

Guidelines for Initial Assessment of Study Programme Groups

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I. General Provisions

1. According to subsections 22³ (4) and § 22⁴ (3) of the Universities Act, subsection 16¹ (6) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act, and subsection 5¹ (6) of the Private Schools Act, the Ministry of Education and Research shall involve the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (hereinafter 'EKKA') in the assessment of the quality of instruction (conducting initial assessment of study programme groups), in order to grant educational institutions the right to conduct studies.
2. Initial assessment of study programme groups (only one study programme in the case of a joint study programme or a master degree programme launched at an institution of professional higher education) provided by EKKA shall assess whether the quality of instruction, including the qualification requirements for teaching staff established by the council of the university and the qualifications of the teaching staff involved in teaching and the resources required for provision of instruction are sufficient and whether the described learning outcomes can be achieved by the curriculum and whether they comply with the requirements for provision of instruction at the level of higher education., taking into consideration the Republic of Estonia Higher Education Standard, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, and other legislation and normative documents regulating quality assessment in higher education.
3. When conducting initial assessment of study programme groups, EKKA shall:
 - 3.1. judge whether the qualifying requirements for the teaching staff as determined by the educational institution are sufficient, and that the qualifications of the teaching staff involved are adequate;
 - 3.2. judge whether the resources necessary for conducting studies are adequate;

- 3.3. judge 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;
 - 3.4. in the case of a joint study programme, also assess the compliance of the joint study programme and the cooperation agreement of the joint study programme with the requirements established by § 22¹ and § 22² of the Universities Act;
 - 3.5. in the case of a master degree programme at an institution of professional higher education, also assess the compliance with the terms described in subsection 15² (2) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act;
 - 3.6. assess the fulfilment of requirements for study programmes and for the quality of instruction arising from other legislation, primarily from the Government of the Republic Regulation No 178 of 18 December 2008 the *Standard of Higher Education*.
4. Information submitted by an educational institution, data available in the Estonian Education Information System (www.ehis.ee) and in the Estonian Research Information System (www.etis.ee), and information received during a visit to the educational institution shall serve as the basis for initial assessment of a study programme group.
 5. In the case of joint study programmes, initial assessment may be conducted without visiting educational institutions (hereinafter 'simplified proceeding') if the right to conduct studies is requested for a joint study 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.
 6. EKKA shall publicise cost rates for initial assessment of study programme groups on its website (www.ekka.archimedes.ee).

II. Requirements for Initial Assessment

7. Study programme and organisation of studies
 - 7.1. The study programme is based on the needs of the labour market and target groups, and contributes to fulfilling the mission of the educational institution and achieving its objectives.
 - 7.2. Employers and other stakeholders of the study programme group are involved in the study programme development.
 - 7.3. The title of the study programme is consistent with its content. Forms of study, and student workload for independent work, practical training and, in the case of doctoral studies, for implementation of professional activities, support the achievement of objectives of the study programme.

- 7.4. The objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme are formulated in such a way that they provide a basis for evaluating the knowledge and skills of graduates of that study programme.
 - 7.5. The objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme are equal and comparable to the learning outcomes of the academic cycles of higher education described in Annex 1 to the Standard of Higher Education.
 - 7.6. The study programme meets the requirements and trends in international legislation that regulates the professional field and, if a professional standard exists, takes into consideration the acquisition and implementation of the knowledge and skills described therein. In professional higher education, study programmes of a study programme group are related to a specific vocation.
 - 7.7. The joint study programme and the cooperation agreement for the joint study programme are in accordance with the requirements established in § 22¹ and § 22² of the Universities Act.
 - 7.8. The master degree programme of an institution of professional higher education is developed as a continuation of the study programme of professional higher education in the same field of study. An institution of professional higher education has concluded a cooperation agreement with a university to conduct the master degree programme.
 - 7.9. The organisation of studies is regulated and takes into consideration the specifics of the study programme group; recognition of prior learning and work experiences is regulated as well.
 - 7.10. The organisation of practical training is clearly regulated, the requirements for implementing practical training are determined, and preliminary agreements with practical training facilities are in place.
 - 7.11. Students are provided with counselling (study, career, and psychological counselling).
8. The teaching staff
- 8.1. Qualifications of the teaching and research staffs involved meet the requirements established in legislation as well as those arising from the specifics of a study programme group and the academic cycle of higher education. The educational institution has entered into binding contracts with its teaching staff to conduct studies.
 - 8.2. The level and extent of research and development by the teaching and research staffs involved are adequate to teach in the corresponding academic cycle of higher education and to supervise student research.
 - 8.3. The teaching staff involved have an adequate teaching competency.
 - 8.4. The number of members of ordinary teaching and research staffs involved – based on their responsibilities, workload and the number of supervised students – is adequate for achieving the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme(s) in a given study programme group.
 - 8.5. The cooperation agreement between an institution of professional higher education and a university prescribes the involvement of highly qualified members of the

university teaching staff in the conduct of the master degree programme at the professional higher education institution.

- 8.6. The teaching staff involved are aware of the objectives of the study programme and their roles in achieving them.
- 8.7. The ordinary teaching and research staffs of the educational institution have undergone the required evaluation. The educational institution provides its teaching staff with conditions for their professional and individual development.
- 8.8. The teaching staff and supervisors of study programmes of doctoral studies regularly further their skills at foreign institutions of higher education or other research institutions, participate in international research projects, and present papers at high-level conferences.

9. Resources

- 9.1. The educational institution ensures that the financial sources necessary for conducting studies are available and prepares a strategy for procuring them (prepares risk analyses and financial forecasts that include a calculation of the cost of a student place, takes into account the risks arising from the operational environment, and uses other appropriate measures to ensure the resources).
- 9.2. The educational institution has the financial sources for research and development needs related to doctoral studies.
- 9.3. There are facilities (lecture halls, laboratories, seminar rooms, rooms for students' independent work) necessary for educational activities, as well as for research and development related to doctoral studies, which are furnished and equipped adequately and are up to date to achieve the objectives of study programmes; or there are specific existing financial decisions/ projects to finance the additional needs.
- 9.4. Means of information technology and communications between national and international communication networks – needed for educational activities as well as for research and development related to doctoral studies – are available.
- 9.5. Financial indicators regarding economic sustainability of the educational institution are available to the general public. Annual reports of the educational institution or its organising body are audited, unless otherwise established by law. This requirement does not apply to new educational institutions.
- 9.6. The educational institution ensures that up-to-date information sources (including data bases) needed for teaching, learning and research in the study programme group are available.

III. Formation of Assessment Committees

10. To conduct an initial assessment, EKKA shall start forming an assessment committee (hereinafter 'committee') no later than one month after the Ministry of Education and Research has forwarded

to EKKA the request by a higher education institution and information needed for the initial assessment of study programme groups.

11. A committee shall comprise three to five members; the Director of EKKA shall appoint an assistant to each committee who is not a member of the committee. The duties of a committee member and the assistant shall be agreed upon in a contract for services concluded with them (see *SAMPLE Contract for Services of Member of Assessment Committee for Assessment of Quality of Instruction*; *SAMPLE Contract for Services of Assistant of Assessment Committee for Assessment of Quality of Instruction*; *SAMPLE Certificate of Transfer Deeds of Member and Assistant of Assessment Committee*).
12. EKKA shall choose committee members based on the following principles:
 - 12.1. Members of a committee are chosen from different organisations.
 - 12.2. A committee includes at least one member from outside of higher education institutions.
 - 12.3. A committee includes at least one student or a person who has graduated (at the moment of the approval of the committee) from a higher education institutions within the previous year.
 - 12.4. Members of a committee are experts in the vocation, profession or occupation, or outstanding practitioners in the fields of the study programme group under evaluation, including from foreign countries, if needed.
 - 12.5. Members of a committee know the functioning of the higher education system and the legislation that regulates it; they are knowledgeable about trends in higher education in the European Union and area-related strategies in Estonia.
13. Members of a committee shall be independent; they shall not represent the interests of the organisation they belong to. Members of a committee shall confirm by signature in their contract for services an obligation to maintain the confidentiality of information that has become known to them in the course of assessment, and a lack of conflicts of interest. A conflict of interest is presumed to be present in the following cases:
 - 13.1. A committee member has an employment or other contractual relationship with the higher education institution under evaluation at the time of assessment, or he or she has had an employment relationship with the study programme group of that higher education institution within three years prior to the assessment visit.
 - 13.2. A committee member is participating in the work of a decision-making or advisory body of the higher education institution under evaluation at the time of assessment.

- 13.3. A committee member is studying in the study programme group of the higher education institution under evaluation, or graduated from it less than three years ago.
- 13.4. The membership connected with the study programme group of the higher education institution under evaluation includes a person closely related to a committee member (spouse or life partner, child or parent).
- 13¹. The Director of EKKA shall approve the final composition of a committee by his or her order and appoint a chairperson of the committee.
- 13². In justified cases, EKKA may involve in the committee a foreign member from abroad. In such cases, the working language of the committee is English. If the higher education institution wishes to use interpretation services during the assessment visit, the interpreter shall be coordinated with the EKKA office no later than two weeks before the assessment visit. The interpreter must fulfill the following requirements: the interpreter has adequate preparation for performing consecutive interpretation (a Master's degree in interpretation, interpretation as an additional specialty, continuing education in the field of interpretation, etc.) and previous experience in performing consecutive interpretation; the interpreter is familiar with the higher education terminology. The costs related to the translation services shall be covered by the higher education institution.
14. The EKKA Bureau shall notify an educational institution of the composition of a committee, and the educational institution may present its standpoint on it and request an additional member to be included in the committee, which is treated as a memorandum or request for explanation as defined in clause 31 of this document.
15. All committee members shall undergo EKKA's assessment training.

IV. Organisation of Assessment

16. The EKKA Bureau shall coordinate the time of visits to educational institutions (hereinafter 'visits') with the educational institution and members of the committee no later than 20 working days prior to the visit.
17. Visits shall last up to three days. In cooperation with an educational institution and the chairperson of a committee, the EKKA Bureau shall prepare a schedule for the visit.
18. No later than one week prior to a visit, an educational institution receiving a committee shall appoint a person who shall ensure the fulfilment of prerequisites for adhering to the schedule, including the working conditions of committee members in the educational institution. The visit is conducted in accordance with EKKA's *Guidelines to Educational Institutions for Assessment Visits by Assessment Committees for Assessment of the Quality of Instruction (guidelines OJ 401-08-01)* that is available on EKKA's website.

19. A committee shall assess a study programme group and the quality of instruction of the corresponding academic cycle of higher education using the assessment format approved as an Appendix to these Guidelines (see Form VO 401-08-01 *The Standard Proceeding Form for Assessment Report Regarding Assessment of the Quality of Instruction*) (hereinafter 'assessment report').
20. As a result of assessment, a committee shall determine whether the quality of instruction:
 - 20.1. conforms to a required standard;
 - 20.2. partially conforms to a required standard; or
 - 20.3. does not conform to a required standard.
21. The committee assistant shall electronically forward the draft assessment report to the EKKA Bureau within ten working days after the assessment visit. The EKKA Bureau shall check the correctness of the drawing up of an assessment form and, with the approval of the committee chairperson, forward it to the educational institution for comments within five working days.
22. An educational institution may electronically forward its comments to the committee within five working days after the receipt of the draft assessment report.
23. The committee shall formalise the final assessment report within five working days after the receipt of the comments from the educational institution and shall forward it, confirmed by the chairman of the committee, to the EKKA Bureau.
24. Committees' assessments on the conformity of the quality of instruction to a required standard shall preferably be adopted by consensus. If consensus is not reached, a simple majority of members of the committee shall make the decision, and the dissenting view(s) together with the reason(s) shall be included.
25. The EKKA Bureau shall forward the assessment report and the comments of an educational institution to the EKKA Quality Assessment Council.

V. Decision by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council

26. The EKKA Quality Assessment Council shall base its decision on the assessment report and the comments by the educational institution received within a specified time, as well as additional materials submitted at its request.

27. In case of contradictions in the assessment report or inadequate justification, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council shall have the right to return the report to the committee to be reviewed and clarified, which the committee shall review within two weeks after its receipt and return it with additional explanations and reasons to the EKKA Bureau.
28. The EKKA Quality Assessment Council shall base its decision on the following principles:
- 28.1. If the assessment regarding the quality of instruction by a committee is provided as ‘conforms to a required standard’, the Quality Assessment Council shall decide that ‘the quality of instruction conforms to a required standard’;
 - 28.2. If the assessment regarding the quality of instruction by a committee is provided as ‘partially conforms to a required standard’, the Quality Assessment Council shall weigh the areas for improvement pointed out by the committee and shall decide that ‘the quality of instruction partially conforms to a required standard’ or ‘the quality of instruction does not conform to a required standard’;
 - 28.3. If the assessment regarding the quality of instruction by a committee is provided as ‘does not conform to a required standard’, the Quality Assessment Council shall decide that ‘the quality of instruction does not conform to a required standard’.
29. The EKKA Bureau shall forward the decision by the Quality Assessment Council and the assessment report to the Ministry of Education and Research, the educational institution and members of the committee no later than 10 working days after the date of that decision.

VI. Reimbursement of Cost of Initial Assessment

30. Applicants shall reimburse the cost of initial assessment in accordance with the invoices presented by EKKA. The Chairperson of the Management Board of the Archimedes Foundation shall, by his or her order, establish further details regarding the procedure for the reimbursement of costs, base rates, and marginal rates of accommodation and transportation costs of committee members. EKKA shall publicise the relevant information on its website as well.

VII. Requests for Explanation and Memoranda Concerning Conduct of Initial Assessment

31. If a person concerned has a doubt that EKKA or an assessment committee has not followed the rules described in these Guidelines when organising and conducting an initial assessment of study programme groups, he or she may file an appropriate request for explanation or memorandum with the Director of EKKA who shall provide a reasoned written response within 30 days after the date of registration of the request.

32. If the person who filed the request does not agree with the response by the Director of EKKA, he or she may submit a request for explanation or memorandum to the Management Board of the Archimedes Foundation, who shall review the explanations of both parties and submit its opinion on the issue raised in the request within 30 days after the date of registration of the request.
33. The EKKA Bureau shall forward the request for explanation or memorandum, as well as the responses by the Director of EKKA and the Management Board of the Archimedes Foundation, to the EKKA Quality Assessment Council and the Ministry of Education and Research for their information.
34. If a person concerned disagrees with the substantive grounds of the decision of the Assessment Council, he or she may present a complaint to the Council within 30 days of receipt of the decision. The Assessment Council shall forward the complaint to the Appeals Committee who provides the Assessment Council with an unbiased opinion regarding the validity of the complaint within 5 days after receiving the complaint. The Assessment Council shall issue a reasoned reply to the complaint within 30 days of receipt of the complaint, taking also into account the reasoned opinion of the Appeals Committee.

VIII Re-evaluation of Initial Assessment

35. The study programme groups and joint study programmes of higher education institutions and Master's programmes of professional higher education institutions that have as a result of initial assessment received a temporary right to conduct studies, shall undergo re-evaluation according to the present regulation, with following specifications:
 - 35.1. In addition to the quality of instruction and necessary resources, the sustainability of studies shall also be evaluated according to the requirements described in clauses 7-10 of the document "Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-Evaluation of Study Programme Groups" and the additional requirements for joint study programmes and Master's programmes of professional higher education institutions described in clauses 7.7, 7.8 and 8.5 of the present regulation.
 - 35.2. Re-evaluation shall always take place as a standard proceeding, thus the rules described in clause 5 of the present regulation concerning simplified proceedings in cases of joint study programme assessment do not apply.
 - 35.3. The committee shall assess the study programme group and the quality of the corresponding study level of higher education in the form for standard proceedings approved as an addendum to the present regulation.
 - 35.4. The EKKA quality assessment Council for Higher Education shall make its decision according to the principles described in clause 44 of the document "Requirements and Procedure for Transitional Evaluation and Re-Evaluation of Study Programme Groups"

