activities according to the division of tasks among the committee members;
- adhere to agreed deadlines.

The chairperson of the committee (in addition to the points mentioned above) has also the obligation to:

- divide tasks among the members of the committee;
- chair the meetings of the committee.

The tasks of a coordinator are to:

- ensure smooth functioning of the evaluation process on the basis of the requirements and the timeframe provided in this document;

- prepare in cooperation with the committee members the list of people whom the committee would like to interview, and the list of additional materials that the committee needs from the institution in order to prepare for the visit;
- coordinate with an institution of higher education the schedule of the visit, the names and the titles of positions of the people participating in meetings; and, if necessary, to request additional materials from the institution of higher education;
- before the visit, assemble all the comments written into the assessment report by the committee members;
- prepare worksheets with questions to be asked during the visit;
- perform other tasks assigned by the chairperson related to the evaluation.

PS! The coordinator does not act as a secretary of a committee, e.g., he/she does not take notes during the interviews. That task should be divided among the committee members.

Self-evaluation report

Self-analysis is conducted on a study programme level, i.e. educational institutions conduct self-analyses for all study programmes incorporated in each study programme group. In addition to study programme levels, higher education institutions analyse internal trends of each study programme group as well as its strengths and areas for improvement: trends regarding admissions, students, graduates and dropouts; core study programmes and/or duplication of study programmes; qualifications of the teaching staff of the study programme group and the student-teacher ratio; etc. To this end higher education institutions compare the study programmes that constitute a group.

If there are more than 10 study programmes in one study programme group (including all academic cycles), in consultation with the higher education institution EKKA may make its selection of study programmes to be reviewed in depth.

Higher education institutions may, along with their self-evaluation reports and based on self-evaluations of study programme groups and/or institutional development needs, submit to EKKA their proposals regarding topics (e.g. internationalisation, assessment of learning outcomes) on which assessment committees could provide more detailed feedback.

EKKA will not publish self-evaluation reports.

The coordinator shall send the self-evaluation report to the committee no later than *two months* prior to the visit. **The chair** will then inform the members of the committee about the further process: whether the members are expected to comment on the whole report or, for example, the assessment areas / study programmes among experts are divided, so that each expert focuses on (a) certain area(s) / programme(s). It is recommended that each area /programme is covered by at least two experts.

Members of the committee are obliged to read the report and start to make preliminary comments in the report template developed by EKKA. The members are expected to send their comments – potential strengths and improvement areas – and possible questions that they would like to ask during the assessment visit to the coordinator no later than *5 weeks* before the visit.

No later than 4 weeks before the visit, the coordinator will, based on the proposals received by committee members and in coordination with them, prepare a list of the following items concerning the self-evaluation report:

- questions and/or comments;
- a provisional list of the strengths of the SPG and the topics to be focused on in the course of evaluation;
- a list of additional materials to be requested;
- a list of individuals whom the committee would like to meet during the visit;

The coordinator shall prepare the draft schedule for the visit, and coordinate it with the chair of the committee as well as with the higher education institution under evaluation no later than *3 weeks* before the visit.

Introductory training/seminar

A day before the assessment visit, the assessment committee meets in EKKA for final preparations of the visit.

The meeting usually starts at 9 a.m. with an introductory seminar carried out by EKKA staff members. The panel will be informed about the systems of higher education and quality assurance in Estonia. Following this, expectations for the visit and the work of the panel will be discussed.

Most of the day is devoted to the individual work of the committee: finalizing questions and their order based on the pre-prepared worksheets for the interviews (especially for the first day); dividing the roles among the panel members – who will be responsible for which questions/topics, how minute taking is organized, etc.

If the institution under evaluation is situated outside Tallinn (e.g., Tartu), panel members and the coordinator usually travel there the same afternoon.

Assessment visit

After the introductory training, experts participate in an assessment visit to the higher education institution guided by the chairman of the committee. Assessment visits are integral parts of the process, but they are conducted in flexible ways – the cooperation among all committee members is essential, both before and after the visit.

A visit may last up to four days. The length of the visit depends from the number of higher education institutions/study programmes to be assessed.

Usually, the committee meets the Rector and/or Vice-Rector, Faculty dean/Institute director, academic staff, students, alumni, employers. The selection of the interviewees depends on the issues raised in the self-evaluation report.

In larger institutions, some interviews can be held in parallel (e.g, parallel interviews with teaching staff). In that case, the committee members need to divide in two groups.

It is the chairman's responsibility to keep to the time schedule during the entire visit, i.e. start and end all the meetings on time.

It is recommended that all panel members take notes during the interviews (see also "Introductory training/seminar").

In general, after every interview the committee has time for reflection. All coffee breaks and lunches are held separately from the staff of the institution and can also be used for committee reflection.

At the end of the visit, the chairman gives an overview of provisional conclusions of the committee to the representatives of the higher education institution, i.e., some strengths and improvement areas for each assessment area.

Interviewing techniques and tips

- Situation is stressful for the higher education institution – reduce strain at the beginning of each interview! (*We are here to support your development* etc.).
- Pose short and easily understandable questions, one question at a time.
- Use relevant questions: What have you done? Why have you done so? What are the results? Are they good or bad? Why do you think so (comparison)? How do you use them? What have you learned from the process? ...
- Let everyone talk. Address questions to specific persons if necessary.
- Reduce domination. Interrupt if necessary.
- End each interview with thanking for time and answers.
- If possible, leave 2-3 minutes for additional question „Is there anything we did not ask but you would like to tell us“?
- Directing (advising) questions should be avoided (Wouldn't it be better if you ...? Why don't you ...?)
- Always remember that you represent EKKA during the visit.

Practical arrangements for the visit – expectations from HEI

The institution lets the panel use an appropriately furnished room during the visit and allows the committee to:

- observe educational activities (lectures, seminars, practical training, etc.);
- access students' research papers, including their final papers;
- interview employees and students of the higher education institution at the choice of committee members;
- meet employers or other stakeholders of the study programme group;
- access internal documents that provide for and govern the activities of the higher education institution;
- access data and information systems related to teaching, learning, support services and students;
- access information related to employees of the higher education institution (their CVs, job descriptions, etc.);
- examine the infrastructure available to the higher education institution.

After the visit

Within five days after the visit, EKKA shall ask the higher education institution for feedback on the apparent preparation of members of the committee, the relevance of their questions and other pertinent issues according to the form established by EKKA. The results of the feedback shall be taken as a basis for choosing members of committees for subsequent assessments.

After the assessment visit, **the committee** is expected to do the following:

- participate in wording recommendations and preparing the assessment report;

- examine the comments of the institution of higher education about the assessment report and consider them when compiling the final assessment report;
- to perform other tasks related to evaluation activities according to the division of tasks among the committee members;
- adhere to agreed deadlines.

The chairman will

- ensure that the opinion of the committee is justified;
- finalise the assessment report;
- confirm it by sending the final report in PDF-format to the coordinator.

Assessment reports

The panel is asked to assess the conformity of the study programmes belonging to the study programme group and the instruction provided on the basis thereof to legislation and to national and international standards and/or recommendations, including the assessment of the level of the corresponding theoretical and practical instruction, the research and pedagogical qualification of the teaching staff and research staff, and the sufficiency of resources for the provision of instruction.

We expect the panel to give recommendations how to

- improve the quality of teaching and student learning;
- improve international competitiveness of graduates;
- improve interaction inside and between universities and companies
- attract more and better local and international students.

The panel is asked to compile an assessment report which:

- presents a **concise analysis on the study programme group** of the higher education institution and the **recommendations** for improving the quality of instruction;
- points out **the strengths** and **areas for improvement of study programmes** submitted to the assessment by five assessment areas, and preferably in international comparison.

Assessment committees' recommendations shall preferably be adopted by consensus. If consensus is not reached, the dissenting view(s) together with the reason(s) shall be included.

Committees shall submit assessment reports to EKKA by the end of the fourth week (sixth week if more than 1 institution) after the visit and EKKA shall forward it to the institution of higher education within one week after receipt of the report.

Higher education institutions shall have the opportunity to submit their comments about the assessment report within two weeks after receipt of the report. The committee shall review the comments received and consider them while preparing its final report.

The chair of the committee will forward the electronic version of the final assessment report, including the final component assessments, to the EKKA Bureau no later than *by the end of the tenth week* after the visit.

The EKKA Bureau shall forward the committee's assessment report and the comments by the higher education institution to the EKKA Quality Assessment Council.

The Quality Assessment Council shall approve an assessment report within three months after receipt of the report. The Council shall weigh the strengths and areas for improvement pointed out by an assessment committee and its recommendations, and then shall decide whether to conduct the next quality assessment of that study programme group in seven years – or less than seven years, if the study programmes, instruction and instruction-related development based on those programmes do not comply with legislation, national or international standards.

Writing the report: some tips

- All the findings in the report should be based on solid evidence gathered by the committee and (if possible) comparative analysis. Subjective opinions of the committee members and unsubstantiated claims should thus clearly be avoided.
- To prevent any ambiguity or vagueness in the comments, the style of the report should not be overly polite. When stating areas of improvement or giving suggestions, conditional mood should thus be avoided.

Total workload

A member of the assessment committee should account for:

- 2-3 days of preparatory work: reading the self-evaluation reports and preparing questions for the visit;
- 4-6 days for the assessment visit: 1 day for the introduction and preparation for the visit, 2-4 days for the visit, 1-2 days for writing the assessment report and consensus meeting;
- 1-2 days to finalise the assessment report.

Practical information regarding travel and accommodation

EKKA will book and buy flight tickets in economy class for the panel members according to the information they have provided – preferred dates/times for arrival and departure, etc. All additional costs – train/bus/taxi to/from the airport and travel insurance will also be covered by EKKA. Travel insurance should be arranged and bought by the panel member him-/herself. All receipts and boarding passes should be kept and given/sent to the coordinator. Reimbursements will be made according to original receipts.

NB! Meals at airports will not be covered.



EKKA will also book and pay for the hotel accommodation (single rooms) for max 7 nights. All additional nights and other costs exceeding the base cost (double room, mini bar etc.) will be covered by experts themselves.

Breakfasts and lunches during the visit are provided by EKKA. Dinners are usually at experts' own cost.