Session 2-5

From Study Programme Accreditation to Study Programme Group Assessment

Liia Tüür
Information Manager, Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency

Heli Mattisen
Director, Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency

Abstract

Estonia has experienced reform of the external evaluation of higher education (HE) in the last decade. General principles of a new system were developed in cooperation with major stakeholders (e.g. higher education institutions, student organisations, professional unions, and employer organisations) taking into account the lessons learned through implementing the previous system. A major shift was made from a resource consuming external evaluation system that was based on the study programme accreditation to a system which includes institutional accreditation of a more general nature and study programme group assessment that concentrates on supportive and feedback giving evaluation. However, the implementation of this new system provides challenges for both (a) higher education institutions who must develop a new kind of self-evaluation reports, and (b) experts who are expected to compose thorough analyses based on those self-evaluation reports plus extracted background information.

The previous and new systems of quality assurance in higher education in Estonia

The previous system of quality assurance (QA) in Estonian higher education, like in many other countries, was based on the accreditation of curricula. The primary aim was to assess a curriculum and decide whether or not studies under it conformed to standards and legal documents. Assessment was heavily focused on accountability. The need for a new system of external quality assurance, where the aim for continuous improvement would be prioritised, was perceived by the higher education institutions as well as the Ministry of Education and Research. The need for this shift was also outlined in the doctoral thesis by Vilgats, "The impact of external quality assessment on universities: Estonian experience" (2009). The major factors were described as follows:

- The existing system was resource and time consuming for both higher education institutions (HEIs) and the state. In addition, self-assessment of a study programme required the HEI to analyse itself as well as the whole academic unit, which was not always within the competence of that self-evaluation team.

- Accreditation of curricula did not have much impact on organisational learning and development of the university as an organisation.

- The focus of accreditations was too broad. They were simultaneously focused on controlling and on giving recommendations for further development.

- In the case of a negative decision, the result of the accreditation could be closure of the study programme, thus the honesty in analysing development needs was strongly challenged.

In addition, under the previous system, in force from 1997 to 2009, accreditation of study programmes was conducted while the students had already been enrolled in those programmes. This could lead into situations where students could not complete their studies because of a negative accreditation decision. In such a case, the students would be transferred to another HEI or study programme, but such situations could have been avoided altogether. Under the new system of QA, the right to conduct studies in a new study programme group is granted after the initial assessment of that study programme group, which is conducted before the launch of new programmes within that group. After the license has been granted, the HEI will be free to develop new study programmes within the respective study programme group. The initial assessment gives assurance to the state that the study to be offered is up to the required level, in other words, the HEI can be trusted.

The new system of external quality assessment (starting from 2009) focuses on the institution as a whole (institutional accreditation) and, on the other hand, on the quality assessment of study programme groups (SPG). The study programmes are not

assessed nor accredited as single entities. The study programme group is a new classification of study programmes that is based on the ISCED97 classification. There are 28 study programme groups altogether – for example, "Teacher training and educational science", "Business and administration" or "Engineering, manufacturing and technology", each form a separate study programme group assembling all the study programmes of the same field.

Under the previous QA system, institutional accreditation was voluntary, but now it is the cornerstone of the new system. In the course of institutional accreditation, the internal quality assurance system of an educational institution and its functioning are assessed, including the fulfilment of tasks the educational institution has been entrusted with and the conformity of its management, administration, study and research environment to the objectives of the educational institution. All HEIs must undergo institutional accreditation once in 7 years.

The new QA system, effective from 2009, enables assessors to focus on the HEI as an organisation, but attention is also paid to trends in study programme development. Quality assessment of SPGs focuses on study programmes, the content and organisation of studies and on instruction-related development activities within a study programme group. These aspects are not evaluated in the course of institutional accreditation.

1997-2009	2009-2011	2011-…
Accreditation of study programmes STATE RECOGNITION	Transitional evaluation	Quality assessment of a study programme group at least once every 7 years
Institutional accreditation (voluntary)		Institutional accreditation at least once every 7 years
Registration of study programmes by the Ministry of Education and Research		STATE RECOGNITION: The right to conduct studies in a study programme group

Table 1. Higher Education Quality Assessment System in Estonia

The development of SPG quality assessment procedures

Several key principles were kept in mind when developing this new system of external quality assessment and the assessment of SPGs, where the lessons learnt from the past were taken into account.

All principal stakeholders of HE provided their inputs during the process of developing the evaluation policies and procedures; educational institutions in particular were included in the development process.

In order to develop guidelines and procedures for the new type of assessment, seven focus group interviews were conducted in 2012 to learn about expectations and needs of the principal stakeholders. The groups that were interviewed included members of the Quality Assessment Council, employers, study programme developers at HEIs and students. They were all asked about the focus of assessment – what areas should be paid attention to, who should be included in assessment committees (local or foreign experts, inclusion of employers, etc.) – and about the main beneficiaries of the assessment report (HEI, wider public, employers and students).

In addition, all higher education institutions' vice-rectors were asked to contribute to developing SPG assessment principles and guidelines.

On the basis of that input, the guidelines for SPG assessment were developed. The regulation was approved by the EKKA (Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency) Quality Assessment Council on 13.06.2012. In autumn 2012, the guidelines were tested by a pilot assessment of the Informatics and Information Technology SPG at two public universities.

The new system of quality assurance is developed to give feedback on study programme groups, in this way supporting their development. This approach enables assessments of a more general nature than the evaluation of a single study programme.

In the course of this type of assessment, an HEI (1) conducts self-evaluation in a study programme group including all study programmes incorporated in that group, and (2) prepares a self-evaluation report which consists of a general part and a part containing self-evaluations of individual study programmes. The self-evaluation is based on five assessment areas and the set standards. The assessment areas are:
* Study programme and study programme development
* Resources
* Teaching and learning
* Teaching staff
* Students

The assessment committee of the pilot assessment in 2012 consisted of nine experts – five foreign and four local experts (employers and a student representative included). The feedback was given about the Informatics and Information Technology

SPG in Estonia at large, and in two universities under assessment, as well as about the study programmes in this SPG.

As the first pilot assessment in the Information and Communication Technologies SPG at two higher education institutions is completed by now, it can be stated that a   major challenge for this type of assessment is to find a balance between two conflicting realities: on the one hand, HEIs expect feedback on every single study programme and; on the other hand, the experts' limited time resources, which do not enable them to deal with all study programmes in depth. Also, there are limitations in assembling an assessment committee (number of experts involved) which prevents one from including experts of each narrow field. The HEI can be given more freedom to select the study programmes where the experts' feedback is more needed. Also, as the bachelor–master level study programmes constitute a whole, they can and should be analysed together.

The principles of the assessment were well perceived by the participating universities and, according to their feedback, the results of the assessment (the assessment report) gave them valuable information for further development of the study programmes and the entire SPG.

The external quality assessment system goes hand in hand with internal work on quality in universities.

Externally imposed inspections of quality standards are criticised by the academic community, namely, that they are not allowed to determine the quality of their own academic work. Now it is expected that self-assessment is a regular process at each university. The quality agency proposes the areas of assessment and (minimum) standards to keep in mind, as well as questions to ask oneself within each standard. Moreover, the existing internal evaluation system of one large public university was taken into consideration when designing the self-evaluation report of SPG assessment.

However, the questions in the standards are not compulsory; rather, these are developed to support universities in their self-evaluation processes. Also, before an external evaluation, HEIs are asked to specify the areas where they expect to receive more thorough feedback from experts. In addition, the study programmes to be assessed within an SPG are chosen in cooperation with the quality agency and the HEI. This approach puts a special emphasis on qualitative indicators, as well as on specific features of a particular field of study or research and the context of a particular HEI.

According to post-assessment feedback from the universities, the standards and guiding questions proved to be very useful in performing the self-evaluations.

The HEI is expected to provide as little extra data for evaluation as possible, and experts are provided with direct links to the available information sources.

The idea behind this principle is to reduce the bureaucracy and workload of HEIs involved in quality assessment. For example, as the Estonian Research Portal provides CVs, publications and research projects of researchers and teaching staffs of universities, the use of this portal might reduce the need to produce an extra staff handbook for each university or SPG. The portal was successfully used during the previous assessment process – transitional evaluation – where only local experts were involved. However, this might make the evaluation process for experts much harder because of the large amount of raw information that needs to be analysed and contextualised in the course of the assessment process.

There is also the experience obtained from the pilot assessment that, for more effective use of experts' time, certain documents will still need to be compiled by HEIs beforehand and be included in the self-evaluation documentation. For example, general information on research and development supporting teaching and learning under the SPG (projects, publications, inclusion of students in research units, etc.); comparison of learning outcomes with the learning outcomes described in the Standard of Higher Education; and information on teaching staff: name, position, qualification, subjects taught, overview of teaching and research activities abroad in last five years, most important publications of last five years that support the teaching in this specific SPG . This ensures accountability for the assessment.

The challenge is to find a balance between universities' workloads in preparing their self-evaluations and additional documentation for assessment, and assessment experts` workloads in analysing and contextualising that information. In their feedback on the pilot assessment, the universities agreed that experts' viewpoints should be taken into account and certain documents should be compiled by HEIs. The regulation of SPG assessment was modified based on this feedback from HEIs and experts.

In addition, to make it as convenient as possible for HEIs to conduct self-evaluations, as well as for experts to write assessment reports; a web-based electronic platform was developed. However, as the SPG assessment is tailor-made – the structure of self-analyses varies as does that of the experts' assessment reports – the electronic evaluation platform, intended for the SPG assessment, was not that well perceived by HEIs nor by experts. The more diverse the structure and content of reports are, the harder it is to fulfil (even describe) or foresee future requirements while developing an electronic environment. As information needs of all target groups (HEIs, experts, quality agencies) vary, another more flexible means for document delivery and cooperation should be found.

New challenges for experts

Since feedback-providing assessment is a relatively new type of external assessment, where specific tasks are assigned to assessment committees (with regard to HEIs as well as the context and development phases of their SPGs), the assessment committees need careful guidance before each evaluation process. A video conference with the members of a committee conducted well in advance could be one option; developing   an appropriate e-course could be another. The one-day training prior to an assessment visit might not be enough preparation. Also, dealing in depth with every single study programme while, at the same time making generic comments, becomes a demanding task for the experts. All these aspects should be taken into account when assembling assessment committees, planning the division of work among the experts, and training them before the actual assessment visit.

Summary

The outcome of an SPG evaluation emphasises the strengths and areas for improvement of study programmes submitted to assessment according to five assessment areas, based on certain standards, and preferably with international comparisons. The outcome   also presents a concise analysis on the study programme group of the higher education institution and the recommendations for improving the quality of instruction.

Concurrently, this indicates a shift from a result-based approach, evidenced by the sole objective of achieving full accreditation, to a more process-based approach where quality-related activities are at the centre of self-evaluation.

References

- Estonian Research Portal https://www.etis.ee/index.aspx?lang=en
- Informatics Study Programme Group Evaluation in Estonia - A Report about Assessments at Tallinn University of Technology and University of Tartu http://www.ekka.archimedes.ee/files/Informatics%20Study%20Program%20Group%20Evaluation_final.pdf
- Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education http://www.ekka.archimedes.ee/files/OKH_kord_07.08.2012_Eng-2.pdf
- Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education. Explanatory Memorandum. http://www.ekka.archimedes.ee/files/Seletuskiri_OKH_23.05_ENG.pdf

- Vilgats, Birgit (2009). The impact of external quality assessment on universities: Estonian experience. Doctoral dissertation abstract. Tallinn University http://www.tlulib.ee/files/arts/95/sots_cd18f70945485fdb29313c2037e2d3cf.pdf