

Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation Experts

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Purpose

Institutional accreditation is an external evaluation in the course of which the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (EKKA) shall assess the compliance of the management, administration, academic and research activity, and academic and research environment of universities and institutions of professional higher education with the legislation as well as with the purposes and development plans of institutions of higher education. Please see also *The Estonian Higher Education System*.

The purpose of institutional accreditation is to support the development of strategic management and culture of quality in higher education institutions, inform stakeholders of the outcomes of the main activities thereof, and enhance the reliability and competitiveness of Estonian higher education.

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

Assessment areas

Institutional accreditation has **four assessment areas**:

- organizational management and performance
- teaching and learning
- research, development and/or other creative activity
- service to society

Each assessment area has been divided into three or four sub-areas. Please see *Annex 1 in Conditions and Procedures of Institutional Accreditation* where the sub-areas and requirements are listed. Next to the requirements are described the assessment criteria and indicators that form the basis for evaluating whether the requirements are met. Higher education institutions should present the trends of quantitative indicators of at least the past three years, preferably five years.

The final decision of institutional accreditation is a comprehensive evaluation on the compliance of the aspects above with the requirements.

Selection of experts

Selection of experts for a specific assessment committee (also called *panel*) begins 6-12 months before the expected assessment visit to a higher education institution. 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 consists of 4-6 members (also called *experts*). When composing a committee, EKKA considers a number of aspects, ensuring also that it includes:

- a person with management experience at a higher education institution of a similar profile;
- a person with experience from outside of higher education institutions (preferably as an employer with management experience; and

- a student representative.

At least two 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. At the same time, it does not mean that higher education institutions need to translate all their documentation into English. The development plan, statutes, field-related action plans (if separate from the development plan) and other basic documents regulating the activities of a higher education institution that are referred to in a self-evaluation report should be available 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 his/her 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 as well as the institution 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 considered 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 in two parts: first part upon the completion of the final assessment report by the committee, and the second part after EKKA Quality Assessment Council has made the final decision on institutional accreditation of the HEI, after which the work is considered to be entirely accepted by EKKA.

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 evaluation, 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 evaluation.
- 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 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 fulfill the following work tasks:

- examine documents regulating institutional accreditation 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

A self-evaluation report prepared by a higher education institution contains an evidence-based analysis of the strengths and areas for improvement of the institution by assessment areas and sub-areas.

The report is written in English, and its maximum length, including annexes, is 120,000 characters but not longer than 70 pages. The report may contain links to appropriate documents.

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 (sub-)areas among experts are divided, so that each expert focuses on (a) certain area(s). It is recommended that each area 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 (see *Assessment Report Template*). 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 *one month* 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 (see *Sample of Worksheets*);
- a provisional list of the strengths of the higher education institution 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;
- a list of regional facilities or colleges which the committee would like to visit (up to 2 facilities/colleges per institution of higher education).

The coordinator shall prepare the draft schedule for the visit (see *Sample of the Visit Schedule*), 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.

See also *Sample of the Process Schedule*.

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 is 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.

A visit may last up to three days, but it could be longer if an institution has regional facilities; yet, no more than one day per facility or college is spent for a visit.

Usually, the committee meets the Rector and Vice-Rectors, Board/Council of the institution, academic staff and representatives of various administrative units (human resource management, finances, students support, etc.), 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 addition, the interviews are audiotaped with the Dictaphone. However, at the beginning of each interview the chairman or the coordinator asks for the permission to audiotape. If the interviewees feel uncomfortable or resist, the interview will not be audiotaped.

In general, after every two interviews 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:

- access internal normative documents that provide for and govern the activities of the higher education institution;
- interview employees and students of the higher education institution at the choice of committee members;
- access information related to education, research, development and students, and information systems;
- access information related to employees of the higher education institution (their CVs, job descriptions, etc.);
- examine the infrastructure of the higher education institution;

- access students' research, development and creative works;
- access information related to financial activities of the higher education institution;
- if necessary obtain other information related to the management and administration of the higher education institution.

After the visit

Within five days after the visit, EKKA asks the higher education institution to give feedback on the preparation of panel members for the visit, the relevance of their questions, and other pertinent aspects. The results of the feedback are taken into account when choosing members of committees for future accreditations.

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

- participate in wording component assessments 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 shall

- ensure that the component assessments are justified;
- finalise the assessment report;
- confirm it by sending the final report in PDF-format to the coordinator.

Assessment reports and formation of component assessments

The committee evaluates an institution of higher education in four separate areas: the organisational management and performance; teaching and learning; research, development and/or other creative activity; and service to society (hereinafter 'component assessments').

Component assessments will be based on conformity analysis by sub-areas. Sub-areas will be evaluated on a scale with three values: 'conforms with

requirements', 'partially conforms with requirements', and 'does not conform with requirements'.

The committee uses the following principles to decide on component assessments:

- If all sub-areas are evaluated as 'conforms with requirements', the component assessment will be 'conforms with requirements'.
- If one sub-area is evaluated as 'partially conforms with requirements' and all other sub-areas are evaluated as 'conforms with requirements', the component assessment will be either 'conforms with requirements' or 'partially conforms with requirements', based on the conclusion after weighing the strengths of the area against its weaknesses.
- If more than one sub-area is evaluated as 'partially conforms with requirements', the component assessment will be 'partially conforms with requirements'.
- If one sub-area is evaluated as 'does not conform with requirements' and all other sub-areas are evaluated as 'conforms with requirements', the component assessment will be 'partially conforms with requirements'.
- If one sub-area is evaluated as 'does not conform with requirements' and at least one is evaluated as 'partially conforms with requirements', the component assessment will be either 'partially conforms with requirements' or 'does not conform with requirements', based on the conclusion after weighing the strengths of that particular assessment are against its weaknesses.
- If at least two sub-areas are evaluated as 'does not conform with requirements', the component assessment will be 'does not conform with requirements'.

The component assessments should preferably be based on the decision adopted by consensus. If consensus is not reached, a simple majority of members of the committee shall make the decision, and the dissenting view(s) together with the reason(s) will be included in the report. If the votes are equally divided, the vote of the chairperson will decide.

Sub-areas, in which the higher education institution has shown outstanding results and/or initiatives, may be recognised by the committee with an additional note of '*worthy of recognition*'. If the committee estimates that at least two sub-areas of an assessment area deserve recognition, the committee will recognize the achievements of the institution in that assessment area with an additional note of '*worthy of recognition*'.

The committee compiles an assessment report and submits it to EKKA *by the end of the third week* after the visit. EKKA will review the report and may send it back to the committee for improvement in case contradictions or deficiencies in the text have been detected. *By the end of the fifth week* after the visit EKKA will forward the report to the institution.

The institution has an opportunity to submit its comments about the assessment report within two weeks after receipt of the report. The committee will then review the comments and consider them in preparing the 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 eighth week* after the visit.

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.
- The assessments of the sub-areas should be consistent and compatible with the findings of the committee presented in the report. For example, when a sub-area is evaluated as “partially confirms to requirements” but there are no critical points in the comments, the committee should consider changing either the assessment or the wording of the comments.
- When forming component assessments of the assessment areas (as explained above), extra attention should be turned to cases where there is possible to choose between different possible decisions. In these cases, the committee cannot do so randomly but always has an obligation to weigh the relevant strengths and weaknesses and present the considerations from which it has proceeded upon adopting a certain assessment.
- 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.
- The committee should not hesitate to highlight new good practices they come across in HEI-s and recognize them with the note “worthy of recognition”.

Total workload

A member of the assessment committee should account for:

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

For the indicative work period, please see *Sample of the Process Schedule*.

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.