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Estonian higher education in the light of institutional accreditation or what managers should know

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Summary

Management decisions in institutions of higher education and the resulting organisational developments are very often triggered by external factors – for example, the activities of such institutions are influenced by changes in legislation, as well as by a feedback received in the course of external evaluations (Carr, Hamilton, & Meade, 2005).

As the well-being of the entire organisation depends directly on leadership i.e. management (Oakland, 1996) the institutional accreditation which main aim is to support the strategic management of institutions of higher education has been the main model for external evaluation in Estonia since 2010. Informing interest groups about the results of the main activities of the institution and increasing the reliability and competitiveness of Estonian higher education (Institutsionaalse akrediteerimise ..., 2011) have been among other important goals.

This article is based on the analysis of evaluation reports conducted by the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (EKKA) in 2014 with the aim to map the main strengths and weaknesses of higher education institutions in Estonia and, where possible, to generalise Estonian higher education as a whole, as well as various types of institutions of higher education (universities vs professional higher education institutions).

The research questions were as follows:

1. Which subtopics/areas of assessment of institutional accreditation have received the most attention from experts, i.e. which do they consider most important?
2. Which areas of assessment are at a very good level in higher education institutions and vice versa, which require further development?
3. What specific suggestions have the experts made?

The goal of this article matches the goal of institutional accreditation: to inform interest groups – the management boards of such institutions, lecturers, students, politicians and employers – of the results of the managing and functioning of institutions. As the EKKA has declared that its mission is to support the development of higher education institutions and provide the necessary feedback via the assessment process, the main beneficiaries of the

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accreditation are the management boards of institutions. The managers of institutions of higher education can use mapped strengths as examples of good practice if they wish and the highlighted problems can form the centre of attention in the self-evaluation process of all institutions of higher education. The results below also represent valuable input for performance agreements and should provide politicians and educational officials with food for thought in terms of e.g. changes in legislation, structure or funding systems.

The sample for the research was formed of all Estonian institutions of higher education that had been positively accredited by June 2014: 10 institutions, including two universities in public law, one private university, five state professional higher education institutions and two private professional higher education institutions.

This was a qualitative survey, based on document analysis, which is why we used summative content analysis as the research method, wherein all strengths and areas of improvement mentioned in assessment reports are classified and coded.

Nearly all assessment committees found that institutions of higher education are guided by the needs of the labour market and the expectations of society when developing new study programmes. In six cases, it was highlighted that the development and action plans of the institutions matched and were based on their missions, visions and basic values, as well as taking the needs of society into consideration. It was also repeatedly highlighted that the satisfaction of employees with management, working conditions, movement of information etc. was regularly surveyed and the results used for improvement purposes. The majority of assessment committees found that the use of the financial resources of the institutions, administration and the development of infrastructure were based on their development plans and on the needs of society. Generally, the institutions provide education to a high level, enabling graduates to compete in the local and international labour markets, and use modern technical and educational means in the teaching process. At the same time, the procurement of funds necessary for the research and development and creative activities (RDC) proved to be very difficult (especially in professional higher education institutions). In the field of management, the determining of key results earned the most criticism, which is partly related to shortcomings in establishing and measuring the results of RDC. Internationalisation is a topic that was underscored by all of the assessment committees in one way or other. Activities related to internationalisation are currently sufficient only in a few larger institutions; the remainder having a lot of room for development in this regard.

Based on the results of both stages of the analysis, a number of strengths that generally characterise Estonian institutions of higher education should be highlighted:

1. Planning of the development of institutions of higher education is detailed and based on mission and vision alike, and takes into account the priorities established by the Estonian state;
2. Senior management copes well with the role of the leader and the involvement of members of management in the decision-making process is at a good level;
3. The professional development of employees is supported in various forms and it has intensified thanks to EU structural funds;
4. The infrastructure of institutions of higher education is excellent and its development has taken priority directions into consideration;
5. In opening study programmes, institutions of higher education are guided by their strategic goals whilst taking into consideration the needs of the labour market and the expectations of the society;
6. Various forms of information technology are used in the teaching process;
7. Graduates of Estonian higher education institutions are competitive in local and international markets.

At the same time, the Estonian higher education faces a number of challenges in forthcoming years:

1. Focusing on the strengths of the institutions of higher education, determining key areas;
2. Steadfastly implementing structural changes;
3. Minimising financial risks arising from the possible decrease in the number of students at the end of the EU structural fund period;
4. Reducing drop-outs by approaching each student individually and offering early support;
5. Applying more formative assessment in the teaching process by providing students with detailed feedback of their learning outcomes;
6. Ensuring quality supervision for students in writing their final theses at all levels of study;
7. Integrating the international aspects into all main processes of the institution of higher education.