QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ESTONIA
(PREPARATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION)

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Abstract

According to the principles agreed upon in the European Higher Education Area [1, 2], the primary responsibility for the quality of study lies with the institution of higher education (HEI). According to Estonian Higher Education Strategy 2006–2015, the higher education quality assurance system should consist of two parts, including internal quality assurance by educational institutions on the one hand, and the adoption of quality standards and supervision by the state on the other hand.

In 2011, the institutional accreditation process will be launched in Estonia, during which the HEI internal quality assurance system and its performance will be assessed – this will include assessing the performance of duties assigned to HEIs as well as their management, work organisation and the compliance of the study and research environment with the aims and development plan of the HEIs.

In order to better prepare the institutional accreditation and assessment process for the management of study programme groups in Estonia, a pilot project for the quality assurance process was launched within the framework of the Primus programme financed by the European Social Fund in autumn 2009; HEIs participating in this project analyse their activities, strengths and areas for improvement.

Goals of the HEI quality assurance process:

- To facilitate the development of an internal quality assurance system and raise the level of the performance of HEIs;
- To determine strengths and areas for improvement in order to lay down development tasks and monitor achievements;
- To share experiences with HEI internal quality assurance systems;
- To acknowledge HEIs that contribute to the development of quality systems.
- increase the competitiveness of Estonian institutions of higher education and support their success in the European Union and worldwide;

To facilitate the success of the process, HEI self-assessment teams and (external) assessors were trained; self-assessment of HEIs was conducted and a self-assessment report (SAR) was compiled; external assessors assessed HEIs and a feedback report (FBR) was compiled; in addition, HEIs that contributed more to the development of their quality systems and whose good results stood out were also acknowledged. The entire process was supported by experts with international experience in the field of quality providing assistance to both HEIs as well as assessors during the compilation of self-assessment and feedback reports. The basis for conducting the process was the European excellence award model [3] and scoring matrix (EFQM Excellence Award, EFQM-European Foundation for Quality Management) adapted for higher education, which provide the institution being assessed an opportunity to compare itself to both Estonian as well as European organisations (Fig. 1). The participants in the process were 8 institutions of higher education (as at September 2010, there are 33 institutions of higher education in Estonia. The process lasted nine months (from September 2009 to May 2010).
The current document discusses the results obtained within the pilot project according to the quality criteria (Fig. 1). More information on the feedback of the representatives of the HEI and the assessors, as well as on the process as a whole can be found at the web page of the Primus programme (http://primus.archimedes.ee/node/37).

Keywords: quality assurance, institution of higher education (HEI), institutional accreditation.

1 ASSESSMENT BY THE ASSESSORS ACCORDING TO THE CRITERIA

It is hard to assess the comparability of the scores received as the result of the assessment, but as they show a range of results, they can be used as a general and visual feedback. The assessments received from the assessors are shown in Fig. 2, which reflects the results of all participating higher education institutions (HEI). Four higher education institutions achieved an equally good result and the scores of the other four higher education institutions were somewhat higher. In addition, the results are alike when comparing institutions of professional higher education and universities: in both cases, the distribution of results is rather similar.

Comparing average results on the basis of the criteria shows (Fig. 3) that both institutions of professional higher education and universities achieved lower than average results for criteria concerning results (6a, 6b, 7a, 7b, 9b) and the criterion for assessing the participation of managers in assuring a continuous improvement of the management system (1c).

Fig. 1 Quality assurance criteria in HEIs

Fig. 2 Comparison of the results of HEIs participating in the assessment on a coded scale
An interesting fact was that all universities scored the lowest points for the result indicators related to the perception of stakeholders (6a) and employees (7a). The perception of students, alumni, employers and employees should be of significant importance in the assessment of the quality and sustainability of the environment for study activities and research and development activities. Compared to universities, institutions of professional higher education received higher than average results from the assessors with respect to the criterion concerning the perception of the employees (7a), but the performance indicators related to employees show weaker than average results (7b). According to the feedback from the assessors, the most important activity in need of improvement was the ability of the HEIs to analyse and measure the results and impact of their activities, learn from the information received and present the results to the public.

However, higher education institutions obtained higher than average results for criteria that assess the activities of the managers in developing a common mission, vision and values (1a), the management of partnerships and resources (4a, 4b, 4c) as well as the operation of processes (5b). It also became evident that the operation of processes was assessed higher than their design (5a) and improvement according to the needs of stakeholders (5c). In the latter case, universities obtained a somewhat higher score compared to institutions of professional higher education than they did for the criteria that measure the management of external partnerships (4a), the involvement of leaders with stakeholders (1b) and the achievement of results in relation to society (8). The universities showed a better than average performance in the management of information, knowledge and technology (4c), which is also connected to the dimension of society and partnerships. The institutions of professional higher education show better than average results in designing their development plan and policies, the use of performance measurement and the management of research (2a) and financial resources (4b).

### 1.1.1 Criterion 6 – STAKEHOLDER RESULTS

In general, students were the (only) stakeholders about whom more or less segmented data was presented. However, there is no common and uniform analysis of this data either and the data is not...
used for planning future activities. Some results concerning the approaches are worth underlining. For example, 35% of the students participated in student elections in a university that applies an open door policy and really includes and supports students, and this significantly exceeds the current results in other universities. Although all universities ask the students for feedback on the subjects and it may even be made obligatory for the students, there are usually no targets set and no trends and comparisons.

The institutions of professional higher education pay close attention to the results related to students, examining both the students' satisfaction with the organisation of studies and the study process as well as with internships and support processes (e.g. counselling, etc.). The satisfaction of students with internships, the stability in the number of graduates, the development of surveys (including the feedback monitoring system TSM) and the comparison of one's own institution with other professional higher education institutions were the strengths that the assessors underlined most often. The results related to other stakeholders (such as graduates and employers) were not reflected upon much by both the universities and the professional higher education institutions. Even though all HEIs consider the international aspect (student mobility) an important part of their development, most of them lack targets, comparisons and assessments of performance with respect to this.

Summing up the criteria concerning stakeholders, it is possible to say that although everyone is involved in measuring, there is often no system; the results are not comparable because the methods used differ and there are no targets set, making it impossible to assess what has been done. One area for improvement that is worth mentioning and generalising about is the observation that nobody sets goals concerning the rate of student admissions and dropouts (i.e. how many graduates should there be so that it would satisfy the needs of the HEI or the unit and meet market demands). There are also no targets set for conducting satisfaction surveys with respect to what one hopes to achieve and how.

1.1.2 Criterion 7 – EMPLOYEE RESULTS

Making a contribution to the employees is a positive aspect that stands out with regard to the professional higher education institutions. Satisfaction surveys and development interviews are being conducted and in most cases, the employees are satisfied with the movement of information, the feedback and acknowledgement received and the existing work environment. It is considered important to ask whether the employees are satisfied with the activities of the management, opportunities to participate in training sessions and conferences and the implementation of changes. It is also worth mentioning that a higher level of evaluation of applied research has improved the satisfaction of the academic staff with opportunities to participate in research activities and increased the number of publications. One strength that was revealed was the fact that all participating professional higher education institutions supported raising their employees' level of qualification via formal education acquired within the adult education system. The areas for improvement that the assessors pointed out were the lack of a system for conducting employee satisfaction surveys; currently, the surveys are not target oriented, and there are no conclusions or comparisons. It was also revealed that often only the satisfaction of the academic staff is assessed. There is little reflection on or no targets set for the participation of teachers in international teacher exchanges as well as the import of foreign teachers.

The universities have only recently started to collect data on employee satisfaction and feedback. As there is no background system and, above all, the focus is on the measuring process itself and not the results, there are no target levels or results defined, which would satisfy the managers or the unit.

Looking at the data and the results on the performance indicators related to employees, a general conclusion must be made that the indicators that the HEIs are able to present to some degree include participation in research conferences, the number of publications, the distribution of qualifications, offices and ages, the length of employment, etc. The targets related to study and staff activities have not been described; therefore, it is not possible to assess their performance. In addition, there is only general data on the participation of teachers in training sessions. In general, there are no targets set for staff development and no impact analysis – there is no knowledge about whether the training sessions reach the desired (unexpressed) objectives.

1.1.3 Criterion 8 – SOCIETY RESULTS

Social results reflected in the HEI self-assessment reports included media reports, conferences targeted at the public, the participation of managers and employees in social life, athletic achievements, successful participation in student research competitions, collaborative projects, cooperation with upper secondary schools, etc. When it comes to presenting social results, the
universities obtained better than average results both in terms of the performance criteria as well as in comparison with professional higher education institutions. The social results are often not numerical, but presented verbally by describing which projects, networks, etc. are used to provide services to society or cooperate. In addition, society-related activities in universities are often managed as project work or in units that operate separately from academic units and are able to present their results better than the academic units present their main processes. The fact that the results are presented in a better manner can probably be explained by the need and motivation to constantly prove the purposefulness of one’s activities because financing the activities (i.e. the obligation to report to the financer) is of critical importance.

One pervasive area for improvement that can be underlined is the weakness in measuring the effectiveness of goals: what the HEI’s own assessments with respect to reaching the goals were and whether the results have been caused by their choice of approaches or how much better the results could be if the approaches were reviewed.

1.1.4 Criterion 9 – HEI PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

When it comes to key results, the universities primarily discussed indicators related to their research and development activities; for example, the volume of research, the number of research articles and doctoral thesis defended, the centres of excellence, etc. With respect to study activities, the existence of accredited study programmes, the compilation of study materials and e-learning courses and participation in refresher courses were named as strengths. The institutions of professional higher education discussed the provision of state-commissioned education, employment of graduates (graduates who find employment in their chosen field) and participation in projects as examples of key results. In general, one can say that as no benchmarking data exists that can be compared with the targets set, other units and other HEIs or comparable structural units, it is not possible to draw any conclusions about the impact of the approaches chosen with regard to the results of research and development activities and the results concerning study activities.

Besides research and development activities, study activities have remained in the background in the universities as key issues, and it can generally be said that not many relevant targets and instruments of assessment have been established for assessing the quality and efficiency of study activities. While the number of graduates or the dynamics of dropouts were named as key results, there were no concrete goals with respect to these indicators in the development and action plan. In conclusion, it can be stated that the HEIs seem to focus less on the performance of study activities, which is one of the most important processes (key process) for society, than on the provision of contract or project based services to society. However, this could result from the model itself and is, therefore, worth further analysis.

With respect to the performance indicators of HEIs, economic stability and sustainability were the aspects named most frequently. The weaknesses again include vague targets, the lack of comparisons and not paying attention to the necessity of reviewing activities.

A valuable aspect of the feedback on the areas for improvement included the observations made about the lack of comparisons between the structure of revenue and expenditure and the targets of the unit and the results of other units and HEIs. If financial results have not been segmented, assessing and measuring results does not indicate the characteristics of different areas and, therefore, the suitability and impact of the approaches cannot be assessed.

1.2 Feedback given on the criteria and sub criteria (1-5) of enablers

1.2.1 Criterion 1 – LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATION

All HEIs revealed that the managers implement an open door leadership policy and such an approach creates a pleasant working environment for the employees. If the approach applied by the management entails a broad inclusion of employees and students in all decision-making bodies and work processes, they have created opportunities for exchanging information and receiving feedback, which also partly compensate for the lack of satisfaction surveys or any other similar measurements. A low level of formality in communication favours creativity, initiative and the presentation of new ideas. At the same time, there is a difference in the extent to which HEIs apply the principle of openness and include employees and students. Usually, inclusion is limited to participation in decision-making bodies and informal communication. At the next level of openness, active use of joint working groups and seminars is added in order to increase cooperation. Good examples are development seminars organised for the entire HEI at least twice a year and monthly briefings led by the management. The
highest level of openness concerns how actively employees and students of the units of the support structure are included and whether it is a daily process.

One important aspect revealed was that, with regard to the management’s involvement with stakeholders, both strengths and areas for improvement predominantly focus on the external stakeholders in the universities’ feedback reports. Communication with stakeholders is predominantly based on personal contacts and traditions rather than on a strategic plan or targets set. Thus, the feedback received is neither continuous nor analysable.

1.2.2 Criterion 2 – POLICY AND STRATEGY

When establishing the development plan and the principles of action, universities generally use some national benchmarking data, but regular international benchmarking and improvement activities are rather lacking. Even if certain numerical indicators are regularly being observed within the university, it is usually not followed by a report or an analysis. Professional higher education institutions have conducted surveys and collected benchmarking data related to different stakeholders since 2006, which support the implementation of the HEI development plan and principles of action. Different policies could be found in the implementation of the development plan and activities in both the universities as well as the professional higher education institutions. There were cases where the compilation of the development plan remained the task of a small group or just at the level of managers and where students and a large part of employees were not included in the process. However, the inclusion of students was still rather an exception. If the staff were included only a little, the employees did not see any need to base their work on a vague and indefinite development plan. However, it was also revealed that the employees and students were aware of the goals of the management and the key processes and common values when the approach chosen entailed the organisation of broad development seminars, including joint brainstorming and working groups.

1.2.3 Criterion 2 – EMPLOYEES

Two aspects – development interviews and individual development – are worth highlighting in the implementation of a personnel policy. The tradition of conducting development interviews is not very long in universities, but almost all of the universities or their units have begun conducting these. However, the application documents in all professional higher education institutions specified that development interviews are being regularly conducted and are used as a basis for recruitment, adjustment of working time and acknowledging employees. However, it is hard to detect how training activities relate to targets or the activity of the managers in mapping the training needs, motivating and assessing employees. Training is not used for the management of changes, which means that the performance indicator is based on continuous individual development of a small portion of the teaching staff who are usually the most active teachers with a focus on development.

In universities, motivating and acknowledging employees is a rather informal activity in nature, satisfying both parties – the focus is less on regulations and more on open communication and the free realisation of one’s ideas. The institutions of professional higher education use quite different ways to motivate and acknowledge employees, such as motivation packages, a teacher rotation system, a free semester, the election of the best teacher of the year, letters of appreciation, co-worker of the year and so on, but often these have remained distant for the employees or the employees are even unaware of them. This is probably caused by the fact that the employees have not been sufficiently included in the development of these methods.

1.2.4 Criterion 4 – PARTNERSHIPS AND RESOURCES

In the case of universities, the management of external partnerships is always characterised by a choice of partners and the establishment of partnerships based on historical tradition and personal relationships. Searching for partners and their retention is not covered by clear targets and principles, which is why the approaches and the impact of partnerships on reaching the targets remain unclear.

As in universities, one of the areas for improvement in the institutions of professional higher education is the analysis and assessment of cooperation with external partners. Another significant area for improvement, especially in the case of professional higher education institutions, is the need to increase the focus on internationalisation and to set relevant targets.

When it comes to the management of financial resources, it was discovered that the methods of financing do not support all goals – for example, in the combination of subjects and use of teachers between different units, sustainable and result oriented activities, the giving of free semesters, long-term planning etc. While a significant part of the funding in universities is project-based and, in
general, financial risks are not being assessed, the largest part of the budget in institutions of professional higher education is composed of the resources of state-commissioned education and not projects. An important issue, however, is the assessment of the success of projects or the sustainability of projects after their completion.

Although many of the participating HEIs should focus on sustainable management, environmental protection and the promotion of economic thinking with respect to the area of their study activities and research and development activities, such targets were missing in most cases. In only one university could it be noted that thinking green was implemented with the support and assistance of students, and this has become a common value and goal of the entire HEI. There was also little evidence in the HEIs application documents of approaches to the use of environmentally friendly technologies. In most cases, conducting risk analyses of the work environment and the obligatory occupational health checks were specified, but there was no systematic specification and continuous application of environmentally sustainable principles.

1.2.5 Criterion 5 - PROCESSES

All HEIs specified their main and support processes and defined their stakeholders. Compared to the universities, responsible individuals have been somewhat better defined in the institutions of professional higher education. A common area for improvement with respect to the design, operation and improvement of processes is the systematic review of the support and primary processes with regard to the efficiency and validity of their operation and the assessment and measurement of results and/or impacts. It also remains unclear what the prioritisation of activities and the planning and implementation of significant activities is based on with respect to processes. For example, there is very little discussion of the importance of support processes in the application documents of professional higher education institutions and several universities as well. However, the support processes have a significant impact on the implementation and results of the main processes.

2 CONCLUSION

The feedback from the representatives of the HEIs and the assessors confirms that the activities and results of the first level of the lead project have been purposeful and have created new value in the development of the quality of higher education in the higher education sector. In addition, it has given the universities and institutions of professional higher education an excellent opportunity for cooperation and joint development.

In order to successfully implement quality management, the following common key words should be taken into consideration:

- A more active inclusion of the top management in quality management;
- The existence of quality assurance systems in HEIs, but also the issue of their system, continuity and purposefulness;
- Quality awareness and systems in HEIs;
- The ability to show and write about the aspects that ensure quality in the HEI;
- The agreement on common and comprehensible quality principles on the level of both Estonian higher education as well as the HEIs;
- The number of measurable indicators is too big and there is a non-compliance of indicators and the priorities of the HEI.

In addition to learning about the results of the HEI's self-assessment, this pilot project can be used as an input to develop the principles and procedures of foreign assessment (institutional accreditation, assessment of the quality of study programme groups).

REFERENCES

