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Higher Education Estonia

Quality assurance

Assessment of programmes began after the foundation of the *Eesti Kõrghariduse Akrediteerimiskeskus* (Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre, EHEAC) in 1997. Until 31.12.2008 accreditation was the responsibility of the EHEAC and the *Kõrghariduse Hindamise Nõukogu* (Higher Education Quality Assessment Council, HEQAC). The HEQAC was founded by the Government in 1995 and operated under the administrative jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Research. The main activities of the HEQAC included accreditation of higher education institutions, accreditation of study programmes, making accreditation decisions public, and giving recommendations on the basis of accreditation decisions.

The system of quality assessment of Estonian higher education consisted of four parts – self-analysis of higher education institutions (faculties or departments), a foreign expert appraisal, the decision by the HEQAC, and self-improvement of the higher education institution.

In case of substantial deficiencies or problems in a higher education institution, the HEQAC or the Ministry of Education and Research could also initiate accreditation. The Standard of Higher Education that specified general requirements for higher education cycles, and on the basis of which, decisions regarding licencing and accreditation were made, had an essential role in the legislation relating to quality.

A critical self-analysis prepared by the educational institution formed the cornerstone of the quality assurance system. The self-analysis, depending on its purpose, included either an analysis of the functioning of the institution as a whole or only one aspect of the teaching-learning process. The experts evaluated both the validity of the completed self-analysis and the object of the particular analysis. At the end of the site visit, they presented their comments and recommendations, which, along with the results of the self-analysis, formed a basis for improving the educational institution as a whole (institutional assessment) or a concrete teaching-learning process (assessment of programmes). They also forwarded their recommendations to the HEQAC regarding either full or conditional accreditation of the programme or for denying accreditation. The HEQAC made the final decision which determined whether the higher education institution would be entitled to issue officially recognised qualifications on the basis of the programme.

There were three accreditation categories:

Accredited: Indicated that the higher education institution or the programme met the requirements. The decision could also include recommendations for eliminating minor shortcomings. Full accreditation was valid for seven years from the date of decision.

Conditionally accredited: Indicated that the institution or the programme under review had major shortcomings which needed to be eliminated or addressed. In this case accreditation was valid for two years from the date of the decision. According to the Amendment to the University Act in 2003, the validity period of conditional accreditation was extended to three years. At the end of this period reaccreditation was relevant.

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Qualifications awarded two years before the accreditation decision was adopted are also officially recognised.

Not accredited: Indicated that the institution or the programme did not meet the minimum requirements set by the standard.

In case accreditation was denied (a “not accredited” decision), the institution or the programme had to stop admission and instruction according to the not-accredited programme, and ensure the transfer of students to another programme or to another higher education institution in co-operation with the Ministry of Education and Research.

Since 2009, higher education quality has been assessed by an independent agency *Eesti Kõrg- ja Kutsehariduse Kvaliteediagentuur* (Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education, EKKA).

During 2009-2012 the Ministry of Education and Research implemented the transition from the former accreditation system, in which individual study programmes were accredited, to quality assessment of study programme groups. This period was called the period of transitional assessment. The conditions and the procedure for quality assessment were established by Directive of the Minister of Education and Research of 6 May 2009. The EKKA Quality Assessment Council had laid down the requirements for transitional assessment and the procedure for its implementation. Programme groups were assessed from three aspects: quality, resources, and sustainability of studies.

In years 2012-2019, the quality assessment of programme groups took place once in seven years, unless EKKA has set an earlier deadline based on the results of the previous evaluation. Within the assessment process of programme groups it was assessed if the programmes corresponded with legislation and with the national and international standards, including the quality of theoretical and practical training, the qualifications of the teaching and research staff, as well as the availability of the necessary resources. On the basis of external assessment, the Government of the Republic granted the higher education institution the right to conduct studies according to the programme belonging to the respective programme group.

The Higher Education Act adopted in 2019, introduced a new method in external evaluation of higher education called a **thematic evaluation**. The purpose of the thematic evaluation is to support changes in the improvement areas that have been identified in completed assessments. Thematic evaluations allow to take stock of the situation, share best practices and receive independent feedback and recommendations from experts.

Thematic evaluations shall be conducted in some or all higher education institutions. The topics are horizontally relevant and as a rule, related to the quality improvement proposals made during external assessments of study programme groups (i.e. purposefulness and up-to-dateness of teaching methods; student assessment; development of students’ key competencies; involvement of students from all cycles of higher education in research, development and creativity activities; etc.). Thematic evaluations predominantly use a research-based assessment method.

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In addition to the thematic evaluation, higher education institutions have an obligation to undergo **institutional accreditation** at least once every seven years or within the term specified by EKKK. The institutional accreditation is an external evaluation during which the management, administration, academic and research activity, and academic and research environment of higher education institution are assessed.