

# Requirements and Procedure for Accreditation of Higher Education Study Programmes

*Approved by the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education of the Estonian Quality Agency for Education on 17.06.2026.*

## **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. The accreditation outcome will be registered in the database of higher education institutions and programmes that have been subject to external quality assurance (DEQAR)<sup>1</sup>.
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.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Database of External Quality Assurance Results

6. An international accreditation may 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. The design, launch, and development of the study programme are based on the Development Plan and the internal quality assurance principles of the higher education institution, national legislation, and relevant international trends and standards in the field. Where a professional standard exists, the programme takes into account the acquisition and implementation of the knowledge and skills they define.
- 9.2. The structure and content of modules and courses within the study programme support the achievement of its objectives and intended learning outcomes regardless of the mode of delivery (on-campus, blended, or online).
- 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 and 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 digital and 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, alumni and other relevant stakeholders.
- 9.9. The institution publishes clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible information about its study programmes and their delivery, intended learning outcomes, qualifications awarded, student admission and selection criteria,



teaching, learning and assessment procedures, pass rates, learning opportunities, graduate employment and the outcomes of quality assurance processes.

## **10. Teaching and learning**

- 10.1. The organisation of studies is unambiguously regulated, and the relevant information is publicly available. The results of feedback surveys and the analysis of learning activities are considered in the planning and management of studies.
- 10.2. The process of teaching and learning supports learners' individual and social development and motivates learners to take responsibility for their studies and achieve learning outcomes.
- 10.3. Teaching methods support students deep learning and achievement of intended learning outcomes, including general competences. The content and process of learning and teaching are research-based.
- 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 practices are transparent, objective, and designed to promote student learning. Where relevant, digital technologies are employed in a reliable manner, with safeguards in place to ensure academic integrity and prevent misuse of AI. Teaching staff collaborate in establishing shared and consistent approaches to assessments.
- 10.6. The higher education institution has established and is implementing clear policies for academic recognition, including the recognition of prior studies and work experience.
- 10.7. Practical training is regulated, the requirements for its successful completion have been clearly defined, and preliminary agreements have been made with organisations that offer practical training placements.
- 10.8. Students are involved in research and development activities. The supervision of student research papers (including seminar papers, applied projects, and final theses) is well organised. Satisfaction with 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, including the analysis and taking into account of feedback from various stakeholders (students, alumni, employers, academic staff).

## **11. Academic staff**



- 11.1. The principles and actions for the recruitment, development and evaluation of the staff are fair and transparent, are based on the institution's strategic goals, and ensure the sustainability and quality improvement in the respective study area.
- 11.2. The number and qualification of full-time teaching staff complies with the requirements established by legislation and assures the quality of studies.
- 11.3. Distribution of full-time teaching staff by age ensure the sustainability of studies in a study programme.
- 11.4. 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.
- 11.5. Academic staff possess adequate teaching and digital competence to support student autonomy and provide effective, professional supervision. They adapt their teaching and supervision approaches to different modes of delivery.
- 11.6. The staff development system is effective, providing academic staff with opportunities for continuous development, including teaching skills tailored to different modes of delivery.
- 11.7. Visiting members of teaching staff (including from foreign higher education institutions) are involved in teaching in the study programme.
- 11.8. Full-time teaching staff regularly enhance their skills through engagement with foreign higher education institutions and participation in international networks.
- 11.9. The scope, level and volume of academic staff's research, development, and creative activities are sufficient to support high-quality teaching and the supervision of student academic work at the relevant level of higher education. Teaching staff are actively involved in national and international research projects and regularly participate in scholarly discussions and conferences.
- 11.10. 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.
- 11.11. Assessment of teaching staff takes into account the quality of their teaching, research, development and creative work, development of 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 diversity of learners (part-time learners, working learners, learners with special needs, and 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 established and implemented.
- 12.6. A system has been established to ensure academic integrity and to prevent and detect academic fraud.
- 12.7. A system is in place for monitoring academic progress. Effective measures are implemented to reduce drop-out rates.
- 12.8. The higher education institution has a tracking mechanism of graduates' employment and monitors the evolution of graduates' career.

### **13. Resources**

- 13.1. The financial resources of the higher education institution are adequate for conducting studies, carrying out study related development activities and supporting the professional development of teaching staff. The development and maintenance of digital infrastructure is ensured.
- 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, fit-for-purpose information and communication technology solutions—including the study information system, learning management system, document management system, and online learning environment—effectively support learning and teaching. Students and teaching staff have access to digital learning tools and IT support. The digital infrastructure is regularly reviewed and improved, with information security and data protection measures in place to ensure a secure learning environment.
- 13.5. The library supports the delivery of studies by providing access to up-to-date information sources, including electronic databases.



### III. Self-assessment of study programmes

14. The higher education institution shall conduct self-assessment of the study programmes under five assessment areas and prepare a self-assessment report following the *Template for the self-assessment report*.
15. The HEI shall submit its self-assessment report in electronic format to HAKA no later than three months prior to the agreed assessment visit.
16. HAKA shall review the self-assessment 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-assessment report to the Panel no later than two months prior to the assessment visit.
18. HAKA shall provide training in preparing self-assessments 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-assessment 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 47 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.

29.1. The assessment visit between the panel and the institution may be conducted either with on-site at the institution's premises or as an online assessment visit by video conference.

29.2. As a rule, the assessment visit includes on-site observation at the institution's premises. An on-site assessment visit enables the panel to gain direct insight into the provider's learning environment and infrastructure, engage with learners, staff and other stakeholders, and develop a broader understanding of the provider's academic and organisational culture. Such observation and engagement may be carried out by all members of the panel or by one or more panel members, or another person designated by HAKA for this purpose, while other participants may attend remotely.

29.3. In justified cases, the assessment visit may be conducted fully online. Such cases may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- (1) the provider holds a valid accreditation of the relevant field of study, or an equivalent external quality assurance outcome granted by an agency listed in EQAR;
- (2) the provider delivers higher education programmes wholly online and does not have permanent premises of its own;
- (3) other circumstances where an online assessment visit would allow the panel to achieve the objectives of the assessment in a reliable and proportionate manner.

29.4. The mode of the assessment visit shall be decided by HAKA in consultation with the institution, taking into account the objectives of the assessment, the institution's circumstances, and the need to ensure a reliable evaluation of the learning environment, infrastructure and educational provision.

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 workload, 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 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.
    - 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.

## **IX. Financing of accreditation**

51. HAKA shall charge the provider a fee to meet the full costs of the accreditation. This includes the expert fees, a fee for the coordination and administration of the accreditation process, and travel and accommodation expenses. The expert fees and administrative overhead are determined by HAKA; travel and accommodation expenses are charged at cost. The approximate total of the whole review is payable by the provider to HAKA upon the signing of the contract. HAKA shall not undertake any further preparations for the accreditation review until the payment has been received.
52. The travel costs and the accommodation costs will be paid as actual costs. Should the real travel and accommodation costs be lower than the amount paid in advance for these purposes, the provider will be reimbursed the difference. Should the real travel and accommodation costs exceed the amount paid in advance for these purposes, the provider shall pay the difference to HAKA.
53. Translation and interpretation shall be provided, and the corresponding costs are covered by the provider. The interpreter shall be qualified in providing



consecutive/simultaneous interpretation in the respective languages. The interpreter shall not have an employment relationship with the provider nor study at the provider.

54. If the Council shall accredit the training programme with a secondary condition, the provider is obliged to cover the costs of the second review according to the scope of conditions set by the Council.

