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# ENQA AGENCY REVIEW: ESTONIAN QUALITY AGENCY FOR HIGHER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION (EKKA)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this review is to provide an opinion to the Board of ENQA on the degree of compliance of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education, EKKA, with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) 2015.

As this is the second review of EKKA, the review panel was mindful of the findings and recommendations of the first review conducted in 2012 and sought evidence of incremental improvement over the period from 2012 to 2017. The review panel also noted the changes in the European Standards and Guidelines that had taken place during the same time frame and that were codified in the 2015 ESG publication. Thus, the aims of the review panel are to provide an evidence-based assessment of the degree of compliance of EKKA with the revised standards and guidelines. The panel's intent in this report is to provide a sufficient and robust basis for decision-making.

The panel, in conducting its assessment, had a strong focus on enhancement and in its commendations, suggestions for improvement and recommendations, has attempted to focus on both the positive achievements and some areas for potential improvement. The panel found much to praise and notes that in virtually all cases where it suggests improvement, EKKA itself had already identified these areas. This capacity for self-reflection and analysis is commended.

The panel found EKKA to be an open, transparent, ambitious and high-minded organisation with a highly developed sense of its mission to serve its stakeholders. In turn, EKKA's stakeholders displayed a high level of trust in the organisation and characterised it as a change-agent in the higher education system of Estonia.

EKKA has also developed considerable expertise in operating in the areas of international quality assurance, and its high-standards and professionalism could be used as an exemplar.

The Director, Heli Mattisen, and her staff operate as a very cohesive and highly motivated unit.

The panel's suggestions for improvement (outlined in the conclusion) are not prescriptive; they are made so as to stimulate further consideration and deliberation.

The review panel found EKKA substantially compliant with ESG 2.1 and 3.4 and fully compliant with all other standards.

# INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of The Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education - EKKA, Eesti Kõrg- ja Kutsehariduse Kvaliteediagentuur, with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted from July to November 2017.

## BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

### BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo a cyclical external review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they act in substantial compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

As this is EKKA's second review, the panel is expected to provide clear evidence of results in all areas and to acknowledge progress from the previous review. The panel has adopted a developmental approach, as the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* aim at constant enhancement of the agencies.

### MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2012 REVIEW

A first evaluation of EKKA took place in 2012, and that review panel emphasised the overall quality of EKKA and stated: "EKKA should be commended for professionalism and its dedication towards matters it is responsible for. The review panel shares the opinion with all local stakeholders that EKKA is working hard towards implementation of its mission for the Estonian society". The 2012 review panel found that EKKA was in substantial compliance on ESG (2005) 2.3 and 2.5 and fully compliant on all other criteria.

The ENQA Board, having considered the review, found that EKKA met its criteria for overall compliance.

In the 2012 external review report, EKKA was encouraged by the panel to address its recommendations, which are listed below. The review panel also stated that its recommendations "should be interpreted as points for discussions and improvement-oriented measures". EKKA's responses to most of the recommendations are contained in the SAR.

#### ***Recommendations in relation to ESG part 2.3: Criteria for Decisions***

*To secure transparency and proportionality in decision making which affects all types – state, public and private – providers, and to properly manage expectations on part of both HEI and students in the programmes, clear decision making criteria should be identified for both transitional re-evaluations and assessments of study programme groups in the first and second cycle of higher education. The clarity should especially be achieved in noting the importance of weighing the conformity between different standards.*

*As transitional re-evaluation procedure will be an on-going one and, according to EKKA's self-evaluation report, may continue until 2017, it is strongly advisable to streamline the decision making process by establishing more clarity between types of component assessment judgments and proposals toward the granting or depriving higher education institutions rights in study programme groups.*

*Accreditations of study programme groups in VET is listed among the main functions of EKKA in its Statutes, and this type of evaluations as tested are running from 2011, therefore, there needs to be publicly available evaluation methodology including criteria for decisions in*

English.

### **Recommendations in relation to ESG Part 2.5: Reporting**

*The Review Panel encourages EKKA to cooperate with other structures and agencies in Estonia, but most importantly, with stakeholders themselves regarding improvement in information provision. The study which the agency plans to do about students' information needs is something to commend, but the key is to indeed make it happen and then plan necessary action to improve the information provision.*

*Publishing and availability of reports should not just be a formal measure, but it must reach the intended audience. Therefore, user-friendliness of EKKA database with assessment decisions and expert reports should be improved. Institutional accreditation policies should be clarified as to what, why and how has to be made public in relation to external quality assurance procedures.*

*Some agencies have found it useful to develop a label that both the agency and institutions should put on their front page, and that could be used at national websites like the Estonian admissions site (SAIS), with a link leading to all information about accreditation and quality assurance, at different levels; such a link or a label (logo) could be visible from all parts of the HEI website. EKKA is encouraged to consider various options and to afterwards implement what is suiting Estonian HEI and the agency context best.*

*EKKA should address Estonian and English language usage in both institutional self-analysis and evaluation reports, as well as on its webpage to reach local audiences and provide sufficient information for international partners.*

*EKKA should take measures to report via website on accreditation process and results in VET in English.*

### **Recommendation in relation to ESG Part 2.6: Follow-up Procedures**

*It is recommended as a good practice that higher education institutions make their improvement-oriented measures known to the target audiences, as this increases public accountability and awareness, and also contributes towards the organizational culture of continuous development. These measures as well could be made public via EKKA website, to complement assessment committee reports and EKKA Quality Assessment Council decisions.*

### **Recommendation in relation to ESG Part 2.7: Periodic Reviews**

*It is advisable to set clear assessment terms and conditions with respect to quality assessment of study programme groups in the first and second cycles of higher education, and also for transitional re-evaluations. This is to increase transparency of EKKA decision-making procedures and to secure interests of learners.*

### **Recommendation in relation to ESG Part 3.2: Official Status**

*This legal framework when EKKA is judging whether to conduct an assessment itself or let a foreign agency do the job, can be seen as potentially leading towards the conflict of interests, and creating unnecessary tensions between the local and a foreign agency. Higher education institutions are not prevented from choice, but could be effectively discouraged in the fear of being perceived as not loyal towards the national quality assurance agency. Therefore, we recommend that the Minister considers assigning to an external independent body responsibility for the decision as to whether a review be carried out by EKKA or by a foreign*

agency.

**Recommendation in relation to ESG Part 3.4: Resources**

*In the Development Plan EKKA sets targets for international recognition, among other, to be included in the development projects for the quality systems of third countries. It is advised to consider possibilities take lead in coordination or be more involved in partnerships in other type international cooperation projects in the field of quality assurance, e.g. via networks EKKA is a member.*

**Recommendation in relation to ESG Part 3.6: Independence**

*The Review Panel took notice of only one woman between EKKA Quality Assessment Council members. However, there is nothing in the EKKA Council formation procedure or on institutional levels that would prevent from seeking a more gender-balanced representation among the suitable candidates. Therefore, it is suggested to address the gender issue upon the expiry of current membership terms.*

*The EKKA Council formation procedure foresees that a service term is three years, and no person may be a member of the Council for more than six years. It is encouraged to think of introducing rotation terms or other comparable measures assuring that on the Council at any given moment there is a proper balance of new and more experienced members, assuring smooth execution of their duties.*

**Recommendations in relation to ESG Part 3.7: External quality assurance criteria and processes used by EKKA**

*It should be discussed, how more transparency into the processes of transitional evaluation and re-evaluation, and initial assessment of study programme groups in first and second cycles in higher education could be brought. In both cases, decisions issued by the Ministry of Education and Research affect degree granting powers of education providers, therefore, fair competition conditions and information provision should be secured.*

**Recommendation in relation to ESG Part 3.8: Accountability Procedures**

*Expert reports, as published by EKKA, could contribute more towards transparency how conflicts of interest are avoided. Although EKKA provides on its website CVs of experts who served, e.g. for institutional accreditation, on the expert reports, review team members are only listed, with no information about their background or representation, which makes it difficult for the general public to assess how EKKA follows the principles in forming the assessment committees.”*

In its concluding remarks, the 2012 review panel wrote:

*EKKA should be commended for professionalism and dedication towards quality matters it is responsible for. The Review Panel shares opinion with all local stakeholders that EKKA is working hard towards implementation of its mission for the Estonian society.*

The Board of ENQA wrote to EKKA in June 2013 to formally notify the agency of the positive outcome of the review and in an annex to the letter summarises its key observations and recommendations as follows:

*The Board suggests that, in addition to the other panel’s recommendations, EKKA should pay particular attention to the following issues:*

**ESG 2.3 Criteria for Decisions:** *criteria for decisions for transitional re-evaluations are*

described in very broad terms, without giving a specific list of which type of judgment by expert committees result in which type of EKKA Council decisions. Decision-making criteria for assessment of study programme groups in the first and second cycles of higher education are not clearly given. There is very limited information on VET, as one of the agency's core function, in English.

**Recommendations:** clear decision-making criteria should be identified for both transitional re-evaluations and assessments of study programme groups in the first and second cycle of higher education. The evaluation methodology for accreditation of study programme groups in VET, including criteria for decisions in English, should be publicly available.

**ESG 2.5 Reporting:** the database with assessment results is only accessible in Estonian. Likewise, some reports are only available in English. An in depth discussion about information needs of different stakeholders has not started yet. Currently, information on quality assessment issues is not communicated clearly for students and other stakeholders. There is lack of transparency in the communication to the public regarding the publication of reports. There does not seem to be a clear policy on language use from the perspective of informing the public.

**Recommendations:** information provision, and its transparency, could be improved through cooperation with other structures and agencies in Estonia, but most importantly, with stakeholders themselves. The Agency should ensure the reports reach the intended readership and that the information provided reach local audiences and is sufficient for international partners. Institutional accreditation policies should be clarified as to what, why and how has to be made public in relation to external quality assurance procedures. Information on accreditation process and results in VET should be available on the EKKA website in English.

#### **ESG 2.6 follow-up procedures**

**Recommendation:** HEIs could make their improvement-oriented measures known to the target audiences in order to increase public accountability and awareness, and to contribute towards the organisational culture of continuous development. These measures could be made public on EKKA website, to complement assessment committee reports and EKKA Council decisions.

**ESG 2.7 Periodic Reviews: (see ESG 2.3)** clear criteria for decisions on transitional re-evaluation are not determined. Currently, the methodology does not give clear terms when the next assessment should be done and no explicit criteria on how this assessment term is established.

**Recommendation:** The Agency should set clear assessment terms and conditions with respect to quality assessment of study programme groups in the first and second cycles of higher education, and also for transitional re-evaluations. This is to increase transparency of EKKA decision-making procedures and to secure interests of learners.

**ESG 3.4 Resources:** In the Development Plan, EKKA sets targets for international recognition, among others, to be included in the development projects for the quality systems of third countries.

**Recommendation:** EKKA could consider possibilities to take lead in coordination or be more involved in partnerships in other types of international cooperation projects in the field of quality assurance.



**ESG 3.6 Independence:** the service term of EKKA Council members is three years, renewable once.

**Recommendation:** the Agency could think of introducing a rotation system or other comparable measures assuring that there is a proper balance between new and experienced Council members, assuring smooth execution of their duties.

**ESG 3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes:** there is limited transparency of reports concluded and decisions made in procedures that are not completely “owned” by EKKA – transitional evaluation and re-evaluation, and initial assessment of study programme groups. Decisions issued by the Ministry of Education and Research affect degree-granting powers of education providers.

**Recommendation:** the Agency should investigate how to increase transparency into the processes of transitional evaluation and re-evaluation, and initial assessment of study programme groups in first and second cycles in higher education in order to secure fair competition conditions and information provision among education providers.

**ESG 3.8 Accountability:** the expert reports list the review team members but do not provide information about their background or representation, which makes it difficult for the general public to assess how EKKA follows the principles in forming the assessment committees.

**Recommendation:** transparency on how conflicts of interest are avoided could be improved by providing further information on the experts’ background in their reports.

EKKA submitted a progress report to ENQA in 2015, and the ENQA Board considered the report. In a letter from ENQA in July 2015, the Board acknowledged the progress made by EKKA and expressed satisfaction with improvements achieved.

## REVIEW PROCESS

The 2017 external review of EKKA was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference (Annex 3). The panel for the external review of EKKA was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Jean-Pierre Finance (Chair), President Emeritus, University of Lorraine, France, academic (EUA nominee);
- Marion Coy (Secretary), President Emeritus, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and quality assurance professional, Ireland (ENQA nominee);
- Ronny Heintze, Commissioner for International Affairs, Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes (AQAS), quality assurance professional, Germany (ENQA nominee);
- Olena Rusnak, Student/Head of National QA Student Experts’ Pool (2016-2017), (ESU nominee).

Lindsey Kerber, from the ENQA Secretariat, coordinated the review panel.

The panel was supplied with all documentation required to carry out a review. In addition to ENQA-published guidelines, templates for reports, and indicative work schedules, the panel received copies of the 2012 review of EKKA, the letter from the ENQA Board in 2013 that outlined the decision of the Board and - in an annex - listed conditions, which it suggested EKKA should address. The progress report of EKKA from 2015 was provided and that report gave an update to the ENQA Board on how EKKA had addressed the recommendations. A contact person at EKKA was identified, Tiia Bach, and

contact details for her were provided. In addition, the EKKA self-assessment report (SAR) and a link to the relevant sections of the EKKA website were circulated.

As recommended, the panel was asked to review all the documentation and to identify any additional material it required. The panel members were also requested to read carefully the SAR and make an initial list of queries and comments. The panel was urged to identify any additional documentation required so that EKKA could prepare (and if necessary, have translated) any additional material.

A phone conference took place in early September 2017. The review coordinator took the panel through the main stages of the review process and reminded the panel of the key features of the ESG. The panel chair led a thorough discussion of the SAR, and all members of the panel contributed to the creation of a composite request for additional documentation. Major lines of enquiry were established, and the panel then reviewed and amended the provisional schedule for a site visit.

EKKA was then given the provisional schedule for its comments and proposed revisions. EKKA was also asked to provide some additional documentation connected to its appeals procedures and to provide additional clarification on the structure of the Archimedes Foundation, of which EKKA is a component. The work of refining the site-visit schedule and the provision of requested material was all handled by EKKA in a timely and professional manner. The panel continued to communicate via e-mail in advance of the site visit.

### **Self-assessment report**

EKKA started preparatory work for this ENQA review in June 2015. The work of self-evaluation was conducted in the context of the adoption of the new Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education (ESG) in that year. The IA self-evaluation team was formed. It analysed initially the compliance of EKKA's procedures with the revised ESG. In 2016 EKKA embarked on the development of a new strategic plan, and preparations for the ENQA review and this development of a new strategic plan were dovetailed.

An analysis of its strategic goals was undertaken, a SWOT analysis prepared and a number of meetings held with stakeholders. Feedback on performance was elicited from stakeholders.

The two councils of EKKA - HEQAC (Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education) and the Council for the Assessment of VET (Vocational Education and Training) were consulted, and a joint meeting of the councils took place in January 2017.

The entire process of self-evaluation was also closely linked to the review of higher education in Estonia, which is underway. Interim analysis results were shared with the Ministry, the rectors of higher education institutions (HEIs), the employers' confederation, and the Estonian students' union and the steering committee of the legal framework for higher education in Estonia.

The final version of the self-assessment report (SAR) was approved by HEQAC in June 2017. The SAR was then sent to the ENQA Secretariat, where it underwent a pre-screening and was sent back to EKKA with comments. The final version of the SAR was sent to the ENQA Secretariat in July. The SAR is available on the EKKA website.

The SAR is structured to cover all the main requirements for an agency review. It provides an overview of the national context and the mission, structure, activity and funding of the agency. It outlines the agency's main types of national and international activity, reviews progress since the previous ENQA evaluation and lists its work in system-wide analysis and the national and international changes which

have impacted on its work. The SAR analyses EKKA's compliance with the ESG, including a commentary on matters raised in the last review and an annex to the letter from the Board of ENQA in 2013. As part of its SWOT, EKKA identifies some areas for development and improvement, and it concludes by providing a summary and reflection. The document includes extensive links to the relevant section of the EKKA website.

In addition, the review panel was provided with a comprehensive list of website links to all key documents. The website has a well-structured pathway to relevant information. Additional information requested by the review panel was prepared and circulated in a timely manner. Overall, the panel was impressed by the thorough and professional approach used by EKKA in providing documentary evidence and analysis.

While acknowledging that a presentation on the Estonian higher education system was included in appendix 1 of the SAR, the panel would have liked a short section in the main document containing basic data on Estonian higher education, modelled on an "Education at a Glance" approach. This would have helped the panel in its initial assessment and also mitigated some minor confusion. For example, the panel found it difficult to determine the number of institutions in the system. The document has a table of abbreviations but some key terms used in the system could have been given further elaboration. For example, terms like "study programme group" and "joint programme" and "thematic reviews" required some further clarification during the site visit.

Some instances of system-level issues and challenges were dispersed throughout the document, and others became evident in the course of discussions during the site visit. It would be useful to provide a consolidated section on this theme. These are suggestions for minor modifications. Overall, the panel was very impressed with the quality of the SAR.

### **Site visit**

The site visit took place from Sunday, 8 October to Wednesday, 11 October 2017. The panel had a lengthy meeting on Sunday afternoon, and the chair reviewed the list of key questions, which he had previously circulated, elicited further areas of questioning from all panel members, and proposed a methodology for each meeting.

The panel had identified and agreed in advance on the profile and composition of each group it would meet. It met key agency staff, the chair and members of its decision-making Board and its appeals Board, the key actors in the Archimedes Foundation, the Ministry and the Estonian Research Council. It met a range of national stakeholders including students, rectors/vice-rectors (of all types of HEIs), and quality assurance officers from the HEIs, employers and other national agencies with whom EKKA interacted in its work and a cross-section of national and international experts involved in all types of EKKA reviews. A separate meeting was held with those involved in the EKKA international activity in Moldova.

The scheduled interviews all took place at the EKKA office. The panel held a short meeting after each interview session, and at the end of each day a further lengthy meeting considered the main findings from the meetings, any requests for additional information and any clarifications required. All requests to EKKA staff were dealt with promptly and fully.

At the final meeting with the Director, staff of EKKA and Chair of HEQAC (by skype) the panel chair, Jean Pierre Finance, gave feedback and thanked all present for their very efficient handling of the process. He emphasised at the outset that his remarks were preliminary observations and that the decision on the outcome of the review is reserved to the ENQA Board.

He commented on the quality and level of detail in the SAR and the EKKA website. He noted the professionalism of the EKKA staff and the level of global activity undertaken by the agency. He indicated that the panel had been made aware of the wide recognition of the value of the agency in the course of its meeting with a comprehensive cross-section of stakeholders. He noted also the capacity of the agency to identify, recruit, train and utilise a large group of high-calibre national and international experts. He remarked on the stability of staff numbers and the management of the increased workload. He mentioned specifically the involvement of EKKA in Moldova, the development of its VET work and the development of policies and procedures for the assessment of Ph.D. study programme groups - the latter a process which is just starting. He noted the accuracy and validity of EKKA's own assessment that it needed to streamline some of its procedures in order to avoid overlapping and fragmentation in assessment activity. He encouraged EKKA to continue to develop its international activity and concurred with EKKA's own proposal that it should identify an area of specialisation.

The chairman emphasised the role of research at institutional level and at the level of teaching and learning on both masters' and doctoral level programmes. In this context he noted with approval the development of a closer working relationship between EKKA and the Research Council. He mentioned the potential for some thematic evaluations connected with societal challenges, research strategy and transversal professional discipline domains.

In respect of areas for further consideration the chair mentioned the improvement of the feedback loop to students, the requirements of ESG Part 1 in respect of teaching and learning (Standard 1.3), the requirement in ESG Part 1 for reporting and information management in respect of the new framework for assessment of Ph.D. study groups. He suggested that EKKA consider the potential value of an established Stakeholder Advisory Board. He mentioned also the strengthening of focus on the implementation of recommendations of all forms of assessment reports. Another area identified for further improvement was the procedures for eliciting feedback from and giving feedback to members of expert panels. As part of its internal quality enhancement, the chair mentioned the crucial role of HEQAC and the appeal Board and made some recommendations. Finally the chair reiterated his congratulations to the Director and her staff on their professionalism, responsiveness and flexibility.

A list of recommendations is given later in this report.

The Director thanked the panel for its work, its courteous interactions with all who attended meetings and its timekeeping.

## **HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY**

### **HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM**

The Estonian higher education system operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Research (MER). There are 20 HEIs in the system, a reduction from a high of 49 fourteen years ago. HEIs are legally autonomous "persons" under Estonian law and operate with a high degree of legal autonomy.

The institutional mix consists of public and private institutions formally described as Universities under Public Law, State Professional Higher Education Institutions, Private Professional Higher Education Institutions and Privately Owned Universities. The two largest institutions are the Tallinn University of Technology and the University of Tartu. Between them they enrol almost 50% of students in higher education.

Estonia is facing a decline in its student population, associated with national demographic trends. National data is published by the MER. In 2016/17 (latest data on MER website), 47,794 students were enrolled in higher education programmes. This number reflected a continuing trend of decline in enrolment. In 2013/14 33% of students were studying in the field of social science, business and law. The panel was informed by Ministry officials that they anticipate further rationalisation of the system. Public institutions receive multi-annual public funding that now includes a component of performance- related funding.

The review of national strategy (mentioned in the SAR) is underway and legislative changes are anticipated. Related national strategies include a national strategy for lifelong learning, a strategy for “Knowledge-Based” Estonia, a higher education internationalization strategy (also under review) and a development plan for the Estonian language.

The structure and basis of the operation of Estonia’s research and development (R&D) system is established in the Research and Development Organisation Act. The Estonian Research Council is the main research-funding agency and is responsible for institutional and personal research funding. EKKA and the Research Council have completely separate legal structures.

#### **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

Traditions of external quality evaluation of Estonian higher education go back to 1997 when the first study programmes were accredited. The Universities Act imposed the task of organising accreditations on the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council (HEQAC), which had been formed for the first time by a government regulation as early as 11 April 1995. The first international assessment committees were appointed in the second half of 1996. To support HEQAC, the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre was established on 1 September 1997.

From 1997–2008, the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre organised the accreditation of study programmes of all HEIs. A positive accreditation decision on a study programme was a mandatory prerequisite for the HEI to issue state-recognised graduation documents. Accreditation committees comprised experienced foreign experts. Pursuant to law, the MER was mandated to confirm the decisions of HEQAC. Institutional accreditation was voluntary during that period. The Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre conducted six institutional accreditations of HEIs. A total of more than 1400 study programmes were accredited in the years 1997–2009 in Estonia.

On 15 November 2006, the Riigikogu (the Parliament of Estonia) approved the Estonian Higher Education Strategy for 2006–2015. Action 2 of that strategy, “Quality Assurance”, was to a great extent based on the ESG, and among other things, envisaged a change to the system of external evaluation of higher education. In 2007, having consulted a range of higher education stakeholders, the MER prepared amendments to the Universities Act. Having consulted with HEIs, it convened a working group tasked to develop a new standard of higher education. The amendments to the Universities Act entered into force on 1 September 2008. The new Standard of Higher Education was approved by the government on 18 December 2008, and it envisaged a transition to a new quality assurance system of higher education. As part of this transition, EKKA developed its study programme group (SPG) assessment structure. Included in its SPG structure is the mechanism for an HEI to open a new study programme within an approved SPG, without the need for further assessment.

## EKKA

EKKA (as it is now known) was established in 1997. Its current formal, full title, the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education was adopted in 2015. From 1997 to 2008, its formal title was the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre and from 2009-2015 it was formally called The Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency.

As established in Article 37 of the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, the provision of education is overseen by the national government. To separate clearly the external evaluation of higher education from governmental structures, the MER decided, on the basis of a contract under public law, to delegate this function to the Archimedes Foundation, the founder of which is the Republic of Estonia with the founder's rights being exercised by the MER. The Foundation was established in 1997 as a "legal person" governed by private law to process international cooperation programmes in the field of education and research in Estonia. Besides its other units, which primarily administer the EU and Estonian cooperation and development programmes, the Foundation also comprises the Estonian ENIC/NARIC centre and the Erasmus+ National Agency in Estonia. In Estonian law, a "legal person" enjoys extensive legal autonomy. It should be noted that universities in their own right enjoy the same status. This is an important feature of the higher education structure.

According to clauses 3.3.1.1 and 3.3.5 of the statutes of the Archimedes Foundation and clause 1.2 of the statutes of EKKA, approved by the Supervisory Board of Archimedes Foundation, EKKA is a structural unit of the Archimedes Foundation, which performs independent functions. In order to ensure the independence of assessment of the quality of higher education, the Supervisory Board of the Foundation has delegated the approval of EKKA regulations and the adoption of assessment decisions exclusively to HEQAC.

The powers of the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation regarding EKKA's activities are as follows:

- Approving the composition of HEQAC according to the rules set in law;
- Selecting the director of EKKA;
- Approving the general budget of the Foundation, including the budget of EKKA;
- Approving the annual report of the Foundation, including the annual report of EKKA.

The Supervisory Board of the Foundation elects members of the Management Board of the Foundation and the director of EKKA. The Management Board consists of two members responsible for the general management of the whole Foundation.

Since 2010, EKKA has conducted also accreditation of vocational education and training (VET). In the beginning, the accreditation, which was at the time voluntary for the educational institutions, was launched as a project under the EU Structural Funds framework. In 2014, the new Vocational Educational Institutions Act was adopted which rendered accreditation compulsory in vocational education, and the task of accrediting was delegated to EKKA by the Ministry of Education and Research. This resulted in the need for a new name for EKKA, and as a consequence, as of April 2015 EKKA's formal full name is Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education.

EKKA is independent in developing the principles and procedures for quality assessment in cooperation with relevant stakeholders, approving assessment regulations and in adopting assessment decisions. The decisions by HEQAC regarding evaluation of the quality of higher education are final.

The review panel examined carefully the structure of the Archimedes Foundation and was satisfied that, having regard to the national context and history, the structure adequately safeguards the independence of EKKA.

#### **EKKA'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE**

As seen in the organisational chart below, EKKA consists of permanent staff and two quality assessment councils: HEQAC and the Quality Assessment Council for Vocational Education and Training. EKKA has nine permanent employees, whose areas of responsibility and duties are specified in their job descriptions and described in the EKKA Quality Manual.

<b>Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (HEQAC)</b> elected by the Supervisory Board of Archimedes Foundation  approving the quality assessment regulations for higher education  adopting assessment decisions	<b>Quality Assessment Council for VET</b> approved by the Minister of Education and Research based on the criteria set in legislation  approving the quality assessment regulations for VET adopting assessment decisions
approving EKKA's development plan and annual reports in joint sessions	
<b>Director of EKKA</b> elected by the Supervisory Board of Archimedes Foundation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EKKA's general management (strategic planning, finances, staff development)</li> <li>• ensuring the compliance of EKKA's activities with legislation and regulations for evaluations</li> <li>• reporting</li> </ul>	
<b>EKKA OFFICE</b> <b>Assessment Director (IA)</b> institutional accreditation, development activities; feedback system, periodic reviews	
<b>Assessment Director (SPG)</b> Initial assessment, re-evaluation, and quality assessment of study programme groups; Secretary of HEQAC	
<b>Assessment Director (VET)</b> Accreditation of study programme groups in VET; Secretary of the Quality Assessment Council for VET	
<b>Director of International Cooperation</b> Management of projects and development activities in the area of international cooperation	
<b>Assessment Coordinator (HE)</b> Coordinating the work of assessment committees, document management, coordinating the activities related to IQA (Quality Manual)	
<b>Assessment Coordinator (VET)</b> Coordinating the work of assessment committees, document management, correspondence	
<b>Communication Manager</b> Internal and external communication; coordinating the work of assessment committees	
<b>Lawyer</b> Regulations, contracts, drafts of assessment decisions, appeals	

**Accountant**

Accounting, financial reporting

Additional support services provided by the Foundation: document management, personnel records, legal Services, IT support

The Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (HEQAC):

- Is elected by the Supervisory Board of Archimedes Foundation;
- Approves the quality assessment regulations for higher education;
- Adopts assessment decisions.

The composition of HEQAC is approved by the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation. Candidates for HEQAC may be submitted by universities, institutions of professional higher education, research and development institutions, registered professional associations, associations of employers and associations of student bodies.

According to the Procedure for the Formation of HEQAC and the Appeals Committee, HEQAC is composed of 13 members who are selected according to the following principles:

- HEQAC shall include at least one expert from each broad group of studies;
- No more than two members from the same institution may belong to HEQAC;
- A member of HEQAC cannot be a rector or a vice rector of an HEI or an official of the MER;
- Priority is given to candidates whose previous activities have served the purpose of improving the quality of Estonian higher education as a whole;
- Preference is given to candidates with previous experience in external quality assurance of higher education;
- At least one employer and one student member must be included;
- Both universities and institutions of professional higher education are represented in HEQAC, and gender balance is maintained among HEQAC members;
- No person may be a member of HEQAC for more than six years.

A rotation of membership ensures that at least 1/3 of the members of the previous HEQAC Board shall be replaced and at least 1/3 of the members shall continue their work in HEQAC. These regulations now incorporate all the recommendations in relation to composition and rotation made in the 2012 ENQA review.

The Director of EKKA is selected by the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation. The Director is responsible for general management, including strategic planning, financial management and staff management and development. The Director must ensure compliance with state legislation and regulations for quality assurance and report at regular intervals on the activities of the agency.

The staff of the agency has clearly defined roles and responsibilities as outlined in the SAR. As there is a very stable, established workforce, a high level of cooperation and flexibility among staff is evident. This was well described by the staff when they met the review panel. They also described an annual planning cycle which anticipates periods of heavy workload and that makes provision for this variation in demand. Staff described planning annual leave so as to facilitate busy periods at work and the Director described the use of some planned over-time. EKKA can also call on some additional personnel for short-term work who have many years experience working with the agency.



## **EKKA'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES**

### **Mission and values**

EKKA's mission, in cooperation with its partners, is to support the development of quality culture in the field of further and higher education. This mission is clearly articulated in agency documentation and well understood by all stakeholders. As the agency has evolved, its focus on system enhancement has increased, and heads of institutions and students welcomed this evolution. The institutional actors who met the panel described an evolution of their institutions, which resulted from the recommendations of institutional accreditation (IA). The students described the recent establishment of a project, the Student Quality Network, which is led by the Estonian Students' Union. EKKA provided much of the impetus for its establishment and has heavily supported the project in its start-up phase, but both EKKA and the student union representatives emphasised that its evolution is expected to continue to rely on student leadership.

EKKA describes its core values as "impartiality, competence, cooperation and openness". These values influence the culture of the organisation and its relationships with stakeholders. Rectors of HEIs stated that they had a high level of confidence in the impartiality of the agency and trusted its work. Ministry officials also expressed a high level of confidence in the work of the agency.

### **Key processes**

EKKA's activities in the area of higher education are based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

EKKA's core process is the external assessment of educational institutions which includes the following key activities:

- Institutional accreditation of higher education institutions
- Quality assessment of study programme groups in the first, second and third cycle of higher education (SPGs) in Estonia and other countries
- Carrying out expert analyses in the context of granting higher education institutions the right to conduct studies: initial assessment of study programme groups and re-evaluation of study programme groups
- Transitional evaluation and re-evaluation of study programme groups;
- Accreditation of study programme groups in vocational education and training
- Analysing assessment results
- Informing the general public about the outcomes of assessments
- Training the assessment experts
- Providing training on self-evaluation for the educational institutions
- Participating in international networks for external quality assessment of educational institutions

This review does not cover the VET activities of EKKA. The activities listed by EQAR are encompassed in the first three and last bullet points on this list.

EKKA builds its internal quality assurance system and external evaluation processes on the Continuous Quality Improvement approach. The organisation's desire for its activities and the results thereof to meet the needs and expectations of different stakeholders serves as the basis for that continuous quality improvement.

Internationalisation is a cross-cutting principle in all activities undertaken by EKKA ranging from the recruitment of foreign experts to participation in international cooperation networks to development projects of external quality assessment abroad to cross-border quality assessment.

EKKA's objectives and performance indicators are outlined in the EKKA Development Plan for 2017-2022.

### **Evaluations of study programme groups**

Between 2009 and 2011, EKKA conducted evaluations of all study programme groups (SPGs), 28 groups of programmes related by discipline. The groupings were developed and are used by EKKA to meet national requirements. It was a legal requirement of the new legislation that all existing programmes undergo "transitional evaluation", while all proposed new programmes undergo "initial evaluation". This process was a major component of the transition to the new system of external quality assurance. These evaluations were required in order to establish the right to issue state-recognised diplomas. Arising from that process, some HEIs were granted the right to conduct studies in an SPG for a specified term. In these cases re-evaluations were required. Legally an institution may be granted the right to conduct studies for a specified term on a second occasion. If the requirements are then not met, are not fully met for a third time, an SPG must be terminated. During the period 2012-2016, a total of 41 re-evaluations were carried out. Twenty-eight of those were granted the right to conduct studies for an unspecified time, 12 for a specific term and one was not granted the right to continue. This process of re-evaluation of approvals for SPGs will be completed in 2017.

The right to conduct studies in an SPG allows the HEI to open new study programmes within the SPG without the need for further assessment. Exceptionally for joint study programmes the MER may commission an expert analysis from EKKA to verify whether the joint study programme complies with all the requirements stipulated in the Universities Act. The MER specifies in the terms of reference provided to EKKA the basis on which EKKA's expert assessment is requested. The MER also sends a copy of the terms of reference to the HEI that submitted the application. For the HEI to be informed about the scope of the potential assessment, EKKA has devised the Guidelines for Assessing Joint Study Programmes. A total of 21 joint study programmes were registered with the MER during the period of 2012–2016, but the MER requested from EKKA the expert analysis of eight joint study programmes.

Universities were granted the right to conduct studies at the doctoral level as a result of having undergone transitional evaluations in 2010–2011. The first quality assessments of doctoral studies will take place in late 2017 and 2018. In the preparatory phase of drafting the regulation for the quality assessment of doctoral studies EKKA asked major stakeholders (the Rectors' Council, MER, the Academy of Sciences, the Federation of Estonian Student Unions, and the Estonian Research Council) to nominate representatives to the working group for quality assessment of doctoral studies. In March 2016, the working group convened in order to devise the regulation for quality assessment of doctoral studies. HEQAC approved the regulation at its meeting on 13 June 2016.

The working group used the structure and assessment areas of existing requirements (the regulation for Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education) as a starting point and made modifications deriving from the specific requirements of doctoral studies. The quality of doctoral studies is (and will be) assessed according to the following assessment areas and standards: 1) study programme; 2) resources; 3) teaching and learning, research and/or creative activity; 4) teaching staff; and 5) doctoral students. This corresponds to the structure used in Moldova. The first cycle of doctoral studies' assessments will be completed in 2018.

For all types of assessments, the standards are based on the Standard of Higher Education, the ESG and other Estonian legislation that regulates quality assurance in higher education. The result of quality assessment is a decision of HEQAC and it approves an assessment report within three months of its receipt. HEQAC procedures require that it consider the strengths and areas for improvement pointed out by an assessment committee, and its recommendations, and that it makes specific suggestions for the educational institution to improve the quality of its studies and a decision on the duration of the approval. HEQAC may decide whether to conduct the next quality assessment of that study programme group:

- In **seven years**, if the study programmes, the teaching conducted on these programmes and development activities regarding teaching and learning conform to legislation, national and international standards and trends;
- In **five years** in case it is a field where, according to HEQAC's assessment, rapid development prompts the need to receive feedback from foreign experts in less than seven years; and/or in case there is some nonconformity of the study programmes, the teaching conducted on 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 HEQAC, needs feedback from foreign experts and/or in case there are some other reasons resulting from the specifics of the study programme group and international requirements;
- In **three years** if, in the opinion of HEQAC, the majority of study programmes and/or assessment areas reveal substantial nonconformity with legislation and/or national and international standards.

The development of these three separate approval periods and the publication of published criteria for their application was influenced by recommendations from the 2012 ENQA review. This procedure was well understood by all the institutional leaders interviewed during the 2017 site visit, and they also stated that they regarded its implementation as being done in an impartial and transparent manner.

At the same time, EKKA is obliged to inform the MER if the quality of studies has worsened significantly compared to the results of the previous quality assessment. In that case, the Minister must initiate state supervision, which may result in the revoking of the right to conduct studies.

However, EKKA states that the main goal of quality assessment of an SPG is supporting the internal evaluation and self-development of the HEI. Quality assessment of SPGs is not followed by sanctions: expert assessments are couched as recommendations.

### **Institutional accreditation**

According to subsection 12(1) of the Universities Act, subsection 21(2) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act and subsection 14(2) of the Private Schools Act, HEIs have the obligation to ensure that EKKA performs their institutional accreditation (IA) at least once in every seven years or within a shorter timeframe if so decided by HEQAC. HEQAC approved the Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation on 1 April 2011. The existing regulation was last changed on 11 November 2016.

Institutional accreditation (IA) is an external evaluation in the course of which EKKA assesses the compliance of management, administration, academic and research activity, and academic and research environment of HEIs with the legislation as well as with the purposes and development plans of the institutions themselves. According to EKKA the purpose of IA is to support the development of strategic management and a culture of quality in HEIs, inform stakeholders of the outcomes of the

main activities thereof, and enhance the reliability and competitiveness of Estonian higher education. IA includes four assessment areas: 1) organisational management and performance; 2) teaching and learning; 3) research, development and/or other creative activity; and 4) service to society.

The final decision on IA is adopted by HEQAC. Based on the self-evaluation report of the HEI, the review panel assessment, comments by the HEI and additional materials submitted by the institution at the request of HEQAC, HEQAC assesses whether the management, administration, academic and research activity, and academic and research environment are consistent with the requirements, and takes a decision on accreditation either for seven, or three years. HEQAC may make such a decision subject to a secondary condition. This is normally addressed within a period of one to two years. If an HEI fails to address a secondary condition in the specified time, the duration of the original term of approval can be modified. In the case of major deficiencies, HEQAC may decide not to accredit the institution.

In its assessment report, an assessment committee may recognise an exceptionally outstanding practice in process management or development activity in one or several assessment areas with an additional note of “worthy of recognition”. EKKA also took on board the suggestion of the last review panel and introduced the EKKA Quality Label in 2014. This review panel saw evidence of its use on the websites of HEIs that received the label. The note does not affect the final decision for or against the accreditation, but allows the committee to recognise and highlight innovative initiatives/approaches, thereby supporting the development of the organisation.

Within two years of the accreditation decision, the HEI must submit to EKKA a written report on the actions planned and taken, as well as their outcomes, on the basis of the recommendations made by the assessment committee.

The first full cycle of IA began in 2011 and is scheduled for completion in 2018. At the time of the submission of the SAR to ENQA, 19 HEIs had undergone IA – 6 universities and 13 professional HEIs. The results of IA can be found on EKKA’s website.

### **International activity**

#### *Accreditation in Moldova*

In 2014, EKKA won the tender of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova for the accreditation of master’s degree programmes in law at the universities of Moldova. In the period from January to October 2015, EKKA conducted the accreditation of 25 master’s level study programmes of law in 12 HEIs in Moldova commissioned and financed by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova. In addition, one private institution asked EKKA to accredit one of their law programmes at the same time. Thus, a total of 26 programmes in 13 different HEIs were accredited.

For conducting these accreditations, EKKA developed an accreditation methodology (Requirements and Procedure for Accreditation of Study Programmes in Moldova) based on Moldovan legislation, the ESG, and EKKA’s requirements. The study programmes were evaluated in five separate assessment areas: 1) study programme and its development; 2) teaching and learning; 3) teaching staff; 4) students; and 5) resources.

Five accreditation committees were formed, each consisting of international experts, among them also Estonian and Moldovan members. EKKA conducted training sessions for university staff and evaluation experts in Chisinau in January 2015. A separate training session was provided to all experts one day before the accreditation visits. The HEIs submitted their self-evaluation reports to EKKA in April 2015, and the site visits to the universities took place in May 2015. Accreditation decisions were

made by HEQAC in its meeting in October 2015 and were presented as proposals to the Minister of Education of the Republic of Moldova. Three out of 26 master's study programmes were proposed to be accredited for five years and 18 programmes for three years. HEQAC proposed not to grant accreditation to five study programmes. The Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova approved all proposals made by HEQAC. EKKA also compiled a general report on the accreditation of the master's programmes in Moldova.

### *Projects and memberships*

The review panel notes the substantial increase in international engagement since the 2012 ENQA review, which recommended that EKKA expand its international engagement. Projects include:

- 2012–2014: EKKA participated in the ENQA project “Transparency of European higher education through public quality assurance reports” (EQArep).
- 2014–2016: EKKA staff members were involved as experts in a Finnish-Estonian Twinning project “Empowerment of the Tertiary Level Education of the Republic of Armenia for European Higher Education Area Integration”.
- 2014–2016: EKKA coordinated the Estonian Development Cooperation project “Creation and Capacity Building of Quality Assurance Agency for Professional Education in the Republic of Moldova”.
- 2015: EKKA won a procurement of the Moldovan Ministry of Education and Research to conduct accreditation of study programmes in law at Moldovan universities
- 2015: EKKA was a partner in an international (Poland, Slovenia, UK, Estonia) Erasmus+ project, “European Solutions in Quality Assurance” (ESQA).
- 2015–2017: EKKA is a junior partner in the Finnish-Estonian Twinning project “Support to the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan for Further Adherence of the Higher Education System to the European Higher Education Area (AZ-ad-EHEA)”.
- 2016: Financed by the MER, EKKA implemented a work-shadowing project with the aim of enabling two employees of ASEM Asian countries' quality authorities to visit EKKA, to learn about external quality assessment protocols in Europe and about EKKA's work and to participate in one assessment visit as observers. The project participants came from the Ministry of Education of Vietnam and the quality agency in Thailand. The MER will continue financing the ASEM cooperation project at least until the year 2019. EKKA is planning on repeating the work-shadowing project in autumn 2017.
- In addition, EKKA's Director of International Cooperation has been invited as expert and consultant to various projects, e.g., World Bank project “Technical Assistance to the Ministry of Education and Science on the Establishment of a Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Tajikistan” (2015); Finnish-Estonian Twinning project “Further Support to Public Safety Education in Kosovo” (2016-2018); Council of Europe project “Report on the development of Review procedures and standards for the Authorization of Higher education institutions in Georgia” (2016); and the HAQAA (“Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation”) initiative in Ghana (2017).
- EKKA staff members and members of HEQAC have participated in evaluations organised by other quality assurance agencies (e.g., in Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Germany).
- The Director of EKKA and the Director of International Cooperation have participated in ENQA reviews as experts in Germany (ACQUIN), Kazakhstan (IQAA) and France (HCERES).
- EKKA staff members have been elected to the boards of quality assurance agencies in Russia and Kazakhstan.
- In 2016, one of EKKA's staff members participated in a quality audit in Finland as an observer. In return, EKKA has hosted representatives from Azerbaijan (within the FINEEC-EKKA Twinning Project in 2016 in higher education), Moldova (2014 in VET and 2016 in higher education),

Lithuania (2013 in higher education) and Latvia (2017 in higher education) as observers in EKKA reviews.

In 2014, EKKA organised the INQAAHE Biennial Forum “Partnerships in Quality Assurance in Higher Education” in Tallinn, attended by delegates from 60 countries.

Starting in 2011, annual tripartite seminars involving the Baltic States — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — have been held to discuss the main trends in external quality assessment. Since 2016, at the initiative of EKKA, the National Reference Points for VET are also invited to the seminars. Since 2015, EKKA has participated in annual Nordic-Baltic seminars.

#### **EKKA’S FUNDING**

The Estonian government finances the regular external evaluation of higher education (including both IAs and the SPGs). In consultation with HEIs and the MER, EKKA prepares a long-term projection of expected external evaluations, and based on that, requests funds for external evaluations from the state budget. Appropriations from the state budget cover both the costs directly associated with the external evaluations and the costs connected with a broader quality development of higher education (trainings, conferences, seminars, publications of results, analyses).

In the area of VET, the Estonian state receives funding from the European Structural Funds to cover the costs of quality assurance accreditation and the development of processes.

Any HEI that wants to launch studies in a new SPG must cover the costs of the initial review itself. The rates and the calculations for this process are published on EKKA’s website; the rates include all costs related to the review. HEIs are obliged to pay the invoice before the evaluation process begins.

From 2014–2017, EKKA implemented several international projects with a total budget of €265,178. A table of funding sources for EKKA in 2013–2017 was included in the SAR.

In discussions with the Director, she indicated that she is satisfied with the budget allocated. The officials from the MER who met the panel indicated that there are no difficulties in agreeing on a budget with the agency and that they meet with the Director to discuss the agency’s requirements. As a consequence of the legal structure of the Archimedes Foundation, the budget line for EKKA appears in the formal budget of the Archimedes Foundation. The panel established that this is a mechanism for the conduit of the funding and that the full, agreed budget passes automatically to EKKA. In an Estonian context, the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation explained that this degree of separation was helpful historically in establishing the fully autonomous nature of the EKKA structure. This view was supported by the Director of EKKA and by the MER officials. The panel also came to appreciate the importance attached to regulation in the Estonian legal system and the legal regulation in relation to the routing of the EKKA budget requires that it be routed through the Archimedes Foundation.

# FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF EKKA WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG)

## ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

### ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

#### Standard:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

#### Evidence

In its SAR, EKKA outlines the full range of quality assurance activity it undertakes on a regular basis. A full cycle of IA is almost complete. As required in national legislation, a **comprehensive transitional evaluation of SPGs** has occurred and re-evaluations (where required) have also taken place.

According to subsection 12(1) of the Universities Act, subsection 21(2) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act and subsection 14(2) of the Private Schools Act, HEIs have the obligation to ensure that EKKA performs their **IAs** at least once every seven years or within a shorter time frame if so decided by HEQAC. EKKA outlines the purpose of IA as supporting the development of strategic management and culture in HEIs. At a range of meetings with heads of HEIs and quality assurance officers from a cross-section of HEIs, those the panel met frequently referenced the impact on internal culture of the process of IA. They described the impact of IA on internal change management as positive and in particular, they referred to the role of IA as providing an additional stimulus to timely change.

In relation to the **quality assessment of SPGs**, HEQAC adopted conditions and procedures for quality assurance of SPGs in the first and second cycle of higher education in June 2012. These are published, as are the results of all assessments. Institutions are required to submit progress reports to HEQAC on the implementation of recommendations. In the case of a secondary condition being attached to a specified period of approval, that secondary condition must be addressed within the timeframe (usually one or two years), or the original duration of approval may be revoked. This has happened. The panel was told by the Chair of HEQAC of an instance in which a secondary condition attached to the outcome of a SPG of Social Services was not addressed and the HEQAC then amended its original period of approval.

A separate procedure for the **initial assessment of an SPG** is used. An initial assessment is required when an HEI is seeking permission to run a programme in a previously unapproved SPG. An initial application is made to the MER, and in accordance with the Universities Act, the MER involves EKKA in this initial assessment. Unlike other assessments of SPGs, the applicant incurs the costs of the initial assessment. A full schedule of costs is published on the EKKA website. The director explained that this initial assessment commences as a desk-based activity and then proceeds to a site evaluation if required. EKKA forwards the results of the initial assessment to the MER, as the decision to grant an HEI the right to conduct studies is taken by the government of Estonia. In the case of initial

assessments, a HEQAC decision was taken in September 2017 to include students in this initial assessment procedure. Students were always included in all other types of procedures.

EKKA systematically plans its assessment activity for each calendar year and agrees this work programme with HEIs and HEQAC. EKKA meets regularly with the Rectors' Conference and Students' Union to discuss the procedures and to seek feedback.

Having carried out extensive consultation, EKKA has now developed a new set of procedures for the **assessment of SPGs at doctoral level**. The Research Council has just completed a cycle of research evaluation. As the Estonian Research Council performs research assessments, the Director of the Research Council informed the panel that he had sought and received permission from the rectors of the universities to share the individual institutional profiles of research activity with EKKA so as to contribute to the EKKA assessment and to prevent unnecessary duplication. The legal autonomy of HEIs requires that this approach to sharing information between the Research Council and EKKA.

EKKA produces **consolidated thematic analyses** of its findings in order to assist system-wide development and enhancement. It attempts to inform the general public about the outcomes of its assessments. In its SAR, EKKA acknowledged that it had mixed results in creating public awareness of its activities and the panel discussed this issue with the Director and a variety of stakeholders. EKKA was pleased with the level of public awareness that resulted from a special conference to provide stakeholders with information on the analysis of the findings of the SPG on teacher education. A representative of the teachers' union was also complimentary about this event. Both EKKA and the MER acknowledged that it was easier to create interest in EKKA's work in some areas - the quality of teaching being one.

In its meeting with EKKA's Director Heli Mattisen the panel noted her emphasis on the need to make the agency's work useful for the HEIs and the need to ensure that EKKA, in its own practices, should always provide a good example. She also mentioned the importance of using stakeholders in working groups and used the example of the development of the framework for Ph.D. SPGs to demonstrate the agency's responsiveness. Another example of how the agency's mission translates into its daily activity was described by the Director when she explained the genesis and evolution of the Student network. She also provided examples of the agency's capacity to be innovative and flexible as in the development of a combined assessment procedure (**combining IA and SPG assessment**), which had been utilised for the first time in the Academy of Arts. She told the panel that other institutions had also been offered this new model but that they had decided to continue with separate IA and SPG procedures for their first full cycle of evaluations. At subsequent development seminars held with assessed institutions where they reflected on the impact of their EKKA assessments, many smaller institutions admitted to now seeing the benefit of integrating IA and SPG assessments.

In response to queries from the panel on the evolution of interdisciplinary studies and the EKKA approach to SPG assessment in this context, the Director indicated that a number of interdisciplinary programmes had been assessed and that the institution decided, in the first instance, on which umbrella SPG to use as the parent group of the interdisciplinary programme.

In its daily work EKKA interacts with the quality assurance offices of all institutions. The panel met a number of these officers, and they described a supportive working relationship. They commented on the good communication they receive from EKKA and the ease with which they can communicate with the agency. They appreciate the time EKKA takes to acquire their feedback after an evaluation. When asked for suggestions on the development of EKKA, the quality assurance officers were in favour of rationalisation of assessment procedures and the development of thematic assessments. On topics



for thematic analyses, they mentioned staff and student international mobility and the non-completion rates. In relation to the quality of written reports they would welcome acknowledgement of their own proposals if they appear in the recommendations. They also felt there was some room for improvement in the consistency of the style of reports and the level of specificity of recommendations. They also felt there were some instances where recommendations could be prioritised so that institutional staff would have a clearer focus on what was significant in the recommendations.

The panel found evidence in EKKA of a strong focus on the need to operate as a trusted and impartial agent of enhancement in the quality assurance system of Estonia. In turn, EKKA's stakeholders also expressed confidence in its processes, procedures and decision-making. Representatives from HEIs stated that they trusted EKKA to carry out its role. This was evident, even if they did not always like all elements of a decision or all recommendations in an assessment report. They indicated that they believed EKKA operated in the interests of enhancing the system and the institution. They went further and described EKKA as a catalyst for necessary institutional and systemic change. The panel concluded that the confidence expressed by EKKA's institutional stakeholders was merited. It was clear from discussions with other agencies that they regard EKKA reports as having a high level of reliability and consistency. For example, the spokesperson for the ICT Foundation of Estonia said that his agency uses EKKA reports to provide contextual material when making funding decisions.

EKKA operates through the extensive use of stakeholders in its working groups, and EKKA itself is widely used as a stakeholder by other bodies. For example, EKKA made a strong contribution to the development of the Estonian strategy for lifelong learning through the participation of EKKA's Director on the strategy development group. From discussions with MER officials, the panel learned that the strategy on lifelong learning is now being used to frame some of the legislative changes being considered for higher education. In particular, the MER officials outlined their intention to strengthen the legislative focus on student-centred learning. In its SAR, EKKA also signals that its focus on student-centred learning is also being strengthened. This dovetailing of interests signals the high level of systemic collaboration, which the panel observed. In the course of its meetings, the panel heard on a number of occasions that "Estonia is a small country", and it was apparent to the panel that a high level of cooperation exists among the agencies and institutions. In this context, EKKA is exercising considerable influence on the evolution of the system.

The process utilised for the accreditation of Masters' Study Programmes in Moldova is described fully in the SAR and was developed in discussions with the EKKA director and the key Moldovan stakeholders.

### **Analysis**

The panel found that EKKA had a very clear understanding of the requirements and underlying principles ESG 3.1. EKKA's principles, processes and procedures adhere to the standards and guidelines. The agency's mission statement is widely published, and its core values were translated into its strategy and activity. The panel found strong supporting evidence that the culture of EKKA is imbued with the spirit and intent of the revised ESG (2015).

The panel noted the enabling approach adopted by EKKA in promoting the Student Network. EKKA's intent is clearly to encourage student leadership, and this approach is strongly supported by the panel.

The panel heard a good deal about the informal networks for communication in Estonia - a feature of its national culture and structure. This was used extensively by EKKA and other institutions. The panel also noted the extensive use of working groups established by EKKA. For example, EKKA established

an extensive working group to assist and advise in the development of the guidelines for doctoral studies assessments. This informality serves a useful purpose, but there may be merit in having a more stable, structured format for stakeholder interaction, such as a more established stakeholder advisory board. Such a structure might be of benefit in enhancing two-way communication with stakeholders, and if established, it would ensure continuity in the exchange of information and allow for more emphasis on strategic goals. Such a body might also assist EKKA in dealing with the understandable challenges involved in communicating with diverse audiences.

#### **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

EKKA should consider establishing a Stakeholder Advisory Board which would, *inter alia*, provide oversight of strategic planning, act as a conduit of information about key EKKA activity to a wide range of stakeholders and bring timely and relevant external activity to the attention of EKKA.

#### **Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

#### **ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS**

Standard:

Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

#### **2012 review recommendation (ESG 3.2)**

This legal framework when EKKA is judging whether to conduct an assessment itself or let a foreign agency do the job, can be seen as potentially leading towards the conflict of interests, and creating unnecessary tensions between the local and a foreign agency. Higher education institutions are not prevented from choice, but could be effectively discouraged in the fear of being perceived as not loyal towards the national quality assurance agency. Therefore, we recommend that the Minister considers assigning to an external independent body responsibility for the decision as to whether a review be carried out by EKKA or by a foreign agency.

#### **Evidence**

According to article 37 of the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, the provision of education is overseen by the national government. To clearly separate the external assessment of higher education from governmental structures, the MER decided, on the basis of a contract under public law, to authorise this function to be performed by the Archimedes Foundation, the founder of which is the Republic of Estonia with the founder's rights being exercised by the MER.

According to clauses 3.3.1.1 and 3.3.5 of the statutes of the Archimedes Foundation and clause 1.2 of the statutes of EKKA, approved by the Supervisory Board of the Foundation, EKKA is a structural unit of the Archimedes Foundation, performing independent functions and, based on article 10 of the Universities Act, was set up in 2009 to continue the work of the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre and HEQAC (operating from 1997 to 2008). EKKA comprises EKKA permanent staff and the HEQAC and Vocational Education and Training Board (VET).

Based on the laws of the Republic of Estonia, the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation also includes representatives of the state, but in order to ensure and assure the independence of assessing the quality of higher education, it has delegated the approval of EKKA's regulations and the adoption of assessment decisions exclusively to EKKA. Assessment decisions are made by HEQAC. Therefore, EKKA is independent in developing its principles and procedures for quality assessment and in adopting assessment decisions.

EKKA bases its activities on legislation, regulations issued by the MER and other normative documents in the field of education; EKKA performs the functions assigned to it by article 10 of the Universities Act and clause 2 of its own statutes.

At its meeting with officials from the MER, the panel learned that a major project on updating the legislation on higher education is underway. It is hoped that the new legislation will contain more explicit provisions on students' rights and responsibilities. The MER officials expressed the view that IA will remain an important component of the system of quality assurance. They reiterated the importance of the panel understanding the status of universities as "autonomous legal persons". The MER officials stressed the autonomy of EKKA in its operations and their high regard for the quality of its work.

In relation to the recommendation of 2012 review, EKKA referred this recommendation to the MER who did not agree that the legislation should be changed. Since 2012, two external agencies have operated in Estonia, using the procedures in place for HEQAC to enter into a contract with an external agency. On both occasions, the process operated successfully.

Regulations, policies and procedures are in place to allow any HEI to use a competent foreign quality assurance agency to conduct an external assessment. The prerequisite for the use of such a foreign agency is its approval by HEQAC. HEQAC must ensure that such a completed assessment is sufficiently comprehensive and robust so as to enable it to make a decision. Two such assessments were approved to proceed between 2013 and 2016. The first, involving the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Medicine (EAEVE) has taken place, and the second, involving the agency MusiQuE in the field of music and theatre will take place in 2017-18.

When asked why they did not choose to use foreign agencies, the heads of the HEIs expressed their confidence and satisfaction in using the services of EKKA. International regulatory bodies (for example, in the case of aviation) carry out international regulatory audits. The Estonian Business School (a private university) stated that they would, in the future, seek membership of some international bodies and undergo international evaluation of its membership application in order to strengthen its international profile.

### **Analysis**

The panel examined carefully the legislative basis for the operation of EKKA. It sought, and received in advance of the site-visit, additional clarification on the legal basis for the operation of EKKA. The panel explored the relationship between the MER, the Archimedes Foundation, HEQAC and EKKA at meetings with all of these bodies. At the conclusion of its review of the documentary evidence of the legislative status for the establishment of EKKA, the panel teased out the conceptual basis for the existence of the Archimedes Foundation and concluded that in the context of Estonian legislation, the Foundation serves the purpose of creating a defined buffer between EKKA and the MER.

Having examined the relevant regulations and explored the legal basis of its operation - including with the legal officer of the MER - the panel was satisfied that EKKA operates with legal and administrative independence.

The panel was satisfied that any institution that wished to use an external agency could do so, provided the external agency produced a report compatible with the HEQAC requirements for decision-making and the legal requirements of Estonia. The success of such applications under the current regulatory framework was accepted by the panel as evidence that the process works.

The separate legal structure of the Research Council is a structural feature of Estonian higher education. Having met the director of the Research Council, the panel concluded that there is a close and effective working relationship between the two bodies. The panel anticipates that as the reviews of doctoral studies' SPGs progress, there will be further collaboration between the two bodies.

**Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

**ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE**

Standard:

Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

**2012 review recommendation (ESG 3.6)**

The Review Panel took notice of only one woman between EKKA Quality Assessment Council members. However, there is nothing in the EKKA Council formation procedure or on institutional levels that would prevent from seeking a more gender-balanced representation among the suitable candidates. Therefore, it is suggested to address the gender issue upon the expiry of current membership terms.

The EKKA Council formation procedure foresees that a service term is three years, and no person may be a member of the Council for more than six years. It is encouraged to think of introducing rotation terms or other comparable measures assuring that on the Council at any given moment there is a proper balance of new and more experienced members, assuring smooth execution of their duties.

As EKKA is just starting a programme of reviews of doctoral studies' SPGs, the panel paid considerable attention to examining how the new procedures were developed and how EKKA interacts with the Research Council. The directors of both institutions confirmed their strong collaboration and their intent to minimise any duplication in activity. The panel learned that the Research Council supplied EKKA with its recently completed institutional evaluations and that, with the permission of the universities, it has given EKKA copies of the institutions' own research profiles. The panel was also informed that there is already some overlap in membership of panels used by the Research Council and those proposed by EKKA for the doctoral studies' SPGs.

**Evidence**

According to clauses 3.3.1.1 and 3.3.5 of the statutes of the Archimedes Foundation and clause 1.2 of the statutes of EKKA approved by the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation, EKKA is a structural unit of the Foundation performing independent functions and being independent in making quality assessment decisions.

EKKA is independent in carrying out its key activities. It is the responsibility of HEQAC to establish the principles and procedures for external quality assessment processes and to adopt assessment decisions. To actually ensure EKKA's independence in the field of external assessment from the MER (whose employees are represented on the Supervisory Board of the Foundation), the Supervisory Board has approved EKKA statutes in which clauses 3.7.1 and 3.7.3 authorise HEQAC to provide the final approval of regulations for assessments (establishing assessment criteria and procedures) and to adopt assessment decisions. The responsibility for the validity of assessment decisions lies with HEQAC.

The members of HEQAC are obliged to sign a declaration of confidentiality and independence confirming that they are independent in their activities and do not represent either the interests of the organisation who nominated their candidacy or the interests of their employers. If a member's relationship with his or her employer changes, that member is obliged to immediately notify the director of EKKA of this in writing. Rectors, vice rectors and officials of the MER cannot be members of HEQAC. A member of HEQAC who is affiliated with an HEI under assessment has an obligation to absent him/herself from the making of any decision connected to that HEI.

In its meeting with the chair and members of HEQAC and a member of the Appeals Board, the panel asked the HEQAC members to describe their approach to decision making. They described the value of the new procedures and guidelines adopted since the last review. They indicated how these procedures and guidelines were utilised to distinguish between unconditional approval for 7 years, conditional approval for 5 years and approval for 3 years where major issues are identified. The utilisation of secondary conditions in the case of seven or five year approval was also explained. A secondary condition is attached to a seven- or five-year approval and must be addressed in a shorter timeframe (usually one/two years). A failure to address a secondary condition may result in a HEQAC decision to amend the original period of approval. The panel also discussed these procedures with the heads of the HEIs, the quality assurance officers, the students and the members of expert panels. In all cases there was a perception that the revised guidelines and procedures had brought greater transparency and consistency to the decisions of HEQAC. All stakeholders expressed confidence in the impartiality, independence and robustness of the system.

The chair of HEQAC and members of the Board described to the panel the process of decision-making. They described a lengthy process of deliberation. If HEQAC has any difficulty in understanding a panel report, the panel is asked for clarification. Considerable time is taken over the wording of any conditions attached to a specified period of approval. HEQAC Board members all felt that their processes had been strengthened as a result of the development, approval and publication of procedures for decision-making. In particular, they welcome the clarity around the criteria for deciding on the period of approval. Heads of HEIs also welcomed this clarification, which is a development since the last review.

The HEQAC Board members were asked to comment on the standard of improvement plans submitted (as required) by institutions. They stated that there was considerable variation. Some, they said, do not deal adequately with the recommendations. Institutions felt that the volume of reviews (both SPGs and IA) in some cases led to less care than appropriate in the preparation of improvement plans. On the other hand, the heads of HEIs and the quality assurance officers acknowledged that the volume of assessments sometimes had a negative impact on the attention given to preparing progress reports and implementing recommendations.

Since the 2012 ENQA review, EKKA has assumed full formal responsibility for VET quality assurance. A separate VET council has been established. The two councils meet on an annual basis in a joint meeting to review the EKKA annual work programme. The two bodies also met jointly to review the new EKKA strategic plan.

EKKA took on board the recommendation in the 2012 ENQA review in relation to rotation and gender balance. The process began informally after the last review, and new principles were formally adopted in June 2015. In the 2015 election of a new HEQAC Board, one-third of previous members were re-elected, and six of the 13 members are now female.

## **Analysis**

Having regard to the national context, the panel was satisfied that EKKA is empowered to operate with complete independence. In addition, it was clear from discussion with the heads of HEIs that they had complete confidence in this independence, and this perception was echoed by employers, other agencies, for example the Research Council, and stakeholders.

The panel was satisfied that the procedures that clarify the basis for decision-making have enhanced significantly the operation of EKKA and the reliability and consistency of HEQAC decisions.

From its discussions with heads of institutions, the panel concluded that the EKKA decision-making process operates with transparency and impartiality. Institutions do not always like all the recommendations and conditions, but they accept that their intent is to enhance the performance of the institution.

The process of initial decision-making has been strengthened considerably since the time of the last review in 2012. EKKA constantly reviews its procedures, and its capacity for self-analysis is strength of the organisation. However, EKKA itself is conscious of some deficiencies in the follow-through procedures. Student representatives also felt that the review of the implementation of recommendations needed to be strengthened. The panel concluded that the focus on continuous improvement is not sufficiently robust in respect of the oversight of implementation of recommendations.

## **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

In considering the next cycle of quality assurance processes, the panel suggests a much stronger focus on follow-through and more oversight of the implementation of recommendations.

The panel suggests that the working relationship with the Research Council be a focus for inter-institutional collaboration, including system-level thematic analysis. As the relationship between EKKA and the Research Council strengthens, it may be worth considering in the future if these two agencies could operate on a similar legal basis or if they could be part of a single umbrella foundation.

## **Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

### **ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

Standard:

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

## **Evidence**

According to the statutes of EKKA, the preparation and regular publication of reports is one of its principal functions. EKKA develops a report on annual assessments that appears in the annual MER journal. A more comprehensive annual assessment of its activities is published on the EKKA website and is a separate publication from the annual report. It also conducts periodic assessments when the quantum of a particular type of assessment is sufficient to act as a reliable basis for general analysis. For example, an analysis of the processes and outcomes of SPG assessments was published in 2015. This was the second major report to focus on SPG assessments. The recent publication of a special report on the quality of teacher education received a lot of national publicity.

The Director informed the panel that EKKA is now consulting with HEIs to establish their level of interest in each institution being provided with an integrated institutional profile based on all the data contained in both IA and SPG assessments for that institution. EKKA has the capacity to generate such reports using a number of specialised programmes for analytics that it now uses as part of its own activity.

Yearly summaries of assessments are published on the website. In its annual plan, EKKA provides a schedule of publications, and it also attempts to use national media to promote awareness of the outcomes of its activities.

Appendix 2 of the SAR lists the annual and periodic analyses conducted by EKKA in the period from 2012 to 2017. For example, in 2016 two short (4-5 pages) articles by staff members were published (in Estonian) in the publication of the MER. One article dealt with accreditation in the VET sector and the other was entitled, “The Main Strengths and Development Needs in Estonian Higher Education against the Backdrop of Outcomes of Quality Assessments of SPGs”. A further three articles were published in international journals.

In addition, research publications are presented by staff at international conferences. An example of such a publication is the paper presented at the INQAAHE 2017 conference on the conduct of the first integrated HE/VET assessment in Estonia. In 2014 a more general study was conducted on the perceived impact of external assessment on HEIs. The results of this study were presented at the INQAAHE annual conference in 2016. EKKA also prepared an analysis of its activity in Moldova for the Moldovan ministry. EKKA takes part in a range of international conferences, seminars and workshops at which it presents analyses of its activity. A list of presentations and papers was attached to the SAR. This list shows a considerable expansion in this activity since the date of the last review.

The SAR mentions that EKKA hopes to conduct planned thematic assessments in the next cycle and that this type of thematic assessments will become a bigger feature of the future work of the agency. EKKA uses this term in a manner, which differs somewhat from the use of the term “thematic analysis” in the ESG. The panel sought suggestions on potential themes for thematic analysis at its meetings. EKKA staff suggested internationalisation, student/staff mobility, international benchmarking of programmes. MER officials also suggested internationalisation. From various groups the panel heard that there were some difficulties for students in having full recognition of periods of study abroad and ensuring that no financial penalties arose as a consequence of spending a semester or longer studying outside Estonia. The EKKA Director, student representatives and MER all emphasised the need for greater focus on student-centred learning.

When considering the issue of thematic analysis, the review panel was interested in hearing the response of a variety of stakeholders to EKKA’s approach to soliciting feedback and disseminating findings. In the course of this discussion, it became apparent that there was some dissatisfaction among students with the approach of individual institutions to the collection of feedback and the responses of institutions. Students expressed a view that they would welcome more direction and intervention from EKKA on this matter. In their meeting with the panel, MER officials expressed a similar view, and both students and MER officials felt that more emphasis should be placed on the monitoring of institutional responses to recommendations.

At the institutional level, quality officers and heads of institutions felt that the number of assessments in recent years (SPGs and IA) made it difficult sometimes to focus on recommendations and on developing the systemic capacity of institutions for thematic analysis. EKKA is now using its thematic assessments as part of the training and development programmes provided to HEIs.

The Employers' Confederation spokespersons acknowledged the difficulty in getting their members to read EKKA reports. However, the Employers' Confederation did emphasise that reports and thematic analyses are considered carefully by the officers and executive board of the confederation.

### **Analysis**

EKKA publishes a wide range of system-level reports and analyses. It ensures that these analyses are widely used in its interactions with HEIs and student unions in order to encourage the development of a system-wide focus on continuous improvement. Thematic analyses are also used by EKKA in its discussions with the heads of HEIs so that the system as a whole can learn from the experiences of others. EKKA promotes strongly the evolution of individual institutional responsibility for quality assurance and its recent proposal to each institution that it will make an individual tailored report available to each institution that combines the findings of all types of assessment conducted by EKKA is welcome.

EKKA, in its SAR, suggested that in the next cycle of activity it might concentrate on some more thematic assessments" The panel welcomes this suggestion but also recommends that more thematic analysis be built into the work of the agency. The panel suggests that EKKA develop a cross-sectional analysis on certain themes, based on the material obtained through various evaluations made over a given period. For example, the panel recommends that the theme of student feedback receive specific focus. The volume of SPG activity is likely to decrease, and more time should now be allocated to thematic work. Other potential themes identified by the panel include:

- Completion rates in higher education;
- The response of higher education to diverse student needs;
- The integration of research into higher education assessment at all levels;
- Closer cooperation with VET provision and assessment in the context of lifelong learning;
- Future skills needs and the higher education system;
- Internationalisation.

The panel emphasises that these suggested areas are indicative, not prescriptive.

Based on its assessment of the totality of its publishing activity in all domains, the review panel concluded that EKKA's general findings are regularly published in different reporting formats. However, the panel concurs with EKKA's own analysis in the SAR that this is an area of activity that could be more systematically and thoroughly developed. As the national system evolves in the context on a new HE strategy, it is timely that EKKA consider developing medium and long-term programmes of thematic analyses. These programmes should include the development of overarching metrics, goals and strategies. The work of EKKA itself should evolve to reflect this more strategic approach.

The review panel considered how EKKA makes use of the outcomes of its reports. The panel noted that EKKA in its annual process of self-review considers the major findings of its own reports and then changes its practices and policies. For example, arising from its consideration of the SPGs, EKKA has concluded that the volume of SPG work, when combined with IAs is giving rise to unnecessary duplication and, as a consequence is now trialling the use of a combined assessment format. EKKA, in its SAR, provided an example of a gap in its approach to IA, which has resulted in insufficient attention being paid to middle-management in HEIs. EKKA has indicated that this gap will be addressed in the next iteration.



### **Panel recommendations**

EKKA needs to put in place a more structured approach to the dissemination and utilization of thematic analyses and to demonstrate more systematically how it uses the outcomes of these analyses.

### **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

EKKA should consider conducting a thematic evaluation on improving methods for eliciting student and expert feedback, utilising that feedback and providing evidence of the impact/changes directly taken as a consequence of that feedback. The context of this thematic analysis should be an increased focus on student-centred learning in the quality assurance policies and processes of the system. Other thematic evaluations should be scheduled on a regular basis over the next five years.

### **Panel conclusion: substantially compliant**

### **ESG 3.5 RESOURCES**

Standard:

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

### **2012 review recommendation (ESG 3.4)**

In the Development Plan EKKA sets targets for international recognition, among others, to be included in the development projects for the quality systems of third countries. It is advised to consider possibilities take lead in coordination or be more involved in partnerships in other type international cooperation projects in the field of quality assurance, e.g. via networks EKKA is a member.

### **Evidence**

EKKA employs nine permanent staff and is managed by a Director, Heli Mattisen. There is remarkable stability in the composition of the staff, and seven staff members have been involved with EKKA for more than six years.

In its SAR, the agency states that it has both the financial and human resources necessary for its work. At the panel meeting with EKKA staff, they confirmed that they shared this view. When asked about the additional workload resulting from the expansion of international activity and the work associated with VET, they explained that this additional workload has been managed because of the agency's use of well-trained national and international experts, the use of some overtime, a flexible work pattern whereby staff can take advantage of periods of less activity to balance their workload and the use of some short-term contract workers who are experienced in working with the agency.

At meetings with the Supervisory and Management Boards of the Archimedes Foundation and with the MER, all confirmed that the financial requirements of the agency are always met as a result of an annual programme of budget allocation. EKKA conducts its own negotiations with the Ministry, and for legal administrative reasons (outlined earlier in this report), the budget is channelled through the Archimedes Foundation.

The Director conducts annual development interviews with each staff member. Staff members told the panel that their professional development needs are discussed at these meetings, and arrangements are made to provide any additional training or professional development required.

EKKA has considerably expanded its international activity since the last evaluation in 2012. Income from this source is outlined in the SAR.

### **Analysis**

EKKA has the resources, both human and financial, required to carry out its work. The panel met members of the Supervisory and Management Boards of the Archimedes Foundation and the MER officials responsible for budget allocation. At the conclusion of these meetings, it was evident that an orderly and effective procedure for budget allocation exists. It is clear that EKKA conducts its own budget negotiations with MER officials, and the panel accepts the legal requirement of the budget transfer mechanism.

The EKKA workforce operates in a very cohesive manner, and individual professional development requirements are met from the EKKA budget. There are obvious strengths but also some potential weaknesses in the staffing structure. Whilst stability is a welcome feature, it may be wise for the agency to consider how it would cope in the case of unforeseen change and to consider, too, if the injection of “new blood” might benefit the agency. This might, in part, be facilitated by developing some research assistant/intern posts associated with specific projects.

EKKA intends to conduct a much greater number of thematic assessments, and these may provide opportunities for the agency to work with specialists in related fields.

EKKA has expanded its international activity and now has considerable expertise in this area. In the course of discussion, the Director indicated that she was considering whether the agency should seek further international engagement in a specific area and continue to build specialist expertise and resources. The panel is supportive of the Director’s proposed strategy in the international arena.

### **Panel commendations**

The review panel was particularly impressed by the evident high level of cohesion, the quality of leadership and the professionalism, responsiveness, flexibility and work ethic of all EKKA employees

### **Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

## **ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT**

Standard:

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

### **2012 review recommendation (ESG 3.6, 3.8)**

The Agency could think of introducing a rotation system or other comparable measures assuring that there is a proper balance between new and experienced Council members, assuring smooth execution of their duties.

Transparency on how conflicts of interest are avoided could be improved by providing further information on the experts’ background in their reports.

### **Evidence**

The EKKA Quality Manual consists of three sections: Management and Functioning of the Organisation; Core Processes; Communication. This manual outlines in detail the policies and procedures for internal quality assurance.

At the meeting with experts (national and international) who have served as panel members, the experts outlined to the review panel a very comprehensive process for the training and support of panel members. They expressed very positive views on the quality of advance material provided for their guidance, on the thoroughness of the first-day briefing, on the quality of support during the site visits and on the final day meeting which focussed on writing the report. They described EKKA as a “very focused institution” that makes good use of “protocol and procedures”. Experts cited the “bottom-up” approach of the agency as having a positive influence on the evolution of the national system and the culture of quality assurance in higher education. They also noted with approval the emphasis on enhancement in the briefing of experts and the high quality of the templates developed by EKKA. Experts felt that the meeting with the management and staff of the institution at the end of the site visit was very useful and a feature they did not always encounter in other countries.

When asked for additional recommendations, the experts suggested that additional time may be required in conducting combined IA and SPG assessments in order to ensure a comprehensive review. The process of managing a larger panel in a combined review was also identified as a potentially tricky area, though it did not cause any difficulty in the pilot assessment.

When asked about their experiences completing feedback reports, the interviewed experts did not seem to be aware of this process. The Director of EKKA, however, stated that feedback was always sought and that a consolidated report of their observations is placed on the website. The panel saw this report and was satisfied with its content. In subsequent discussion on this issue, EKKA suggested that many of the experts provided oral feedback at the final de-briefing meeting at the end of a visit and that this may account for the low numbers who subsequently completed feedback reports. All the feedback provided at the meeting is fed into the consolidated report.

There were strong and differing views among the experts on the separation of research assessment in the national system.

Student panel members described in positive terms their involvement in panels. They said they were treated exactly the same as other panel members, and their views carried equal weight.

Full information on the backgrounds of experts is now published.

As a consequence of receiving feedback from institutions on the performance of panels, EKKA has now included a session on interview techniques in its training for experts. EKKA has also developed an explanatory letter which it recommends HEIs give to interviewees prior to panel visits so that interviewees are familiarised with the purpose and processes of a site visit.

EKKA conducts extensive consultation with stakeholders and seeks their input at all stages in the development and review of procedures. In his opening remarks to the panel, the chair of the Rectors’ Conference stated that EKKA had done a good job in clearing up anomalies in the procedures for assessment and that EKKA was particularly good at seeking institutional feedback in the aftermath of assessments. He also indicated that the rectors of the public universities had already had discussions with EKKA about changes in the next cycle of assessments and legislative changes that will occur in the context of the MER review of the higher education strategy. The rectors felt that there was unnecessary duplication between the IAs and the SPG assessments. In its SAR, EKKA makes the same point and described a pilot assessment, which integrated these two types of assessment at a smaller institution. The rectors also approved of the EKKA proposal to develop a range of thematic assessments and suggested that if assessment of SPGs is to continue it should focus on those found

to be problematic in the first cycle of assessment. There was general consensus among the heads of all types of institutions that the bureaucratic load was very onerous because of the number of assessments being carried out. The only private university in the system, the Estonian Business School, felt that the EKKA assessments were important for comparison of its standing in international evaluation procedures but found that the number of assessments made it difficult to focus sufficiently on implementation of recommendations.

The heads of institutions indicated that they were consulted on the composition of panels, and an example was provided of EKKA changing a panel member because an institution was not confident of the currency of the expertise of the proposed panel member. EKKA indicated a willingness to discuss panel composition with institutions but only to make changes when valid reasons are advanced.

Both EKKA and the representatives of institutions were asked about their experience with joint programme accreditation. Both confirmed that some regulatory and legal impediments in the national system made accreditation with international partners a difficult process.

At a meeting with representatives of the Employers' Confederation, the panel was told that whilst reports are read by the confederation, they are not widely read by employers. EKKA showed a high level of awareness of this issue and frankly admits its frustration. As EKKA has also completely revamped its website to make its communication more accessible, this is a particular disappointment for the agency.

Development seminars are also held internally. For example, in developing its new strategic plan, the agency staff considered at one seminar how to prioritise learners' needs in the new plan.

The panel reviewed carefully the operation of HEQAC and its Appeals Board. The panel noted the implementation of the recommendations of the 2012 ENQA review in relation to rotation and gender balance on HEQAC. The Appeals Board has been established since the last review. The panel examined its composition and procedures. It also discussed its operation with an institution that had appealed a decision. The panel reviewed additional documentation in relation to appeals and discussed the basis for appeals with the heads of HEIs. In the two appeals to date, they were made because institutions perceived a mismatch between a decision and the stated reasons for the decision.

### **Analysis**

Having heard the views of national and international experts who serve or have served on review panels, the review panel is particularly impressed with the thoroughness of the preparation of panels for their work. The review panel also noted the support provided during site visits and the guidance in writing reports. Experts were particularly complimentary about the templates developed by EKKA.

The EKKA approach to panel preparation could well be the basis for an agency "good practice" report which could assist in the development of other agencies. It was noteworthy that this attentiveness to panel preparation was much admired in Moldova and that it is now being emulated there.

In view of the evident interest in their work, it may be worthwhile considering the request of some experts for feedback on their recommendations and their interest in more feedback on their individual performance.

As HEQAC is such an important component of the operation of EKKA, the panel suggests that, as part of its annual work programme, EKKA seek to involve members of HEQAC in some professional development. Recognising that HEQAC members have other responsibilities, such professional

development could concentrate on a specific topic each year. In line with good international practice, this might, in time, evolve into an annual performance evaluation of HEQAC.

#### **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

EKKA should review the methodology used to elicit feedback from experts on their experience of the process. It might be useful to send to them a summary of comments made at the final de-briefing meeting and to use this document as a basis for gathering any additional reflections that may arise over time. This might encourage a higher response rate. EKKA itself displayed a strong commitment to using feedback from experts as a basis for continuous improvement of its policies and processes. Experts should be provided with feedback on the institutional and agency evaluation of the experts' performance. Experts should also be provided with an update on the impact of their recommendations, should they request this follow up.

As HEQAC plays such an important role in the agency, a systematic programme aimed at developing the skills and competencies of members of HEQAC should be introduced as a regular part of the enhancement activity of the agency.

#### **Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

#### **ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES**

Standard:

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

#### **Evidence**

EKKA underwent a first ENQA review in 2012, and this document is the report from the second review of the agency. In the ESG, emphasis is placed on the onus of an agency to demonstrate how it has evolved since the last review. A review panel is also expected to seek evidence of evolution and enhancement.

In its SAR, EKKA makes explicit reference to the requirement for evidence of improvement and enhancement in second and subsequent reviews. EKKA also addresses in one section of the SAR the recommendations of the first review and the changes that have taken place as a result of that review and its own processes for internal review. Noteworthy changes since the last review include:

- The establishment of an Appeals Board;
- Changes to the rules on transitional re-evaluation;
- The clarification of decision-making criteria for determining the outcome of SPGs so as to enhance consistency and predictability;
- The introduction of improved procedures for rotation and gender balance on HEQAC;
- The development of a new website which has a comprehensive database of study programmes in higher education;
- Improved English language information on IA and SPG assessments including all reports and decisions;
- The introduction of an EKKA quality label in 2014 which is awarded to HEIs that have been accredited for seven years;
- The introduction of feedback seminars where HEIs that have undergone IA are asked to reflect on the recommendations contained in the assessment and their impact on the institution;
- A very substantial increase in the level of its international activity;

- Improved transparency on the profiles of panel experts so as to ensure there is no conflict of interest.

The change of regulation to ensure that students are included in **all** initial SPG assessments took place in September 2017. Until that date, students were involved when the HEI had not yet passed an institutional accreditation and the quality assessment of a study level of a corresponding SPG. This happened in about half the cases. The Director notified the panel of this change during the site visit.

In assessing its development over the last five years, EKKA explains why some recommendations in the 2012 report were not implemented. In respect of HEI reporting, HEIs cannot be compelled to publish their self-evaluations and assessment reports. This was explained by the MER legal representative as arising from the legal status of the institutions as “autonomous persons”. EKKA notes that to date all institutions have published their assessment reports in full.

In relation to the use of English and Estonian versions of all documentation, EKKA outlines a rationale related to usage for its procedures on publishing in both languages. It also indicates that some types of translation in relation to VET documentation would be a disproportionate use of human and financial resources.

### **Analysis**

EKKA has complied with the ESG requirement for external review at least once every five years. It is noteworthy that EKKA has a very strong culture of good practice. The director and staff, during the course of separate meetings, referred to the absolute necessity that the agency itself be an exemplar of good practice.

A process of continuous improvement was also evident in the reflective discourse that the director had with the panel and in the staff evaluation of the agency performance. The SWOT analysis in the SAR is a good example of the agency’s capacity to examine itself. It is well elaborated and comprehensive and provides a good insight into the internal workings of EKKA.

**Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

## **ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE**

### **ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE**

Standard:

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

### **Evidence**

EKKA describes its core process as the external assessment of higher education by means of a variety of types of assessment, the conduct of system-level analyses, the promotion of a quality culture focussed on enhancement and the dissemination of information on the quality of Estonian higher education. It emphasises the responsibility of institutions themselves for the quality of their study programmes and the overall quality of the institution. In its SAR, EKKA maps the ESG Part 1 standards (internal quality assurance) against the specific requirements and standards in EKKA’s regulations for assessment.

In the framework for the quality assessment of SPGs at the level of doctoral studies, the panel notes the absence of mapping in respect of information systems (1.7) and public information (1.8).

In respect of ESG criteria 1.3 (student-centred learning, teaching and assessment), this is not mapped onto the procedure for the initial assessment of an SPG. The explanation offered for this gap was that no teaching had taken place, so teaching could not be assessed.

In the SAR, EKKA identifies a gap in its own procedures. Having reviewed the totality of its IAs and SPG assessments, EKKA concludes that insufficient attention is paid to mid-level management of HEIs, including the implementation of management-level decisions at the level of academic units.

This is the table used by EKKA in its SAR to show the match between internal quality processes described in Part 1 of the ESG and the regulations, requirements and standards used by EKKA:

Standard ESG Part 1	EKKA assessment criteria that take into consideration the standard					
	Institutional Accreditation	Quality Assessment of SPG in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education	Quality Assessment of SPG at the Level of Doctoral Studies	Initial Assessment of SPG	Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of SPG	Accreditation of Study Programmes in Moldova
1.1 Policy for quality assurance	Requirements for sub-sections 7.1.1 (General management) and 7.3.3 (Student research supervision and doctoral studies)	Standards for sub-section 5.1 (Study programme and study programme development)	Standards for subsection 5.1 (Study programme)	Requirements for sub-section 7 (Study programme and organization of studies)	Requirements for sub-sections 7.1 and 7.3 (Study programmes and learning outcomes; Students)	Requirements for sub-section 5 (Study programme and its development, e.g. clauses 5.1, 5.8 and 5.9)
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	Requirements for sub-section 7.2.2 (Study programme development)	Standards for sub-section 5.1 (Study programme and study programme development)	Standards for sub-section 5.1 (Study programme)	Requirements for sub-section 7 (Study programme and organization of studies)	Requirements for sub-section 7.2 (Study programme development and requirements for teaching staff)	Requirements for sub-section 5 (Study programme and its development)
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	Requirements for sub-section 7.2.3.2 (Student academic progress and student assessment)	Standards for sub-section 5.3 (Teaching and learning)	Standards for sub-section 5.4 (Teaching, learning, research and/or creative activity)		Requirements for sub-section 7.1 (Study programmes and learning outcomes)	Requirements for sub-section 6 (Teaching and learning, see e.g. clause 6.2)
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	Requirements for sub-sections 7.2.1 and 7.2.3 (Student academic progress and student assessment, Effectiveness of teaching and learning, formation of the student body)	Standards for sub-sections 5.1 and 5.3 (Study programme and study programme development, Teaching and learning)	Standards for sub-sections 5.4 and 5.5 (Teaching, learning, research and/or creative activity; Doctoral students)	Requirements for sub-section 7 (Study programme and organization of studies)	Requirements for sub-sections 7.1 and 7.3 (Study programmes and learning outcomes, Students)	Requirements for sub-section 8 (Students)
1.5 Teaching staff	Requirements for sub-section 7.1.2 (Personnel management)	Standards for sub-section 5.4 (Teaching staff)	Standards for sub-section 5.4 (Teaching staff)	Requirements for sub-section 8 (Teaching staff)	Requirements for sub-sections 7.2 and 8.1 (Study programme development and requirements for teaching staff; Resources/	Requirements for sub-section 7 (Teaching staff)

					Teaching staff)	
1.6 Learning resources and student support	Requirements for sub-sections 7.1.3 and 7.2.4 (Management of financial resources and infrastructure, Support processes for learning)	Standards for sub-section 5.2 (Resources)	Standards for sub-sections 5.2 and 5.5 (Resources, Doctoral students)	Requirements for sub-sections 7 and 9 (Study programme and organization of studies, Resources)	Requirements for sub-section 8 (Assessment of the resources for conducting studies)	Requirements for sub-section 9 (Resources)
1.7 Information management	Requirements for sub-sections 7.1.3 and 7.2.4 (Management of financial resources and infrastructure, Support processes for learning)	Standards for sub-sections 5.1 and 5.3 (Study programme and study programme development, Teaching and learning)		Requirements for sub-sections 7 and 9 (Study programme and organization of studies; Resources)	Requirements for sub-sections 7.1, 7.2 and 8.3 (Study programmes and learning outcomes; Study programme development and requirements for teaching staff; Assessment of the resources for conducting studies / Teaching and learning environments)	Clause 6.1 under sub-section 6 (Teaching and Learning)
1.8 Public information	Requirements for sub-section 7.1.1 (General management)			Requirements for sub-section 9 (Resources)	Requirements for sub-section 8.2 (Financial resources)	Clause 6.1 under sub-section 6 (Teaching and Learning)
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	Requirements for sub-section 7.2.2 (Study programme development)	Standards for sub-section 5.1 (Study programme and study programme development)	Standards for sub-section 5.1 (Study programme)	Requirements for sub-section 7 (Requirements for the quality of instruction)	Requirements for sub-section 7.2 (Study programme development and requirements for teaching staff)	Requirements for sub-section 5 (Study programme and its development)
1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance	Based on legislation, all external assessments by EKKa are conducted on a cyclical basis. For further information, see sub-sections 1.4.1 (Transitional evaluation and re-evaluation of study programme groups), 1.4.3 (Institutional accreditation) and 1.4.4 (Quality assessment of study programme groups).	Based on clause 33 the HEQAC made the proposal to the Minister of Education of the Republic of Moldova to accredit the study programmes on a cyclical basis for three to five years.				



## Analysis

The panel was not satisfied that there was a valid basis for the absence of mapping in respect of 1.7/1.8 on the assessment of SPGs for doctoral studies and in respect of 1.3 on initial studies assessment. Whilst the panel does want to avoid any unnecessary duplication, it thinks that these criteria should be addressed explicitly and systematically. The panel does acknowledge that EKKA fully follows the ESG, Part 1 procedures in respect of all other fields.

Standard 1.3 is a new standard in the revised ESG. Its specific intent is to encourage institutional focus on student-centred learning and teaching. EKKA has indicated that it proposes to increase its own focus on this area. To that end, it should seek to create an institutional mind-set that sees students as co-creators of the learning process. Thus, the dimensions of this standard need to be interpreted as ranging much wider than a consideration of teaching.

In respect of ESG 1.7 and 1.8, the panel is concerned that this mapping is omitted in a new area of activity for EKKA –assessment at doctoral level. EKKA should review all its own data and any data available from other sources in the first instance and look at linking this data to the new SPGs. It should then consider what additionality could be brought to the SPG reporting in respect of these two criteria.

The panel concurs with EKKA's own findings in respect of the evaluation of middle management. At its meetings with quality officers of HEIs, the panel got confirmation of this gap. As EKKA develops its processes for combined evaluation, it is likely that this gap will be addressed.

## Panel recommendations

EKKA must reconsider its approach to reviewing institutional compliance with the ESG standards on internal quality assurance in the three areas omitted from its mapping. The gaps in its framework in relation to information management and reporting on the new guidelines for Ph.D. Study Programmes should be addressed. On initial assessments, the approach should address comprehensively all of ESG, Part 1, particularly on Teaching and Learning (Standard 1.3).

## Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

### ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

Standard:

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

## Evidence

All of EKKA's evaluation procedures have been developed in accordance with the legislative requirements and strategic priorities of the Republic of Estonia and in alignment with the ESG. The agency has developed its model of SPG assessment to specifically address a national requirement. The agency publishes all its policies and procedures. It holds regular consultation with HEIs to elicit their views on its policies and procedures. It organises seminars at which HEIs can reflect on the experience of assessment, share good practice with other institutions and consider the implication of assessments. EKKA uses these seminars as part of its own reflective practice. EKKA stakeholders are systematically consulted as part of the process of developing appropriate methodologies that are geared to achieve defined aims and objectives.

EKKA itself holds internal seminars to review its own performance and to benchmark its performance against comparable agencies. As a consequence of this procedure, EKKA is now working on procedures to strengthen the focus on student feedback and institutional responsiveness in the next cycle of IA. EKKA is also responding to institutional concern about duplication of assessment activity. As a consequence, it has developed a pilot model for integrated assessment that was trialled at the Estonian Academy of Arts. The chair of this integrated assessment told the panel that it was a successful model and added that perhaps more time might be required in larger institutions.

As a consequence of its awareness of the need for constant review, EKKA has made a range of changes between 2013 and 2017:

- The assessment criteria for SPGs have been updated and have a stronger focus on student-centred learning. This also takes account of the development of the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 in which EKKA was involved;
- The criteria for decision making in respect of the assessment of SPGs have been modified to make them more specific and transparent;
- An integrated assessment model which combined SPG and IA assessments has been developed and was used on a pilot basis;
- A pilot combined VET/HE integrated assessment model was developed and used for the first time;
- New policies and procedures for the assessment of SPGs in doctoral studies have been developed following extensive consultation with the HEIs.

Consultation with the Students' Union of Estonia takes place on a regular basis, and EKKA staff members brief students on the operation of EKKA during the "summer school" conducted by the Students' Union to train student members.

EKKA has developed relationships with a range of other national agencies, for example, the Estonian Qualifications Authority and the Information Technology Foundation. It consults with employer bodies and unions. The panel learned from these agencies of the development of a unit producing national reports on future skills needs. It was told by employer representatives of a shortage of labour in the country and of the need for more graduates in specific disciplines. The panel also learned of the decline in the Estonian population, its impact on enrolment to date and some potential future impact in relation to system re-alignment and national skills shortages.

In its SAR, EKKA provided an extensive report on its activities in Moldova. In 2014, EKKA won a tender for the accreditation of master's degree programmes in law in the universities of Moldova. Between January and October 2015, EKKA conducted the accreditation of 26 programmes in 13 different HEIs.

The panel scheduled one full meeting to hear directly from those involved in the assessment of Moldovan law programmes. The panel therefore heard the views of panel experts, the coordinator of the process, the chair of HEQAC, representatives of institutions in Moldova, a senior official from the Moldovan Ministry of Education and a student representative. The panel also discussed the Moldovan experience with the Director of EKKA and her staff. The panel learned that EKKA had to devise specific criteria for Moldova, which took account of the Moldovan legislative requirements, the ESG and HEQAC's own policy and procedures for decision-making. EKKA recruited and trained experts to carry out the Moldovan assessments and created five accreditation panels. EKKA conducted training sessions for university staff and evaluation professionals in Moldova. All institutions were required to prepare a self-evaluation. EKKA coordinated site visits and prepared final reports. Three out of 26 master's study programmes were recommended for accreditation for five years and 18 programmes

for three years. HEQAC recommended that five programmes not be accredited. EKKA also prepared a general report on the accreditation of programmes in Moldova.

The Ministry of Education in Moldova accepted all the findings and recommendations of the reports. At the meeting with those involved in the Moldovan process, the panel heard of the impact of the experience on the Moldovan system. The interviewees referred to “the professionalism” of the evaluators. They spoke of their new understanding that it was not enough to have “good study documents” and their realisation that they must also have the means to implement the programme. As a consequence of the assessments, HEIs have started to work much more with employers. Institutions have now put in place short- and long-term implementation plans in respect of the recommendations. The preparation of panels was noted and is being emulated. The interviewees referred to the impartiality of the process and how the experience greatly enhanced their understanding of the ESG. The involvement of stakeholders in panels also impressed them, as did the involvement of students, which had not previously happened. The interviewees stated that the current position in Moldova is that they are trying to emulate the standards of EKKA in developing their own agency.

The review panel also discussed with the MER officials and the EKKA Director the use of the European Approach on Quality Assurance for Joint Programmes. In both sets of discussions, it was explained that Estonia does not use the approach for individual programme accreditation. As a consequence, joint programmes are not evaluated at the individual level. Only in a very limited number of cases does the MER ask EKKA to perform an expert analysis to verify whether the joint study programme complies with all the requirements stipulated in the Universities’ Act. It was explained that the regulations pertaining to that legislation are often very specific and do not support the establishment of joint programmes. EKKA and the MER both mentioned possible reforms to this area in the context of the national strategic review.

At the meeting with the Heads of the HEIs, the review panel heard examples of how they have influenced the design of quality assurance procedures and how they are actively encouraged to comment on the policy and procedures of EKKA with a view to enhancing EKKA’s performance. They provided examples of suggestions they have made which have been implemented. In particular, they mentioned the decision already taken to eliminate unnecessary duplication between SPGs and IAs in the next cycle of assessments.

### **Analysis**

EKKA has now reached the stage where it is in a position to take an overview of its approach to assessment. It has concluded that there is some unnecessary duplication between its processes, and the panel concurs with this view. The panel also notes the observation of the chair of the Rectors’ Conference that it might be useful to focus any future SPG assessments on those that proved “problematic” in the first cycle. It should be noted that the model for SPG assessment was specifically developed by EKKA to meet specific national requirements. It has been constantly modified to make it more effective and the EKKA Director emphasised that all revision was aimed at enhancing its usefulness to institutions. This focus on pragmatic, flexible assistance is a notable feature of EKKA’s culture and activity.

The panel notes the variety in the size of institutions in the system. It was told that two institutions account for 50% of enrolment. There are a large number of small institutions and specialist institutions. Undoubtedly, the assessment procedures need to be tailored to the size and type of institution, and the likelihood is that a number of models of integrated assessment will need to be developed.

At present, there is a complete separation in the work of HEQAC and the VET council. A pilot HE/VET assessment was conducted at the Estonian Academy of Security Science. One team conducted the assessment, but it appears its findings were considered separately by the two councils. In view of the comments of employers, students and MER on future skills needs and lifelong learning, EKKA may wish to consider if there is any merit in integrated decision making when appropriate.

Regarding the use of the European Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, the review panel recognises that it currently has limited potential application in Estonia. The current legislative requirements do not facilitate it. The panel saw evidence of great interest in developing international joint programmes and of an awareness of the changes that need to occur to make this possible.

The panel was very impressed with the quality of EKKA's work in Moldova. In particular, there was considerable evidence that the Moldovan system as a whole had learned a great deal from the process. EKKA displayed considerable skill in developing a model for Moldova that met the legislative requirements of both countries. EKKA's emphasis on the use of the ESG had considerable influence on how the development of the Moldovan system is being approached.

#### **Panel commendations**

The panel commends EKKA on the quality of its work in assessing master's programmes in law in Moldova. The impact of this work has gone well beyond the assessment of specific programmes and is helping to steer the evolution of the quality assurance system in Moldova.

#### **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

The review panel acknowledges the good suggestion from EKKA on the need to streamline assessment procedures in order to eliminate duplication of activity for both the HEIs and EKKA. This suggestion should be implemented in the next cycle of assessments. Approaches to integration of assessment types should be explored more fully.

#### **Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

### **ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES**

Standard:

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent
- an external assessment normally including a site visit
- a report resulting from the external assessment
- a consistent follow-up

#### **2012 review recommendation (ESG 2.6)**

It is recommended as a good practice that higher education institutions make their improvement-oriented measures known to the target audiences, as this increases public accountability and awareness, and also contributes towards the organisational culture of continuous development. These measures as well could be made public via the EKKA website, to complement assessment committee reports and EKKA Quality Assessment Council decisions.

## **Evidence**

EKKA prepares a schedule of assessments, often agreed some years in advance, with institutions. For both IA and assessment of SPGs and for assessments conducted in Moldova, the classic assessment model, including a self-evaluation report, a site-visit, a report, recommendations and a progress report is followed. Follow-up procedures are required in the case of conditions attached to approvals. In these cases, institutions must outline how the conditions have been addressed within a specified time. The only exception to the site-visit requirement occurs when the MER requests a desk-based assessment of an application by a HEI to provide a new programme. All quality assurance processes are documented, and the documents are published. The published documentation is available on the EKKA website, which has been extensively updated since the date of the last review.

Institutions are required to submit their self-evaluation reports two to three months prior to a site visit. EKKA offers self-assessment training to institutions and it has also published guides for drafting self-evaluation reports. Expert reviewers who met the panel stated that they always received the documentation in good time to prepare for a review. Quality assurance officers from HEIs told the panel that they could always approach EKKA for assistance in preparing for all types of evaluations.

After the site-visits, EKKA surveys institutions and looks for feedback on all elements of the site visit.

In discussion with the quality officers of HEIs, some of them suggested to the panel that areas for improvement could include greater consistency in tone of recommendations and, in a small number of instances, more realism about the practicality of implementing recommendations. Quality assurance officers were also asked about the process for appeals of decisions and displayed a clear understanding of the criteria for appeals. It was noteworthy that they, the heads of institutions, HEQAC members, Appeals Board members and the MER officials all referred to the right of institutions, as a final stage of appeal, to go to court. They all added that there had been no instance where this proved necessary.

EKKA has developed guidelines for its expert reviewers, and each review panel is assigned a coordinator. The duties and responsibilities of panel members, chairs and coordinators are documented. Experts interviewed by the panel referred to the “good use of protocol and procedures”. They referred with approval to the consultative nature of the process, the quality of introductory meetings, the agency focus on enhancement, the composition of panels and the thoroughness and professionalism of EKKA in approaching all types of assessment. When asked for suggestions on improving the policy and procedures for assessment, some experts felt that research should be considered in all types of assessments; others felt that it should be left to the Research Council. Panel members also expressed the view that the final meeting at the reviewed institution served a very useful purpose.

EKKA notes in the SAR some duplication between IA and SPG assessment, and the HEIs feel the same. All parties are working on creating more streamlined procedures.

The panel sought the views of students on the value of these procedures, and they indicated that more could be done by institutions to get meaningful feedback from students and to take action based on that feedback. The MER officials also mentioned the need for stronger institutional responsiveness to student issues, including but not limited to, international students.

## **Analysis**

EKKA follows the ESG on quality assurance processes. The reliability of its decision-making processes has been enhanced by the publication of the criteria and procedures used in decision-making. Heads

of institutions understood and saw value in the differing periods of approval and the criteria used to make these decisions. The establishment of an Appeals Board has added a necessary structural component to the system, and it appears to have operated effectively in the very small number (2) of cases where it has been used.

In considering how EKKA might enhance its performance, one consistent theme emerged: a greater focus on review of institutional response to report recommendations.

EKKA publishes in full all its reports including all improvement-oriented measures. HEIs publish all the EKKA reports; they do so on a voluntary basis. EKKA is not in a position to legally compel any publication by an HEI, in view of the legal autonomy conferred on institutions as a consequence of their status in Estonian law as “legal persons”. The panel discussed this matter with MER officials and accepts that this legal autonomy is an important feature of the Estonian higher education system and structure. It was evident to the panel that the publication of report findings is accepted by all actors as an important feature of the quality assurance system. In addition to EKKA publishing reports in full, a consolidated annual overview appears in the MER annual publication.

The use of desk-based assessment in relation to the opinion requested by the MER on an application by a HEI for permission to offer a new programme was accepted by the panel as appropriate for this specific request.

The panel considered where EKKA could exercise significant impact over the next five years and concluded that one area that could be targeted is the strengthening of the oversight of institutional implementation of report recommendations.

#### **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

The balance between assessment, feedback and implementation of recommendations should be reviewed so that more attention is focussed on the implementation of assessment recommendations

#### **Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

#### **ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS**

Standard:

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

#### **2012 review recommendation (ESG 3.8)**

Expert reports, as published by EKKA, could contribute more towards transparency how conflicts of interest are avoided. Although EKKA provides on its website CVs of experts who served, e.g. for institutional accreditation, on the expert reports, review team members are only listed, with no information about their background or representation, which makes it difficult for the general public to assess how EKKA follows the principles in forming the assessment committees.

#### **Evidence**

EKKA takes considerable care in the selection of national and international experts, in the composition of panels and in the preparation of panel members for their work. Experts are selected in accordance with the documented EKKA procedures for the selection of experts. These procedures are published online. These procedures outline the requirements in respect of all the different types of evaluation. In the case of initial assessment and re-assessment of SPGs, EKKA may use only national experts if the

required expertise can be found in Estonia. Typically, EKKA takes three months to prepare a panel for a site visit.

All panels now have student members. Student panel members stated that they were treated exactly the same as non-student members, that their views carried equal weight and that they were given an equal share of the workload. EKKA cooperates with the Estonian Federation of Student Unions, ESU, and the German Student Accreditation Pool in selecting its student experts.

Panels have an appropriate balance of expertise and a balanced representation from employers/social partners, students and academics. EKKA identifies potential experts from a variety of sources including other agencies, ESU, international professional/academic associations, employers' bodies and other national and international associations. Foreign experts can also apply for the position of an assessment expert by submitting an application for evaluation. The application procedure is published on the website. An electronic database of experts is maintained by EKKA.

EKKA has published procedures in place to avoid conflicts of interest for panel members. An institution that is about to be reviewed can query the selection of an expert if they believe there is a conflict of interest or that a potential panel member does not have the requisite expertise. The HEI rectors gave an example of a panel member being changed when an institution queried the currency of the academic expertise of one proposed panel member.

EKKA has invested considerable effort in developing its approach to the training of experts. They devote time to ensuring that the experts become familiar with the ESG – both the standards and guidelines. Experts spoke in very positive terms about this training.

In the case of its assessment of Moldovan law programmes, EKKA prepared specific guidelines and procedures so as to take account of specific Moldovan legislative requirements. At its meeting with those involved in the accreditation of law programmes in Moldova, the spokesperson for the Ministry for Education said that the first lesson learned by Moldova from the process was “the professionalism of the evaluators”. The head of one of the law programmes said that in advance of the evaluation he thought he had a very good programme and that after the evaluation he realised that he had a lot to do. He described the interaction with the external experts as uniformly positive. It was also clear from the meeting with the Moldovan group that the inclusion of stakeholders on panels made a very strong impact on them.

The EKKA methodology was also used in developmental work with Azerbaijan.

### **Analysis**

EKKA has developed a strong set of policies and procedures for the selection, preparation and utilisation of external experts. It has done a very good job documenting these procedures, and experts confirmed that they had undergone very high quality preparation. International experts particularly appreciated the initial briefing on the Estonian higher education system. EKKA staff told the ENQA panel that, at the request of international experts, panel members are now supplied with information on the Research Council report on an institution in advance of an IA. It is clear that EKKA is constantly monitoring the effectiveness of its approach to panel briefing and training.

The panel devoted one full meeting to hearing from those who had been involved in the assessment of law programmes in Moldova. To fully understand the impact of the EKKA approach in Moldova, one must keep in mind that master's level degrees were only introduced in Moldova in 2009 and that the EKKA cycle of assessments gave the Moldovan Ministry its first sense of the quality of its programmes.

All decisions made by HEQAC on the Moldovan programmes were accepted in full. It was also clear from this meeting that the evolution of quality assurance in Moldova is being heavily influenced by what was learned by institutions, students, stakeholders and the Ministry from this experience. The panel concluded that EKKA had done outstanding work in introducing a complete assessment structure to another country.

#### **Panel commendations**

The review panel commends the leadership role of EKKA in supporting the international development of good practice in quality assurance.

#### **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

EKKA could disseminate more fully to an international audience the excellent policies, procedures and practices that it has developed for the identification, selection, panel composition, training and support of international experts.

#### **Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

#### **ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES**

##### **Standard:**

Any outcomes or judgements made, as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

#### **2012 review recommendation (ESG 2.3, 3.7)**

To secure transparency and proportionality in decision making which affects all types – state, public and private – providers, and to properly manage expectations on part of both HEI and students in the programmes, clear decision-making criteria should be identified for both transitional re-evaluations and assessments of study programme groups in the first and second cycle of higher education. The clarity should especially be achieved in noting the importance of weighing the conformity between different standards.

As transitional re-evaluation procedure will be an on-going one and, according to EKKA's self-evaluation report, may continue until 2017, it is strongly advisable to streamline the decision-making process by establishing more clarity between types of component assessment judgments and proposals toward granting or depriving higher education institutions rights in study programme groups.

It should be discussed, how more transparency into the processes of transitional evaluation and re-evaluation, and initial assessment of study programme groups in first and second cycles in higher education could be brought. In both cases, decisions issued by the Ministry of Education and Research affect degree granting powers of education providers, therefore, fair competition conditions and information provision should be secured.

#### **Evidence**

All assessment criteria for all its activity related to higher education have been published in both English and Estonian on the EKKA website. The preparation of assessment panels places a great deal of emphasis on the need for consistency in the application of the published criteria.



In line with good international practice, EKKA sends draft assessment reports to the institutions so that errors of fact can be noted. Institutions may also comment on the report, and their comments are sent to the panels. Panels then create final reports, and a consensual approach to creating the final report is preferred. In exceptional (and very rare) cases, a reasoned dissenting view is also submitted.

The panel sought the views of all stakeholders on the transparency of the decision-making process of HEQAC. All stakeholders expressed confidence in the procedures and in particular welcomed the publication of the criteria for decision-making. Institutions were very clear on why, for example, they might get a condition attached to a decision and on the difference between this and a specified period of approval for three or five years.

EKKA continues to refine its criteria for decision-making and to make appropriate amendments. For example, the criteria for determining when to conduct the next quality assessment of an SPG were clarified in 2016.

As decisions are made by HEQAC, the review panel devoted considerable time to examining its procedures, understanding its relationship to the Board of the Archimedes Foundation and in analysing its operating standards. The review panel met the chair of HEQAC, members of the Board and members of the Archimedes Supervisory Board and Management Group. From these discussions, the review panel learned that the staff of EKKA performs a consistency check on all reports before they are sent to HEQAC. In discussions with EKKA staff, this procedure was explained and reports from expert panels are referred back to the chairs of the panels if any inconsistencies are detected. At its seminars with HEIs, EKKA then uses its consolidated analyses to assist all institutions in developing a common understanding of its criteria for decision making. EKKA also provides training to all HEI staff that work specifically in quality assurance on the concept of consistent interpretation of standards and guidelines.

### **Analysis**

EKKA now has transparent, published criteria in place for all types of assessments, and these are applied consistently.

EKKA places great emphasis on delivering transparent and consistent reports and decisions. This is evident in the guidelines for the training of panel members as well as in the published criteria for decision-making.

Having evaluated the procedures for decision making in HEQAC, the panel concluded that the standard of consistency and transparency in decision-making has received considerable attention and improvement since the last review in 2012. In particular, the publication and refinement of criteria for decision-making has enhanced the process. Institutions displayed a high level of trust and confidence in the decision-making process, and all stakeholders showed a high level of confidence in the impartiality of the decision-making process.

**Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

## ESG 2.6 REPORTING

### Standard:

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

### 2012 Report, ESG 2.5

The Review Panel encourages EKKA to cooperate with other structures and agencies in Estonia, but most importantly, with stakeholders themselves regarding improvement in information provision. The study which the agency plans to do about students' information needs is something to commend, but the key is to indeed make it happen and then plan necessary action to improve the information provision.

Publishing and availability of reports should not just be a formal measure, but it must reach the intended audience. Therefore, user-friendliness of EKKA database with assessment decisions and expert reports should be improved. Institutional accreditation policies should be clarified as to what, why and how has to be made public in relation to external quality assurance procedures.

### Evidence

EKKA publishes assessment reports and decisions for all activities on its website and database. This is done after HEQAC has adopted a final decision and that decision has been communicated to the relevant HEI. In its written decision, HEQAC includes again the main strengths and areas for improvement outlined in the panel's assessment report.

The ENQA panel sought the views of HEIs on the reports. In general, they expressed a high level of satisfaction with the reports. It appears from their comments that occasional difficulties of interpretation arise between the English and Estonian versions of reports. These were ascribed to translation idiosyncrasies, and the institutions said that such occasional minor difficulties are dealt with very quickly by EKKA. Quality assurance officers also mentioned some unexpected variation in tone of commentary and again they felt that translation might impact on tone.

EKKA tries to ensure that its reports are accessible and clear. To assist its effectiveness in this area, EKKA seeks feedback from all its stakeholders. For example, student union representatives told the ENQA panel that EKKA staff members regularly attend student union training sessions in order to brief students on reports. EKKA also held a special conference to inform all relevant stakeholders about the findings of its assessment of the quality of teacher training. A spokesperson for the teachers' union said that this had been a very successful event and that it had given very important information to parents and others interested in the quality of teacher education programmes. The MER officials also commented on this event and the level of public interest it generated. The EKKA reports are also being used to assist the labour forecasting and future skills analysis now underway in Estonia. When asked to suggest areas for improvement, the spokesperson for the Information Technology Foundation suggested that when important quality issues are raised in a report, these issues should be specifically referenced in the recommendations so that stakeholders can see the follow-through mechanism that is proposed. He also emphasised the need for more reporting on the implementation of recommendations.

The spokespersons for the employers said that EKKA reports were of considerable assistance to their endeavour to hasten the pace of institutional change. Rectors of HEIs made the same observation. The spokesperson for the Estonian Qualifications Authority stated that EKKA's influence on

“developing quality culture has been impressive” and he and representatives of other stakeholder organisations referred to EKKA as a catalyst in “the national system-level conversation”. The MER officials and other stakeholder agencies also commented on the engagement of the EKKA Director and staff in other national strategy groups. In particular, the influence of the Director on the development of the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy was mentioned on several occasions.

### **Analysis**

The panel found considerable evidence in the SAR and the website of EKKA’s adherence to ESG 2.6. It also found evidence of improvement since the previous ENQA review in 2012.

The website has received considerable attention, and it is easy to find reports and assessment decisions. Having reviewed a sample of reports published online, the review panel concluded that reviews are well-structured and communicate effectively to the target audiences.

EKKA also makes considerable efforts to disseminate its findings both through its website and in direct communication with relevant stakeholders. EKKA acknowledges that its reports are not always as widely read as it would like, and the panel suggests that further work be undertaken on identifying how best to communicate with different target audiences. This may be particularly important as the higher education system changes and develops. The panel heard from the spokesperson for the Employers’ Confederation that many employers (and others) have preconceived ideas about the quality of different programmes and institutions, and that this tends to influence, for example, the recruitment of new employees. EKKA cannot address such preconceptions on its own. Institutions must also address this issue as must other system-level agencies and foundations. This may be another potential area for thematic analysis.

### **Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

#### **ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS**

Standard:

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

### **Evidence**

EKKA has introduced an appeals procedure for all external assessment processes.

An Appeals Committee was established and introduced through the statutes of EKKA in September 2016. This action was prompted by an appeal lodged by the University of Tartu against a decision of HEQAC to grant a five-year approval of an SPG. HEQAC had to review its own decision. It did not amend its decision but did provide additional commentary on the evidence base for its decision. EKKA reviewed this process and concluded that the creation of an additional, separate, independent review body would assist impartiality of the process. The Appeals Committee was thus established as a completely separate entity from HEQAC.

The Appeals Committee operates under EKKA as an independent body elected for a fixed period of three years by the Supervisory Board of the Archimedes Foundation. The Appeals Committee provides HEQAC with an independent opinion on the validity of a complaint against or challenge of a HEQAC decision. This new body therefore deals with both procedural complaints and appeals. The composition, formation and rules of procedure of the Appeals Committee have been formally adopted

and are published in full. Opinions/recommendations of the Appeals Committee are sent to HEQAC who make the final decision. The formal regulations allow for a further level of appeal to the courts.

In May 2017, the Estonian Business School lodged a challenge to a secondary condition attached to a seven-year approval of an SPG. The Appeals Committee considered the challenge and came to the conclusion that additional substantive justifications were required if the condition was to remain in place. HEQAC provided the additional justifications, and as of October 2017, there have been no further developments on this matter.

An institution may also file a challenge to the procedures adopted by EKKA to HEQAC. In the case of re-evaluation of SPG procedures used by EKKA, these may be challenged by way of an appeal to the Management Board of EKKA.

As of 2017, no appeals have been filed in court against administrative actions of EKKA or decisions taken by HEQAC.

### **Analysis**

The evolution of EKKA is well captured in the evolution of its processes for decision-making and the development of procedures to handle complaints. The publication of the criteria for decision-making has brought a lot of clarity to its decisions, and institutions see not only how but also why decisions are made. This is evident in the widespread institutional acceptance of decisions on the duration of approvals and the imposition of secondary conditions.

The impetus for the establishment of the Appeals Committee arose from EKKA's own reflection on how it handled an appeal. The agency response was to seek to strengthen its own procedures and this is to be welcomed. As of the date of this review, opinions from the Appeals Committee are just that - opinions. In the example cited from 2017, HEQAC acted on the opinion of the Appeals Committee and did as it suggested. From the ENQA panel's interviews with the director of EKKA and the Chair of HEQAC, it is clear that the Appeals Committee operates with complete independence and a high level of systemic, cultural and moral authority.

As this Appeals Committee is a relatively new addition, there was limited evidence available for the panel in considering its effectiveness. Its own operating procedures have worked effectively to date but may need some development in relation to the separation of complaints and appeals and how each is handled.

### **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

As the Appeals Board (in relation to decisions of HEQAC) has only been in existence for a short period of time, it would be good practice to appraise regularly its operation and to consider making its findings binding on HEQAC. The panel understands that this may require a legal change.

### **Panel conclusion: fully compliant**

# ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

## **RESEARCH, TEACHING AND LEARNING**

As research becomes more important at institutional level as well as at the level of teaching and learning on all higher education programmes, EKKA should continue to strengthen its working relationship with the Estonian Research Council, including the possibility of more formal linkages between the two agencies.

## **INTERNATIONALISATION**

EKKA has made exemplary progress on the internationalisation of its activity, and its own suggestion that it should now target an area of specialisation in relation to future international activity is well judged and should be pursued.

## **SOCIETAL CHALLENGES**

In considering a methodology and themes for thematic analysis, EKKA in consultation with its stakeholders might consider how major societal challenges could be integrated into the analysis of transversal professional discipline domains.

## **RECOGNITION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDY**

The panel heard from students of some difficulties they encounter in undertaking study abroad. Students described some difficulties in having home institutions recognise the credits achieved abroad and in reconciling study abroad with the duration of a national programme. In turn, this then causes some difficulty in student funding. The MER, EKKA and the HEIs expressed strong support for international study. At system level, it is important that these anomalies are resolved.

# CONCLUSION

## SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

### ESG 3.5

The evident high level of cohesion, the quality of leadership and the professionalism, responsiveness, flexibility and work ethic of all EKKA employees particularly impressed the review panel

### ESG 2.4

The review panel commends the leadership role of EKKA in supporting the international development of good practice in quality assurance.

## OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1: Fully Compliant

3.2: Fully Compliant

3.3: Fully Compliant

3.4: Substantially Compliant

3.5: Fully Compliant

2.1: Substantially Compliant

2.2: Fully Compliant

2.3: Fully Compliant

2.4: Fully Compliant

2.5: Fully Compliant

2.6: Fully Compliant

2.7: Fully Compliant

### Panel Recommendations (ESG 3.4)

EKKA needs to put in place a more structured approach to the dissemination and utilization of thematic analyses and to demonstrate more systematically how it uses the outcomes of these analyses

### Panel Recommendations (ESG 2.1)

EKKA must reconsider its approach to reviewing institutional compliance with the ESG standards on internal quality assurance in the three areas omitted from its mapping. The gaps in its framework in relation to information management and reporting on the new guidelines for Ph.D. Study Programmes should be addressed. On initial assessments, the approach should address comprehensively all of ESG, Part 1, particularly on Teaching and Learning (Standard 1.3).

### Formal Opinion of Review Panel

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, EKKA is in compliance with the ESG.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

### 3.1

EKKA should consider establishing a Stakeholder Advisory Board which would, *inter alia*, provide oversight of strategic planning, act as a conduit of information about key EKKA activity to a wide range of stakeholders and bring timely and relevant external activity to the attention of EKKA

### 3.3

The panel suggests that the working relationship with the Research Council be a focus for inter-institutional collaboration, including system-level thematic analysis. As the relationship between EKKA and the Research Council strengthens, it may be worth considering in the future if these two agencies could operate on a similar legal basis.

In considering the next cycle of quality assurance processes, the panel suggests a much stronger focus on follow-through and more oversight of the implementation of recommendations.

### 3.4

EKKA should consider conducting a thematic evaluation on improving methods for eliciting student feedback, utilising that feedback and providing evidence of the impact/changes directly taken as a consequence of that feedback. The context of this thematic analysis should be an increased focus on student-centred learning in the quality assurance policies and processes of the system. Other thematic evaluations should be scheduled on a regular basis over the next five years.

### 3.6

EKKA should ensure that there is consistent elicitation of feedback from experts on their experience of the process. Experts should be provided with feedback on the institutional and agency evaluation of the experts' performance. Experts should also be provided with an update on the impact of their recommendations, should they request this follow-up.

AS HEQAC plays such an important role in the agency, a systematic programme aimed at developing the skills and competencies of members of HEQAC should be introduced as a regular part of the enhancement activity of the agency.

### 2.2

The review panel acknowledges the good suggestion from EKKA on the need to streamline assessment procedures in order to eliminate duplication of activity for both the HEIs and EKKA. This suggestion should be implemented in the next cycle of assessments. Approaches to integration of assessment types should be explored more fully.

### 2.3

The balance between assessment, feedback and implementation of recommendations should be reviewed so that more attention is focussed on the implementation of assessment recommendations.

### 2.5

EKKA should consider conducting a thematic evaluation on improving methods for eliciting student feedback, utilising that feedback and providing evidence of the impact/changes directly taken as a consequence of that feedback. The context of this thematic analysis should be an increased focus on student-centred learning in the quality assurance policies and processes of the system. Other thematic evaluations should be scheduled on a regular basis over the next five years.

### 2.7

As the Appeals Board (in relation to decisions of HEQAC) has only been in existence for a short period of time, it would be good practice to appraise regularly its operation and to consider making its findings binding on HEQAC.

# ANNEXES

## ANNEX 1: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

SUNDAY, 8 OCTOBER 2017		
17.30 19.30	Pre-meeting of panel Dinner	
MONDAY, 9 OCTOBER 2017		
TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
8.30	Panel arrive at EKKA	
8.45-9.45	Meeting with the CEO	<b>Heli Mattisen (PhD)</b> – Director of EKKA; in EKKA – 8 years
9.45-10.00	Private panel meeting	
10.00-11.00	Meeting with the senior staff of EKKA	<b>Mr Hillar Bauman</b> – Assessment Director (study programme groups: initial and re-assessment, quality assessment incl. doctoral education); in EKKA – 8 years <b>Ms Liia Lauri</b> – Assessment Director (institutional accreditation) and Analyst, responsible for feedback system; in EKKA – 7 years <b>Dr Maiki Udam</b> – Director for development and international cooperation (incl. accreditations in Moldova); in EKKA – 8 years <b>Ms Tiia Bach</b> – Assessment Coordinator and the holder of the Quality Handbook; in EKKA – 8 years <b>Ms Lagle Zobel</b> – Lawyer, responsible for drafting projects for HEQAC decisions based on assessment reports; in EKKA – 8 years
11.00-11.15	Review panel's private discussion	
11.15-12.00	Meet Chair and some members of HEQAC (To include a member from Appeals Board)	<b>Professor Tõnu Meidla</b> (University of Tartu), Chair of HEQAC <b>Professor Liina Siib</b> (Estonian Academy of Arts), Member of HEQAC <b>Mr Hanno Tomberg</b> (recent position: Eesti Meedia, Programme Director), Member of HEQAC <b>Ms Katrina Koppel</b> , Student representative, Member of HEQAC <b>Dr Martin Hallik</b> (University of Tartu, Library Director), Member of the Appeals' Committee <a href="#">via Skype</a>
12.00-12.15	Review panel's private discussion	
12.15-13.00	Meeting with Research Council	<b>Dr Andres Koppel</b> – Estonian Research Council, Director General <b>Ms Eeva-Liisa Otsus</b> – Estonian Research Council, Department of R&D Analyses, Head of the Department
13.00-14.00	Lunch (panel only)	
14.00-14.45	Management Board and the Council of Archimedes Foundation	<b>Mr Rait Toompere</b> – Archimedes Foundation, Chairman of the Management Board <b>Dr Indrek Reimand</b> – Ministry of Education and Research, Deputy General for Higher Education and Research, Member of the Council <a href="#">via Skype</a>
14.45-15.00	Review panel's private discussion	
15.00-15.45	Meeting with members of the Ministry of Education and Research	<b>Mr Margus Haidak</b> – Head of the Higher Education Department <b>Ms Sigrid Vaher</b> – Deputy Head of the Higher Education Department; Representative of MoE in EKKA working groups <b>Ms Sille Uusna</b> – Head of Educational Legislation
15.45-16.00	Panel Private meeting	
16.00-16.45	Meeting with Students	<b>Ms Britt Järvet</b> – Federation of Estonian Student Unions, Chair of the Management Board <b>Ms Eva Liina Kliiman</b> – Tallinn University, MA student; Member of the Senate of TU <b>Ms Jekaterina Masenko</b> – Tallinn University of Technology, BA student; Student Union of TTU, Coordinator of Foreign Students; Member of the Students' Quality Network <b>Ms Heidi Maiberg</b> – University of Tartu, MA student (Religious Studies); EKKA expert: The Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church – IA 2016; re-evaluation of SPG of Theology – 2017 <b>Mr Joosep Raudsepp</b> – Tallinn University, MA student (Communication); EKKA expert: Estonian University of Applied Sciences – IA 2014; Lääne-Viru College – IA 2014 <b>Ms Talvi Pihl</b> – Tallinn University of Technology, graduated MA studies 2017; EKKA expert: Estonian Business School – IA 2013; SPG assessment of Agriculture, forestry and fisheries – 2016 <b>Ms Vanessa Yasmine Birgitta Roosmets</b> – Estonian Business School, MA student; EKKA expert: re-evaluation of SPG of Social Sciences and Business & Administration 2017; member of the Students' Quality Network
16.45-17.00	Panel Private meeting	
17.00-17.30	Meeting with the representatives of the Employers' Confederation	<b>Mr Toomas Tamsar</b> – Estonian Employers' Confederation, CEO <b>Ms. Anneli Entson</b> – Estonian Employers' Confederation, Education Adviser
17.30-18.30	Private Panel meeting	
TUESDAY, 10 OCTOBER 2017		
TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
8.45-9.30	Meeting to review work in Moldova (Include head of institution, expert reviewer, head of reviewed MA programme)	<b>Mr Urmas Volens</b> – law office Nove Advokaadibüroo, Chair of EKKA review panel  <b>In Moldova, via Skype (with the help of interpreter in Moldova):</b> <b>Ms Nadejda Velisco</b> – Head of the Department of Higher Education, Moldovan Ministry of Education <b>Mr Alexandr Cauia</b> – Dean of the faculty of law, ULIM (Free International University of Moldova) <b>Mr Adrian Ermurachi</b> – Review expert (Student expert at that time) <b>Mr Andrei Chiciuc</b> – Contact person of the accreditation at the Technical University of Moldova and an observer of the process, President of ANACIP



9.30-9.45	Review panel's private discussion	
9.45-10.30	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs/HEI representatives (Universities)	<b>Professor Tiit Land</b> – Rector of Tallinn University; Estonian Rectors' Conference, Chair of the Board; Member of the Council of the Archimedes Foundation <b>Professor Mart Kalm</b> – Rector of the Estonian Academy of Arts <b>Professor Mait Klaassen</b> – Rector of the University of Life Sciences <b>Professor Jakob Kübarsepp</b> – recent Vice-Rector for Studies of Tallinn University of Technology <b>Dr Maarja Murumägi</b> – Vice Rector for Studies of the Estonian Business School
10.30-10.45	Review panel's private discussion	
10.45-11.15	Meeting with quality assurance officers of Universities	<b>Ms Helen Joost</b> – Tallinn University, Head of Study Department <b>Ms Hanna Haavapuu</b> – Tallinn University of Technology, Office of Academic Affairs, Head of the Development and Quality Division <b>Ms Jane Kreek</b> – Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, Head of the Registry and Student Affairs Department  <b>Ms Kersti Viitkar</b> – Tartu Health Care College, Vice Rector for Studies <b>Ms Anne Rooste</b> – Tallinn University of Applied Sciences, Head of the Study Department <b>Ms Jaanika Mõlter</b> – Estonian Aviation Academy, Quality Manager <i>via Skype</i> <b>Mr Ants AVer</b> – <i>Estonian Aviation Academy, Vice Rector for Studies, (via Skype)</i>
11.20-11.50	Meeting with quality assurance officers of other HEIs	
11.50-12.05	Review panel's private discussion	
12.05-12.50	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs (Universities of Applied Sciences and other types of institutions)	<b>Ms Ülle Ernits</b> – Rector of Tallinn Health Care College <b>Mr Vallo Nuust</b> – Rector of Tartu Art College <i>via Skype</i> <b>Mr Andres Pung</b> – Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, Vice Rector for Studies <b>Mr Lauri Peetrimägi</b> – Tallinn University of Applied Sciences, Vice Rector for Studies <b>Ms Eneken Titov</b> – Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences (private professional HEI)
12.50-13.45	Lunch (panel only)	
13.45-14.30	Meeting with stakeholders	<b>Dr Olav Aarna</b> – Estonian Qualifications' Authority, Counsellor, former Member of the Management Board <b>Ms Heli Aru</b> – Information Technology Foundation for Education, Head of the Management Board <b>Ms Margit Timakov</b> – Estonian Teachers' Union, Head of the Management Board <b>Mr Jüri Jõema</b> – Estonian Association of Information Technology and Telecommunications (Employers' organisation), CEO
14.30-14.45	Review panel's private discussion	
14.45-15.45	Meeting with representatives of pool of reviewers (Include experts from different types of reviews)	<b>Professor Peeter Normak</b> –Tallinn University, Estonia; Panel member for Initial and Re-assessment of SPGs in ICT <b>Mr Tõnu Pekk</b> – SAGA Family Office, CEO, Estonia; Employer expert for IA of the University of Tartu (2015) and SPG of Business and Administration at the Estonian Business School, Tallinn University and the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (2016) <b>Ms Piret Raukas</b> – SEB Life and Pension, actuary; Employer expert for SPG of Mathematics and statistics at University of Tartu and Tallinn University (2017)  <i>via Skype:</i> <b>Dr Danute Rasimaviciene</b> – Vilniaus Kolegija/University of Applied Sciences, Lithuania; Panel member for IA of Lääne-Viru College and the Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences (2014), and SPG Business and administration at Tallinn University of Technology and University of Tartu (2016) <b>Mr Philipp Schulz</b> – Student at Aachen University, Germany; student expert for SPG of Mathematics and Statistics at University of Tartu and Tallinn University (2017) and for SPG of Transport Services, Engineering, Manufacturing and Technology at the Estonian Aviation Academy (2016) <b>Professor John Butler</b> – Chief Executive Officer, EQ-Arts, UK; Chair of the panel for the integrated IA and SPG of the Estonian Academy of Arts (2017) <b>Professor Kari Keinänen</b> – University of Helsinki, Finland; Panel member for SPG of Environmental Protection at the Estonian University of Life Sciences, Tallinn University, Euroacademy and Tallinn University of Technology (2015)
15.45-16.15	Meeting of panel members to identify issues requiring clarification	
16.15-16.45	Meeting with CEO to clarify any pending issues	
16.45-17.30	Private meeting of panel to consider findings	
WEDNESDAY, 11 OCTOBER 2017		
TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
08.45-9.45	Meeting of panel members to agree on main findings	
9.45-10.45	Meeting with CEO and staff and Chair of HEQAC to indicate main findings	EKKA staff Tõnu Meidla – Chair of HEQAC <i>via Skype</i>
10.45-11.15	Private meeting among panel members	
11.15-11.45	Coffee and departure	

## **ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW**

External review of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

### **Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE**

January 2017

#### **1. Background and Context**

EKKA was established under the Universities Act in 2009 on the basis of the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre (EKAK, established in 1997). From 2009 until 2015, EKKA was called “Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency”. Starting from 1 February 2015, the name was changed to “Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education”. EKKA is an independent structural unit of Archimedes Foundation. The Foundation is an independent legal body established 1997 by the Estonian government with the objective to coordinate and implement different international and national programmes and projects in the field of training, education and research. EKKA is independent in developing its principles and procedures for quality assessment and in adopting assessment decisions.

EKKA is comprised of the Bureau, which administers and organises EKKA's work, and two councils: Higher Education Quality Assessment Council and Quality Assessment Council for Vocational Education and Training (VET).

EKKA:

- Provides institutional accreditation of higher education institutions;
- Provides quality assessment of study programme groups in higher education;
- Provides accreditation of study programme groups in vocational education and training;
- Conducts expert analyses in order to grant educational institutions the right to conduct studies;
- Analyses evaluation results and makes recommendations for improvement to educational institutions;
- Informs the general public of the outcomes of evaluations;
- Offers training for higher education institutions, VET institutions and evaluation experts;
- Participates in international networks and cooperation projects.

EKKA is a full member of International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA) and participates in the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) network. In 2014, EKKA organised the INQAAHE biannual Forum in Tallinn. In 2015, EKKA's Director for Development and International Cooperation was elected to the Board of Directors of INQAAHE. EKKA staff members are elected to the boards of quality assurance agencies in Russia and Kazakhstan.

EKKA has been a full member of ENQA since April 2013 and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership.

EKKA has been registered on EQAR since October 2013 and is applying for renewal.

## **2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation**

This review, will evaluate the way in which and to what extent EKKA fulfils the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. Consequently, the review will provide information to the ENQA Board to aid its consideration of whether membership of EKKA should be reconfirmed and to EQAR to support EKKA application to the register.

The review panel is not expected, however, to make any judgements as regards granting membership.

### **2.1 Activities of EKKA within the scope of the ESG**

In order for EKKA to apply for ENQA membership and for registration in EQAR, this review will analyse all activities EKKA that are within the scope of the ESG, i.e. reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditation of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). This is regardless of whether these activities are carried out within or outside the EHEA, and whether they are obligatory or voluntary.

The following activities of EKKA have to be addressed in the external review:

- Institutional accreditation of higher education institutions;
- Quality assessment of study programme groups in the first and second cycles of higher education;
- Quality assessment of study programme groups in the third cycle of higher education;
- Initial assessment of study programme groups;
- Transitional evaluation and re-evaluation of study programme groups;
- Accreditation of Master's study programmes in law in Moldova.

Furthermore, the self-assessment report and external review report should also address the recognition of the external quality assurance activities carried out by other quality assurance agencies.

## **3. The Review Process**

The process is designed in the light of the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in line with the requirements of the *EQAR Procedures for Applications*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Formulation of the Terms of Reference and protocol for the review;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel;
- Self-assessment by EKKA including the preparation of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to EKKA;
- Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final evaluation report by the ENQA Review Committee;
- Analysis of the scrutiny by the ENQA Board and their decision regarding ENQA membership;
- Follow-up of the panel's and/or ENQA Board's recommendations by the agency, including a voluntary follow-up visit.

### **3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members**

The review panel consists of four members: one or two quality assurance experts, an academic employed by a higher education institution, student member, and eventually a labour market representative (if requested). One of the members will serve as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. For ENQA Agency Reviews at least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among

the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. An additional panel member may be included in the panel at the request of the agency under review. In this case an additional fee to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses is applied.

In addition to the four members, the panel will be supported by the ENQA Secretariat review coordinator who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA expectations are met throughout the process. The ENQA staff member will not be the Secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide EKKA with the list of suggested experts with their respective curriculum vitae to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The experts will have to sign a non-conflict of interest statement as regards EKKA review.

### **3.2 Self-assessment by EKKA, including the preparation of a self-assessment report**

EKKA is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-assessment is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-assessment report is broken down by the topics of the evaluation and is expected to contain, among others: a brief description of the national HE and QA system; background description of the current situation of the Agency; an analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a SWOT analysis; each criterion (ESG part II and III) addressed individually. All of the agency's QA activities (whether within their national jurisdiction or outside of it, and whether obligatory or voluntary) will be described and their compliance with the ESG analysed.
- The report is well structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which EKKA fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ESG and thus the requirements of ENQA membership.
- The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat who has 4 weeks to pre-scrutinise it before forwarding the report to the panel of experts. The purpose of the pre-scrutiny is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but whether the necessary information, as stated in the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews, is present. For the second and subsequent reviews, the agency is expected to enlist the recommendations provided in the previous review and to outline actions taken to meet these recommendations. In case the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to reject the report and ask for a revised version within 4 weeks. In such cases, an additional fee of 1000 € will be charged to the agency.
- The report is submitted to the review panel a minimum of six weeks prior to the site visit.

### **3.3 A Site Visit by the Review Panel**

EKKA will draw up a draft proposal of the schedule for the site visit to be submitted to the review panel at least two months before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule includes an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is 2,5 days. The approved schedule shall be given to EKKA at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The review panel will be assisted by EKKA in arriving in Tallinn, Estonia.

The site visit will close with an oral presentation and discussion of the major issues of the evaluation between the review panel and EKKA.

### **3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report**

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings with regards to each ESG. A draft will be first submitted to the ENQA review coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity and language and it will be then submitted to EKKA within 11 weeks of the site visit for comment on factual accuracy. If EKKA chooses to provide a statement in reference to the draft report it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report. Thereafter the review panel will take into account the statement by EKKA, finalise the document and submit it to EKKA and ENQA.

The report is to be finalised within three months of the site visit and will not exceed 40 pages in length.

When preparing the report, the review panel should also bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG*, so as to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR.

EKKA is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation applying for membership and the ways in which EKKA expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be discussed along with the final evaluation report.

### **4. Follow-up Process and Publication of the Report**

EKKA will consider the expert panel's report and will publish it on its website once the ENQA Board has made its decision. The report will also be published on the ENQA website, regardless of the review outcome and decision by the ENQA Board. EKKA commits to preparing a follow-up plan in which it addresses the recommendations of the review panel and to submitting a follow-up report to the ENQA Board. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website, in addition to the full review report and the Board's decision.

The follow-up report will be complemented by a small-scale visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). This visit will be used to discuss issues, based on the ESG, considered as of particular importance or challenge by EKKA. Its purpose is entirely developmental and has no impact on the judgement of membership and/or compliance of the agency with the ESG. Should the agency not wish to take advantage of this opportunity, it may opt out by informing the ENQA Review Coordinator about this.

### **5. Use of the report**

ENQA shall retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the expert panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, shall be vested in ENQA.

The review report is used by the Board of ENQA for the purpose of reaching a conclusion on whether EKKA has met the ESG and can be thus admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA. The report will also be used for registration on EQAR, and is designed so as to serve these two purposes. However, the review report is to be considered final only after being approved by the ENQA Board. Once submitted to EKKA and ENQA and until it is approved by the Board the report may not be used or relied upon by EKKA, the panel and any third party and may not be disclosed without the prior written

consent of ENQA. EKKA may use the report at its discretion only after the Board has approved of the report. The approval of the report is independent of the decision on membership.

The Chair of the panel shall remain available to respond to questions of clarification or further information from the EQAR Register Committee provided that the ENQA Secretariat is copied in all such requests.

## 6. Budget

EKKA shall pay the following review-related fees:

Fee of the Chair	4,500 EUR
Fee of the Secretary	4,500 EUR
Fee of the 2 other panel members	4,000 EUR (2,000 EUR each)
Fee of 2 panel members for follow-up visit	1,000 EUR (500 EUR each)
Administrative overhead for ENQA Secretariat	7,000 EUR
Experts Training fund	1,400 EUR
Approximate travel and subsistence expenses	6,000 EUR
Travel and subsistence expenses follow-up visit	1,600 EUR

This gives a total indicative cost of 30,000.00 EUR VAT excl. for a review team of 4 members. In the case that the allowance for travel and subsistence expenses is exceeded, EKKA will cover any additional costs after the completion of the review. However, the ENQA Secretariat will endeavour to keep the travel and subsistence expenses in the limits of the planned budget, and will refund the difference to EKKA if the travel and subsistence expenses go under budget.

The fee of the follow-up visit is included in the overall cost of the review and will not be reimbursed in case the agency does not wish to benefit from it.

In the event of a second site visit required by the Board and aiming at completing the assessment of compliance, and should the agency accept a second visit, an additional fee of 500 EUR per expert, as well as travel and subsistence costs are recoverable from the agency.

## 7. Indicative Schedule of the Review

Agreement on terms of reference	November/December 2016
Appointment of review panel members	May 2017
Self-assessment completed	By 15 <sup>th</sup> of June 2017
Pre-screening of SER by ENQA coordinator	July 2017
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	August 2017
Briefing of review panel members	August/early September 2017
Review panel site visit	Early October 2017
Draft of evaluation report and submitting it to ENQA coordinator for pre-screening	November 2017
Draft of evaluation report to EKKA	December 2017
Statement of EKKA to review panel if necessary	December 2017
Submission of final report to ENQA	January 2018
Consideration of the report by ENQA Board and response of EKKA	February 2018
Publication of the report	February/March 2018

### ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

EKKA	Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	<i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015</i>
HEI	Higher education institution
HEQAC	EKKA Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education
IA	Institutional accreditation
MER	Ministry of Education and Research
SPG	Study programme group
SAR	Self-assessment report
VET	Vocational education and training

## ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

### DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY EKKA

Higher Education Assessment Concept 2020

#### *Legislation*

Republic of Estonia Education Act

Universities Act

Organisation of Research and Development Act

Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act

Private Schools Act

Standard of Higher Education

Occupational Qualifications Act.

Descriptions of qualification levels

#### *Government strategies*

Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020

Strategy “Knowledge-based Estonia 2014-2020”

Implementation Plan 2016-2019 for achieving the objectives of the Estonian Research and Development and Innovation Strategy 2014-2020

#### *Databases*

The EKKA database (assessment reports, decisions by the Quality Assessment Councils) (EE)

EKKA study programme database

HaridusSilm (a database for Estonian education statistics)

Estonian Research Information System

#### *EKKA documents*

Self-evaluation report 2017

General documents:

- EKKA statutes
- Development plan for 2017-2022
- EKKA Quality Manual

Procedures for assessments:

- Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation
- Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education
- Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups at the Level of Doctoral Studies
- Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Assessment and Re-assessment of Study Programme Groups
- Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups
- Guidelines for Accreditation of Curriculum Groups in VET
- Requirements and Procedure for Accreditation of Study Programmes in Moldova

Minutes of meetings of the decision making body:

- Minutes of meetings and decisions taken by the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education (EE)

Assessment decisions and reports:

- Quality Assessment of SPGs
- Institutional Accreditation
- Quality Assessment of Study Programmes in Moldova

Guidelines for experts and coordinators:



- Guidelines for institutional accreditation experts
- Guidelines for quality assessment of study programme group experts
- Guidelines for a coordinator (EE)

Summaries of feedback:

- Summary of feedback received from educational institutions (EE)
- Summary of feedback received from members of assessment committees

Additional materials requested by ENQA

- Documents regarding the appeal of EBS
- An explanation regarding the management structure of the Archimedes Foundation and EKKA
- A working paper on an overview of the project “Launching the initiative group of the Student Quality Network for Promoting Quality in Higher Education”
- Sample service contracts
- Sample site visit schedules

#### **DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY ENQA**

Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews

Analysis of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in external review reports: system-wide analysis, resources, and independence

Comparative analysis of the ESG 2015 and ESG 2005

EQAR’s Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies



**THIS REPORT** presents findings of the ENQA Agency Review of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA), undertaken in 2017.



**2018 ENQA AGENCY REVIEW**