

**Panel Report
of the external review of
Estonian Higher Education
Quality Agency (EKKA)**

March 2013



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency / *Eesti Kõrghariduse Kvaliteediagentuur*, (EKKA) was founded on January 1, 2009. The agency was established to promote quality in the field of education. It is comprised of a Bureau, which organises EKKA's work, and two councils – Quality Assessment Council and Quality Assessment Council for vocational education and training.

EKKA in cooperation with its partners is expected to contribute to the increase in the competitiveness of Estonian society. EKKA is the successor body to and continues the work of the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre and the Estonian Higher Education Quality Assessment Council that operated from 1997 to 2008. In common with other European higher education quality assurance agencies, EKKA is obliged under agreements made by European education ministers to submit to an external review of its work every five years. The review was conducted under the auspices and following the protocols of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

The purpose of the review was to evaluate the way in which and to what extent EKKA fulfils the criteria for the Full Membership of ENQA, as well as Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Notably, this is the first external agency review for EKKA. Alignment with the ENQA membership criteria (and thereby, the ESG) is expected to be “substantial compliance”, not rigid adherence. Therefore, the overall judgments below should be interpreted accordingly. The Panel found:

- ENQA criterion 1a / ESG Part 2: External quality assurance processes
substantial compliance
- ENQA criterion 1b / ESG 3.1, 3.3 Activities
full compliance
- ENQA criterion 2 / ESG 3.2 Official status
full compliance
- ENQA criterion 3 / ESG 3.4: Resources
full compliance
- ENQA criterion 4 / ESG 3.5: Mission statement
full compliance
- ENQA criterion 5 / ESG 3.6: Independence
full compliance
- ENQA Criterion 6 / ESG 3.7: External quality assurance criteria and
processes used by the members
full compliance
- ENQA Criterion 7 / ESG 3.8: Accountability procedures
full compliance
- ENQA Criterion 8 / Miscellaneous
full compliance

The Review Panel encourages EKKA to take appropriate action to consider and implement the recommendations set out in this report. While views on EKKA work are given under each of the standards, it falls to the ENQA Board to make an overall judgment of EKKA's compliance with the ESG.

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

CEENQA	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
EE	Refers to documents in Estonian language
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EKKA, the agency	Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ENQA Guidelines	Guidelines for External Reviews of Quality Assurance Agencies in the European Higher Education Area [September 2012]
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ESF	European Union Structural Funds
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area [Third Edition, 2009]
EU	European Union
HEI	Higher education institution(s)
IA	institutional accreditation
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
Ministry	Estonian Ministry of Education and Research
ProfHE	professional higher education
SER	EKKA's self-evaluation report
SPG	study programme group
ToR	Terms of Reference, ENQA document setting the present review conditions
VET	vocational education and training

1. BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND PROCEDURE

The review of EKKA was coordinated by ENQA and executed according to the *Guidelines for External Reviews of Quality Assurance Agencies in the European Higher Education Area* [2012], and in observance of *ENQA Code of Conduct for Review Experts*, which sets canons of fine behaviour in relation to the agencies' external review procedure. It is a "Type A" review, and the focus is upon the current status of EKKA, not its predecessor agency (Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre and the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council) and not upcoming developments.

With the intention to make sure that all member agencies meet ENQA requirements, ENQA Statutes, under the section of provisions for full and candidate members, contain a condition that all agencies are externally reviewed at least once every five years. ESG, originally adopted by the members at the General Assembly of ENQA in 2004, were also endorsed by the Ministers of Education of Bologna process countries in 2005. Substantial compliance with the ESG is the criterion for Full membership of ENQA.

Initially, the *Guidelines for External Reviews of Quality Assurance Agencies in the European Higher Education Area* [2009] foresaw the possibility of both nationally and ENQA-coordinated reviews. However, effective July 1, 2011, ENQA Board adopted a new policy on agency reviews, making mandatory for agencies seeking Full Membership status, to be reviewed by ENQA. This has an aim to guarantee a higher level of homogeneity of the reviews. Also, in this new policy, enhancement aspect of agency reviews is underscored, thus the Review Panel incorporated a certain number of recommendations in the present report to stimulate the process.

In accordance with the renewed ENQA Guidelines [2012] the review is an evidence based process carried out by independent experts. Another important feature is that the information provided by the agency is assumed to be factually correct unless other evidence points to the contrary. The review is a process of verification of the information provided in the self-evaluation report and other documentation, and the exploration of any matters which are omitted from that documentation. The Panel is not judging overall EKKA's compliance towards ESG, as this is prerogative of ENQA Board.

The membership of the Panel for the review was initially proposed by several bodies – ENQA, EUA and ESU, then finalised and approved by the ENQA Board in October 2012. The Review Panel of EKKA included the following members:

- **Mr. Séamus Puirseil**, President, Dublin Business School, Ireland (Chair),
- **Ms. Aurelija Valeikienė**, Deputy Director, Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC), Lithuania (Secretary),
- **Dr. Riitta Pyykkö**, Professor of Russian Language and Culture, University of Turku, Chair of the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC),
- **Dr. Jean-Pierre Finance**, Honorary President of the University Henri Poincaré, Nancy, advisor for EU at the French university rectors conference (CPU) – *EUA nomination*,
- **Mr. Allan Päll**, student, University of Tartu, Estonia – *ESU nomination*.

EKKA produced a self-evaluation report, which was sent to the Panel by EKKA Director. In addition, EKKA has prepared the Panel a folder in *Dropbox* which contained all documents linked in the self-evaluation report and the report itself. The SER for the Panel was the main document while beginning to work. During the scrutiny of the SER, the Panel requested from EKKA additional information which was thoughtfully provided by the agency. All documents supplied by EKKA as well as other reference sources used by the Review Panel are listed in Annex 1. Sources analysed by experts included Estonian legislation, and EKKA website both in English and Estonian (accessible at <http://www.ekka.archimedes.ee/>).

Logistical support for the visit was kindly arranged by ENQA Secretariat and EKKA. The Review Panel received telephone briefing by ENQA Board member on November 27th, 2012. The Review Panel generated a draft visit template with groups of meetings to have a possibility to see the agency staff, but also to discuss with different stakeholder groups. Subsequently, it was filled by EKKA inviting Estonian participants, while taking into account preferences of the Panel. This was arranged several weeks before the site visit. The schedule of meetings can be found in Annex 2.

The electronic mail was the main channel of Panel members work prior to and after the site-visit. Duties of Panel Members were assumed in line with ENQA Guidelines for External Agency Reviews and ToR. The Review Secretary mediated to gather comments on the agency's self-evaluation report using the ENQA membership criteria and ESG Part II and III criteria, and gathered requests from the Panel Members to further ask for documentation from EKKA. These included samples of records produced in the assessment process, as well as of internal agency processes.

A site visit to EKKA office in Tallinn took place on December 5-7, 2012: the first day was devoted to Panel's preparation, while during the next two days the Panel held 13 meetings, and met 52 persons (several of them more than once) from the following groups:

- Archimedes Foundation Supervisory Board (namely – the Chair),
- Archimedes Foundation Management Board (namely – the Chair),
- EKKA Bureau,
- EKKA Quality Assessment Council,
- Rectors of professional higher education institutions,
- Rectors and Vice-Rectors of universities,
- Estonian and international review experts, who took part in EKKA procedures (institutional reviews, study programme group reviews, study programme reviews, transitional reviews),
- representatives of professional associations, employers' organisations,
- representatives of student unions,
- Estonian Ministry of Education and Research.

In four meetings, video conferencing was used to connect and hear the reports and opinions of several persons, including one EKKA Bureau member (at the time of the Review Panel visit – on evaluation mission to Tartu), the Chair of Archimedes Foundation Supervisory Board, two leaders of professional higher education institutions, and a student representative. One student memo on

participation in the quality processes (an example of the University of Tartu) was submitted digitally signed on the second visit day.

In the discussions at EKKA, the Review Chair assumed the leading role in interrogations, while other Panel Members complemented with additional set of questions. In view of the very good level of competence in English of EKKA staff and external stakeholders there was no requirement for translation facilities.

At the end of the first and second day of the site visit the Review Panel met with the Director of EKKA to review progress and to receive materials on matters of concern identified by the Panel.

The visit aims included developing understanding of the position of EKKA within Estonian higher education system, and triangulation of data of self-evaluation report both with EKKA staff and stakeholders. The Panel is grateful for all who were available to meet in person, including those the linkage with whom was established via videoconference, and especially representatives of Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, who travelled from the Ministry's seat in Tartu to meet the Panel. Noteworthy, three foreign experts travelled from even more distant places: Finland, Sweden, and United Kingdom. This attests to both the expert's commitment and the agency's efforts to arrange quality and versatile discussions, even though two foreign experts had only participated to the evaluations carried out by the predecessor of EKKA, their presence was important as they would be part of new evaluations. Meetings and conversations helped the Review Panel to gather information and clarify points for the work under the review procedure.

At the end of the site-visit the Panel considered the evidence and reached preliminary consensus on the agency standing against each ENQA membership criteria, thus against compliance to ESG Part II and III. Afterwards, the Review Secretary prepared the initial draft report in cooperation with the Chair and Panel Members. It was then submitted to EKKA, providing the agency possibilities to comment on the factual correctness of the draft. A final report was produced subsequently and submitted to ENQA.

Sources for judgment on EKKA's compliance towards ENQA criteria for Full Membership were various and abundant:

- the Self-Evaluation Report with active references to legislation and agency website both in electronic version and paper-printed (mailed to the Panel), these constituted a starting point;
- additional documents the Panel had asked for and received prior to the visit (on appeals procedure during the period of 2007-2012; personal composition of Archimedes Management Board, Archimedes Supervisory Board, and EKKA Quality Assessment Council; EKKA and the aims of ENQA; statistics on involvement of foreign and local experts in external evaluations in 2007-2012; sample accreditation decisions; sample visit schedules under different types of procedures);
- additional documents the Panel had asked for and received during the visit to the agency (such as sample visit agendas; samples from the period of transitional evaluation on information in relation to exercise HEI right to appeals prior to filing formal complaints - requests for explanations and memoranda);

- supplementary materials in English, specially produced by the initiative of EKKK Bureau members for the moment of the site visit (such as a colour scheme on contestation of EKKK external evaluations (appeals); and other materials in Estonian made available for the Review Panel during the meeting days (including a sample IA assessment committee's report, a sample accreditation decision of EKKK Quality Assessment Council);
- data and opinions from the meetings with both EKKK staff, Archimedes Foundation, and other external stakeholders.

Thus, the Review Panel's findings and the present report are based on the solid body of information and analysis. Thanks to the member of Estonian origin, the Panel was able to scrutinize and use evidence submitted in the national language. This extensive knowledge of local context and readily available help in interpreting matters was indispensable towards objectivity of the overall judgments.

Acknowledgements

Noteworthy, EKKK Bureau took the review visit very seriously which manifested in careful planning of the event, diligent preparation by all staff members, attentive and enthusiastic contribution during the meetings which altogether left no doubt in devotion, mutual support, and overall professionalism of the agency.

The Panel is grateful to ENQA Secretariat, EKKK Director and staff for their respective contribution towards organisation of the review and assistance in the process. The Review Panel also thanks external participants who contributed towards the extended understanding of Estonian quality assurance arrangement and validation of the review findings. The courtesy of the agency, and productive work atmosphere of the visit should be noted.

2. THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF THE REVIEW AND CURRENT SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Estonia declared its national independence from the Soviet Union on August 20th, 1991; and was re-admitted as a member of the United Nations on September 17th the same year. Officially the country became a member of NATO on March 29th, 2004, and joined the European Union on May 1st, 2004. Despite the world economic crisis of 2008/09, the state managed to stabilise its economy, and prepared to switch from the national currency to euro, which resulted entering Euro zone on January 1st, 2011.

Following data from the Department of Statistics¹, as of January 1st 2012, the population of Estonia was estimated at more than 1,3 million. The official state language is Estonian, native to 68,7% of population. The largest minority group is of Russians (24,8%), other big minority groups include Ukrainians (1,7%), and Byelorussians (0,96%).

Reforms in all sectors of education in Estonia started immediately after regaining independence. Further on, the nation was among the first group of countries signatories of:

- UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (popular name – Lisbon recognition convention) – signature put on April 11th, 1997;
- Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education convened in Bologna on the 19th of June 1999 (popular name – Bologna declaration), committing itself to joint European reforms in higher education.

The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia (1992) stipulates that the provision of education is overseen by the national government. A clear hierarchy is observed: the terms of higher education in Estonia are set in a series of Parliamentary Acts, supplemented by regulations issued by the Government of the Republic, then Ministry Directives, and finally provisions by EKKA Quality Assessment Council.

At the time of the present review, the country is living according to the Estonian Higher Education Strategy for 2006-2015 (progress assessed periodically, in 2008, 2011 and 2014). In it, objectives for the 10 year period are established as follows:

- Guarantee a volume of higher education study that is applicable to the demand for higher education, bringing the preferences of students closer to the needs of society;
- Assure the quality of higher education on a level comparable to the Nordic countries and the European Union;
- Participate as an equal partner in regional and Europe-wide academic cooperation;

¹ <http://www.stat.ee/>

- Satisfy the needs of Estonian society for a highly qualified workforce, taking into account the integration of the Estonian economy into the Nordic countries' economy, with preferential development of studies in the natural and exact sciences and in technology;
- Ensure the continuation and development of Estonian-medium higher education in the European open education space;
- Ensure a level of funding close to the OECD average per student, simultaneously preserving an access to higher education comparable to OECD countries.

The system of higher education in Estonia is binary, i.e. of academic and professional orientation, including universities (*Ülikool*) and professional higher education institutions (*rakenduskõrgkool*). Tertiary education might also be provided by vocational educational institutions (*kutseõppeasutus*), upon which such a right is conferred. Each type of institutions is regulated by separate legal acts: Universities Act (passed 12.01.1995 with subsequent amendments), and Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act (passed 10.06.1998) respectively. In addition, Private Schools Act (passed on 03.06.1998) applies to legal persons which, among other, provide higher education. As reported by Eurypedia², since the academic year 2002-2003, the general structure of academic study in Estonia has three cycles.

According to information provided by EKKA's SER appendix 1, currently Estonian higher education system includes total 30 entities:

- six public universities,
- one private university,
- 10 state professional higher education institutions,
- 11 private professional higher education institutions,
- two state vocational education institutions (with a right to offer professional higher education programmes).

Comparing this data to the historic numbers supplied by the Ministry of Education and Research, the peak in higher education providers was reported in 2002-2003 (51 institution), and has been diminishing ever since. No branches of foreign higher education institutions are currently registered in Estonia, and the state long-term strategy does not establish any goals regarding expanding the local providers network by inviting foreign institutions. Instead, both out-bound and in-wards mobility of young researchers and other scientists is stressed.

Estonian Constitution does not guarantee higher education free of charge, in fact it does not deal with the issue at all. It is a duty of the Ministry of Education and Science to allocate funds in a variety of ways (including distribution of student-funded placed among educational institutions). Both governance and funding of higher education were subject to reforms, started in 2011. It is envisaged that the current funding system will remain effective in respect for doctoral studies, and the new model will be applicable to other study cycles from autumn 2013. After the three-year transition period expires, from 2016, 70-75% of funds will be calculated for the support of activities based on the extent, quality and efficiency of provision, while the rest 25-30% will be disbursed for the support of

² https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Estonia:Higher_Education

activities which provide instruction of national importance. The aims of the reform are to increase fairness of the system, support efficiency of studies, reduce inequities among study fields, increase public accountability, and, finally, to ensure the quality of education.

As it was already mentioned, in Estonia, a shift towards study organization in Bologna cycles was completed in 2002/2003. ECTS is officially used from the academic year of 2009/2010, although the previous credit system was compatible. Following data from EKKA SER, in the academic year of 2011/2012, there were more than 67 thousand students studying for higher education qualifications.

Work on creation of the National Framework of Qualifications started in 2005, resulting in eight-level qualification framework launch in 2008. The self-referencing exercise to European Qualifications Framework (EQF) took two more years, was completed in 2011, and the final report with amendments (after its presentation at the EQF Advisory Group and based on remarks and suggestions of the reviewers) was published in 2012.

Archimedes Foundation was originally founded in 1997 as an independent body by the Government of Estonia. Archimedes is an umbrella organization, hosting the Academic Recognition Information Centre (Estonian ENIC/NARIC centre) which carries out evaluation of foreign qualifications, EURAXESS services centre (responsible for promotion of researchers' mobility), EKKA as external quality assurance agency, also units responsible for European Union Life-Long-Learning programme and marketing of Estonian higher education.

Accreditations of study programmes in Estonia started in 1997, and were completed by Higher Education Quality Assessment Council (HEQAC), EKKA predecessor organization. Back then, evaluations of individual study programmes by international teams of experts were conducted (as opposed to the current system, where study program groups and institutions are assessed), and accreditation decisions drafted by the HEQAC were subject to approval by the Minister of Education and Research.

In its present form, EKKA was founded on January 1st, 2009, in way of reorganization from the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council. The reform was initiated in 2006 by the Parliament (*Riigikogu*), as an element of the package of reforms included in the Estonian Higher Education Strategy till 2015. The reasons to change from the earlier setup of the external quality assurance to the new one included the following:

- Needs of the main stakeholders, such as students, to have certainty regarding the expected level of quality of studies;
- Organizational reasons (to ensure consistency and attention to detail across all reports; to diminish requirements for resources involved in accreditations);
- Political aims (to establish clarity regarding status and function of parties involved in organization of assessments and accreditation, involving aspects of independence).

Expected changes in legislation on the national level include the new draft of the *Vocation Education Institutions Act*. During the review visit, the Director of EKKA expressed an expectation that VET accreditation is likely to follow the procedures

established for higher education accreditation. At present, as VET Council is functioning inside the ESF project, it was not formed the way EKKA HE Council was.

Cooperation between EKKA and Estonian Research Council is taking place with the aim to avoid certain duplication, thus evaluation of research is made alongside with external evaluation of higher education.

Supervisory authority in the field of higher education is the Ministry of Education and Research - in the capacity of performing these functions, it is called the state supervisory agency. As assigned by the *Universities Act*, supervision is carried over the legality of the activities of universities. Evidence and information might be examined (also obtaining copies or extracts from documents), and even precepts issued for termination of violations of the requirements provided by legislation, prevention of further violations and elimination of consequences of a violation. The Ministry has the right to involve experts in the exercise of state supervision, and for this purpose it has asked EKKA to appoint experts to support the process.

The National Audit Office is the auditor of the state that verifies whether public funds have been used successfully (i.e., economically, efficiently and effectively) and legitimately. In its capacity the National Audit Office has looked into funding of higher education several times, and by its reports has thus given impetus for certain political or judicial actions. It must be noted, that the latter were outside the area of quality assurance and EKKA realm of responsibilities as well.

3. EKKA'S AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Currently, EKKA consists of the EKKA Bureau (including Director of EKKA), the organizational unit, and EKKA Quality Assessment Council, the quality assessment decision making body. The work of EKKA Bureau is overseen by Archimedes Foundation Management Board and Archimedes Foundation Supervisory Board, formed on the basis of nominations by stakeholders, the latter also appoints EKKA Quality Assessment Council, which is independent in its quality assurance related decisions.

EKKA's mandate extends not only to higher education, but to the sector of vocational education and training as well. The agency covers all kinds of institutions – state, public, and private. Accreditation by the main laws (applicable to each type of institutions) is a mandatory process.

Authorisation to EKKA to organise evaluations comes from the national level legislation and is fixed in EKKA Statutes. All types of evaluations – ex ante accreditation of study programme groups, ex-post accreditation of study programme groups in HE and VET, transitional evaluation and re-evaluation of SPGs, and accreditation of higher education institutions – are conducted by commissions of independent experts, organised by EKKA.

Research management is addressed within the institutional accreditation procedure EKKA coordinates. Also, under transitional evaluation and re-evaluation of study programme groups, there is a separate form to be filled for one of assessed components being doctoral studies. Otherwise, EKKA does not interfere with evaluation of research and development content, which is the area

of Estonian Research Council. As informed by the *Explanatory Memorandum on Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education*, there is an intention to combine the quality assessment of doctoral studies with the evaluation of research and development, and the respective discussions have already started.

As already mentioned earlier, programme evaluations were the first activity that was conducted by EKKA predecessor organization since 1997, and from then till 2009, total more than 1400 accreditations were issued. EKKA was charged to conduct transitional evaluations, they lasted for two years, and a result of this endeavour, the shift from individual assessment of programmes to assessment of study programme groups was implemented. At the time of this review, therefore, EKKA was not doing any more single programme reviews, only those under transitional re-evaluation procedure.

EKKA has partnered with Innove Foundation regarding vocational education and training from August 2010. At the moment of writing of SER, the *Vocational Educational Institutions Act* was in drafting phase, by the time of the Review Panel visit to EKKA, this process was not completed yet.

3.1. The Main Functions of the Agency

As defined by the Statutes, collectively EKKA Bureau and EKKA Quality Assessment Council are responsible for implementation of the following functions:

- Providing institutional accreditation of higher education institutions and quality assessment of their study programme groups,
- Providing accreditation of study programme groups in vocational education and training,
- Providing initial assessment of study programme groups,
- Analysing the evaluation results and making recommendations for improvement to educational institutions and the Ministry of Education and Research,
- Informing the general public of the outcomes of evaluations,
- Training the assessment experts,
- Counselling and training educational institutions,
- Participating in international networks for external evaluation of educational institutions.

Specifically, EKKA Council is charged of the following duties to:

- approve the regulations regarding the principles of and the procedure for quality assessment of the Estonian higher education;
- approve the principles of forming assessment committees and the requirements for qualification of committee members;
- make decisions on institutional accreditation of higher education institutions and on quality assessment of their study programme groups;

- under the transitional evaluations and re-assessments of study programme groups, make proposals to the Minister of Education and Research to grant educational institutions the right to conduct studies; and shall provide expert opinions on the quality of instruction at the launch of a new study programme;
- coordinate development plans and annual action plans of the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency.

The rest of duties, such as drafting action plans, conducting public competitions for experts, training of assessment committee members, coordinating the evaluation process overall, presenting the reports of the assessment commissions to EKKA Council for its consideration, and similar tasks are in the hands of EKKA Bureau.

EKKA holds an internal electronic database of both local and foreign experts, which is continuously expanded. The website of EKKA is organized according to different target groups – universities, students, assessors. On its website, among other, the agency maintains a database of HEI self-assessments, expert reports, and EKKA Council decisions.

Below are descriptions of the main characteristics of evaluation procedures carried out by EKKA.

Evaluation of HE study programmes

This type of assessments is discontinued from the systemic reform time in 2009, which involved the change of focus in evaluation from study programmes and voluntary institutional review into mandatory evaluation of study programme groups and mandatory institutional assessments, and also organizational shift from an “older” agency and a Council that function under the Ministry, into the current EKKA. Due to this reason, and following ENQA Guidelines [20012] to evaluate the current agency, this report will not analyse evaluation of individual study programmes as run between 1996 and 2009.

Transitional evaluation of study programme groups

According to the *Standard of Higher Education*, established by a Government Regulation, there are 28 study programme groups. The procedure of transitional evaluation of study programme groups was started in 2009 with the purpose to move from the system of study programme reviews to evaluation of study programme groups. The main bulk of work was carried out during the course of two years, however, the procedure is estimated to be completed in 2017 due to the nature of decisions taken and the need to conduct re-evaluations (majority of these are planned for 2013-2014).

Content-wise assessment is comprised of three main parts:

- quality of conducting studies (encompassing study programmes and learning outcomes, study programme development and requirements for teaching staff, students),
- resources necessary for conducting studies (including teaching staff, financial resources, teaching and learning environments),

- sustainability of conducting studies (based on adequacy as judged by the assessment committee; trends of students, graduates and the budget; regular planning of development; delivery of doctoral studies).

These types of evaluations were a rather special case of activity, aiming to establish a minimum compliance to standards, not following the established European methodology consisting of institutions preparing self-analysis reports, expert teams visiting institutions, individual decisions passed and publicised. By *the Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study programme Groups*, there could be two types of proceedings: a simplified one (on the basis of the information submitted), and a standard one (on the basis of the information submitted alongside with the assessment visit). For the procedure of re-evaluation, a standard proceeding (with the site visit) is always applied.

Each of the above listed three components is assessed by an assessment committee as conforming to a required standard, partially conforming, or as does not conforming to a required standard. The transit decision is taken by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council in a form of proposals towards the Ministry of Education and Science which then makes the final judgments regarding granting rights in the study programme group and issuance of academic degrees and diplomas. In case of partial conformance, the right to conduct studies in a programme group may be granted for a period of one to three years, after which a follow-up procedure will be organised by EKKA.

As a result of transitional evaluation, several institutions underwent serious transformations (including mergers, closures and changes in status from a university, delivering studies of three cycles, into professional higher education institutions with no rights to conduct doctoral training).

Quality assessment of study programme groups

This type of activity started in 2012, as a result of the systemic move in the external quality assurance processes (from individual programme reviews to evaluation of the whole study programme groups at an institution in question). There are five assessment areas established, encompassing study programme and study programme development, resources, teaching and learning, teaching staff, and students.

The procedure includes an institution filing the EKKA Bureau the request, accompanied by information needed for an expert analysis (self-analysis and background information compiled by the Ministry); EKKA forming the assessment committee, the site visit (for one or two days), then production of the assessment report. The outcome of analysis of the evaluation results in the EKKA Quality Assessment Council is a decision regarding next quality assessment of that study programme group (7 years or less).

Quality assessment is focused on assessing the quality of studies provided on the basis of study programmes and its objective is to support the self-evaluation and self-development of higher education institutions. Quality assessment of study programme groups is not followed by sanctions; expert opinions are considered recommendations. Quality assessment results in an assessment decision and concrete recommendations how the educational institution can improve the quality of studies. At the same time, EKKA has an obligation to

inform the Ministry of Education and Research if the quality of studies has substantially declined compared to the results of the previous evaluation. In this case, the Minister must conduct state supervision, which, at worst, may result in deprivation of the right to conduct studies.

The procedure was tested in autumn of 2012 in the Informatics and Information Technology study programme group at two universities.

Initial assessment of HE study programme groups

As regulated by *Universities Act*, the Ministry involves EKKA in assessment of a new study programme group (to which a HEI does not yet have the right to provide higher education) once an institution applies for this right. Initial assessment of a study programme group involves similar steps in procedure described above under regular assessment of study programme groups. The distinct feature from all types of assessments done by EKKA, is that this is the only type, for which the state is not covering, but instead institutions themselves are obliged to incur costs.

Assessment areas under this procedure include the following:

- sufficiency of qualification requirements for the teaching staff (as determined by the educational institution);
- adequacy of actual qualifications of the teaching staff involved with the new study programme group;
- adequacy of available resources needed for conducting studies;
- estimation whether the described learning outcomes are achievable by a given study programme and whether they are in conformity with the requirements for conducting studies at the level of higher education.

EKKA Council may take three types of resolutions in relation to HEI preparedness to deliver studies, namely: "conforming to a required standard", "partially conforming to a required standard", or "not conforming to a required standard". Initial assessment decisions by EKKA Council constitute part of the decision making chain towards the final decision adopted by the Government to grant (or not) an institution in question rights to open studies in a new study field.

As reported in SER, during the period of 2011-2012, EKKA organized 17 initial assessments of SPGs in five higher education institutions, in seven study programme groups.

Institutional evaluation and accreditation

By definition of the *Universities Act*, "institutional accreditation" means external assessment in the course of which compliance of the management, organisation of work, instruction and research, and the environment of teaching, learning and research of a university with the legislation, objectives and development plan of a university are assessed.

EKKA started its first institutional evaluation in 2011, and the first round is planned to encompass the period of 6 years between 2011-2016, with total 31 higher education institution. The process followed was laid down in the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*, approved by EKKA

Quality Assessment Council on 01.04.2011, subsequently, revised on 13.06.2012. It is supplemented by Explanatory Memorandum by EKKA Director on the above mentioned Conditions, dated 01.04.2011.

EKKA Quality Manual demands carrying out pilot phases for the launch of each new type of evaluation. A pilot phase of institutional accreditation was conducted in two institutions of different types: one professional higher education institution (the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, autumn 2011) and one university (public institution, the Estonian University of Life Sciences, spring 2012). Revisions in the methodology, as testified by EKKA staff, are the result of this pilot phase.

According to the Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation, EKKA assess the compliance of management, administration, academic and research activity, and academic and research environment of higher education institutions. EKKA has further specified, that each of four assessment areas – 1) organizational management and performance, 2) teaching and learning, 3) research, development and/or other creative activity, 4) service to society, – has several sub-areas, and higher education institutions are expected to address these in the self-evaluation report.

Within the area of organisational management and performance, issues to be dealt with include:

- general management (role in Estonian society, development plan, key results, leadership preparation and implementation of action plans including stakeholders, liability at all levels, internal and external communication including marketing and image building),
- personnel management (principles and procedures for employee recruitment and development, consideration of past achievements, principles of remuneration and motivation, employee satisfaction, employee participation in mobility activities, principles of academic ethics),
- management of financial resources and infrastructure (the allocation of financial resources and the administration and development of infrastructure, usage of information systems, the working conditions of the staff, and the learning and RDC conditions of students).

The second sub-area of teaching and learning has the following aspects:

- Effectiveness of teaching and learning, and formation of the student body (defined educational objectives and measuring of their implementation, creating of the prerequisites to ensure national and international competitiveness of graduates, planning of student places, consistency of the admission rules and support towards formation of a motivated student body, provision of opportunities to study regardless of any special student needs),
- Study programme development (study programmes based on the needs of the labour market, also taking into account the country strategies and expectations of the society, systematic and regular development activities involving stakeholders, surveys and analysis of graduate satisfaction with the quality of instruction and employer satisfaction with the quality of graduates and suitability of requirements to them, with

subsequent consideration of results towards the development of study programmes),

- Student academic progress and student assessment (monitoring and support to student academic progress, alignment of student assessment support to learning and learning outcomes, installing an effective system for taking account of prior learning and work experience),
- Support processes for learning (opportunities for students to complete their studies within the standard period, studies and career counselling, supports of student international mobility, periodically asking for student feedback and taking it into account in improvement activities).

The third sub-area of research, development and/or other creative activity (RDC) covers the following issues:

- RDC effectiveness (definition of RDC objectives and measurement of their implementation, monitoring the needs of society and the labour market, and considering them in planning; usage of modern technical and educational technology resources to organise educational activities),
- RDC resources and support processes (effective RDC support system; availability of financial resources needed for RDC development and a strategy that supports their acquisition; participation in different RDC networks; infrastructure being updated and used effectively).
- Student research supervision and doctoral studies (inclusion of students of all academic cycles in research, creative or project activity, and systematic surveys of student satisfaction with their supervision; reasonable balance between professionalism, effectiveness and the workload of supervisors, guidance to recognize plagiarism and to avoid it; conditions for admission of international doctoral students and for studies abroad for doctoral students; inclusion of recognised foreign scientists in the provision of doctoral studies and the supervision of doctoral theses).

The fourth sub-area of service to society includes the following:

- Popularisation of core activities of a higher education institution and the involvement of an institution of higher education in social development (a system for popularising core HEI activities, participation of HEI employees in the activities of professional associations, and as experts, in other social supervisory boards and decision-making bodies),
- In-service training and other educational activities for the general public (defined objectives regarding in-service training and measures for implementation, planning in accordance with the needs of target groups as well as with the potentials and purposes of a HEI, regular surveys of participant satisfaction and subsequent incorporation of results into further planning of improvement activities),
- Other public-oriented activities (purposeful orientation of the activities, periodic evaluation, and improvements on the basis of evaluations; contribution to enhancement of community welfare).

Taking into account what is stated above, in its IA methodology, EKKA is implementing core elements of quality management cycle – planning, implementation, analysis and improvement – in a systematic way.

A committee is expected to submit EKKA with the assessment report containing component assessments (these come from four main evaluation areas and relevant sub-areas).

Institutional accreditation is granted for seven years, for three years, or non-accreditation decision may be passed. Cases when each types of the decision should be taken are laid down in the procedure for the EKKA Quality Assessment Council to follow. The impact of non-accreditation is discussed within the *Universities Act*, and might result in two types of decisions:

- A university receiving a deadline of up to two years for elimination of deficiencies detected, then a new institutional accreditation procedure;
- To make a proposal to the Government to revoke the license to provide instruction and award degrees and diplomas, and to initiate the organization of a university (merger, division, or dissolution).

The evaluation process for higher education institutions is designed to be compatible both with the provisions of Part II of the ESG and to address topics that are relevant to higher education institutions under Estonia's legislation.

Accreditation of SPGs in VET

EKKA is trusted to perform evaluation and accreditation of study programme groups in vocational education and training, these activities are implemented by a relevant ESF funded project. Key features of methodology, as reported in SER, include reliance on internal evaluations, then independent assessments by experts (including employers). An extensive piloting was conducted in 2011, regular reviews started in 2012.

Provision of information by EKKA

The main bulk of information is circulating between EKKA and EKKA Council enabling it carrying of accreditation decisions, then information is supplied with the purpose of administrative accountability to its own Management Board and Archimedes Supervisory Board. EKKA Quality Manual contains a detailed flow-chart in relation to communication with respect to evaluation procedures (including news for the website, press releases, messages to the target partner list, newsletters), and the results to the general public.

EKKA also routinely provides information to several Estonian official bodies, including the Ministry for Education and Research. Among other, this is used by the Ministry to make recommendations to the Estonian Government to grant HEI rights to deliver studies in certain study fields. EKKA is a source of information for other institutions and natural persons. The agency takes part in various events in the fields of vocational education and training, and higher education.

3.2. The Engagement of the Agency with the ENQA Membership Provisions / ESG

The Statutes of EKKA set the broad legal framework for agency activities being the national legislation, and it also demands the agency to operate in accordance with ESG.

As stated in the SER and on the agency website, EKKA cherishes traditions of active participation in professional networks, such as (listed in chronological order):

- the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) (EKKA predecessor member from 1996),
- the Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA, predecessor network called CEENetwork, in which EKKA predecessor was from 2001); currently CENNQA is affiliated to ENQA,
- and in ENQA (since 2002 as HEQAC, currently – candidate member).

EKKA implements active foreign relations policy, as it comes from the principal objective in the agency's Development Plan to be visible on the international level, among other by becoming full member of ENQA, being admitted to EQAR, and by participation in projects and organization of events. The agency sees this as a matter of both organizational representation and personal involvement.

Most recently, EKKA became involved in informal ENQA working groups devoted to three pertinent topics of current higher education. The agency also actively worked in ENQA project on improving the transparency of quality assurance reports (further info on ENQA website at <http://enqa.eu/projectitem.lasso?id=456&cont=projDetail>).

In various documentation EKKA explicitly states that its standards have been developed in accordance with the ESG, including:

- *Explanatory Memorandum on Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation;*
- *Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups;*
- *Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education.*

The work plan 2012 (EE) of EKKA gives further evidence to agency's international activities and involvement within ENQA by highlighting the participation of individual staff members in different international activities, especially in terms of events and projects.

ESG is disseminated to the audiences of EKKA (universities, students, experts) via EKKA website (Estonian version). There, translation to Estonian is available (http://ekka.archimedes.ee/files/EK_Standardid_suunised_tolge.pdf), next to the English version.

Stakeholders interviewed by the Review Panel were supportive of EKKA's international involvement.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 a) ENQA criterion 1 / ESG Part 2: External quality assurance processes

Standard:

The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

Guidelines:

The standards for external quality assurance contained in Part 2 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. The standards reflect best practices and experiences gained through the development of external quality assurance in Europe since the early 1990s. It is therefore important that these standards are integrated into the processes applied by external quality assurance agencies towards the higher education institutions.

The standards for external quality assurance should together with the standards for external quality assurance agencies constitute the basis for professional and credible external quality assurance of higher education institutions.

Below, evidence is provided and analysis is made against each of eight ESG Part 2 criteria separately.

4.1.1 ESG Part 2.1: Use of Internal Quality Assurance Procedures

STANDARD:

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines

GUIDELINES:

The standards for internal quality assurance contained in Part 1 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. It is important that the institutions' own internal policies and procedures are carefully evaluated in the course of external procedures, to determine the extent to which the standards are being met.

If higher education institutions are to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards, then external processes might be less intensive than otherwise.

Evidence

Following information in SER of EKKA, the agency does not perform an evaluation of the internal quality assurance systems within HEI, i.e. quality systems as such are not separately evaluated, but are addressed within the four types of procedures EKKA runs. In SER, a table is included demonstrating how ESG standards are linked with specific requirements and standards in EKKA regulations.

As described under part *the Main Functions of the Agency* of the present report, EKKKA evaluates both internal HEI policies and implementation procedures:

- it is addressed under institutional accreditation (encompassing the broadest areas of organizational management and performance; teaching and learning; research, development and / or other creative activity; service to society – each in its turn analysed in sub-areas, amounting to total of 49);
- it is scrutinized under transitional evaluation and re-evaluation (including assessment of quality of conducting studies; resources necessary; sustainability of conducting studies – with total amount of smaller components being 31);
- it is investigated under initial assessment of SPGs (the broadest areas being study programme and organization of studies, teaching staff, resources – altogether 14 elements assessed).

As stated, e.g. in memorandum on institutional accreditation, EKKKA is aiming at evaluating the planning of processes, their implementation, also measuring of results and coherence. By a comprehensive table in SER, the Review Panel was informed how the agency sees implementation of standards linked to concrete passages of procedures.

The legal acts foresee only two instances of lighter procedures for institutions, namely:

- in case of transitional evaluation of study programme groups (6 conditions to be met, as specified in the *Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups*, pending decision of EKKKA Council),
- in case of initial assessment of SPGs (a possibility to undergo “a simplified proceeding” for a joint degree programme for which the other partners have the right to conduct studies in the corresponding study programme group and academic cycle for an unspecified term or, in the case of a foreign educational institution, the study programme and/or the educational institution has unconditional national recognition granted by the country of location).

Analysis

Although to a different degree and in varying sequence, yet in EKKKA assessments, all standards and guidelines in ESG part I are encompassed: policies and procedures for quality assurance; approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards; student assessment; quality assurance of teaching staff; learning resources and student support; information systems; public information.

Analysis given by the agency in SER is convincing EKKKA has embedded ESG requirements into own assessment criteria.

While gathering opinions from persons the Review Panel met, the large consensus was that requirements of the ESG part I are being met. However, one concern within the expert group (who previously worked for EKKKA) was raised

about the common difficulty to really grasp the achievement of learning outcomes, not the institutional structures behind those.

There are explicit legally defined conditions, upon meeting which higher education institutions might undergo simplified assessment procedures by EKKA.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

4.1.2 ESG Part 2.2 Development of External Quality Assurance Processes

STANDARD:

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

GUIDELINES:

In order to ensure clarity of purpose and transparency of procedures, external quality assurance methods should be designed and developed through a process involving key stakeholders, including higher education institutions. The procedures that are finally agreed should be published and should contain explicit statements of the aims and objectives of the processes as well as a description of the procedures to be used. As external quality assurance makes demands on the institutions involved, a preliminary impact assessment should be undertaken to ensure that the procedures to be adopted are appropriate and do not interfere more than necessary with the normal work of higher education institutions.

Evidence

As defined in the *Universities Act*, the aims of institutional accreditation are to establish compliance of components assessed to multiple targets – the first of them being legislation, then objectives and development plans of an institution in question. *EKKA Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation* further specify the purpose: “to support the development of strategic management and culture of quality in higher education institutions, inform stakeholders of the outcomes of the main activities thereof, and enhance the reliability and competitiveness of Estonian higher education.”

The scope of quality assessment of study programme groups, according to the *Universities Act*, is compliance with legal acts, national and international standards, with the purpose of making recommendations for improvement of the quality of studies.

The purpose of transitional evaluation stems from the Ministerial Directive, and is as follows: to determine the study programme groups and the studies at the higher education level in which an educational institution may conduct studies and issue graduation documents which are recognised by the state.

For initial assessment of study programme groups, and if that concerns joint study programmes, assessments may be conducted without visiting educational institutions (so called 'simplified proceeding', which, however is a rare case, following testimony by the EKKA). As mentioned earlier, under transitional evaluation procedure, there also were two options – of conducting a "standard procedure" or a "simplified" one (both cases discussed in regulations providing guidance on the situations when which would be applicable).

Explanatory memoranda of both institutional accreditation and assessment of SPGs describe in detail how these procedures were developed – actors involved, stages went, and principles laid behind. The self-evaluation report of EKKA also gives meticulous account on the way went: focus group interviews involving stakeholders (employers, academics, students included); initial drafting by agency staff and outside experts; steering groups to prepare regulations; gathering feedback and producing amendments; finally – approving by EKKA Quality Assessment Council.

EKKA provided evidence on several assessment procedures being tested (also see under description of EKKA activities above) and feedback incorporated into further development of processes. As referred in SER, higher education institutions received training for each external assessment.

Analysis

There is complete transparency regarding EKKA procedures: they are defined, relevant documentation published, tests of assessment types conducted. Aims and objectives of all quality assurance processes are clearly established in the national level legislation and more detailed in EKKA procedures. Purposes of institutional accreditation and assessment of study programme groups are twofold, encompassing compliance to requirements and impetus to development of quality culture. In relation to these assessments, EKKA accreditation decisions provide conditions for continuation of HEI activities, while initial assessment of study programme groups stands out as a specific procedure resulting in award of rights to begin activities in prescribed areas. The most important stakeholders, including higher education institutions, were properly involved in the development of procedures; this conclusion by the Review Panel is also supported via additional evidence received from EKKA Bureau during the site visit.

It could be said, that with the systemic shift from accreditation of individual study programmes to accreditation of groups of programmes in a study field, the passage happened towards less resource intensive external review procedures for all HEI concerned.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

4.1.3 ESG Part 2.3 Criteria for Decisions

STANDARD:

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

GUIDELINES:

Formal decisions made by quality assurance agencies have a significant impact on the institutions and programmes that are judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, decisions should be based on published criteria and interpreted in a consistent manner. Conclusions should be based on recorded evidence and agencies should have in place ways of moderating conclusions, if necessary.

Evidence

All descriptions of EKKA procedures (available from the agency website) contain sections with detailed evaluation criteria and organization of assessments (see under EKKA activities). To ease interpretation, thus, consistent application of these, EKKA Bureau members produced explanatory memoranda to assessment procedures. Both requirements for procedures and interpretation guidance are updated regularly (as testified by revision dates under the titles of these documents): two editions of requirements towards transitional evaluation procedure; two amendments for institutional accreditation; several changes to guidelines on initial assessment of SPGs, etc.

There are multiple bases for decisions of EKKA Council. For example, regarding initial assessment of a study programme group, data available in the Estonian Education Information System (www.ehis.ee) and in the Estonian Research Information System (www.etis.ee) is used, and information received during a visit to the educational institution. Also, for assessment of study programme groups, to judge academic staff credentials being appropriate for teaching in a given field, EKKA relies on advice by colleagues in Estonian ENIC/NARIC centre (also a part of Archimedes Foundation). To sum up, in each case, decision making stages are explicitly defined in EKKA procedures.

Criteria for transitional evaluation were set in EKKA Council requirements for this procedure of October 14, 2009. To be exact:

- In case all three of the component assessments are “partially conforms to a required standard”, the EKKA Council shall decide to make a proposal to the Minister of Education and Research to grant the educational institution the right to conduct studies in the study programme group for a period of one to three years and issue corresponding academic degrees or diplomas, or not to grant the educational institution the right to conduct studies in the study programme group and issue corresponding academic degrees and diplomas.
- If component assessments by an assessment committee contain “conforms to a required standard” as well as “partially conforms to a

required standard”, the EKKK Council shall decide to make a proposal to the Minister of Education and Research to grant the educational institution the right to conduct studies in the study programme group and issue corresponding academic degrees or diplomas; or shall make a proposal to grant the applicant the right to conduct studies in the study programme group for a period of one to three years and issue corresponding academic degrees or diplomas.

Identical as above, are criteria for transitional re-evaluation process (requirements and procedure approved by EKKK Council on June 13, 2012).

Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education, approved by EKKK Council establish the following in relation to decision making: “The Council shall weigh the strengths and areas for improvement pointed out by an assessment committee and its recommendations, and then shall decide whether to conduct the next quality assessment of that study programme group in seven years – or less than seven years, if the study programmes, instruction and instruction-related development based on those programmes do not comply with legislation, national or international standards”. No more specific guidance regarding intensity of assessment and criteria for their establishment is given.

In EKKK English website, there is no either detailed regulations, or any shorter statement with criteria for decisions and possible judgments for VET. The only available document is “Development and Implementation of a State Recognition System for Institutions of Vocational Education and Training” (A Document by the Concept Development Working Group of the Content Team), dated April 30th, 2010. Among other, it discusses at that time proposed changes, yet further information on EKKK website in respect to currently valid assessment methodology is absent. Documentation is only available in Estonian section of the web pages.

Consistency is achieved by following established methodologies, to which both experts (at least once a year) and higher education institutions (upon request) are introduced during trainings. EKKK calls for participation of experts both with prior evaluation experience obtained through participation in EKKK reviews, and abroad, when the agency relies on foreign experts recommended by other agencies. Assessment committees are expected to reach the decision by finding consensus.

As informed by various sources, supplied by EKKK, including SER and Quality Manual, there are process managers assigned to all types of assessments (these are considered as “owners” of the procedure in question). Apart of this, evaluation coordinators (not necessarily only process managers) are assigned to assist experts committees. Subsequently, after the expert report is turned in, evaluation coordinators are responsible for checking the quality of reports and guiding the expert panel in finalizing the report, before submitting them to EKKK Council’s consideration. The EKKK Council in its own turn, has the right to return the report to the panel for clarification. In SER, the Review Panel found statistics of transitional evaluation procedure, that EKKK Council returned reports to assessment committees to be either supplemented or clarified on 8% of proceedings (equal to 20 cases).

Analysis

The Review Panel has checked, and to reiterate what was already written, all relevant information is published on EKKK website, but there is very limited information on VET, as one of the agency's core function, in English.

In none of its procedures the agency relies on a single source of evidence, but on the contrary. In institutional accreditations and study programme group assessments, triangulation method is used: taking into account institution's own self-analysis supplied, external data and opinions gathered during the site visit, and independent judgement by the assessment committees. Only transitional evaluation procedure stands out from this pattern by simplified proceeding without visits to educational sites (but otherwise also relying on multiple sources of information), and it is understood that this is an approach applied for a relatively short period (2009-2011) and having a very specific purpose. Moreover, as continuation of transitional evaluation, in case executed, re-evaluations can not be run without a site visit.

The Review Panel noted unusually great flexibility regarding decision making under the transitional evaluation procedure (completed in 2009-2011), and understands types of decisions taken and terms provided were related to the specific aim of this assessment, number of assessments held and the speed with which they were executed.

Even though the methodology for transitional re-evaluations was updated and re-approved by EKKK Council in mid-2012, criteria for decisions remain the same, described in very broad terms, without giving a specific list of which type of judgment by expert committees result in which type of EKKK Council decisions. Furthermore, and yet less clarity is with the final decision, made at the Ministry level, but it was evident that the Ministry had followed the advice of the EKKK Council in each case. Precisely, under "partially conforms to a required standard" two rather different EKKK Council proposals might be expected:

- no right to conduct studies at all, or
- the right to conduct studies in the study programme group for a period between one to three years.

What is complicated yet more, is that when component assessments are mixed (some are judged "conforms to a required standard", some - "partially conforms to a required standard"), the EKKK Council may propose:

- to issue "not limited in time" rights to conduct studies, or
- can make a proposal to grant the right to conduct studies in the study programme group for a not predefined period, which is between one to three years.

Notably, there is vast difference between getting unlimited rights to conduct studies and getting rights only for one year, therefore, it is recommended to reconsider this set-up.

While methodology for assessment of study programme groups in the first and second cycles of higher education address in detail such matters as programme standards, coordination matters, formation and functions of assessment committees, assessment visits, assessment reports and recommendations, contesting of proceedings, follow-up, involvement of competent evaluation

authorities of foreign countries, yet decision making criteria are not clearly given. The methodology in question only states decision making grounds (a self-evaluation report by a HEI, an assessment report, comments by HEI, additional materials submitted at request of the EKKA Council), and regulates the timeline. It should be noted that this procedure is primarily aiming at improvement, hence decisions have less legal consequences, unless the panels find a deterioration at the programme group. Regrettably, it is unclear:

- criteria upon which EKKA Council decides when the next assessment will take place – in seven years or less;
- in case it is decided the assessment shall take place less than in seven years, when it could possibly take place.

The Review Panel received an explanation from EKKA that it was a conscious decision to keep decision making-process flexible, thus providing the EKKA Council with a certain right of discretion in a prescribed framework. It was pointed by the agency, that the EKKA Council had an obligation to weigh the relevant strengths and areas of improvement and present the considerations from which it had proceeded upon issuing a certain decision. Further, it was said, that similar decisions with similar reasoning were delivered when comparable circumstances were present, and some concrete examples given to the Panel, thus, no randomness.

From this additional information the Review Panel makes an inference, that in fact, there should have been consistency in interpretation of assessment reports and decision making, thus, this practice should enable the agency to publicly announce more precise criteria for judgments issued. The value rests not so much in processes and flexibility of decision making of EKKA Council, but, following ESG, in the principle of criteria being clearly set beforehand and applied consistently. This then guarantees fairness of results produced and clarity of principles applied towards decision making that directly affect higher education institutions, students and other stakeholders.

In relation to an initial assessment of a study programmes group, which, in a positive case results in a license issued by the Ministry of Education and Research, the decision making process on the Ministry levels seems not to be entirely transparent. However, the Review Panel recons it is beyond EKKA area of influence, and notes that the Ministry has been following the advice of EKKA and its predecessor in the past, thus respecting the legitimacy of the process of a quality assessment. The importance of relying on an independent appraisal for official decisions at the Ministry was highlighted both by stakeholders and the Ministry at the review visit.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: substantial compliance.

Recommendation

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.

4.1.4 ESG Part 2.4 Processes Fit for Purpose

STANDARD:

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

GUIDELINES:

Quality assurance agencies within the EHEA undertake different external processes for different purposes and in different ways. It is of the first importance that agencies should operate procedures which are fit for their own defined and published purposes. Experience has shown, however, that there are some widely-used elements of external review processes which not only help to ensure their validity, reliability and usefulness, but also provide a basis for the European dimension to quality assurance.

Amongst these elements the following are particularly noteworthy:

- insistence that the experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;
- the exercise of care in the selection of experts;
- the provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts;
- the use of international experts;
- participation of students;
- ensuring that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached;
- the use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review;
- recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality.

Evidence

From EKKA Quality Manual and other sources the Review Panel is aware that expert selection procedures fall under public competition. EKKA receives expert nominations for various categories of reviews from its partner organizations (in-country and abroad, such as foreign quality assurance agencies) as well. The Review Panel checked that there is also a possibility to self-nominate by filling a form on the EKKA website (including non-competition period). What's more, experts have an opportunity to subsequently supply their updated CVs, if the

person is already included in EKKK database and meantime expanded his/her profile.

Expert selection procedures are both incorporated in requirements for each type of reviews, and summarized in one place – EKKK Quality Manual. Notably, cooperation with professional bodies in the country and abroad is mentioned there. When choosing a person to become a member of a particular assessment committee, composition of the entire group is taken into account, as EKKK works not only with academics, but also student members and employer representatives. Evidence-based positive feedback from previous engagement is equally important. The prospective composition of the assessment committee is presented by EKKK Bureau to the EKKK Quality Assessment Council for consultation, and after mutual agreement, is approved by the EKKK Director.

It is a part of routine, that HEI are informed on the composition of prospective panel, and have a right to submit grounded objections. EKKK then, judging the reasons are fitting, finds substitute members and reaffirm the assessment committee with the institution.

Noteworthy, even though the period of 1997-2009 is out of scope of the present EKKK review, at that time, for individual programme accreditations, committees were predominantly comprised of foreign academic experts (total 269 experts recruited), local experts were rarely incorporated.

Transitional evaluation procedure is the only one of EKKK procedures, where local experts were used exclusively (158 persons). The Review Panel received EKKK explanation on reasoning behind this approach. Involvement of foreign experts was judged not being essential when an evaluation was based on predominantly quantitative indicators; information systems and data submitted by HEI were in Estonian; and experts could, among other things, also rely on single programme assessment reports by international accreditation committees (as mentioned above). As reported by EKKK, according to the feedback results collected from higher education institutions after the transitional evaluation process, about 90% of respondents agreed or partially agreed that the use of local experts justified itself.

When assembling the assessment committee for a study programme group, EKKK takes into consideration if relevant expertise is available in the country, and usually foreign experts should be invited for the service. Thus, (only in case of grounded reasoning) it is possible to have only local assessment committees, but normally assessment committees would be mixed for this type of reviews - it is EKKK to make an appropriate decision. Alternatively, for initial assessment of SPGs, only local experts are called for the job (so far – 27 persons), although the methodology does not exclude a possibility of bringing qualified persons from abroad if the need be.

By definition, institutional assessment procedure requires at least two committee members from abroad. The Review Panel requested concrete data on local vs. foreign expert involvement and found out, that to date of EKKK review, the number of experts from abroad was 13, and the number of local experts hired was 6.

It is mandatory that students are involved as committee members in institutional assessment, transitional evaluation and re-evaluation of study

programme groups, and quality assessment of study programme groups in the 1st and 2nd cycles of higher education. It is required that at the moment of approval of the committee the person has a student status. It is not explicitly said, if for initial assessment of study programme groups students should be involved, but, according to guidelines, if they are, persons studying in the institution assessed and recent graduates (this rule applies for a three year period) are not eligible. Students taking part could also be international and from foreign countries.

The Review Panel is informed by SER and EKKA methodologies, that the model of reviews, encompassing institutional self-evaluation, site visit by independent experts, a draft report produced, then publication of a final report and decisions, and follow-up activities is used for assessment of study programme groups and institutional accreditation. Only transitional evaluation and initial assessment of study programme groups, as much as the "simplified proceeding" was and is used, present deviation from this model.

Assessment committees are required not only to produce grounded decisions, but also to identify essential areas of institutional improvement needed. EKKA tries to motivate HEI toward continuous self-improvement and recognise them for their strengths. In particular, experts may distinguish sub-areas where a HEI has shown outstanding results and/or initiatives, with an additional note of 'worthy of recognition'. If the whole assessment area has received such recognition, the EKKA Council would cite the recognition in its decision.

EKKA organises trainings for experts ahead of the reviews, which, in case they are involving foreign experts, would be conducted the day before the site visit. The panel was presented with outlines of training materials, agendas and was given comments by participants through interviews. Trainings included also informal learning components and were developed to be practically oriented (i.e. use of role play).

Analysis

As seen from SER and other documentation, EKKA evaluation procedures are largely geared towards checking legal compliance and development of quality culture, while taking into account contextual factors of various institutions, basing on best practice and encouraging benchmarking, and in this regard, they are following basic principles of ESG. Students with whom the Review Panel met, expressed a wish to encourage higher education institutions share best practices more, as well as more intensively promote ESG, with the goal of among other raising student interest in external quality assurance matters.

EKKA should be commended for involvement of both international experts and student members in all regular assessment procedures – and especially for involvement of students as this is a very significant development from the time of single programme reviews. However, in respect of foreign expert inclusion, transitional evaluation is not viewed as a "regular" procedure given particulars of its implementation (previously discussed), and including temporary nature and special aims. Participation of either local or foreign experts is pre-defined in regulations, and is largely related to the purpose of the procedure and justification behind – if involvement of natives is sufficient for carrying out the task, or is it more appropriate to have wider expertise on the board. Higher

education institutions seem to be accepting EKKK arrangements regarding cooperation with foreign vs. local experts. It is commendable, that given the serious consequences and wide impact of assessments, for both institutional review and evaluation of study programme groups, mixed panels are composed.

EKKK compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

4.1.5 ESG Part 2.5: Reporting

STANDARD:

Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

GUIDELINES:

In order to ensure maximum benefit from external quality assurance processes, it is important that reports should meet the identified needs of the intended readership. Reports are sometimes intended for different readership groups and this will require careful attention to structure, content, style and tone.

In general, reports should be structured to cover description, analysis (including relevant evidence), conclusions, commendations, and recommendations. There should be sufficient preliminary explanation to enable a lay reader to understand the purposes of the review, its form, and the criteria used in making decisions. Key findings, conclusions and recommendations should be easily locatable by readers.

Reports should be published in a readily accessible form and there should be opportunities for readers and users of the reports (both within the relevant institution and outside it) to comment on their usefulness.

Evidence

EKKK has developed forms for assessments of institutions and study programme groups, which carry predetermined structure and guidance both to institutions and to experts. For example, at the end of *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*, there are tables presenting summary of general requirements, then assessment criteria, then indicators. At the end of the explanatory memorandum pertaining to the same process, there is another table giving alignment between general requirements and reference to legislation, strategies, and international agreements. Further, experts are given samples of so-called best practices; notably, EKKK interprets the list as neither being exhaustive or binding.

The EKKK web site (both in English and Estonian) is distinguished by its artistic design, and simple appearance, where navigation is arranged via matrix of choices on the top panel and expanding columns on the left. Among other, the website hosts an electronic platform that enables higher education institutions to produce self-evaluations of their study programme groups, and that also assists experts in preparation of assessment reports. Yet, the database with reports

lacks functions of making it accessible, especially as it has seemingly too complex ways of browsing, navigating and searching the database, making information difficult to find for somebody not knowing how to search for something very particular. Further, concerning navigation, it is difficult to understand in which part of the database one is in any given moment. It is not target group oriented, although that is the stated goal in the Development Plan.

Decisions of the EKKA Council with the panel reports are reported by the agency on its website and are also available via a searchable database (in Estonian); there is no additional obligation for HEI to publish them. When looking for the information for IA on sites of both evaluated institutions (that have gone through the new procedure), the Review Panel did not find the reference to the accreditation results or the procedure. Certain reports and decisions are available only in English or in Estonian without even a translated executive summary of the report or a decision.

In addition, EKKA has produced extra information material. For example, transitional evaluation results are not only included in the EKKA database and published both in Estonian and English versions, but also are presented in a single document – in pdf format publication on the website, and distributed in paper publication. This publication includes classified decisions on institutions, also bearing colour coding (red, yellow, and green). Transitional evaluation results as presented in a publication, are easily interpreted even at the snapshot (colour coding being analogous to traffic lights).

There are varying obligations towards higher education institutions to disclose content of self-analysis, to be precise:

- EKKA makes institutional self-evaluation reports available to the public unless the HEI in question does not consider it both necessary and possible, in which case the HEI must justify the request;
- to not publish it in full or in parts; in relation to assessment procedure of study programme groups, there is an expectation that HEI make their self-evaluation reports available to their communities on intranets or by other means of internal communication; it is regulated that EKKA shall not publish self-evaluation reports of HEI.

While there is relevant information available on quality assurance in vocational education and training in Estonian, yet evaluation methodology, schedule of activities and results in respect to VET in English are absent from the agency pages.

Analysis

EKKA website serves a number of purposes, among them – to inform the public and assist higher education institutions, as well as experts in their work. The agency has invested efforts into producing detailed guidance through the evaluation processes and should be commended for that. The website in Estonian is obviously more dynamic, than its counterpart in English. Evidently, there is no need to translate everything, yet it is advisable to consider how English language pages could be made livelier.

EKKA has developed and upholds a database with assessment results for a single study programme and study programme groups, but it is only accessible in

Estonian. Likewise, some reports are only available in English, thus potentially making it difficult to access in Estonia where English, though widely spoken, is not an official language. Further, due to the database being in Estonian, any foreign audiences, such as prospective exchange students to Estonia, as well HEI wishing to develop joint programmes with local institutions, would be deprived of more detailed information on quality of studies in the country, which otherwise is available.

Within Archimedes Foundation, both EKKKA and ENIC/NARIC office maintains their own databases and files with decisions on assessments regarding single study programmes, study programme groups, and institutions. Notably, EKKKA database (in Estonian) is rather difficult to search, not user friendly even by basic expectations (especially in the modern age), and requires perseverance and good level of previous knowledge in locating the desired information.

Expert reports have the same structure, making comparisons easy, but as there are many reports, especially under transitional review procedure, it is difficult to assess whether they are comparable in their analysis and content, but it does seem so. As reports are giving little background information on the review and criteria, the process or the composition of the panel beside the names, understanding them might be complicated for users that are not familiar with the quality assurance system.

The Review Panel wishes to encourage EKKKA with the issue of transparency, as it does not seem to have been a policy priority, although EKKKA has set it as part of its mission. It is though understood that the agency (in the present quality assurance setup) is rather young as an organization, and that it did not manage to start an in depth discussion about information needs of different stakeholders yet. Currently, information on quality assessment issues is not communicated clearly for present or prospective students and other stakeholders. The panel was encouraged though by EKKKA's future plans for investigating the information needs, especially of prospective students, and activities to proactively reach audiences, for example by visiting schools and fairs. While a lot of information has been made available in general, it is neither very accessible by modern "social-media internet age" standards, nor targeted.

It is an obligation of the quality agency to publish HEI self-analysis, together with other materials – the final decision, and the assessment report – as set in the Institutional Accreditation methodology approved by the EKKKA Council. Yet, cases when institutional self-evaluation reports might be presented for the general audiences not in their entirety and how the public is made aware the reports are abbreviated, are not clearly set. There is also lack of transparency as to how it would be communicated if the entire report is not published at all (as this possibility is foreseen by legislation).

While reports are available on the EKKKA site the Review Panel was disappointed that many HEI did not publish them on a voluntary basis.

As described earlier, institutional accreditation procedure is conducted by international panels. Despite many in Estonia having good English skills, of which the Review Panel had a firsthand experience during the site visit, the official state language is Estonian, while English is not mandatory. Currently, institutional accreditation documentation (self-analysis, expert report) is only available in English, and the working language of this type of reviews is English.

Unfortunately, there are difficulties to subsequently access assessment information in Estonian at the same level and quality as with English, since only the final decision by the EKKA Council is published in Estonian, which contains a summary from the expert report. The final decision, however, is not translated in full into English. Given that the three different documents, the self-evaluation report, the expert group assessment report and the decision of the EKKA Council, might contain varied information and opinions, and that the agency seems to mirror the working language of different formations of working when it concerns publishing the review documents (English for the expert group and Estonian for the EKKA Council), it does indicate that the agency does not seem to have a clear policy on language use from the perspective of informing the public.

Some stakeholders, including the Ministry, students and employers, with whom the Review Panel met, shared a view that expert reports could benefit from more outspoken language. Even experts, with whom EKKA worked in the past, agreed, that assessment reports could have more suggestions for encouraging action on the part of local academic communities, which tended to interpret polite academic style to their own benefit, when in fact they were suggesting urgent attention should be devoted to promote change.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: substantial compliance.

Recommendations

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-analyses 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.

4.1.6 ESG Part 2.6 Follow-Up Procedures

STANDARD:

Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

GUIDELINES:

Quality assurance is not principally about individual external scrutiny events: It should be about continuously trying to do a better job. External quality assurance does not end with the publication of the report and should include a structured follow-up procedure to ensure that recommendations are dealt with appropriately and any required action plans drawn up and implemented. This may involve further meetings with institutional or programme representatives. The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged.

Evidence

As presented in SER and requirements towards several assessment procedures, EKKA's starting point coincides with the basic principles of ESG, namely, that higher education institutions are primarily responsible for quality provision of studies, and that HEI should also engage in continuous improvement of their activities. Development oriented recommendations by expert groups are inherent part of assessment reports, as the Review Panel had a possibility to check them.

It is foreseen in legislation, that in cases, when partial compliance towards expected standards is found, conditional institutional accreditation decisions are issued, as well as shorter accreditation terms established. The SER notes, that EKKA Quality Assessment Council may also impose secondary conditions with respect to institutional accreditation of HEI. Re-evaluation is foreseen both in case of study programme groups and institutional assessments.

According to the stipulations of *Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education*, EKKA is required to regularly organize workshops where higher education institutions introduce developments in study programme groups during the post-assessment period, based on areas for improvement and recommendations presented in the assessment reports. Similar provisions are incorporated in the institutional accreditation procedure, also complemented by expectations towards EKKA specialists to provide feedback to institutions.

In the legal acts, the Review Panel was not able to locate clear requirements as towards what information higher education institutions should make public with the aim to remove deficiencies identified in the course of external reviews.

Analysis

There is a structured follow-up procedure in place, allowing consistency of approach. Repeated assessment is foreseen as the systemic measure to assure improvement does take place within higher education institutions or else pre-determined sanctions by laws follow.

As quality agency, EKKA is charged with the task to organize regular workshops for HEI both in respect to institutional accreditation (at least once every two years) and assessment of study programme groups as well. Representatives of higher education institutions, with whom the Review Panel spoke, confirmed EKKA trainings were valuable to the community.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

Recommendation

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 Council decisions.

4.1.7 ESG Part 2.7 Periodic Reviews

STANDARD:

External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance

GUIDELINES:

Quality assurance is not a static but a dynamic process. It should be continuous and not "once in a lifetime". It does not end with the first review or with the completion of the formal follow-up procedure. It has to be periodically renewed. Subsequent external reviews should take into account progress that has been made since the previous event. The process to be used in all external reviews should be clearly defined by the external quality assurance agency and its demands on institutions should not be greater than are necessary for the achievement of its objectives.

Evidence

It is defined in legislation, that institutional accreditation cycle is maximum seven years; but in case there are deficiencies in the management, administration, instruction and research, and in the environment of teaching, learning and research of the university – three years.

The institutional accreditation procedure was tested in two institutions, and till the moment of review visit, in 2012, EKKA organised the evaluation of three more higher education institutions. In 2013 it is envisaged to carry out the evaluation of six higher education institutions; in 2014 the evaluation of seven higher education institutions will be organised; in 2015, the plan contains a list of eight HEI to be evaluated, and in 2016 – six HEI would be evaluated.

Following stipulations of transitional evaluation of study programme groups, rights to conduct studies might be issued for one to three years.

As informed by SER and a special publication, in transitional evaluations, 33 HEI participated, total 28 study program groups (that included 670 study programmes) were evaluated, overall number of assessments held – 254 (73% of decisions were open-ended licences, 20% fixed-term licences, in 7% cases – no licence issued). Till the moment of Review Panel visit, two re-evaluations were undertaken.

Quality of a study programme groups should be assessed at least once within seven years or within a shorter term set by the EKKA Council. However, provisions regarding this shorter term are not clearly established neither in national level legislation, nor in EKKA methodologies.

Accreditations of study programme groups in VET underwent a pilot phase in 2011, it included 24 institutions, 41 expert, and as a result 37 proceedings were conducted. In 2012, accreditations in five study programme groups were planned.

Analysis

EKKA is undertaking regular assessments in quality of higher education and vocational education and training, as supported by statistics above.

The *Universities Act* delegates responsibility to the EKKA Quality Assessment Council to set shorter terms for quality assessment of a study programme group, yet no further guidance is given what influences decisions in relation to those shorter terms. Till now EKKA Council did not determine clear criteria for decisions on shorter terms. Currently, the methodology does not give clear terms when the next assessment should be done; also no explicit criteria how this assessment term is established – what level compliance and with what exactly legislation and standards.

Transitional re-evaluation, according to EKKA calculations, may last till 2017. Therefore, it is essential to establish more clearly which type of decisions is taken when.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

Recommendation

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.

4.1.8 ESG Part 2.8 System-Wide Analysis

STANDARD:

Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc.

GUIDELINES:

All external quality assurance agencies collect a wealth of information about individual programmes and/or institutions and this provides material for structured analyses across whole higher education systems. Such analyses can provide very useful information about developments, trends, emerging good practice and areas of persistent difficulty or weakness and can become useful tools for policy development and quality enhancement. Agencies should consider including a research and development function within their activities, to help them extract maximum benefit from their work.

Evidence

In the self-evaluation report, EKKA informed of analysis made so far by providing a list of articles written both by EKKA Bureau and external members; publications were in Estonian and English as well. Notably, EKKA participates in events, such as European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF), where presentations were given in 2011 and 2012.

Launching of the new evaluation system was described in several research articles on the subject. A doctoral thesis by EKKA staff member of the same topic – stakeholder expectations for external quality assurance in higher education – is under preparation.

Transitional evaluation period (2009-2011) was the one analysed in a special publication. Obligations towards producing feedback summaries of shorter evaluation periods and analysis of feedback trends, are established in EKKA Quality Manual. Overviews by process managers, outlining the strengths, areas for improvement, and feedback of the evaluation process shall be prepared for quality assessment of study programme groups and accreditation of SPGs in VET.

EKKA staff members are also contributing towards other analytic reports, such as in the exercise of referencing the Estonian national qualifications framework towards European Framework of Qualifications.

The Review Panel was informed of agency plans to create a new position of analyst in EKKA Bureau in 2013.

Analysis

Notably, till the moment of EKKA external review, new assessment procedures were not running very long, especially in respect to institutional accreditation

and quality of study programme groups of first and second cycle. It appears that till now EKKA mostly capitalised on analysis on expectations of stakeholders and consultation process in setting up the new quality assurance system, and also of the transitional period and its results.

From the discussion with EKKA Bureau staff, the Review Panel formed an opinion that the agency intends to strengthen the research and development function within its all procedures. Stakeholders, especially institutions and students, also stressed that such approach would be useful in disseminating best practice.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

4.1 b) ENQA criterion 1 / ESG 3.1, 3.3 Activities

STANDARD:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

GUIDELINES:

These may involve evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities and should be part of the core functions of the agency.

Evidence

EKKA's formal responsibilities are set in the Statutes following stipulations of the *Universities Act*, and the *Professional Higher Education Act*, each of these laws listing such functions as:

- organization and implementation of institutional accreditation,
- organization and implementation of quality assessment of study programme groups.

Institutional accreditation procedure was piloted in autumn 2011 (assessment of the ProfHE institution – The Estonian Academy of Security Sciences) and spring 2012 (assessment of the university – The Estonian University of Life Sciences). In autumn 2012, as planned, assessment visits to three more HEI were organized: Tallinn Health Care College, Tartu Health Care College, Institute of Economics and Management. At the time of the Expert Panel review visit, one of EKKA staff members was on the assessment visit in Tartu participating to the meeting with the Review Panel by a video conference.

As was already described, transitional evaluations run for two years between autumn 2009 and autumn 2011, and for the time it was a regular activity of EKKA. This is supported by evidence, that 33 HEI participated in the process, altogether 28 study programme groups were evaluated (this included 670 programmes). This procedure was of two kinds: a simplified one (relying on reports by international accreditation committees, institutional reports, other national data sources) and a full one (in addition of everything enumerated in the simplified procedure, it was supplemented by an expert visit to an

institution). Though transitional evaluation exercise as such is already completed, because of the types of decisions issued (open-ended licences to conduct studies in a certain field; fixed term-licenses (2-3 years); negative decisions withdrawing the rights to conduct studies), re-evaluations is still on EKKA's agenda. Majority of re-evaluations fall within the most immediate term of 2013-2014, however, the agency projections show that some re-evaluations may continue till 2017.

As noted earlier, accreditation of study programme groups in VET was tested in 2011, by procedures run in two study programme groups (i.e. hotel and catering; building and construction), encompassing 24 institutions. For 2012, activities were planned for five more study programme groups (i.e. computer sciences; management and administration; crop and livestock production; electricity and energy; motor vehicles, aircraft and ship technology).

Initial assessment of study programme groups in both universities and professional higher education institutions was a regular activity during 2011-2012: 17 assessments in five HEI conducted (in particular – seven study programme groups assessed).

Quality assessment of study programme groups in the 1st and 2nd cycles of higher education is the most recent activity of EKKA resulting from transitional evaluations. It was tested in autumn 2012 (in the field of informatics and information technology), and is planned to run the first full cycle till end of 2016.

Analysis

EKKA undertakes regular activities on organizational level (i.e., institutional accreditation of HEI), and group of programmes level (i.e., assessment of study programme groups in HE and VET; initial assessment of study programme groups in HEI).

EKKA pays careful attention to planning of processes and to learning from doing. Procedures for assessment of SPGs in VET were among the first ones tested, and running already as regular ones in 2012. At the time of this review EKKA was at the end of piloting several other procedures, - namely institutional accreditation, and assessment of SPGs in higher education.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

4.2 ENQA criterion 2 / ESG 3.2 Official status

STANDARD:

Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

Evidence

Recognition within Estonia

National legal acts directly identify EKKA as external quality assurance agency. In the *Universities Act*, article no. 10 is solely devoted to EKKA; article 12 talks of EKKA in relation to institutional accreditation, article 12² deals with EKKA and accreditation of study programme groups. The same clauses are repeated in the *Private Schools Act*, article no. 14. In the *Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act*, under article 16¹ (Granting right to provide instruction), it is regulated that "The Ministry of Education and Research shall involve the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency in the assessment of the quality of instruction".

A contract under public law is concluded between the Ministry of Education and Research and Archimedes Foundation for all activities, including external quality assurance matters as well; the EKKA's annual work plan is attached to this contract.

The *Statutes of Archimedes Foundation* stipulate that EKKA is independent in its quality assessment decisions. Further, in SER, EKKA mentions representatives of the state being included in the Supervisory Board of Archimedes Foundation (within which the agency is rooted), but for the purpose of safeguarding EKKA independence, the Board delegated EKKA Quality Assessment Council to approve all working methodologies in addition to issuing assessment decisions.

Archimedes Management Board, among other, supervises EKKA activities as regards conformity to such national legal obligations, as public procurement procedures, and reporting. In the meeting with Chairman of Archimedes Management Board the Review Panel heard of satisfaction how EKKA activities are run.

Recognition across the EHEA

EKKA was a full member of ENQA since 2002 till September 2010. At the moment of the present review EKKA was regarded by ENQA as a candidate for Full Membership (reference in ToR). It is also indicated accordingly on ENQA webpages (<http://www.enqa.eu/candidates.lasso>), a brief agency profile is given there.

EKKA predecessor organization was a co-founder of INQAAHE regional sub-network CEENet (as from 2011, registered in Germany as association CEENQA). The agency is listed on the network's website under members section (<http://www.ceenqa.net>) accordingly, contacts given too.

EKKA intends to become a member of European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies by 2016, as indicated in the Development Plan.

Analysis

EKKA is clearly formally recognised both within Estonia and across EHEA, and has future plans on active engagement internationally.

While the *Universities Act*, as issued by the Estonian Parliament, does not detail how an institution's right to undergo accreditations abroad should be

implemented, the *Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation*, and *Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education* (both approved by EKKA Quality Assessment Council) have separate sections on involving competent evaluation authorities of foreign countries. This procedure requires a HEI to file a well-grounded request to EKKA to include a foreign assessment authority; and the EKKA Council is charged with a duty to scrutinise this request and make an appropriate decision.

Although in legal acts there are provisions that Estonian higher education institutions can request to undergo reviews with another foreign agency, till date no such case occurred. In Panel interviews with rectors of universities and leaders of professional higher education institutions, no one seemed to be explicitly interested in using such an opportunity, for any of possible reasons, to fulfill their legal external quality assurance obligations.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

Recommendation

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 gives consideration to 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.

4.3 ENQA criterion 3 / ESG 3.4 Resources

Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes, procedures and staff.

Evidence

Finances

Financial aspects in the *Universities Act* are regulated as follows: "The costs related to institutional accreditation shall be covered from the state budget or, at the request of the university, through the budget of the university. If the university applies for the performance of accreditation from a quality agency of a foreign state, the costs related to accreditation shall be covered from the state budget in the extent of actual costs and in the amount which does not exceed the costs which would be covered in the case of a nationally conducted

institutional accreditation.” Equivalent provisions are written in *the Private Schools Act* and the *Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act* – accreditation-related costs to be born by the state or the school itself. The laws similarly stipulate that the funding for evaluation of study programme groups follows the same principle.

To remind, as stipulated by the *Universities Act*, the contract under public law between the Ministry of Education and Research and Archimedes Foundation is concluded. The annual work plan of EKKK is also an annex to the contract (based on which the reporting will be carried out). The contract does not, however, give evidence to the process of how the decision is reached as to how much funding is given to EKKK and how exactly any reporting takes place.

According to data in self-evaluation report accounting for the last 4 years and projection for 2013, two main sources of EKKK funding are state funds and projects (both for higher education-related activities, and VET-related activities). Total agency funds from 2009 to 2013 increased almost twice. In 2010, state funding constituted around 60%, while two ESF projects contributed the rest 40%. Since then, the proportion of state funding declined (in 2011 it made approximately 47%, in 2012 – 42%, estimation for 2013 is around 46%). In SER, it is explained that reduction in state budget funds in 2012 was related to sharp decline in the number of external assessments, in their turn caused by completion of transitional evaluations and start of the pilot assessments under institutional accreditation procedure. No reference is given to other than two ESF funded projects (e.g. external financial support from third sources).

As described earlier, state and project funding are provided for institutional assessment and assessment of SPGs, transitional evaluation was also publicly funded. However, HEI are to pay for initial accreditation of study programme groups. The reimbursement procedure is regulated by the order of the Chairperson of the Management Board of the Archimedes Foundation (available at http://ekka.archimedes.ee/files/kk_349.pdf). By the *Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups*, EKKK is requested to publish relevant information on its website. Following information announced on the website (<http://ekka.archimedes.ee/korgkoolile/oppe-labivimise-oiguse-taotlemine>) until the end of 2012, the base fee for initial accreditation of SPGs was 6780€.

Resources for research and development seem to be imbedded in ESF-funded projects managed by EKKK. As stated in SER, it is a responsibility of EKKK Director to draft a long-term activity plan with quantitative data, and present it to the Ministry as the main sponsor of quality assurance activities. During the Review Panel meeting with Minister of Education and Science, he confirmed it being in the interests of the Ministry to have properly resourced and professionally running agency.

Staff

EKKK has staff of 8 persons, and the Review Panel had a possibility to talk to them all (one member – in a video conference). As informed by self-evaluation report and in meetings with EKKK Bureau, for carrying out transitional evaluation, which required many more coordinators at the same time, temporary contracts were concluded with qualified members mainly from higher education institutions. This way the agency covered imbalance between the human resources available and the workload assigned for the period.

EKKA work plan for 2012 gives evidence to staff development on a yearly basis. Trainings that staff has to attend are varied according to different needs of the staff coming from their daily commitments at EKKA; they range from improving creative presentation skills, language courses, psychology at the workplace to trainings in computer skills.

Infrastructure

The review visit took place at EKKA office, located in central part of Tallinn city at Toompuiestee street no 30. The nicely furnished office space includes working rooms for staff, one meeting room (for 15 persons), one common room, and utility space. The conference room is well equipped for working meetings, including video devices (which were used not once during the review visit).

Analysis

The Review Panel posed multiple questions to representatives of Archimedes Foundation, EKKA partner organizations, and HEI leaders regarding the fact of EKKA as quality body based within a larger organization – whether it was effective and efficient in terms of assuring independence of the agency, and also in economic terms. During the discussions, it was repeatedly reminded of Estonia being a small country with a particular need to manage all resources in the most efficient manner, and that current arrangements were exactly serving the purpose.

Estonian state completely takes over the responsibility of providing funding towards accreditation of professional higher education, yet with respect to higher education two alternatives exist: costs covered by the state or under request of the institution and once consent is obtained – by the school itself. Governmental funding towards quality assurance is disbursed following the contract between the Ministry (as state representative) and Archimedes Foundation (as legal body representing EKKA). This set-up seems to reflect the regulatory tradition of Estonia as a country and to that extent is beyond influence of EKKA. Payment of fees in relation to initial assessment of SPGs is handled in a transparent way.

During the oral discussion with EKKA Director, the Review Panel was assured that till now the agency succeeded to hold a grounded discussion with the Ministry regarding the funding level. Also, an example was given, that secured through planning and negotiations process, in 2013 EKKA Bureau will expand with an additional position of an analyst. The Review Panel was assured of EKKA forward planning efforts both in relation to finances and staffing needs.

The Review Panel is aware EKKA experienced dramatic transformation in terms of systemic shift in types of external quality assurance processes run, as well as fluctuations in workload during the last several years; yet the agency seems to be managing changes well.

Evidence of EKKA's strategic planning was provided in a form of Development Plan for a period covering 2012-2016. The plan was produced involving EKKA Bureau staff, members of EKKA Council, other relevant stakeholders, thus, attests not only to institutional ownership, but also to joint efforts and consultation.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

Recommendation

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.

4.4 ENQA criterion 4 / ESG 3.5 Mission statement

STANDARD:

Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

GUIDELINES:

These statements should describe the goals and objectives of agencies' quality assurance processes, the division of labour with relevant stakeholders in higher education, especially the higher education institutions, and the cultural and historical context of their work. The statements should make clear that the external quality assurance process is a major activity of the agency and that there exists a systematic approach to achieving its goals and objectives. There should also be documentation to demonstrate how the statements are translated into a clear policy and management plan.

Evidence

Delegation of responsibilities to EKKA is based on the *Universities Act*, which broadly defines the main aspects of the agency work. EKKA Statutes formalise this delegation. It begins with the following statement: "The mission of the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency is, in co-operation with its partners, to promote quality in the field of education and thereby increase the competitiveness of the Estonian society." Further, it goes on to present the main functions of the agency, and the management structure. The Statutes require EKKA to follow work schedules and operating objectives. This document is approved by the Supervisory Board of Archimedes Foundation on June 13, 2012.

On its website, EKKA introduces itself from the mission as above and also provides access to the Statutes (in pdf format) from the documentation section.

EKKA Development Plan for 2012-2016 begins with a self-definition stating that EKKA "is a leading competence centre in the field of external evaluation of educational institutions in Estonia. EKKA acts in accordance with agreements and trends in the European Education Area, retains information about trends and best practices also outside Europe, applies up-to-date know-how tailored for a local context, and employs analyses of the results of external evaluations to enhance competitiveness of the Estonian educational system". Further, it goes on with the description of mission to promote quality, then spells out core

processes being external evaluation of educational institutions. Core values are identified as equity, competency, cooperation, and openness. The Vision for 2020 declares intensions of EKKA being an internationally recognised competence centre in the field of external evaluation of educational institutions, valued by its partners. In the Plan four objectives to be reached by 2016 are set, subsequently each objective is accompanied by assessment criteria (which is intended provide basis for evaluation whether aims have been attained).

The final chapter of the Development Plan talks about implementation secured through preparing early work plans and checks on progress as need be, but at least once a year. The Plan was initially approved by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council on March 16th, 2012, and amended on June 28th the same year. It is available for the general public in the same format and from the same area of EKKA website as the Statutes are.

The Quality Manual of EKKA begins with the repetition of the agency's mission, core processes, supporting activities, and values, then describes in detail work principles, planning of development and activities (with separate attention towards inclusion of internal staff and external stakeholders, consultation processes and subsequent publishing and presentation to agency's partners).

EKKA work plan 2012 (EE) gives an overview of EKKA's activities and different responsibilities of the staff members.

In the Self-analysis Report, EKKA refers to all above mentioned documents.

Analysis

The Statutes of EKKA satisfy European Standards and Guidelines in a way that it describes historic context of the agency operations by clearly relating EKKA as continuing work done by Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre and the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council during the period of 1997-2008. The document is rather brief (3 pages), but includes a detailed account on EKKA functions, responsibilities of the Archimedes Foundation with respect to EKKA, then EKKA Quality Assessment Council, and notes that the lowest implementation level – job duties shall be specified in relevant job descriptions. Therefore, there is a straight management structure in place.

Key activities listed in the EKKA Development Plan 2012-2016 include typical activities of external quality assurance agencies, namely provision of accreditation (of HEI and study programme groups; of VET programme groups), and other supporting processes (such as analysis, informing, training, counselling). Thus, the agency is clear about its core work and demonstrates good apprehension of the need to properly run services enabling achievement of goals. The cultural context is mirrored both in values, which again, are quite common to similar foreign organizations, and in the statement of who are identified as the main target groups and partners in the process. Agency values in the Development plan reflect the nature of EKKA activities. Critical success factors (professionalism, relevance of communication, and visibility on an international level) tie up with values and assessment criteria. The international participation factor is blended both in activities, values, conditions for success, further objectives and assessment criteria, therefore, it could be seen as critical and integral. The Development Plan itself does not hold sections on analyses

with strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, but in the Quality Manual a description of necessary stages in producing the Plan reveals scrutiny of local and international contexts to be done, as well estimation on the current positioning of the agency etc. The work plan 2012 (EE) is clearly related to the EKKA goals set out in the Development Plan and stipulates main activities in relation to the objectives of the development plan.

The Statutes, EKKA Development Plan, Quality Manual, and the annual work plan complement each other with different level of specificity, but together produce guidance and guarantee coherency of efforts.

In meetings on the site visit, the Panel found that different stakeholders see EKKA as working hard towards implementation of its mission for the Estonian society. There was no evidence that till now EKKA would fail its objectives or work plans. Former Chair of Archimedes Supervisory Board, with whom the Review Panel talked in a video conference, was of the opinion that the Ministry of Education and Science rely on the competence of EKKA and is willing to hear the advice, while Archimedes Foundation would not stand in the middle of the process. The Minister of Education and Science confirmed the value of EKKA to the whole education system, especially stressing both public and political expectations to the agency to maintain trust in Estonian higher education and the need to further promote quality agenda, highlighting also the importance of the independence of the agency as that is central for legitimacy. All of various participant groups the Panel held meetings with were supportive to EKKA and were of the opinion that there is always room for improvement.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

4.5 ENQA criterion 5 / ESG 3.6 Independence

STANDARD:

Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

GUIDELINES:

An agency will need to demonstrate its independence through measures, such as:

- its operational independence from higher education institutions and governments is guaranteed in official documentation (e.g. instruments of governance or legislative acts);
- the definition and operation of its procedures and methods, the nomination and appointment of external experts and the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence;

- while relevant stakeholders in higher education, particularly students / learners, are consulted in the course of quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agency.

Evidence

Independence defined in legislation and regulations

In the Self-Evaluation Report, EKKKA draws on the statements in certain paragraphs of the *Statutes of Archimedes Foundation* and the *Statutes of EKKKA* as providing legal grounds for its independence. Namely, in the Statutes of Archimedes Foundation (EE) two paragraphs are pertinent to the topic, precisely: paragraphs 3.3.1.1 (establishes the structural units of the agency with the purpose of fulfilling the main tasks and objectives of the agency itself - 3.3.1.1 thus establishes EKKKA), and 3.3.5 (it reads: EKKKA is independent in its decisions on quality assurance).

Although EKKKA is positioned as Archimedes Foundation's structural unit, it is guaranteed to be carrying out independent tasks, and being independent and sovereign in making quality assessment decisions (respectively clauses no. 1.2; 1.3 in EKKKA Statutes).

In the *Universities Act*, there are clearly stated functions (institutional accreditation, quality assessment of study programme groups, other functions assigned thereto by legislation), and management of EKKKA (the binary structure including Bureau and Quality Assessment Council). This legal act imperatively sets some crucial elements of work methodology (such as involvement of international experts, following international principles of activity, the need to establish and publish the conditions and procedure for institutional accreditation and quality assessment taking into account different types of institutions and processes). The law further details (under separate articles no. 12 and 12²) the necessary components in institutional accreditation – it defines which are assessment areas, requires to make certain accreditation decisions for a specified term. No details of the quality assessment of study programme group (except for accreditation terms and financial part) are regulated by law. State expectations and requirements for studies (of what should be in place) in broad terms are defined in the *Standard of Higher Education*, which however, does not interfere with quality assurance processes.

To recall, the *Universities Act* foresees a contract under public law between the Ministry of Education and Archimedes Foundation to be concluded. The example of a yearly contract (EE) supplied to the Review Panel defines responsibilities and declares funding from the Ministry to Archimedes Foundation for carrying out the activities of EKKKA. The contract does not refer to internal division of responsibilities within Archimedes Foundation with that regard.

Both responsibilities of EKKKA Director and EKKKA Quality Assessment Council are laid down in the *Statutes*, the greater level of detail is found in the Quality Manual. The Quality Manual is coordinated by the EKKKA Quality Assessment Council. The Statutes of EKKKA explicitly set the main functions of agency (including provisions on appointment of Director), and management structure (as concerns EKKKA Bureau and EKKKA Quality Assessment Council). Procedure for the formation of EKKKA Council clearly establishes the way of composition especially taking attention to the representation of study fields (in broad terms)

and avoiding conflicts of interests. Neither representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science, nor leaders of universities and professional higher education institutions voiced concerns regarding the transparency of EKKA Council selection procedure or appointments of assessment committees.

Independence from higher education institutions

By the procedure, candidates for the post of a member of the EKKA Council may be presented by universities, institutions of professional higher education, research and development institutions, registered professional associations, associations of employers, and associations of Student Bodies. In meetings with rectors of universities and leaders of professional higher education institutions, they confirmed to the Panel having been invited to propose members of EKKA Council (to be chosen by the Supervisory Board of Archimedes Foundation), some of them told having used this possibility, others recalled having had internal discussions on the institutional level, but not put their nominees forward.

Although majority of experts come from higher education institutions, both membership of assessment committees and expectations towards expert conduct are specified in EKKA procedures. The EKKA Council formation procedure explicitly forbids including rectors or vice-rectors, as well as Ministry officials as members.

Under institutional accreditation procedure, it is necessary that EKKA forwards a higher education institution a letter with information on the intended composition of assessment committees. Institutions then have a possibility to submit a grounded objection, which would be taken into account. EKKA Council is informed on the planned composition of a committee, and it is a duty of EKKA Director to approve a final composition of the assessment committee.

Independence of judgement

Various stakeholders are represented in Archimedes Supervisory Board, such as Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, the Estonian Rectors' Conference, the Union of School Heads, and Estonian Ministry of Finance. Archimedes Management Board consists of two internal members. EKKA Director does not report directly to Archimedes Supervisory Board, but rather to Archimedes Management Board, as the latter appoints EKKA Director in a way of public competition. The Statutes of EKKA suppose the Director is directly subordinated to the Management Board of the Foundation, to which reports (including budgets) are submitted. It is a duty of EKKA Director to approve composition of any assessment committee.

In the meeting with Chairman of Archimedes Management Board the Panel was assured EKKA Director was chosen in an open and competitive way by testimony that in the second selection round there were four candidates competing.

EKKA methodologies require stakeholder involvement in the quality assessment process in a variety of ways, from participation in assessment committees, to supplying opinions. In particular, in *the Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation* it is demanded to explore via surveys graduate satisfaction with the quality of instruction and employer satisfaction with the quality and suitability of requirements of the labour market. In *the Requirements for Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme*

Groups, members of assessment committees shall interview students of the educational institution at the choice of experts; the educational institution shall provide conditions for that and not hinder in this process.

As specified in procedures both towards institutional accreditation and evaluation of study programme groups, assessment committees are responsible for drafting the reports, educational institutions may forward their comments to the draft, then experts have an obligation to file completed reports. EKKA Bureau is monitoring the work of assessment committees, while the EKKA Quality Assessment Council has to provide final assessment decisions on the matter in question.

Analysis

The mandate to EKKA comes from the highest level of national legal acts – the three main laws in the field of higher education and professional higher education. In particular, the *Universities Act* sets rather strict legal framework of what EKKA should do and how. At the same time, the law trusts EKKA to create detailed procedures towards execution of its responsibilities. The Review Panel clearly understands, that is this is the legal tradition of the country, to which EKKA is a subject.

There was no evidence that Ministry of Education and Research as the founder of Archimedes Foundation, of which EKKA is a part, would be directly interfering with any of agency processes, including expert selection, publication of reports, issuing of accreditation decisions.

Even though on Archimedes Supervisory Board Ministry representatives sit, this body does not bear responsibility for day-to-day running of EKKA and was not found to be otherwise intrusive.

The contract mentioned above does give evidence to the independence of EKKA from the management of Archimedes Foundation as the budget line is separate from the Foundation's, thus substantiating the statements given at interviews that EKKA discusses its budget and resources directly with the Ministry.

Even though the *Universities Act* established a maximum accreditation period being seven years, then possibilities for issuing accreditation decisions valid three years, or a case for no accreditation at all, both EKKA Statutes and Quality Manual leave no room for doubt that the agency is finally responsible for the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance processes.

Persons to which the Review Panel spoke confirmed of the independence of the EKKA Council selection procedure and had no doubt in their integrity.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

Recommendations

The Review Panel took notice of only one woman between the 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.

4.6 ENQA Criterion 6 / ESG 3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by EKKA

STANDARD:

The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;
- an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;
- publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;
- a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.

Guidelines:

Agencies may develop and use other processes and procedures for particular purposes. Agencies should pay careful attention to their declared principles at all times, and ensure both that their requirements and processes are managed professionally and that their conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even though the decisions are formed by groups of different people.

Agencies that make formal quality assurance decisions, or conclusions which have formal consequences should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of each agency.

Evidence

A self-assessment is a compulsory procedure in institutional accreditation of HEI, and in quality assessment of study programme groups in the first and second cycles of higher education (in this case, self-evaluation shall encompass all study programmes belonging to the programme group).

According to EKKA Council guidelines, self-assessments were not needed for transitional evaluation of study programme group, but institutions were requested to submit certain information (six clauses, encompassing previous results of study programme accreditation, results of doctoral studies evaluation, implementation of an action plan to eliminate deficiencies of conditionally

accredited programmes). Similar provisions are applicable towards transitional re-evaluation. In both cases, not the institution in question, but EKKA Bureau is assigned the task to do a provisional analysis concerning fulfilment of the conditions in three clauses (as listed above).

Requirements towards having an external assessment by a group of experts, student inclusion, and a visit are as follows:

- An international group of four to six experts including a student, a mandatory visit – towards institutional accreditation;
- Five local members including a student, an obligatory visit under standard proceeding, but no visit under simplified proceeding – in transitional evaluation and re-evaluation of SPGs;
- In general cases, both foreign and Estonian experts in a committee of at least three members including a student – in quality assessment of SPGs in HE;
- A committee of three to five members (including from foreign countries, if needed); no explicit requirement of a student member, but if there is a student invited, he/she cannot be studying at the HEI under evaluation, or graduated from it less than three years ago – for initial assessment of SPGs in HE.

It is required to produce an evaluation report in all cases: institutional accreditation; initial assessment of SPGs in HE; quality assessment of SPGs in first and second cycles in higher education; component assessments to be written for transitional evaluation and re-evaluation.

Publication of evaluation reports is clearly set for institutional accreditation. Yet, following EKKA Council guidelines, for transitional evaluation and re-evaluation EKKA Bureau is obliged to send information to the Ministry, and to the educational institution; there is no obligation fixed in the legal act that EKKA must publish component assessments on its website or by other means. Similarly, there are no requirements to publish expert reports on initial assessment of SPGs. In comparison, a procedure on quality assessment in SPGs in higher education, directly sets: "Within one week after the decision and the assessment report were forwarded to the institution of higher education, EKKA shall publicise on its website both the decision and the assessment report".

Follow-up is foreseen only for two procedures - for institutional accreditation, and quality assessment of SPGs in higher education.

The appeals procedure was originally introduced with launch of assessment procedures, but streamlined by EKKA after audits by Ernst & Young Baltic. To achieve consistency in evaluations, among other, EKKA trains its experts, and has EKKA Bureau member to accompany all review teams (in cases there are visits to institutions organized). For more details on this please see under *ENQA Criterion 8 Miscellaneous*.

Analysis

EKKA's main procedures - institutional accreditation and quality assessment of SPGs in higher education - follow an established standard of an institutional self-

analysis, external assessment committees (including student members), expert reports, publication of expert reports and EKKA Council decisions, follow-up activities.

Other procedures – transitional evaluation and re-evaluation, and initial assessment of SPGs in higher education – are not EKKA completely “owned” procedures in a way that the final decision is not in hands of EKKA. In these cases, there is limited transparency of reports concluded and decisions made.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

Recommendation

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.

4.7 ENQA Criterion 7 / ESG 3.8 Accountability procedures

STANDARD:

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

GUIDELINES:

These procedures are expected to include the following:

1. A published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself, made available on its website;
2. Documentation which demonstrates that:
 - the agency’s processes and results reflect its mission and goals of quality assurance;
 - the agency has in place, and enforces, a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts;
 - the agency has reliable mechanisms that ensure the quality of any activities and material produced by subcontractors, if some or all of the elements in its quality assurance procedure are subcontracted to other parties;
 - the agency has in place internal quality assurance procedures which include an internal feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from its own staff and council/board); an internal reflection mechanism (i.e. means to react to internal and external recommendations for improvement); and an external feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from experts and reviewed institutions for future development) in order to inform and underpin its own development and improvement.
3. A mandatory cyclical external review of the agency’s activities at least once every five years which includes a report on its conformity with the membership criteria of ENQA.

Evidence

The agency's work is organized in line with the state laws and own Statutes, following the yearly work plans and the Development Plan for 2012-2016. As was already mentioned, the contract under public law between the Ministry and Archimedes Foundation (as EKKA umbrella body) includes a number of clauses, among them – requirements for monthly reporting on expenses and annual reporting on implementation of the responsibilities of Archimedes (conducting quality assurance) to the Ministry.

EKKA Quality Manual is the document attesting to a published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself, made available on its website in English and Estonian. It is a personal responsibility of EKKA Director to ensure planning the work and reporting, including budgets, to the Management Board of Archimedes Foundation and other parties. EKKA Council shall coordinate development plans and annual action plans, as stipulated by the clauses in EKKA Statutes.

All procedures of assessments contain detailed descriptions of a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of EKKA's external experts – they are found in relevant passages on formation and functions of assessment committees in institutional accreditation, quality assessment of SPGs in higher education, transitional evaluation and re-evaluation, initial assessment of SPGs in HE within all methodologies. Experts are signing a sample declaration of no-conflict of interests. As already referred, EKKA maintains a database of experts and constantly accepts self-nominations, as well as makes specific public announcements for services, this way ensuring a required composition of assessment committees.

Even though EKKA hires experts for execution of assessment tasks, the assessment process is clearly in the hands of EKKA Bureau staff from planning to running procedures, ensuring correspondence with education institutions, delivering materials towards decision making by EKKA Quality Assessment Council, or, in specified cases, by the Ministry, then publishing results. Thus, in a strict sense, activities are not subcontracted to other parties.

The Review Panel requested and was supplied sample work schedules of institutional accreditation assessment committees. It gives evidence to the planning and execution of the work of the assessment committee, including commenting and reading the self-evaluation report, preparing the schedule of the visit, training of the committee members (one day before the site visit), carrying out the visit, drafting of the assessment report and commenting on the report by the institutions; finalisation of the report. The entire schedule for the two examples of the institutional accreditation is laid out to four months, with the site visit taking place two months into the schedule.

The sample accreditation decision of EKKA Quality Assessment Council, that the Review Panel analysed, was with the outcome to grant accreditation for seven years, but with a secondary condition. The secondary condition is an option requested by the assessment committee that was not originally available, but for which the regulation was amended to allow for establishing a secondary condition to avoid going through a full review process when it did not seem to be a proportional follow-up action to ensure compliance to standards. The

document highlights the legal grounds for the review and the decision and in major part, quotes the assessment committee report followed by a more extensive overview of the discussion and considerations given within the EKKA Council itself. Thus, the document evidences that the Council does not rubber-stamp the decisions of the assessment committees, but follows its own independent discussion and decision.

An external feedback mechanism includes formal feedback forms from experts and reviewed institutions. Feedback questionnaire forms (EE and ENG) delivered to the Review Panel give information about which kind of information EKKA gathers about experts when they apply to become an assessment expert. EKKA asks for contacts, preferences for types of reviews and for study programme groups, education, work experience, language skills, motivation and experience in the field of quality assurance. Most of the information about the qualities of the experts is gathered in open fields. The feedback forms given to the panel were for feedback from experts, feedback from HEI for IA and feedback from HEI on the assessment visit organised within the transitional evaluations. The feedback from experts asks about the suitability of self-analysis reports, about the usefulness of the introductory seminar and materials provided by EKKA; whether requirements and criteria for each assessment area allows to evaluate appropriately; whether appropriate access to information was provided during the visit; whether the organisation of the visit (length of interviews, logistics) was appropriate; whether the coordinator provided professional support; if the assessment committee consisted of competent members; if the chair allocated tasks and led the work in an appropriate manner. The questions included options of "agree", "partially agree" or "disagree", but experts were requested for suggestions for improvements under each point as well as to provide general comments. The HEI and interviewees were asked whether the composition of the assessment committee allowed for appropriate and objective decisions; whether the members of the committees were adequately prepared for the visit; whether questions put forward by the committees were appropriate; whether time management by the committee was appropriate; whether the interviews were conducted in an open manner; and whether the persons being interviewed were given the opportunity to voice their views and opinions to the committee.

Information shared at EKKA Bureau meetings is saved on EKKA server. Feedback from assessment procedures is also gathered in a formal way, via forms, and subsequently taken into account, e.g. in appointing new assessment experts. The Review Panel was presented evidence of correspondence between EKKA Bureau and EKKA Council, attesting towards the fact that discussions are on-going regarding execution of EKKA functions, taking into account improvement measures.

The self-assessment report points to a fact, that EKKA had undergone an external evaluation by Ernst & Young Baltic AS, an auditing firm between December 2011 and February 2012. The purpose was twofold: 1) to check compliance of EKKA's operations with its own rules of procedure, Estonian legislation and international standards; and 2) EKKA's internal quality management. EKKA's self-analysis report provides a description how this audit triggered positive developments in the agency, including clarification and unification of appeals procedure.

Obligation for EKKA to undergo periodic internationally recognised external evaluation is fixed in the *Universities Act*.

Analysis

Documentation pertaining to EKKA as an organization – the laws, the Statutes, the Development Plan, an annual work plan, the Quality Manual are published on the website and available to all audiences.

EKKA's procedures are explicitly following principles of ESG. In execution of its mission, the agency follows PDCA cycle: Plan-Do-Check-Act. Specifically, EKKA work plan for 2012 is well in accordance to the Development Plan and describes main activities of the agency. Much attention is on development and analysis, especially as institutional accreditations are just launched and transitional evaluations have finished, thus, it is in accordance to statements in SER as well.

The Review Panel was looking at the mechanism of no-conflict-of-interests, and during the discussions on the site visit to Tallinn, no evidence was obtained that would point to implementation contrary to the declared principles. However, it was repeatedly recalled in many meetings that Estonia being a small country with a small academic community, careful attention to avoiding conflicts of interest (that would question the conclusions of an assessment committees) needed to be paid, and for that same reason, participation of experts from abroad was seen indispensable.

EKKA gathers detailed feedback both from higher education institutions and experts by formalised questionnaires, it is then used towards further planning and improvement.

As EKKA Bureau is rather small, information sharing and reflection is easy and ongoing. Still, minutes of the meetings are produced. EKKA staff share Microsoft Outlook Group Calendar. In many communication matters, coordination between EKKA Bureau and Archimedes Foundation takes place.

Former Chair of Archimedes Supervisory Board, as well as Chair of Archimedes Management Board both expressed satisfaction with progress and accountability of EKKA.

The *Universities Act* obliges EKKA to undergo periodic internationally recognised external evaluation, thus, from the Estonian state point of view, this procedure (and to that matter, the current ENQA-coordinated external review) is seen as very important in assessing EKKA's compliance towards tasks set in the law and success in reaching them.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

Recommendation

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.

4.8 ENQA Criterion 8 Miscellaneous

- i. The agency pays careful attention to its declared principles at all times, and ensures both that its requirements and processes are managed professionally and that its judgments and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even if the judgments are formed by different groups.
- ii. If the agency makes formal quality assurance decisions, or conclusions which have formal consequences, it should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of the agency.
- iii. The agency is willing to contribute actively to the aims of ENQA.

Evidence

Consistency

As mentioned in SER and confirmed during the meeting with Quality Manager of Archimedes Foundation, since 2006 the Archimedes Foundation has held the ISO9001:2000 quality management system certification and since 2008, the ISO 9001:2008. In the period of December 2011 - February 2012 Ernst & Young Baltic AS (an auditing firm) conducted an internal audit at EKKA, and at EKKA's request focused on two aspects:

- the compliance of EKKA's operations with its own rules of procedure, Estonian legislation and international standards; and
- EKKA's internal quality management within the framework of its core processes.

As a result of this audit, at the recommendation of auditors, EKKA produced a Quality Manual containing detailed descriptions of principles and procedures for quality assurance of the core process.

With the aim to assure the quality of its main process, EKKA has developed separate regulations for each type of evaluation. These include a double set: the description of procedure (approved by EKKA Quality Assessment Council), and its explanatory memoranda (produced by EKKA Bureau staff), the list available in the *Annex 2* of the present report. Moreover, to have consistency across documentation submitted by higher education institutions and to be produced by assessment committees, EKKA has developed various forms (made available on EKKA's website), e.g.:

- A sample form for Self-Evaluation of a Study Programme Group,
- The Re-evaluation report,
- The Standard Proceeding Form for Expert Report Regarding Assessment of the Quality of Instruction,
- The Feedback from a Representative of the Educational Institution on the Visit by the Assessment Committee, etc.

In SER, in descriptions of procedures and explanatory memoranda, abundant references to such documentation forms (bearing identifying codes of letters and numbers) are available.

Attention to no-conflict of interests is paid through declarations to be signed by assessment committee members. In addition, procedures, describing formation of EKKA Quality Assessment Council and expert groups also set limitations in this aspect. For example, in *the Procedure for Formation of Estonian Higher Education Quality Assessment Council*, the statements go: "Members of the Assessment Council shall be independent in their activities. Members of the Assessment Council shall not represent in the Assessment Council either the interests of the organization who presented their candidacy or the interests of their employer" (clause 1.3). The notion of independence is elaborated in various procedures, and includes handling aspects of contractual relations, involvement in decision-making, defining of expiry periods, and close relationships. Besides, members of assessment committees are required to maintain confidentiality of information that has become known to them in the course of evaluation (clause 15 of *Conditions and Procedure of Institutional Accreditation*; clause 13 of *Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups*)

Training of experts as foreseen by procedures and carried out by EKKA, is perceived as one of measures to reach consistency. Experts, with whom the Review Panel met, recall having received training. International experts to which the Panel talked, proposed an idea to have additional advance meeting for experts coming from abroad to help better prepare for their service in Estonia.

In addition, to assist both HEI and assessment committees, an assessment coordinator, staff member of EKKA, is assigned. Notably, these persons are not formal members of expert group and have no voting powers, their functions are to help.

Consistency across evaluations is also secured via multi-staged decision making procedure: assessment reports produced by consensus of experts involved; reports then checked by EKKA staff; consideration of decisions in EKKA Council, and the Ministry (in the event final decisions, e.g. the decision to revoke or grant a right to conduct studies in a certain study field is taken by the Ministry). To remark, the EKKA Council has and does use a right to return the report to assessment committees for clarification.

Appeals

SER testifies that appeals procedures were improved at the suggestion of above mentioned external auditors Ernst & Young Baltic AS. Descriptions are provided both in SER and EKKA Quality Manual as regards to each type of assessment activities.

In case of transitional evaluation and re-evaluation of study programme groups, requirements approved by EKKA Quality Assessment Council foresee the possibility to dispute proceedings. The challenge is filed with the Management Board of the Archimedes Foundation within 30 working days after the person filing the challenge became or should have become aware of the contested finding. The final assessment by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council may be disputed after adoption of the corresponding administrative decision.

With respect to institutional accreditation, there are two possibilities to contest accreditation proceedings, namely:

- Filing a challenge to EKKA Council by the procedure provided for in the Administrative Procedure Act,
- Filing an action with the Tallinn courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court by the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court Procedure.

Clear terms in time are given in both cases (maximum of 30 days).

The agency confirmed that to the review visit date there have not been appeals concerning the proceedings or final results of currently run three procedures – institutional accreditation, quality assessment of study programme groups, and initial assessment of study programme groups.

In additional evidence provided by EKKA on actual appeal cases, reference was given to the period of accreditation of study programmes in 2007-2009. However, this was a process endured by EKKA predecessor organization, therefore, following ENQA Guidelines [2012], it falls out of scope of the present review.

Another example of dispute (in additional evidence), was a reference to one court case concerning results of transitional evaluation where a professional HEI contested several administrative decisions. These were not issued by the agency, but rather made by the Ministry, based on the proposals by EKKA Quality Assessment Council. EKKA was involved in that case as a third person (as this is demanded by the Code of Administrative Court Procedure), and was given opportunities to submit opinions on the matter. The appeal of HEI in cassation proceeding was finally dismissed by the Supreme Court just before the review visit to EKKA.

The Review Panel was presented documentation in Estonian attesting to correspondence between higher education institutions and EKKA in relation to transitional evaluation procedure. It was called requests for additional explanation and memoranda, to which explanations were provided by letters signed by the Director of EKKA. It is evident that the agency at first encourages such official requests for explanation to be put forward, to which the Director should respond within 30 days.

The agency confirmed that to the review visit date there have not been appeals concerning the proceedings or final results of currently run three procedures – institutional accreditation, quality assessment of study programme groups, and initial assessment of study programme groups.

Contribution to ENQA

To remind, ENQA aims are threefold:

- to represent its members at the European level and internationally, especially in political decision making processes and in co-operation with stakeholder organisations;
- to function as a think tank for developing further quality assurance processes and systems in the EHEA;

- to function as a communication platform for sharing and disseminating information and expertise in quality assurance among members and towards stakeholders.

The agency argues these purposes are consistently reflected in EKKA's activities by involvement in national decision making processes are described in SER, as well as co-operation with stakeholders; developing further quality assurance processes; sharing and disseminating information and expertise in quality assurance among members and towards stakeholders. EKKA disseminates information about quality assurance among both Estonian and international stakeholders. As submitted in additional evidence, EKKA sees itself functioning in direct accordance with ENQA aims and principles. Particularly, the following aspects were underscored in written materials submitted by the agency:

- EKKA has taken into account that ENQA respects diversity and has developed its quality assurance models according to the expectations and needs of Estonian stakeholders, at the same time following the best practices used elsewhere in the world;
- the primary responsibility for quality rests with higher education institutions; the aims of external quality assurance conducted by EKKA combines both accountability for the reassurance of the public and developmental role for enhancing quality in institutions,
- EKKA, like ENQA, is dedicated to respect the principle of fitness for purpose;
- autonomy of higher education institutions and independence of EKKA is guaranteed by Estonian legislation.

With its rather small staff, EKKA is committed to ENQA aims, and for implementation of these – to participation in ENQA events, projects, special initiatives. Most recently, in 2012, several EKKA Bureau members joined ENQA working groups on internal quality assurance and stakeholder involvement, excellence in higher education. EKKA was also a partner in a recent ENQA project entitled *Transparency of European higher education through public quality assurance reports*.

Ambition to have EKKA representative elected to ENQA Board by 2016 is included in the agency's Development Plan.

Analysis

Consistency

EKKA has not only explicit quality policy, but is on the level of experienced organizations working under quality management systems. This system, introduced in the whole Archimedes, thus EKKA as well, is conducive to improving quality of agency activities as the instance described above shows. Consistency in EKKA's work is achieved by observing various measures, including by having detailed regulations for processes, training of experts, way of coordination of assessment visits, multi-staged decision making procedure. Therefore, EKKA is well aware that quality does not happen by accident, and is working in a systemic way.

Handling of no-conflict-of-interests is imbedded in all EKKA procedures and is implemented at a satisfactory level, since during the review process the Panel did not come across other evidence or complaints.

Discussions with EKKA staff members left an impression of high professionalism, manifested by experience on the job, serious attitude towards the duties (of which the staff was very well aware).

All experts with whom the Review Panel spoke confirmed both EKKA training and personal assistance provided by assessment coordinators being very helpful and to the point.

Appeals

The Review Panel was concerned of the particulars regarding not the provisions *de jure* (which are in place), but rather exercising the appeals right *de facto*, thus, requested additional explanation from the agency. Although formal rights and processes were thoroughly described in SER, the lack of concrete statistics and examples was somewhat disturbing.

Correspondence between higher education institutions and EKKA under transitional evaluation show there were some concerns raised, but in those cases explanations by EKKA were sufficient, no further formal complaints submitted. It might be called a certain mitigation procedure, preceding formal appeals. It should be noted, that the amount of clarifications requested was rather small when compared to the size of the whole transitional evaluation exercise.

As a rule, a small number of appeals submitted indicate a healthy external quality assurance system. Current absence of appeals cases is viewed by the Review Panel as directly related both to the consistency of EKKA processes, and also to the fact, that new external quality assurance procedures are introduced rather recently, thus, no disputes to date.

As it appears from documentation, appeals are concerned with the breaches in procedures, and this falls in the pattern how many quality assurance agencies across EHEA are likely to act in relation to the assessments run.

Contribution to ENQA

EKKA seriously takes its membership in ENQA – it founds the main correspondence being on the level of principles observed, which subsequently are translated into assessment practices, and this way mutually shared principles imbedded in a local setting.

EKKA compliance

Conclusion: full compliance.

5. CONCLUSION AND DEVELOPMENT

The Panel in review of EKKA found:

- **ENQA criterion 1a** / ESG Part 2: External quality assurance processes
substantial compliance
 - ESG Part 2.1: Use of Internal Quality Assurance Procedures – full compliance
 - ESG PART 2.2 Development of External Quality Assurance Processes – full compliance
 - ESG PART 2.3 Criteria for Decisions – substantial compliance
 - ESG PART 2.4 Processes Fit for Purpose – full compliance
 - ESG PART 2.5: Reporting – substantial compliance
 - ESG PART 2.6 Follow-Up Procedures – full compliance
 - ESG PART 2.7 Periodic Reviews – full compliance
 - ESG PART 2.8 System-Wide Analysis - full compliance
- **ENQA criterion 1b** / ESG 3.1, 3.3 Activities
full compliance
- **ENQA criterion 2** / ESG 3.2 Official status
full compliance
- **ENQA criterion 3** / ESG 3.4: Resources
full compliance
- **ENQA criterion 4** / ESG 3.5: Mission statement
full compliance
- **ENQA criterion 5** / ESG 3.6: Independence
full compliance
- **ENQA Criterion 6** / ESG 3.7: External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the members
full compliance
- **ENQA Criterion 7** / ESG 3.8: Accountability procedures
full compliance
- **ENQA Criterion 8** / Miscellaneous
full compliance

The agency is encouraged to address Review Panel's recommendations, which are listed below and are meant as independent expert opinion from outside of the agency. These recommendations should be interpreted as points for discussions and improvement oriented measures.

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-analyses 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 EKKK website, to complement assessment committee reports and EKKK 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 EKKK decision making procedures and to secure interests of learners.

Recommendation in relation to ESG Part 3.2: Official Status

This legal framework when EKKK 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 EKKK or by a foreign agency.

Recommendation in relation to ESG Part 3.4: Resources

In the Development Plan EKKK 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 EKKK is a member.

Recommendation in relation to ESG Part 3.6: Independence

The Review Panel took notice of only one woman between EKKK Quality Assessment Council members. However, there is nothing in the EKKK 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 EKKK 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 EKKK

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.

Concluding remarks

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.

ANNEX 1. Documents to support the review

Documents provided by EKKA

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6. Self-Evaluation Report. External Review of Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (EKKA). 2012. Translated by Juta Grube.
7. Statutes of Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency. Approved by Supervisory Board of Archimedes Foundation on 13.06.2012.
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9. EKKA Quality Manual. EKKA's Principles and Procedures for External Evaluations. August 2012.
<http://www.ekka.archimedes.ee/files/Quality%20Manual.pdf>
10. Procedure for Formation of Estonian Higher Education Quality Assessment Council. Archimedes Foundation. Document OD 401-01/V1. Prepared by Mati Heidmets (the chairman of the working group formed by the directive No 111 of the Minister of Education and Research, dealing with the formation of the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency), approved by Adres Koppel (the chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Foundation, based on the decision of the Supervisory Board meeting held on 11th December 2008). Date: 01.01.2009.
11. Rules of the Procedure of Estonian Higher Education Quality Assessment Council. Approved by Assessment Council of EHEQA on 11.03.2009.
12. Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation. Approved by EKKA Quality Assessment Council on 14 October 2009.
13. Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-evaluation of Study Programme Groups. Approved by EKKA Quality Assessment Council on 16.03.2012.

14. Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education. Approved by EKKK Quality Assessment Council on 13.06.2012. Accessible at: http://www.ekka.eu/files/OKH_kord_07.08.2012_Eng-2.pdf
15. Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups in the First and Second Cycles of Higher Education. Explanatory Memorandum (with two annexes, including assessment report template accessible at <http://ekka.archimedes.ee/files/OKHSample%2520form.pdf>). Compiler: Heli Mattisen.
16. Conditions and Procedure for Transition to Evaluation of Study Programme Groups of Educational Institutions Providing Higher Education (Ministerial Directive). 6 May 2009 No. 367. Accessible at: http://www.ekka.archimedes.ee/files/Ministri%2520k%25C3%25A4skiri_%25C3%25BCI_eminckuhindamine_ENG.pdf
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24. EKKK database (EE), which includes decisions and evaluation reports, Decisions of EKKK Quality Assessment Council. Accessed at: https://wd.archimedes.ee/?page=pub_list_dynobj&desktop=10016&tid=414961
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28. Organizational structure of Archimedes (EE). Reference: OD 105/V6, dated 09.12.2012
29. Training plans of EKKK as Archimedes structural unit (EE). Reference: Vorm VO 202-02/V2. Accessible at: http://ekka.archimedes.ee/files/EKKK_koolituskava_2012.pdf

30. Declaration of confidentiality and independence. Accessible at: http://ekka.archimedes.ee/files/EKKA_HN_liikme_konfidentsiaalsuskohustus_ja_soltumatause_deklaratsioon.pdf
31. EKKA work plan for 2012 (http://27852.edicypages.com/files/EKKA_tooplaan_2012_17.02.pdf).
32. Contract under public law between the Ministry of Education and Archimedes Foundation (EE)
33. Previous EKKA Quality Assessment Council's suggestions to EKKA office from January 2012 (EE).
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35. Sample work schedule of institutional assessment committee.
36. Sample institutional assessment committee's report with comments from a HEI (the case of Estonian Academy of Security Sciences).
37. Quality Management System / Foundation Archimedes / Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency. Power Point Presentation handout, 9 slides. December 2012, Tallinn.
38. Kaspar Kruup (Vice-Chairman of the Student Council of the University of Tartu). Memo: Student participation in the quality processes of the University of Tartu. Digitally signed. 6.12.2012, Tartu.

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ANNEX 2

Timetable for review of Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (EKKA)
Tallinn, Estonia

Wednesday December 5th, 2012

	Panel arriving	Tallinn International airport
	Panel settling in	Radisson Blue Hotel, Räävalapst 23, Tallinn, http://www.radissonblu.com/hotel-tallinn
18.30-19.30	Panel meeting	Seminar room "Turku" in the Hotel (2 nd floor)
20.00	Panel dinner in private	Restaurant "Lounge24" in the Hotel (24 th floor)

Thursday December 6th, 2012

Meetings will take place in EKKA's office at Toompuiestee 30, Tallinn

Time	Meeting no	Meeting with	Purpose/Discussion Topics
8.45-9.00		Quick tour of EKKA's facilities, settling in	Welcome, acquaintance with physical infrastructure
9.00-9.45	1	<p>CHAIR OF THE ARCHIMEDES SUPERVISORY BOARD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Andres Koppel, Head of Estonian Research Council; Former Deputy Secretary General for Higher Education and Research, Ministry of Education and Research (via skype) <p>QUALITY MANAGER OF ARCHIMEDES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Kirsi Viikholm-Karu <p>EKKA DIRECTOR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Heli Mattisen 	Overview of the organization Presentation of internal quality management system in Archimedes (ISO 9001)
9.45-10.00		Panel discussion in private	
10.00-11.15	2	<p>EKKA BUREAU</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Heli Mattisen, Director • Ms Maiki Udam, Development Manager • Mr Hillar Bauman, Evaluation Expert (higher education) • Ms Marge Kroonmäe, Evaluation Expert (vocational education) • Ms Liia Tüür, Information Manager (via Skype) 	Activities of EKKA and respective staff Process of self-analysis Producing and findings of self-evaluation report Functioning of internal quality assurance system

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Tiia Bach, Assistant Adviser • Ms Lagle Zobel, Lawyer • Ms Merike Arpo, Accountant 	Compliance to ESG
11.15-11.30		Coffee break and panel discussion in private	
11.30-13.00	3-1	EKKA's PROCESS MANAGERS OF KEY ACTIVITIES Institutional accreditation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Maiki Udam, Development Manager • Ms Tiia Bach, Assistant Adviser • Ms Lagle Zobel, Lawyer 	Compliance to ESG Functioning of internal quality assurance system
	3-2	Assessments of study program groups (incl. transitional evaluation, initial assessment of SPGs, quality assessment of SPGs) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Hillar Bauman, Evaluation Expert • Ms Tiia Bach, Assistant Adviser • Ms Lagle Zobel, Lawyer 	
13.00-14.00		Lunch on site, panel meeting in private	
14.00-14.45	4	ESTONIAN MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Jaak Aaviksoo, Minister • Dr Indrek Reimand, Deputy Secretary General for Higher Education and Research; Supervisory Board Member, Foundation Archimedes • Ms Helen Põllo, Deputy Head of Higher Education Department 	Overview of Estonian Higher Education system and current developments Role of EKKA
14.45-15.00		Panel discussion in private	
15.00-15.45	5	EKKA QUALITY ASSESSMENT COUNCIL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prof Jakob Kübarsepp, Chair, Professor at Tallinn University of Technology, Member of Estonian Academy of Science • Prof Tõnu Meidla, Vice-Chair, Professor at University of Tartu • Prof Olav Aarna, Member of the Management Board at the Estonian Qualifications Authority • Mr Tanel Sits, student representative 	Decision making process Appeals EKKA's role in Estonian HE Management of EKKA

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Jaanus Pöial, Ass. Professor at the Estonian IT College • Dr Tõnis Karki, Ass. Professor, Vice-Dean at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Tartu • Dr Ants Sild, Director, Baltic Computer Systems • Prof Andres Tali, Dean at the Department of Fine Arts, Estonian Academy of Arts 	
15.45-16.00		Coffee break and panel discussion in private	
16.00-17.00	6	<p>RECTORS OF PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Krista Tuulik, Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences • Prof Tiit Roosmaa, Estonian IT College • Ms ÜlleErnits, Tallinn Health Care College • Dr Jaan Tamm, Estonian Aviation Academy (via skype) • Dr Enno Lend, TTK University of Applied Sciences • Colonel Aarne Ermus, Estonian National Defence College (via skype) • Mr Lauri Tabur, Estonian Academy of Security Sciences 	Views of EKKA work and role in Estonian HE system
19.00		Panel dinner in private	Restaurant Ribe (Vene str. 7)

Friday December 7th, 2012

Meetings take place in EKKA's office at Toompuiestee 30, Tallinn

Time	Meeting no	Meeting with	Purpose/Discussion Topics
9.00-9.45	7	<p>EKKA's PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS (professional associations, employers' organisations)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Erki Urva, Member of the Management Board, The Estonian Information Technology Foundation • Mr Peter Gornischeff, Director of Services, Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry • Ms Maaja-Katrin Kerem, Member of the Board, Estonian Qualifications Authority 	Views of EKKA work and role in Estonian HE system

9.45-10.00		Panel discussion in private	
10.00-10.45	8	<p>RECTORS/VICE-RECTORS OF UNIVERSITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prof Alar Karis, President of the Estonian Rectors' Conference; <i>Rector emeritus</i>, University of Tartu; Chair of the Board, Estonian Development Fund; Supervisory Board Member, Foundation Archimedes • Prof Tiit Land, Rector of Tallinn University • Dr Martin Hallik, Vice-Rector in Academic Affairs, University of Tartu • Prof Margus Pärtlas, Vice-Rector in Academic Affairs, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre • Dr Paavo Kaimre, Director of Institute of Forestry and Rural Engineering, from January 1, 2013 Vice-Rector of Studies , Estonian University of Life Sciences 	Views of EKKA work and role in Estonian HE system
10.45-11.00		Coffee break and panel discussion in private	
11.00-12.00	9	<p>MEETING WITH EXPERTS</p> <p>Representatives of HEI-s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Kristiina Tõnnisson, Director of EuroCollege, University of Tartu; expert in transitional evaluation, initial assessment of SPG • Mr Aret Vooremäe, Director of the Institute of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Estonian University of Life Sciences; expert in transitional evaluation <p>Representatives of non-academic organisations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Olev Kalda, Deputy Director General, Veterinary and Food Board; expert in transitional evaluation, institutional accreditation • Mr Virgo Inno, Systems Architect, Tieto Estonia AS; expert in VET accreditation, quality assessment of study program groups <p>Representatives of student experts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Viljar Mee, Student at Tallinn University; expert in transitional evaluation, quality assessment of study program groups 	Expert participation in reviews and other activities of EKKA Topics: consistency in reviews, training, visit organization, ethics

		<p>Foreign experts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Seppo Kolehmainen, Deputy National Police Commissioner, National Police Board of Finland; expert in institutional accreditation • Prof Ossi V. Lindqvist, Professor Emeritus, University of Eastern Finland; expert in study program accreditation • Prof Peter Mason, London South Bank University; expert in study program accreditation 	
12.00-12.15		Panel discussion in private	
12.15-13.00	10	<p>REPRESENTATIVES OF STUDENT UNIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Gerlin Järvela, Estonian University of Life Sciences • Ms Kerttu Karon, Estonian University of Life Sciences (via skype) • Mr Karel Kundrats, Tallinn University of Technology • Ms Reet Sillavee, Tallinn University • Ms. Jonne Viinamägi, Vice Chairperson, Federation of Estonian Students Unions • Ms. Monika Maljukov, Chairperson, Federation of Estonian Students Unions • Kaspar Kruup, Vice Chairman of the Student Council of the University of Tartu submitted a written contribution 	Student participation in external and internal QA
13.00-14.00		Lunch on site. Panel meeting in private	
14.30-15.00	11	<p>MANAGEMENT OF FOUNDATION ARCHIMEDES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Rait Toompere, Chairman of the Board 	EKKA's status in the organisational structure of the Foundation Archimedes
15.00-15.30	12	<p>EKKA DIRECTOR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Heli Mattisen 	Compliance to ESG
15.30-16.30		Coffee break and panel meeting in private	
16.30-17.00	13	<p>Preliminary feedback from the panel</p> <p>Staff of EKKA Bureau</p>	