Paper proposal for the INQAAHE Conference Chinese Taipei, 8 – 11 April, 2013
The conference sub-theme: Innovative approaches to external QA in tertiary education: not a single approach towards excellence
Topic: Lessons learned from external review of agencies or from studies measuring the impact of QA process, which have led to revised external QA processes

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Abstract
Estonia has experienced the reform of external evaluation of higher education in the last decade. The general principles of the new system were developed in cooperation with major stakeholders (e.g. HEI-s, student organisations, professional unions, employer organisations), taking into account the lessons learned from the implementation of the previous system. The major shift was made from the resource-consuming external evaluation system, which was based on the study programme accreditation, to the institutional accreditation of more general nature and study programme group (SPG) assessment that aims at giving feedback. However, the implementation of this system provides challenges for both the higher education institutions in developing new-type self-evaluation reports and experts who are expected to compose a tailor- made analysis based on the self-evaluation reports in addition to extracted background information.

From study programme assessment to study programme group assessment: from accreditation to supportive assessment.

The previous system of QA in Estonian higher education, like in many other countries, was based on the accreditation of curricula. The primary aim was to assess whether a curriculum and studies based on the curriculum conformed to standards and legal documents. The assessment focused heavily on accountability. The need for the new system of external quality assurance, where the aim for continuous improvement is prioritized, was perceived by the higher education institutions as well as the Ministry of Education and Research. The need for this shift was also outlined in the doctoral thesis by B.Vilgats "The impact of external quality assessment on universities: Estonian experience" (2009). The major factors were described as follows:

- The existing system was resource and time consuming for both the HEI and the state. The self-assessment of the study programme required the analyses of the HEI as well as the whole academic unit that was not in the competence of the self-evaluation team.
- The accreditation of the curricula did not have much impact on the organizational learning and development of the university as an organization
- The focus of the accreditations was too broad. It focused at the same time on controlling and giving suggestions for the development
- As the result of the accreditation could be closure of the study-programme in case of a negative decision, the honesty in analysing development needs was strongly challenged

The new system of external quality assessment (starting from 2009) focuses on the institution as a whole (institutional accreditation) and, on the other hand, the quality assessment of SPGs. This system enables to focus on the HEI as an organization, but attention is also given to the developments at the study programme level.

There are several key principles that were kept in mind in developing the new system of external quality assessment of SPG.

- The new system of quality assurance aims to give feedback to study programme groups in order to support their development. A study programme group refers to study programmes belonging to the same field of study (for example, separate SPGs are Social Science, Physical Sciences, Languages and Cultures etc.). This approach enables assessments of a more general nature than the evaluation of a single study programme.

- All principal stakeholders of HE provide their input during the process of developing the evaluation policies and procedures; educational institutions are especially included in the development process.

- The external quality assessment system stands hand in hand with internal work on quality in universities. The self-assessment is expected to be a regular process in every university. The quality agency proposes the areas of assessment and (minimum) standards to keep in mind as well as questions to ask oneself within each standard. However, the questions are not compulsory to answer; these are developed to support universities in their self-evaluation process. Also, the HEI is asked before the external evaluation about the areas where they expect to receive more thorough feedback from experts. In addition, the study programmes to be assessed are chosen in cooperation with the quality agency and the HEI.

- The HEI is expected to provide as little extra data for evaluation as possible, and experts are provided with links to the information sources available. This is expected to reduce the bureaucracy involved in the quality assessment systems. However, this might make the evaluation process for the experts much harder because of the amount of the raw information that needs to be analysed and contextualized in the course of the assessment process.

- The outcome of the evaluation of study programmes submitted to assessment points out the strengths and areas for improvement by five assessment areas, based on certain standards. The results also present a concise analysis of the study programme group of the higher education institution and the recommendations for improving the quality of instruction. Concurrently, this indicates a transfer from a result-based approach, which manifests in the orientation to achieve a full accreditation, to a more process-based approach, where quality-related activities are centred around self-reflection.

Challenges and lessons learned:

Now that the first new type assessments in the Information and Communication Technologies SPG at two higher education institutions are over, some challenges have emerged:

- The balance between universities' workload in preparing the self-evaluation and additional documentation for assessment and assessment experts' workload in analysing and contextualizing the information should be found. Higher education quality agency in cooperation with Ministry of Education and Research should compile the background information consisting of data on study-programmes (e.g. structure, goals and learning outcomes), academic staff and other relevant statistical data prior to the assessment. This will enable to ensure the accountability of the assessment.

- The electronic evaluation platform that was developed for the SPG assessment was not that easily accepted by experts, while the HEIs compiling self-assessment reports found the indicators and questions presented in the platform to be helpful for the self-assessment. Information needs of both target groups (HEIs and experts) should be carefully studied and analysed when providing a unified assessment platform.

- As feedback –oriented assessment is a rather new type of external assessment, where the specific tasks for assessment are assigned to the committee (taking into account the HEI and SPG context and development phase), the assessment committee needs careful supervision before the evaluation process. The video conference with members of the committee conducted well in advance could be one option. The one-day training prior to the assessment visit might not be enough for the preparation.

- The balance between two standpoints should be found: on the one hand, the HEIs who look for the feedback to every single study-programme and, on the other hand, the experts' limited time resource that does not enable to go down to the level of all the study programmes. Also, composing an assessment committee (number of the experts involved) imposes limitations, which do not allow to involve experts of every narrow field.