Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education

Approved by EKKA Higher Education Quality Assessment Council on 13.06.2012

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I. General Provisions

1. On the basis of clause 10 (1) 2), subsection 10 (4) and § 12^2 of the Universities Act, subsections 21^1 (1) and (2) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act, and subsections 14 (6) to (8) of the Private Schools Act, as well as taking account of the Republic of Estonia Standard of Higher Education, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, and other normative documents and legislation regulating quality assurance in higher education, the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (hereinafter 'EKKA') shall establish and disclose the conditions and the procedure for quality assessment of study programme groups.
2. Quality assessment of study programme groups in the first and second cycles of higher education is an external evaluation which assesses the compliance of study programmes for professional higher education (hereinafter 'RKH'), bachelor degree studies (hereinafter 'BA'), master degree studies (hereinafter 'MA'), and integrated study programmes of bachelor and master degree studies (hereinafter 'INT'), 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.
3. Higher education institutions[1] have an obligation to undergo assessment of the quality of their study programme groups at least once in seven years.
4. A higher education institution shall submit a request for quality assessment of its study programme group to the EKKA Bureau no later than one year prior to the assessment visit. The assessment shall be based on a self-evaluation of the study programme group prepared by the higher education institution and its background information compiled by the Ministry of Education and Research based on data from the Estonian Education Information System (EHIS).

[1] For the purpose of this document, a higher education institution means an educational institution (including a vocational education institution) where instruction is provided based on the study programmes of higher education

II. Assessment Areas and Standards

5. EKKA shall assess the quality of a study programme group by the following assessment areas and standards:

5.1. Study programme and study programme development

5.1.1. The launch or development of the study programme is based on the Standard of Higher Education and other legislation, development plans, analyses (including labour market and feasibility analyses), and professional standards; and the best quality is being sought.

5.1.2. 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.

5.1.3. Different parts of the study programme form a coherent whole.

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

5.1.5. The study programme development takes into account feedback from students, employers, alumni and other stakeholders.

5.2. Resources

5.2.1. Resources (teaching and learning environments, teaching materials, teaching aids and equipment, premises, financial resources) support the achievement of objectives in the study programme.

5.2.2. There is a sufficient supply of textbooks and other teaching aids and they are available.

5.2.3. Adequacy of resources is ensured for changing circumstances (change in student numbers, etc.).

5.2.4. Resource development is sustainable.

5.3. Teaching and learning

5.3.1. The process of teaching and learning supports learners' individual and social development.

5.3.2. The process of teaching and learning is flexible, takes into account the specifics of the form of study and facilitates the achievement of planned learning outcomes.

5.3.3. Teaching methods and tools used in teaching are modern, effective and support the development of digital culture.

5.3.4. Practical and theoretical studies are interconnected.

5.3.5. The organisation and the content of practical training support achievement of planned learning outcomes and meet the needs of the stakeholders.

5.3.6. The process of teaching and learning supports learning mobility.

5.3.7. Assessment of learning outcomes is appropriate, transparent and objective, and supports the development of learners.

5.4. Teaching staff

5.4.1. There is teaching staff with adequate qualifications to achieve the objectives and planned learning outcomes of the study programme, and to ensure quality and sustainability of the teaching and learning.

5.4.2. Overall student assessment on teaching skills of the teaching staff is positive.

5.4.3. The teaching staff collaborate in the fields of teaching and research within the higher education institution and with partners outside of the higher education institution (practitioners in their fields, employers, and staff members at other Estonian or foreign higher education institutions).

5.4.4. Recognized foreign and visiting members of the teaching staff and practitioners participate in teaching the study programme.

5.4.5. The teaching staff is routinely engaged in professional and teaching-skills development.

5.4.6. Assessment of the work by members of the 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.

5.5. Students

5.5.1. Student places are filled with motivated and capable students.

5.5.2. The dropout rate is low; the proportion of students graduating within the standard period of study is large.

5.5.3. Students are motivated to learn and their satisfaction with the content, form and methods of their studies is high.

5.5.4. As part of their studies, students attend other Estonian and/or foreign higher education institutions as visiting or international students.

5.5.5. Employment rate of alumni is high.

5.5.6. Alumni and their employers are pleased with their professional preparation and social competencies.

III. Preparation of Self-Evaluation Report

6. A higher education institution shall conduct self-evaluation in a study programme group incorporating all study programmes belonging to the study programme group, and prepare a self-evaluation report by the assessment areas and standards described in clauses 5.1 – 5.5.

7. The self-evaluation report shall contain:

7.1. A brief introduction of the higher education institution;
7.2. The relative position of the study programme group in the context of that higher education institution, as well as in an Estonian and/or international context;
7.3. An overview of structural units responsible for the quality of instruction within the study programme group;
7.4. Aggregate data on study programmes within the study programme group (a list of study programmes, responsible units, and the number of students by study programme at the time of conducting self-evaluation);
7.5. A brief description of trends in the study programme group during the last five academic years (comparison with the same study programme group of other higher education institutions, if appropriate; based on background information compiled by the Ministry of Education and Research), and an overview of more important changes within the study programme group since the previous assessment thereof (including transitional evaluation, assessment of the quality of instruction, etc.);
7.6. An overview of research, development and/or other creative activity (RDC) that supports teaching and learning within the study programme group (research and development projects; publications; student involvement in research groups and RDC projects; etc.; which are associated with the study programme group.);
7.7. A self-analysis of the study programmes by the assessment areas;
7.8. A summary of the strengths and areas for improvement, as shown in the self-evaluations of study programmes, and their analysis.

8. The higher education institution shall also submit the following appendices to the self-evaluation report:

8.1. A list of study programmes under evaluation, including their objectives and planned learning outcomes at both the study programme and module levels;
8.2. Details (course descriptions/syllabi) of the five most important courses (selected by the higher education institution) from each study programme under evaluation, including the objectives and planned learning outcomes for each course; descriptions of students' independent work and its assessment, teaching methods, assessment methods and criteria; and a required reading list;
8.3. Sample completion timetables (detailed outline charts of study programmes) by semester.
8.4. A comparison between the learning outcomes to be achieved according the Standard of Higher Education and the learning outcomes of the curricula;
8.5. Information about members of the teaching staff for all subjects of each study programme (name, year of birth, position, workload at the higher education institution, qualifications, subject taught and its workload, a link to the appropriate web page of the Estonian Research Portal in English).

9. Higher education institutions shall submit their self-evaluation reports in electronic format to EKKA no later than three months prior to the assessment visit.

10. The volume of the self-evaluation report depends on the number of study programmes under evaluation. The maximum volume of the general part is 10 pages, and the estimated maximum volume of the self-evaluation of an individual study programme is 5 pages.

11. The choice of a language for a self-evaluation report shall be subject to the planned composition of an assessment committee and agreed upon with each higher education institution individually. The available choices include the Estonian and English languages.

12. EKKA shall provide 2 basic trainings per year in preparing self-evaluations of study programmes to higher education institutions free of charge. If necessary, the higher education institution may apply for an additional (paid) training in self-analysis. The content and conditions of the additional training shall be specified in an agreement concluded between the higher education institution and EKKA.

13. EKKA shall send the self-evaluation report to the assessment committee no later than two months prior to the visit.

14. EKKA shall not publicise self-evaluation reports.

IV. Coordination of Study Programmes Under Evaluation

15. If the number of study programmes within a study programme group under evaluation is larger than ten, EKKA may, after receipt of the self-evaluation report and in accord with the higher education institution, make its selection of study programmes on which the assessment will focus.

16. EKKA shall make its selection based on the following principles:

    16.1. Reasoned proposals by the higher education institution, based on self-evaluations of study programmes and development needs of the higher education institution, are taken into consideration.
    16.2. A sampling represents study programmes from all academic cycles within a study programme group (RKH, BA, MA, INT).
    16.3. If several structural units conduct study programmes of the study programme group, the sampling will include at least one study programme from each structural unit.
    16.4. A sampling includes all study programmes added to the study programme group during the period between the assessments.

V. Formation and Functions of Assessment Committees

17. EKKA shall start forming an assessment committee (hereinafter 'committee') no later than five months prior to the assessment visit and, when determining the composition of the committee, EKKA shall, if possible, take into consideration reasoned proposals by the higher education institution under evaluation, regarding candidate members of the committee and/or emphases arising from development needs of the higher education institution.

18. EKKA shall form an assessment committee based on the following principles:

    18.1. A committee includes experts from higher education institutions who are specialists in the fields taught by study programmes under evaluation.
    18.2. A committee includes at least one expert from outside of higher education institutions.
    18.3. A committee includes at least one student or a person who has graduated from a higher education institutions within the previous year.
    18.4. In general, a committee includes both foreign and Estonian experts (apart from justified exceptions).
    18.5. The minimum size of a committee is three members.

19. Requirements for members of a committee:

    19.1. Members of a committee shall be independent; they shall not represent the interests of the organisation they belong to.
    19.2. Members of a committee shall be unbiased in their assessments, they lack conflicts of interest as defined by clause 23 below.
    19.3. Members of a committee shall have the necessary teamwork skills to implement the work.
    19.4. Members of a committee shall be proficient in the working language of the committee.
    19.5. Members of a committee shall preferably have past experience in external evaluation of higher education.
    19.6. Committee members from higher education institutions have participated in the development of similar study programmes in different higher education institutions, prepared state-of-the-art teaching materials, and have internationally relevant results in research, development or other creative activity.
    19.7. Committee members from outside of higher education institutions are recognised experts and, in general, they have experience in teaching or supervising at a higher education institution, or they have participated in the work of advisory or decision-making bodies of a higher education institution.
    19.8. In general, the student member of a committee has participated in the process of study programme development or in the work of decision-making bodies of different levels at a higher education institution.

20. EKKA shall send the information about a preliminary composition of the committee to the higher education institution, who then has ten working days to ask for additional members or the removal of a member, when justified.

21. The Director of EKKA shall approve of the final composition of a committee by his or her order and appoint a chairperson of the committee and an assessment coordinator.

22. An assessment coordinator (hereinafter 'coordinator') shall be an EKKA employee. The coordinator is a support person of a committee and an administrator of the assessment process whose main duty is to ensure smooth functioning of the assessment process on the basis of the requirements and the timeframe provided in this document. The coordinator is not a member of a committee.

23. Members of a committee shall confirm by signature an obligation to maintain the confidentiality of information that has become known to them in the course of assessment, and a lack of conflicts of interest. In the case of a conflict of interest, committee members shall immediately notify the Director of EKKA of it and remove themselves from the work of the committee. A conflict of interest is presumed to be present in the following cases:

    23.1. 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.
    23.2. 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.
    23.3. A committee member is studying at the higher education institution under evaluation, or graduated from it less than three years ago.
    23.4. 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).

24. If the working language of a committee is English and the higher education institution wants to use interpretation services, it shall notify the EKKA Bureau of it no later than one month prior to the assessment visit. According to EKKA, an interpreter must meet the following requirements: he or she has necessary preparation for consecutive interpretation in Estonian-English-Estonian (master degree studies in interpreting, in-service training in interpreting, interpreting as an additional specialty, etc.), past experience in consecutive interpretation, and commands the terminology regarding higher education. Costs of interpretation services shall be incurred by the higher education institution under evaluation.

25. Duties of members of a committee include the following:

25.1. reviewing a self-evaluation report of an institution of higher education;
25.2. examining documents that regulate quality assessment of study programme groups and completing assessment training provided by EKKA;
25.3. participating in the meetings and discussions of the committee;
25.4. participating in wording recommendations and preparing the assessment report;
25.5. examining the comments of the institution of higher education on the assessment report and considering them when coordinating the output of the final assessment report;
25.6. performing other tasks related to assessment activities according to the division of tasks among the members of a committee;
25.7. adhering to the agreed committee deadlines.

26. Duties of the chairperson of a committee include the following:

26.1. chairing the meetings of the committee;
26.2. dividing tasks among the members of the committee;
26.3. leading the committee during the visit;
26.4. after the visit, giving the overview of provisional conclusions of the committee to the higher education institution;
26.5. ensuring that the opinion of the committee is justified;
26.6. preparing and confirming the assessment report.

27. EKKA shall enter into contracts for services with members of a committee and compensate the members of a committee for transportation and accommodation costs related to performing their duties.

IV. Assessment Visits

28. A higher education institution who receives a committee shall, no later than one month before a visit, appoint a person who is responsible for a smooth process of the visit and who ensures appropriate working conditions for members of the committee.

29. No later than one month prior to the assessment visit, the coordinator shall, based on the proposals by members of the committee, prepare questions and/or comments on the self-evaluation report; a list of additional materials to be requested; and a list of individuals whom the committee would like to meet during the visit.

30. The coordinator shall, in cooperation with the chairperson of the committee, prepare the schedule for the visit and start to coordinate it with the higher education institution under evaluation no later than three weeks prior to the visit.

31. A visit shall last for one to two days. In justified cases, a member of the committee may be excused from participation in the visit. If the higher education institution conducts studies at different locations, the committee may split into corresponding parts.

32. In the course of a visit, the higher education institution shall make working space available to the committee members and allow the committee to:

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

33. 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.

V. Assessment Reports and Recommendations by Assessment Committees

34. An assessment report shall:

    31.1 point out the strengths and areas for improvement of study programmes submitted to the assessment by five assessment areas, based on standards provided in clauses 5.2.1 to 5.2.5 above, and preferably in international comparison;
    31.2 present a concise analysis on the study programme group of the higher education institution and the recommendations for improving the quality of instruction.

35. 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.

36. Committees shall submit assessment reports to EKKA by the end of the fourth week after the visit and EKKA shall forward it to the institution of higher education within one week after receipt of the report.

37. 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.

38. The chairperson of a committee shall forward the electronic version of the final assessment report, signed by the chairperson of the committee, to the EKKA Bureau no later than by the end of the ninth week after the visit, which the EKKA Bureau will immediately send to the higher education institution under evaluation.

39. The EKKA Bureau shall forward the committee's assessment report and the comments by the higher education institution to the EKKA Higher Education Quality Assessment Council (hereinafter 'Quality Assessment Council').

VI. Decision by EKKA Quality Assessment Council

40. The Assessment Council shall base its decision on the self-evaluation report of a university, the assessment report, the comments by the university received in a timely manner, and on additional materials submitted at the request of the Assessment Council. If necessary, the Assessment Council may ask the chairperson of the committee or a member of the committee assigned by the chairperson to attend the session for explanations.

41. The Assessment Council shall approve an assessment report within three months after receipt of the report. The Assessment 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:

    41.1. in seven years where the study programmes, the teaching conducted under these programmes and development activities regarding teaching and learning conform to legislation, national and international standards and trends;

    41.2. in five years:

        41.2.1. in the case of a field where, according to the Assessment Council's reasoned assessment, rapid development prompts the need to receive feedback from foreign experts in less than seven years; and/or

        41.2.2. in case there is some nonconformity of the study programmes, the teaching conducted under these programmes and development activities regarding teaching and learning with legislation, national and international standards and trends, the elimination of which, in the opinion of the Assessment Council, needs feedback from foreign experts and/or

        41.2.3. in case there are some other reasons resulting from the specifics of the study programme group and international requirements;

41.3. in three years where, in the opinion of the Assessment Council, the majority of study programmes and/or assessment areas reveal substantial nonconformity with legislation and/or national and international standards.

42. According to § 53 of the Administrative Procedure Act, the Assessment Council may, in justified cases, impose a secondary condition on its decision if a study programme group has any specific noncompliance with legislation and/or national and international standards, which in the opinion of the Assessment Council could be eliminated within two years, and it is possible to assess the results without the assistance of external experts.

43. The EKKA Bureau shall electronically forward a final decision by the Assessment Council to the university within two weeks after the date the decision was adopted.

44. Within one week after a decision and an assessment report were forwarded to the university, EKKA shall publicise both the decision and the assessment report on its website.

VII. Contesting of Assessment Proceedings Conducted by EKKA and Decision by Quality Assessment Council

45. A person who finds that his or her rights are violated or his or her freedoms are restricted by assessment procedures conducted by EKKA or by a decision made by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council may file a challenge pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Administrative Procedure Act. The challenge shall be filed with the EKKA Quality Assessment Council within 30 days after the person filing the challenge became or should have become aware of the contested finding.

45[1]. The Assessment Council shall forward the challenge to the Appeals Committee who provides the Assessment Council with an unbiased opinion regarding the validity of the challenge within 5 days after receiving the challenge. The Assessment Council shall adjudicate the challenge within 10 days after the challenge is delivered to the Council, taking into account the justified opinion of the Appeals Committee. If the challenge needs to be further examined, the Assessment Council may extend a term for review of the challenge by up to 30 days.

46. A decision by EKKA Quality Assessment Council may be challenged within 30 days after its delivery, filing an action with the Tallinn courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court Procedure.

VIII. Follow-Up Activities

47. EKKA assumes that the responsibility for resolving the problems pointed out in assessment reports and for continuous improvement activities lies with the higher education institutions. EKKA shall regularly organise workshops where higher education institutions introduce developments in study programme groups during the post-assessment period, based on areas for improvement and recommendations presented in the assessment reports.

IX. Involving Competent Evaluation Authorities of Foreign Countries

48. When assessing the quality of study programme groups, it is possible to take into account assessment reports approved by international professional organisations or other competent assessment authorities which include the analyses and opinions described in clause 31 above.

49. If a higher education institution wishes that a competent foreign assessment authority (hereinafter 'assessment authority') would conduct quality assessment of its study programme group and the costs thereof will be covered by the state budget of Estonia, the higher education institution shall submit a well-reasoned application to EKKA to include that assessment authority, no later than two years prior to the expiration date of its current accreditation, and the application shall contain the following information:

    49.1. the name and contact details of the assessment authority;

    49.2. the consent of the assessment authority to conduct the assessment of quality of the study programme group, and an estimated expenditure;

    49.3. the description of the procedure (including the schedule) and requirements for a planned assessment process.

50. An assessment authority must meet the following requirements:

    50.1. The assessment authority has an experience in assessing study programmes of higher education institutions.

    50.2. The procedure and requirements for an assessment are transparent and in conformity with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

    50.3. The assessment is conducted by an international expert committee.

    50.4. The assessment report points out the strengths and areas for improvement of study programmes within a study programme group, including international comparisons, and makes recommendations for improving the quality of instruction.

51. Within one month after receipt of the request, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council shall make a reasoned decision on the suitability of the assessment authority to conduct quality assessment of the study programme group.

52. If EKKA approves of the use of an assessment authority, it shall conclude a tripartite contract with the higher education institution and the assessment authority, providing the rights and responsibilities of the parties during the assessment process and the procedure for reimbursement for expenditures.

53. An assessment authority shall submit its assessment report to EKKA.

54. If a higher education institution wishes that the result of a previously conducted assessment would be taken into account as a quality assessment of a study programme group, the higher education institution shall submit a corresponding request including the assessment report approved by the competent assessment authority, to the EKKA Quality Assessment Council.

55. If an assessment report does not include all aspects described in clause 31 above, and it is impossible to make a final decision that would be in accordance with the procedure outlined in this document, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council shall have the right to return the report to the assessment authority for modification and improvement or (in the case described in clause 50 above) not to make an assessment decision on the quality of the study programme group based on the submitted assessment report.

56. If it is possible to make a final decision that would be in accordance with this procedure, the Quality Assessment Council shall approve the assessment report, weigh the strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations pointed out in the assessment report, and then shall decide whether to conduct next quality assessment of that study programme group in seven years or, in justified cases, in less than seven years.

57. The proceedings described in this chapter and the decision by the Quality Assessment Council shall be contested following the procedure provided in Chapter VII.