

# **Formation of national quality assurance systems and implementation of European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance: aspects of stakeholder involvement in the case of Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia**

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## *Summary*

The present article provides a regional perspective on functioning of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Specifically, implementation of ESG is analyzed on the example of three neighbouring countries – Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia, and application of external review procedures in relation to study programmes and higher education institutions (HEI). Historical development of the national systems is presented with a view of decisive internal and external factors. Comparison of quality assurance procedures is made, especially in respect to stakeholder involvement (among these, selected groups being governmental authorities, students, and employer representatives). Current debates in external quality assurance are touched upon. It is argued that states share similar development because of coordinated efforts from the outset and further influences from the general political processes in European higher education area (EHEA). The latter are complemented by logics of development of internal quality assurance processes within HEI.

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The present article deals with the topic of stakeholder involvement in setting up external quality assurance systems in Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia and their subsequent development. Current implementation of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) across three countries is discussed, a special focus being on involvement of such stakeholder groups as governmental authorities, students, and employer representatives.

Analysis encompasses published research papers, includes content scrutiny of publicly available materials (such as legal acts, external review reports of quality assurance agencies, and working documentation of quality assurance agencies themselves), interviews with specialists, and some non published materials. The author also relies on her personal expert experience and insights generating from serving on international panels, which were charged with assessment of compliance towards ESG of Latvian quality agency AIKNC (in 2010), and Estonian quality agency EKKA (in 2012-2013). The author was leading an internal self-analysis group of Lithuanian quality agency SKVC, with the aim of it being reviewed against implementation of ESG (in 2011-2012).

- ***Initiation of external quality assurance procedures***

At the initial stages of formation, external quality assurance systems in all three countries were mainly influenced by concurrence of internal developmental factors and larger trends in higher education outside national borders. Yet, it would be a big mistake to west all authority of ideas born and actions taken into the Bologna process. As noted by A. Rauhvargers (2004), the quality assurance system in Latvia was not created by or because of the Bologna process, and similar observation would be true for Lithuania and Estonia.

In case of the three Baltic states, debates as to the need to modernize educational systems were launched within the national independence movements, and complex restructuring started immediately after regaining sovereignty in 1990. This is

comparatively long before the official launch of the joint European process of reforms, counting from the meeting of four ministers in Sorbonne (1998), but most importantly – from the date when 29 European ministers of education gathered in Italy and signed so called Bologna Declaration on 19 June, 1999. It might appear as an exaggeration to regard those 9 years as a relatively long period, yet, in the author's opinion it is a justified step, taking into consideration, that Bologna process – which currently is the major external transforming factor in the vast landscapes of higher education of 47 countries – itself is only 14 years old, and also bearing in mind the fast pace of changes during the given periods<sup>1</sup>.

The inspiration for reforms and coordinated actions in quality assurance in the Baltic countries to the most part are in the activities of such international organizations as Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES (Rauhvargers, 2003; Čižas, 2011). Specifically, various preparatory actions taken during some two years led to a joint meeting – an international seminar on higher education quality assurance, arranged by the Council of Europe in Riga on 24-25 October, 1994. In this meeting, debates and agreements reached by various stakeholders were concluded by Ministers arriving to the event and sealed by signing a joint protocol on Baltic cooperation in higher education quality assurance and establishing an advice-giving forum called Baltic Higher Education Cooperation Council (BHECC).

In the BHECC, various stakeholders of higher education took part, including representatives of national university Rectors' conferences, ministerial staff members in charge of establishment of quality assurance systems, and heads of ENIC/NARIC centres. Notably, other stakeholders without whom today any European consultative forum dealing with matters of higher education would be considered incomplete, that is national student

unions and employer associations, at the time were not present.

A. Rauhvargers (2003) notes, that the role of BHECC consists of twofold results, namely, helping Baltic States to establish comparable higher education quality assurance systems, and introducing practice of commissioning each other's experts in the evaluation teams visiting higher education institutions and study programmes.

In all three countries bodies responsible for external quality assurance in higher education were created almost at the same time, within the span of four months, yet legal shapes chosen were different, corresponding to local realities.

In Latvia, the external quality assurance agency – Foundation “Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre” (in Latvian – *Augstakas izglitibas kvalitates novertešanas centrs*, AIKNC) was opened on 28 December, 1994 (AIKNC, 2010). Founders of it were six legal entities, namely the Ministry of Education and Science and five largest higher education institutions (University of Latvia, Riga Technical University, Daugavpils University, Riga Stradinš University, and School of Business Administration Turiba, Ltd.). In other words, both the governmental authority, (four) state and (one) private higher education establishments were involved in creation of AIKNC.

As recalls the first Director of SKVC Dr Algirdas Čižas (2011), the initiative in setting up Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (in Lithuanian – *Studiju kokybės vertinimo centras*, SKVC) belongs to the past leadership of the Ministry of Education and Science and individual academics who afterwards became employees of the new organization. Formally functions of the founder were assumed by the sole body, state authority – the Ministry of Education and Science of Lithuania; the relevant order of the Minister was signed on 24 January, 1995. Higher education institutions had not plaid any more significant role in this establishment process (Čižas, 2011). From the start, SKVC

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<sup>1</sup> between the proclamation of independence and initiation of Bologna process (1990-1999) and after joining Bologna process (1999-currently)

was organized and functioned as the state budget organization, and in 2002 was transformed into the public administration institution, with almost all employees performing functions as civil servants.

In Estonia, the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council was formed by a government regulation on 11 April 1995 (EKKA, 2012). Later on and in parallel, with the aim to support the Council, the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre was established by the Ministry on 1 September 1997; it was as a separate structural unit of a larger umbrella organization – the Archimedes Foundation<sup>2</sup>. The working group which produced the principles of external quality assessment included both representatives of the HE institutions and the Ministry. The binary structure of Assessment Council and Accreditation Centre undergone a major transformation and on 1 January 2009 a new organization was created – Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (in Estonian – *Eesti Kõrghariduse Kvaliteediagentuur*, EKKA), which is a legal successor of the two above mentioned bodies.

This institutionalization of the three Baltic agencies coincided with the first wave of establishment of external quality assurance bodies in other European countries. Namely, separate organizations responsible for review of quality on the national level were opened gradually:

At the beginning of the 1990s, the quality assurance landscape in higher education in Europe looked very different from that of today. There were newly established external quality assurance agencies

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<sup>2</sup> Archimedes is a relative large organization, which includes such structural units as the Academic Recognition Information Centre (Estonian ENIC/NARIC centre performing recognition of qualifications), EURAXESS services centre (responsible for promotion of researchers' mobility), also divisions in charge of European Union Life-Long-Learning programme and marketing of Estonian higher education, and finally – EKKA as external quality assurance agency.

in a handful of countries, i.e. Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the UK. Other countries were contemplating the establishment of agencies, such as Sweden and Spain, and others were conducting pilot projects as a preparation for a future agency, for example Finland and Norway. (Kristoffersen, 2010)

For the sake of truth, it should be clarified, that in France, the pioneering country, CTI (in French - *Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur*) was established long before – in 1934, and another agency – CNE (*Comité national d'évaluation des établissements publics à caractère scientifique, culturel et professionnel*) which engaged in institutional reviews of research and educational institutions – in 1985<sup>3</sup>. All other agencies, mentioned in the quotation above were registered as legal entities or consolidated into one body from several preceding initiatives (like in the UK) in the period between 1992-1998.

D. Kristoffersen concentrated her view on the North and West, while omitting from analysis situation with founding of agencies in the large territories of Central and East Europe. Here, in fact, was no lagging behind, quite the contrary – some countries were in the forefront of their Northern and Western counterparts, like Czech Republic, whose Accreditation Commission was formed as early as 1990. Further, HAC (Hungarian Accreditation Committee) opened in 1993; FH Council (*Österreichischer Fachhochschulrat - FHR*) in Austria became operational in the same year. A joint Swiss-German non-profit foundation – FIBAA (Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation) was launched by leading organisations of Swiss, Austrian and German industry in 1994. Soon after, in 1995, German agency ZeVA (Central

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<sup>3</sup> it subsequently was transformed into AERES in 2006, which in 2013 converted into HCERES – High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education

Evaluation and Accreditation Agency Hannover), and NAA - National Accreditation Agency of the Russian Federation started their work. In Bulgaria, NEAA (National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency) was created in 1996. Later on, in 1999, GAC (German Accreditation Council), responsible for oversight of local accreditation agencies, was created jointly by Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany and the Association of Universities and Other Higher Education Institutions in Germany. By the dawn of new millennium, in the whole Europe some 23 agencies were taking care of various aspects of quality on institutional and/or study program levels.

Afterwards, from 2000 to date, nearly 30 quality agencies were established in members of Bologna Process, sometimes more than one in a state<sup>4</sup>. The most recent development, which already took place in Ireland and Austria in 2012, was amalgamation of several national sectorial quality agencies into one new body, and reforms are still under way in Denmark and Sweden. Then, processes of founding or strengthening of international standing of national agencies is far from complete if we go further to the states members of European Union's Eastern Partnership.

To reiterate, this extensive list above proves that Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia implemented the initiative to exercise state care for quality with the multiple aims of assuring minimum educational standards, strengthening institutional quality cultures and increasing transparency in higher education very early compared to the founding years of the totality of European agencies running today.

- ***Participation of stakeholders in quality assurance***

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<sup>4</sup> cases of Austria, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Spain

In all three states there are specific regulations enforced as to obtaining general licenses to engage in provision of higher education and/or related activities. In addition, there are certain gate-keeping procedures to start new study programs, and cyclical re-evaluation of quality of running study programs. Another common element of quality assurance systems in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is that assessment procedures result in accreditation decisions taken. States act as watchdogs of minimum quality in higher education, and in line with ESG, two other most important of results of quality assurance procedures are expected are stimulus for internal institutional development and greater accountability.

All three Baltic countries started external review procedures from assessments of study programs with participation of international experts – to begin with – from the region, but at later stages inviting qualified peers from many European countries or even regions outside Europe. For example, to SKVC the year of 2002 was a turning point in a sense, that from then involvement of foreign experts in assessment of study fields increased very significantly, and ever since majority of study programs and all institutions are evaluated by mixed teams. Specifically, upon an invitation of Lithuanian agency, in 2005–2010, 455 experts participated in study programme evaluations, 221 of which came from 26 different countries (SKVC, 2011). The added value of such intensive presence of outside experts is seen in greater transparency of the system in general, also objectivity of the individual assessments carried out, alongside with possibility of learning from best international practices.

While Latvia has a long standing tradition of assessment and accreditation of higher education institutions (from 1995), this type of review was only recently introduced both in Lithuania and Estonia – almost simultaneously in 2011 (SKVC, 2011; EKKA, 2012). Generally, this form of review aims at:

- supporting institutions in development of leadership and strategy (on the level of senior management), and strengthening of internal quality culture (across all levels),

- to better fulfill their multiple missions towards the society,
- increasing public accountability and awareness of HEI activities and value of these to the sustainable country development, advancement of democratic and civic society, and competitive economy.

To echo requirements of ESG, procedures require, that both in Estonia and Lithuania institutional reviews are carried out by teams in which include local and foreign nationals and stakeholders outside governments. In Latvia, the Law on Higher Education Institutions also foresees a possibility for international expert participation. To take a specific case of EKKA, an institutional assessment committee shall consist of four to six members, of which at least two should be chosen from outside of Estonia, and at least one shall be a student, and at least one should come from outside of higher education institutions (EKKA Conditions and Procedure for Institutional Accreditation, 2011).

In Lithuania, from end of 2011, student members are present in all review panels – both for study programs and higher education institutions. Prior to that, student participation was irregular, as well as involvement of labor market representatives. It must be said, that this positive development was especially encouraged by the SKVC external review panel, that we as an agency took very seriously (SKVC external review report, 2012).

Universally experienced, program accreditation is a lengthy, detailed and expensive procedure to implement (irrespective of who pays the bill, being this responsibility on the state shoulders or making the institutions to cover expenses). These aspects put together represent powerful arguments in favor for optimization of the process and the need to explore possibilities of grouping the study programs according fields to entail a lighter burden for all involved in the process – both the state, the agency and a HEI in question.

Taking this into account, assessment of individual study programs is changing. A systemic shift already took place in Estonia, where in 2009-2011 transitional evaluation of all study programs in all fields was executed. It encompassed 33 higher education institutions, 28 study program groups that included 670 study programs were evaluated, 254 assessments (130 standard proceedings and 124 simplified proceedings) were carried out with the help of 158 Estonian experts. This massive effort resulted in issuing 185 open-ended education licences (giving the right to conduct studies for an unspecified term), 51 fixed-term education licences (the right to conduct studies for a specified term), 18 negative decisions (the right to conduct studies was not granted). As the agency learned during the impact study conducted, 89% of the representatives of higher education institutions agreed (51%) or partially agreed (38%) that transitional evaluation has increased the reliability of Estonian higher education (EKKA, 2011).

Latvia, although, already had assessment according to so called “study directions”, also implemented a project of swiftly assessing all existing 860 study programs in 60 higher education establishments during 2011-2013 in 28 study directions, and currently is re-considering its overall structure and principles of quality assurance system (AIP, 2013).

What somewhat differs across the countries, is level of steering by the state, and independence of quality assurance agencies. Yet, scrutinizing, what is current local regulation, and how it corresponds to ESG, independence of quality agencies stands out as a tough requirement, which is very important to meet. The one and only Law on HE&R (as in case of Lithuania) or several main laws on HE and types of institutions (as in case of Estonia) provide quite detailed general regulatory frameworks and description of organization of quality assurance, not only on the level of principles, but also basic managerial details both in respect to the agencies and review procedures.

Specifically, in the Universities Act (1995), the role of EKKA in Estonian higher education system is described, including its organizational composition, composition of a decision making body (Assessment Council), also the requirement to involve international experts and follow international principles in its activity; it then delegates to establish and publish working conditions and procedures; fixes the mandatory periodic internationally recognized external evaluation of the agency itself (Universities Act, article 10).

Similar level of detail is found in Lithuanian Law on Higher Education and Research (2009): it talks about the aims of SKVC, organization of its strategic making body (Council), appointment of the Director, obligatory external review of the agency every five years, possibility to participate in international non-profit organizations which operate in the fields related to the activities of SKVC (Law on HE&R, article 17).

In both cases these long descriptions in laws might be seen as unnecessary legal eloquence, yet bears very powerful consequences looking from an international perspective. At the time of external review of AIKNC in 2010, the agency had not had any reference to its mission and working principles in the Latvian laws, and although there were lower level regulations, this was judged as important deficiency to be addressed. The role of the Ministry of Education in Latvia has been stronger than of their counterparts in Lithuania and Estonia, if we compare the most recent years; yet this fact and also organizational peculiarities of the quality agency posed certain difficulties in AIKNC review for it as quality assurance agency meet all ESG requirements. It leads to think, that striking the right balance between state intervention and agency independence, as well as proper organization of resourcing is vitally important.

It is a characteristic feature of Lithuania, that the role of the Ministry of Education and Science was changing over time from more intensive involvement into a lesser one, and the landmark stands in 2009. Prior to this moment, for some 11 years, the Ministry was

very closely participating in the following parts of the assessment procedure:

- Initiation of assessment (the Ministry used to approve annual plans of study programme evaluations at the recommendation of the SKVC),
- Issuing of accreditation decision (on the basis of assessment made by SKVC),
- Registration of (new and accredited) study programs.

After the reform on 2009, study program evaluations are initiated by the HEIs themselves which may choose between the evaluation organized by SKVC or by another evaluation agency which is a member of the EQAR. In both cases, irrespective who managed the assessment, decisions on accreditation are taken exclusively by SKVC. The Ministry still retains oversight of the State register of educational institutions, qualifications, learning and study programs. At all times, prior to the reform and after it, SKVC as quality agency is in charge and completely independent in choice of experts, is responsible for their training and briefing, issuing of assessment judgments, publication of final results, and follow-up activities. Yet, stakeholder participation in drafting the methodologies has been changing from less open consultative way into a more open consultative way, in line with ESG spirit.

Although all 47 Ministers, members of Bologna process committed to the promise to let EQAR-listed agencies in, far from all are already implementing this principle. In this context, it should be noted, that Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia represent the case, where the political will is there – to exercise a move of trust and let higher education institutions to choose from agencies within EQAR. Lithuania is among the forerunners – this right to HEI was conveyed as early as in 2009 after passing the new Law on Higher Education and Research, and this presents a case, when the state is consciously taking a decision to limit itself in favor of the free market. So far, during the last two years, less than 10% of study program accreditation decisions were issued on the basis of assessments produced by foreign agencies, thus, it is rather early to

make generalizations as to the benefits and risks involved. Still, there are certain warning signs that point to the need to further elaborate the model of collaboration and decisions making involving SKVC and foreign agencies that supply expert reports towards the accreditation decisions to be taken. Not least, perhaps EQAR should take certain measures as well not only to set entering/threshold requirements, but also have permanent monitoring of agency activities to assure real quality work done.

As shared by colleagues at EKKA and responsible staff of Latvian Ministry, there were no real-life cases yet, when Estonian and Latvian institutions would be running through the quality procedures of EQAR-registered agencies. Though, in the author's view, it might not take them long to have such precedents, not least because of financial considerations by institutions and perceived value of quality labels.

- ***Some conclusions and remarks on the most recent developments in QA in the Baltic countries***

In general, the role of the state is very visible in setting the framework of requirements for external quality assurance in Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia, however, this should not be seen as a negative feature. It was states (or to be precise, Ministers) who subscribed for the ESG at Bergen and increased EQAR role in Bucharest. Coordinated policy measures across EHEA undoubtedly act as powerful impetus for all of us who take international commitments seriously.

All Baltic countries have seen the value of agreed actions on the regional scale with a view of benefits of sharing and learning from each other, as well as possibly of competing together in larger scenes between the countries and regions.

Aside of regular yearly meetings within such professional networks as CEENQA, ENQA, and INQAAHE, and in addition to participation in various projects and other activities, more could be done together.

Especially it is so at the moment, when AIKNC's contract with the Ministry was discontinued and Latvian Ministry of Education and Science as of end 2012, and in the absence of the national independent QA agency currently the Ministry assumes functions of a such, while planning further changes in the quality assurance.

Once again, it should be noted, that neither of the educational systems is static, and further changes expected still. Including in Lithuania, where the new draft Law on Higher Education and Research shall be presented to the Parliament by the end of this calendar year. The first, and most important, to our mind, proposal of SKVC towards the new draft was to maintain our alignment to the principles of ESG. Another suggestion was to carefully plan the external quality assurance system taking into account the current level of development within HEIs themselves. After all, ESG calls for unity of principles of external and internal quality assurance.

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