



2019

**FOLLOW-UP REPORT
AFTER
EXTERNAL REVIEW
BY ENQA**

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INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC, agency) completed self-evaluation and in February 2017 in head offices in Vilnius (Lithuania) underwent an external review, coordinated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). This was the second external review of SKVC as a quality assurance agency by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The panel concluded that SKVC is in compliance with the ESG.

ENQA panel found SKVC fully compliant with eight standards, and substantially compliant with five standards as below:

| Fully compliant | Substantially compliant |
|--|---|
| 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance | 3.4 Thematic analysis |
| 3.2 Official status | 3.5 Resources |
| 3.3 Independence | 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose |
| 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct | 2.5 Criteria for outcomes |
| 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies | 2.7 Complaints and appeals |
| 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance | |
| 2.3 Implementing processes | |
| 2.4 Peer-review experts | |
| 2.6 Reporting | |

In June 2017, the ENQA Board discussed the agency’s Self-evaluation report (SER) and concurred with the judgment of the panel and its suggestions for improvement, and decided to renew the full membership of SKVC. This was communicated to the agency in a letter signed by ENQA President in Dublin on 14 July 2017.

The ENQA external review report on SKVC was translated and posted on the agency’s website in original (English) and the state language (Lithuanian). Results of ENQA review were discussed with members of the staff and the Council of SKVC, also transmitted to the founder – the Ministry of Education and Science¹ (Ministry). To address suggestions for improvement, an action plan was produced in June and integrated into the annual work plan of 2017, also further actions were envisaged and formulated into the personal goals of leadership for 2018.

ENQA review is a very important opportunity to SKVC as a quality assurance agency to reflect on our own work from perspective and look for ways to learn and improve. Status quo on implementation of ENQA panel and ENQA Board recommendations or plans in that respected are presented below, separately per each standard. First, the ESG is quoted, then the recommendation given, afterwards the description how SKVC addressed it follows. At the end of the report an account regarding suggestions by ENQA panel, which were offered as additional observations, not affecting overall judgement on individual ESG standards, is given.

¹ As of 1 January 2019 - the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports

IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

3.4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

Guidelines:

In the course of their work, agencies gain information on programmes and institutions that can be useful beyond the scope of a single process, providing material for structured analyses across the higher education system. These findings can contribute to the reflection on and the improvement of quality assurance policies and processes in institutional, national and international contexts. A thorough and careful analysis of this information will show developments, trends and areas of good practice or persistent difficulty.

ENQA Panel and ENQA Board recommendation

“The agency should develop a procedure for the production of thematic analyses with the sole aim of contributing to the enhancement of the quality of higher education. Analyses need to focus on key issues relevant to a well-defined target audience. The agency might also want to reconsider the resources needed, both in human and financial terms, given the rather ambitious goals.”

Current state of affairs

So far, the recommendation has been partly implemented: while the procedure for production of thematic analyses is in place, the question of resources is not fully resolved. Due to the specificity of SKVC functions in carrying external quality assurance and the current organizational structure, there is no dedicated staff who would solely work as analysts. Having received ENQA recommendation, it was discussed that keeping a diverse job profile, rather than a narrowly focused one, and different activities to be performed by Review Coordinators, makes this position more attractive. Also, given a small number of total staff in the respective units, this allows better implementation of evaluation activities, which constitute the biggest part of everyday work. Nevertheless, when delegating annual tasks to employees, the possible thematic analysis is assigned to one or more staff members to carry it out. Depending on the nature of question and complexity of the subject, the enquiry can be performed both individually and in a team. Themes of analyses are usually discussed between supervisors and staff of relevant divisions taking into account the evaluations performed over the recent few years, trends, topical issues that are relevant to a wider range of institutions. The methodology applied during the thematic analysis is developed and adapted to the relevant theme.

Since the volume of the study programme evaluations went down in 2016-2019 due to the end of an evaluation cycle, and also in relation to the work on the development of the new external quality assurance model, more analyses were done. In the aforementioned period, the Centre has performed quite a large number of thematic analyses of evaluation findings and reviews on various topics: on the

system level, per different sectors (given the binary higher education system), and comparing different foreign systems.

The following eight reports were produced by initiative of SKVC and two at the initiative of the Ministry, as listed below:

- **Study programmes which received a negative evaluation in the period of 2013-2017**². The aim of this analysis was to identify the main problems which determined the negative evaluation of study programmes. The range of analysis included 33 programmes of first and second cycle both in university sector and the sector of colleges of higher education in all fields under the classification that was valid at the moment of carrying it.
- **Analysis of study field overview reports (2010-2016)**³. When several programmes in the same study field are evaluated, expert teams prepare overview reports where general observations about the entire study field are presented, also recommendations for the Lithuanian education system on the institutional and national levels are given. This analysis aimed to assess the main strengths and weaknesses of different study areas.
- **Follow-up activities of higher education institutions (2017)**⁴. It was analysed how higher education institutions improve their study programmes according to experts' recommendations. In 2017 Centre received 47 follow-up activities reports from 11 higher education institutions: 4 universities (53 percent of all reports) and 7 colleges of higher education (47 percent of all reports). In comparison with the results of 2016, it was received 68 percent less follow-up activities reports.
- **Overview of study programme evaluation in 2010-2016**⁵. This was a system level analysis the external evaluation results according to different types of higher education institutions, study areas, fields and study cycles. The overview was used to evaluate the overall scope of SKVC activities, also to present the results to wide public and HEIs itself.
- **Review on the publicity of evaluation results in higher education institutions (2017)**. Every two years the Centre gathers information on how higher education institutions publish the evaluation results in terms of user friendliness, ease of access, and completeness. Recommendations are then addressed to higher education institutions. Each of them has the right to decide where and in what form the information on evaluation results will be provided, however, the information should be readily accessible and understandable to all interested parties.
- **Quality Standards (2018)**. The notions of "standards" and "quality" were analysed in the context of nine EHEA countries in order to formulate suggestions to our Ministry regarding state regulation,

² The text in Lithuanian is available at <http://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Kokyb%C4%97s%20u%C5%BETikrinimas/Analiz%C4%97s/2013-2017-m-neigiamai-vertint%C5%B3-studiju-programu-analize.pdf>

³ The text in Lithuanian is available at http://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Kokyb%C4%97s%20u%C5%BETikrinimas/Analiz%C4%97s/Ekspertu_apzvalgu_analize_2010-2017_koreguota_suformatuota.pdf

⁴ The text in Lithuanian is available at <http://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Kokyb%C4%97s%20u%C5%BETikrinimas/Analiz%C4%97s/Paskesne-veikla-po0studiju-programu-vertinimo.pdf>

⁵ The text in Lithuanian is available at <http://www.skvc.lt/default/lt/kokybes-uztikrinimas/gallery/studiju-programu-vertinimu-apzvalga>

practises external evaluation of higher education, including the elements of national qualification frameworks, level of autonomy of higher education institutions, and indicators of external evaluation. Analysis was discussed with the Council of SKVC, then transmitted as a paper to the Ministry, also discussed separately with the Conferences of University Rectors and Conference of Directors of Colleges of Higher Education. Findings were also useful towards on-going discussion regarding the new external quality assurance framework.

- **Review of State Colleges (2018)**⁶. Led by Vice-Minister for Education, a working group was initiated to analyse the state colleges' network. A representative of the Centre was included in that working group. The profiles of state college were developed during the course of analysis. Based on the data received from the higher education institutions and official sources, a general overview of the colleges was done. The quality of provision of studies was compared, the number of students forecasted, data on teachers and students, the structure of funds were included. In parallel, a detailed analysis of specific indicators was prepared for each college. After reviewing all available sources, a review of State Colleges Evaluation and Recommendations for each College has been prepared and sent. Information is also available on the Centre's webpage.

- **Overview of ENQA members' activities (2018-2019)**. In this overview 51 full member and affiliate of ENQA was taken, and the scope of their activities was analysed. According to the results, the vast majority of ENQA agencies (80 percent) are only responsible for the evaluation of study programmes and institutional review. The rest part carries out as well additional functions, such as diploma recognition, evaluation of professional education and training or evaluation of doctoral studies and research. This information was used when discussing with the Ministry distribution of responsibilities among various agencies in Lithuania. Further, a detailed analysis how ENQA members scored in relation to their compliance to ESG-2015 was done for internal benchmarking purposes of SKVC. From total 38 full members evaluated by ENQA panels as of 1st January 2019, it was discovered that only nine agencies either fully or substantially met requirements of ESG-2015, and SKVC was found among them.

- **Follow-up after evaluation of study programmes (2018)**⁷. In the period of 2016-2018, the Centre has been gathering information on how higher education institutions addressed shortcomings found during the course of external evaluation and implement improvement measures according to experts' recommendations. In 2018, 9 higher education institutions sent their progress reports: 2 universities (55 percent of all reports) and 7 colleges of higher education (45 percent of all reports). Information how many higher education institutions are producing progress reports and how they improve the quality of studies is presented and analysed.

⁶ The text in Lithuanian is available at http://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Kokyb%C4%97s%20u%C5%BETikrinimas/Analiz%C4%97s/Valstybinu_kolegiju_apzvalga_2018.pdf

⁷ The text in Lithuanian is available at http://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Pa%C5%BEngangos%20ataskait%C5%B3%20ap%C5%BEvalga_2018.pdf

• **Study programmes accredited twice in succession for three years of study over the period 2010-2018**⁸. The statistical data about weak study programmes, which were repeatedly accredited for three years of study, distribution of such programmes according to the study area and the reasons for the repeated accreditation for three years was done.

In addition to written analyses, other analytical work was done. Considering the political priorities to instigate mergers of public universities and colleges of higher education and an interest on the HEI's part to actively shape their own future, SKVC organized an international conference in November 2018. The aim was to discuss examples of other countries in Europe and Asia: critical considerations for mergers and success factors for managing quality of provision in the time of changes. The event was met with a high interest on the part of senior leadership and administrators within HEIs.

In 2019, the Centre is planning to perform analyses and reviews on the following topics: how higher education institutions publish their external evaluation results, review of progress reports submitted in 2019, profiles of higher education institutions. Additionally to this, the social partners' survey will be prepared and it is expected that the received results of it will be used in the external evaluation of study programmes and institutions as an impartial source of information.

It is also worth to mention, that this year the representatives of the Centre are going to take part in various international projects (under ERASMUS+ and Twinning programmes) where one of the discussed topics will be the dissemination of good practises regarding the thematic analysis.

To summarise, thematic analysis is based on tasks of importance for quality in higher education. They serve to evaluate the overall impact of SKVC activities, to encourage critical reflections and discussions, and in the long run – to contribute to the improvement of quality management in a national and international context. Analyses are planned to focus on key issues relevant to the target audience of the Centre (e.g. the Ministry, academics and administrators within HEIs and etc.). Reviews and analyses, as well as evaluation reports are published on SKVC website, in newsletters, presented at conferences, in meetings with social partners (e.g. conferences of rectors, principals of colleges, Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, etc.).

Themes that can be explored in the future include findings which contribute to the reflection on and the improvement of quality assurance policies and processes in the national context. The analysis of information obtained through different activities of SKVC show developments, trends and areas of good practice or persistent difficulty, they are also useful in the dialogue with our stakeholders.

⁸ The text in Lithuanian is available at http://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Du_kartus_i%C5%A1_eil%C4%97s_akredituot%C5%B3_SP_ap%C5%BEvalga_2010-2018.pdf

3.5. RESOURCES

Standard:

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

Guidelines:

It is in the public interest that agencies are adequately and appropriately funded, given higher education's important impact on the development of societies and individuals. The resources of the agencies enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance activities in an effective and efficient manner. Furthermore, the resources enable the agencies to improve, to reflect on their practice and to inform the public about their activities.

ENQA Panel and ENQA Board recommendation

“The panel recommends SKVC developing a financial plan as a joint effort of both council and management. This financial planning demands an analysis of the current financial situation, realistic financial goals and priorities, well-considered conclusions and a rigid implementation. This plan might have far-reaching consequences but it would help the agency to at least guarantee the funding of its core activities.”

Current state of affairs

Considering the recommendation to prepare a financial plan, an external expert in public finances was invited to consult the leadership of the Centre and to help make financial modelling. The draft financial plan was discussed with the Council of SKVC during the meeting on 17 April 2018. It was concluded, that further work is needed.

However, further work on financial planning was interrupted due to two main reasons: uncertainties around the initiated reform of public sector organizations and the external quality assurance model itself, consequently – the scope and volume of evaluation activities that SKVC will be carrying too.

Firstly, at the beginning of 2018, analysis of functions performed by all public sector organizations under the Government of Lithuania was carried out, with a particular focus on implementation of financial management and human resources management. The aim was to identify cases, where these two functions could be lifted from an organisation and consolidated into the newly founded National Centre for Common Functions. In the first phase, this reform affected 140 organizations; SKVC was not among them. For the time being, both financial and human resources management remains within SKVC.

Another factor putting on hold long term financial planning was a comprehensive audit of organisational functions, management of conflicts of interests and public procurement procedures in the entire education sector – in 17 organisations – established by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports. It was initiated in December 2018 and lasted till end of March 2019. Several proposals were made to the Government to implement large scale organizational mergers with the purpose of optimisation of functions and consolidation of resources. Concerning SKVC, several alternative options

were considered, but as of today no final conclusions are made yet. The reasons for this continuing uncertainty include set political priorities to first of all restructure organisations in the sub-sector of general education; then consideration of costs associated with mergers and implications for the civil service.

Despite some political uncertainty, it must be said, that SKVC performs public administration functions and is a state budgetary institution, and as such has a stable basic yearly budget financing. In 2018, SKVC was informed about the draft budget for a period 2019-2021. This instrument gave the institution the clearer view regarding the allocations for future activities.

In 2019, decisions were made to extend financing of the external quality assurance activities through the extension of European Social Fund's supported project till the end of 2023. Further discussions regarding the funding of activities from 2023 onwards are held in the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, as founder of SKVC.

2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

Standard:

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

Guidelines:

In order to ensure effectiveness and objectivity it is vital for external quality assurance to have clear aims agreed by stakeholders.

The aims, objectives and implementation of the processes will:

- bear in mind the level of workload and cost that they will place on institutions;
- take into account the need to support institutions to improve quality;
- allow institutions to demonstrate this improvement;
- result in clear information on the outcomes and the follow-up.

The system for external quality assurance might operate in a more flexible way if institutions are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance.

Panel recommendation

“The panel recommends SKVC revising its methodologies starting from HEIs’ full responsibility for the quality of their programmes. A move from quality control towards an enhancement led peer-review is required, also in support of the development of a quality culture. Furthermore, SKVC should take the initiative for a more integrated approach of programme and institutional evaluations. Further integration and simplification of the various procedures will also help reducing bureaucracy and making procedures more fit for purpose.”

Current state of affairs

While the Law on Higher Education and Research adopted in June 2016 remains valid with only minor amendments, lower level legislation regarding quality assurance, issued by the Government and the Ministry saw several significant changes. There were two periods of drafting legislation: the first one ran from late 2016 to mid-2018. The main characteristic of it was the radical course of reforms pursued by the Ministry, which was stopped by the Constitutional Court decisions. The second period runs from mid-2018 to date and its characteristic feature is a more moderate approach.

During the first period, the Centre completed the last procedures both on study programme and institutional levels according to the previous model (which was valid at the date of second ENQA review). At the same time, the Centre was very actively involved with the Ministry in discussions and designing of a new quality assurance model, new legislation on institutional review, study fields evaluation and accreditation, including threshold requirements for studies. Various discussions organized by the Ministry included the Centre and different stakeholders, such as MOSTA (The Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre under the Government of Lithuania), Lithuanian Research Council, Invest Lithuania (the official agency for Foreign Direct Investment and Business Development in Lithuania), students' organizations and higher education institutions. In the framing of the external quality assurance model, the word of the Minister was decisive. The overall orientation of the Minister with her team was towards raising quality standards as quickly as possible and imposing more control, rather than promotion of quality culture and incremental development. Unfortunately, the voice of SKVC was not heard and the risk of legal disputes materialized. As mentioned before, the Ministerial position has led to a large scale disagreement with higher education institutions, which through Members of the Parliament, logged a case before the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court ruled, that while public authorities have both the obligation and right to set common requirements for provision of studies, at the same time, higher education institutions should be given a reasonable period of time to prepare meet those new expectations. Thus, the Ministerial procedure of temporary accreditation of study programmes and decisions of SKVC based on this temporary procedure were annulled. It must be said, that scrutiny of the case brought before the Constitutional Court regarding legislation on accreditation of study programmes is unparalleled in the history of the last 28 years in Lithuania, it was a truly disruptive and extraordinary situation.

After the Constitutional Court rulings, another period of drafting legislation started and continues to date. According the general areas of responsibilities, the Ministry issues the order on the procedure of the external evaluation, and based on it, SKVC produces methodologies for evaluations. At the moment, the Ministry is at the final stages of completing own procedure, thus, the Centre has started to produce evaluation methodologies for study fields and new study programmes evaluation and accreditation. Methodologies should describe the evaluation process, procedures, participants and their responsibilities. Currently, SKVC holds discussions with representatives of higher education institutions, students unions and the labour market. The Centre is seeking to involve these stakeholders from the very beginning and make them the co-owners of the methodologies. It is expected that common work and generation of ideas will result in the development of a better quality assurance model where all parties were heard.

2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Standard:

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

Guidelines:

External quality assurance and in particular its outcomes have a significant impact on institutions and programmes that are evaluated and judged.

In the interests of equity and reliability, outcomes of external quality assurance are based on pre-defined and published criteria, which are interpreted consistently and are evidence-based. Depending on the external quality assurance system, outcomes may take different forms, for example, recommendations, judgements or formal decisions.

Panel recommendation

“It is necessary to reinforce the trust in the outcomes of external evaluations performed by experts with the assistance of SKVC staff, and to recognise the director’s responsibility in taking consistent and evidence-based decisions. As a consequence SKVC needs to reconsider the position of the advisory commissions in the decision-making process.

SKVC could further support experts in applying criteria consistently by providing definitions for the scores, illustrative examples and assessment rules. These should be included in the methodologies and guidelines.

The panel qualifies the criteria for outcomes as appropriate but the present decision-making process needs to be adjusted in full acknowledgment of both the outcomes of the external evaluation and the responsibility of the director.”

Current state of affairs

To assure consistency of external evaluation outcomes, staff of SKVC performs training for expert panels, gives advice on application of methodologies and other legislation, accompany teams to site visits; proof-read, comment, and discuss evaluation reports before they are sent to HEIs for correction of factual errors and given for consideration and approval by our advisory bodies. SKVC provides HEIs with draft evaluation reports to check their content for any possible errors in facts or essential misunderstanding based on facts. As mentioned, consistency of decisions is also assured through consideration of evaluation reports at advisory commissions – Commission for Higher Education Institutions’ Review and the Study Evaluation Commission. These two Commissions discuss reports with a purpose to ensure that they are objective, comprehensive and evidence-based. To furtherly assure trust and acknowledgement, Commissions meet members of HEIs, whose institution or study programmes are under evaluation, as well as one of the expert panel’s member are asked to participate. In case the Commissions decide that the reports need to be amended in order to provide more arguments and, thus, achieve greater integrity, they are returned to the expert panels for the necessary amendments.

As SKVC is a public administration body, all decisions, leading to legal consequences, can be taken only by the director of SKVC. In this regard, director of SKVC formalises (from the legal point of view) decisions of panels and the Commissions which act as certain quality check points.

The ENQA panel recommendation to re-consider the role of advisory Commissions is implemented. During 2018, the regulations of the Study Evaluation Commission were revised twice, its mandate being broadened. By the order of Director of SKVC No. V-16, issued on 28 of February 2018, responsibilities of the aforementioned Commission widened in assuring grounded decisions towards the rationale of the new study programmes. Another order No. V-19, signed on 6 March 2018 stipulates that the Commission should scrutinise plans for improvement of quality of study fields submitted by higher education institutions. Thus, the role of the Commission is given bigger prominence.

Following recommendations of the ENQA panel to support experts in applying criteria consistently by providing definitions for the scores, we would like to inform that definitions of scores were changed in the new legislation for evaluation of study fields; it is going to come into force in 2020. There will be five point scores (instead of four point scale) with definition for each score. However, the definition of scores is a part of legal document and Lithuanian legal tradition does not allow providing illustrative examples in such documents. Broader explanation, examples are going to be provided to experts during briefing and consultation sessions held by SKVC staff.

2.7. COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Standard:

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

Guidelines:

In order to safeguard the rights of the institutions and ensure fair decision-making, external quality assurance is operated in an open and accountable way. Nevertheless, there may be misapprehensions or instances of dissatisfaction about the process or formal outcomes. Institutions need to have access to processes that allow them to raise issues of concern with the agency; the agencies, need to handle such issues in a professional way by means of a clearly defined process that is consistently applied.

A complaints procedure allows an institution to state its dissatisfaction about the conduct of the process or those carrying it out.

In an appeals procedure, the institution questions the formal outcomes of the process, where it can demonstrate that the outcome is not based on sound evidence, that criteria have not been correctly applied or that the processes have not been consistently implemented.

Panel recommendation

“SKVC should supply a more specific complaints procedure as part of its quality assurance system. Information about the complaints procedure should be made easily accessible to HEIs.”

The complaints procedures

Upon receipt of information about the members of the expert panel, an HEI can submit a grounded request to replace any member of the team. Such a request must be based on facts, proving the potential conflict of interests of the expert, non-objectivity of the expert, etc. This opportunity is comparatively rarely used by the HEIs – less than 5 requests annually.

Until 2019 in all such cases, Ad hoc commissions of the Centre's employees had been formed for handling such requests and also the cases of potentially unethical behaviour of the panel members before, during and after the evaluation procedure. Since January 2019 there is a permanent internal commission that scrutinizes both types of complaints. The complaint needs to be answered within 20 working days since it was received. An HEI receives a detailed reasoning of a decision. The same commission deals with such requests for new programme, on-going programmes and institutional reviews and gives advice to the Director, who makes final decisions that are communicated to institutions.

The Centre is trying to improve the transparency of all the procedures, therefore all the information about the complaints for evaluation processes (requests to replace experts, appeal procedures, experts' misconduct, etc.) is publicly available on the webpage next to relevant evaluation information.

On-going amendments. Currently the Centre is working on improving communication with students and other stakeholders. By the end of July, 2019 Centre will launch its smart phone survey application which will provide a direct channel of communication from students to the Centre. The application, which is called the National Student Survey, will allow not only survey students on the external quality but also provide feedback on the on-going issues in HEIs. At the same time, Centre has regular meetings (at least twice a year) with the representatives of Student Associations where relevant issues are being discussed. During those meetings students have an opportunity to bring some light on the issues that they struggle within their HEIs. As a consequence of those meetings, the webpage of Centre is being amended to provide a complaint form for students and general society. In this section, one can find information about what issues could be solved by Centres involvement and a form to be filled for a complaint. The Centre as an external quality assurance agency can only recommend some solutions, however, they cannot be mandatory to implement. In cases where issues with HEIs reach a critical point, only the Ministry can start some legal procedures, e. g. initiate extraordinary external evaluation of study programme.

The appeals procedures have not changed yet, since the self-evaluation report and the ENQA evaluation took place, however will be reviewed later in this year in order to ensure the consistency with the procedure of external evaluation of study fields. The up-coming changes include the expansion members' number, more transparent system of withdrawal when a member is biased and broadening the scope of appeals: new study programme evaluation, on-going study field evaluation, joint study programmes evaluation and application for licence evaluation.

IMPLEMENTATION OF ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS OFFERED BY ENQA PANEL

PANEL SUGGESTION REGARDING PEERS

“The panel encourages SKVC to keep investing in its international network, also in order to engage independent experts from abroad. This becomes all the more urgent when individual programme evaluation will be replaced by evaluations per field. It will certainly limit the availability of independent local experts. The panel suggests creating an action plan to tackle this issue in a cost-effective way.”

“The selection of students, whom the experts will meet at the site visit, should be left to the expert team. Also the panel suggests reconsidering the engagement of PhD students as experts in SKVC procedures although this is common practice in some countries. The panel finds that PhD students cannot be considered as peers of bachelor or master students.”

Current state of affairs

In the end of 2018, the Centre’s administration considered amendments to the Expert Selection Description approved by the Director of SKVC, taking into account the good experience of the EHEA countries. The Legal and General Affairs Division has prepared and agreed on the relevant text of the Description which should be approved in the near future.

Since 2016, all ongoing study programmes’ evaluations have been carried out by international expert panels. Only new study programmes are evaluated by Lithuanian expert groups due to their unpredictable number and short deadlines for evaluation.

The involvement of independent experts from abroad ensures greater objectivity and transparency of evaluation, allow evaluation of study programmes in an international context. Such practices will be applied when study programmes evaluations will be replaced by study field evaluations. SKVC is actively searching for new sources of potential international experts, also considering associations of HEIs from abroad.

Also, in 2018 Centre had invested into the development of internal expert database. Technical solutions made the processes of data inclusion and search much easier, as a consequence this allows saving of time. The implementation of General data protection regulation gave a unique possibility to review the content of this database – all the experts were asked to update the information regarding their qualifications, competences and fields of interests.

One student representative is included in all groups of experts for study programmes evaluations. Students representatives should be from at least the second-year first cycle or integrated study programmes, or from the second cycle, third cycle or non-degree study programmes. Engagement of PhD students was reconsidered, the Centre decided to somewhat limit their participation, but not to refuse them at all, as indeed practices of various European countries are different, while the value of contribution by PhD students is obvious.

Following the recommendation to make the process of selection of students, whom the experts will meet during the site visit, independent from HEI, the Centre communicates directly to the students' organizations prior to the visit of expert panels, informing them about the experts visit and asking to disseminate this information among the students of the HEI.

PANEL SUGGESTION REGARDING INTERNAL QUALITY PROCESSES

“The panel encourages the further development of some internal quality processes in terms of external communication, more flexible instruments and further digitalisation of the agency's activities and services.

The SKVC website needs to follow governmental regulations but the panel agrees with the stakeholders that it needs further improvement. External communication in general and students' needs in particular – both in content and form – would benefit from more focus. SKVC is encouraged to adjust its communication plan accordingly. Given the importance of the code of ethics, the panel also suggests posting the code as a separate document on the SKVC website. The panel acknowledges that the further digitalisation of the agency's activities and services is complex and costly. Nevertheless, SKVC should take up this challenge and develop a strategy and implementation plan. And although an update of the quality manual is being prepared the panel questions the functionality of this tool. SKVC might want to consider a toolbox with more flexible instruments for its internal quality assurance processes. This would also be more in line with the always-changing landscape of quality assurance and higher education.”

Status quo

So far, the recommendation on the further development of internal quality processes has been partly implemented: in terms of external communication it is implemented by formalisation of the so called communication group and its activities, and also initiation of the review of communication strategy and its plan.

The ENQA expert recommendation on the enhancement of the SKVC website functionality has been implemented to some degree. For example, the publication of program evaluation results on website have possibility to "unlock" the overall scoring score in 6 areas of evaluation. Further improvement is envisaged.

As it was mentioned before, the Centre is launching its smartphone survey application which will provide a direct channel of communication from students to the Centre. The application, which is called the National Student Survey, will allow not only survey students on quality of higher education but also provide feedback on the on-going issues in HEIs.

Also, the idea of having the electronic self-evaluation submission system which could generate external data on higher education institution performance for HEIs while preparing the self-evaluation reports as well as for the Centre in beforehand was discussed. Unfortunately, due to the lack of financial recourses, this idea is left for the future.

PANEL SUGGESTION REGARDING QUALITY CULTURE

“The panel strongly suggests including the notion of quality culture in the discourse. The quality culture dimension in the present quality assurance system is still rather vague. In this context, the panel wants to reiterate the importance of HEIs’ responsibility for the quality of their programmes. SKVC should also further invest in a more formal network of HEI staff concerned with internal quality assurance within their institutions.

At the start of the second cycle of external evaluations, the panel advises SKVC to refrain from offering additional assistance and to leave the initiative with HEIs; where it belongs. They could benefit, for instance, from exchanging good practice. The panel refers to its earlier appeal for SKVC to reconfirm HEIs in their autonomy and to diminish its advisory role substantially.”

Status quo

Lithuania follows the Continental tradition in law, thus, the Centre operates in the legal context, that is determined by the Parliament, the Government, and the Ministry, respecting their individual responsibilities. According to the data by the European University Association⁹, among 29 countries of Europe, Lithuania takes 26th place, thus, scores very low in terms of academic autonomy. While we have an opportunity to propose certain changes, ultimately, some choices are not up to SKVC.

SKVC as an external quality assurance agency is very keen to promote the notion of quality culture, at the same time we have to remain relevant to the local context. Low analytical capacities demonstrated in self-evaluation reports turned in by HEIs were mentioned not once by international experts, evaluating study programmes. In response, SKVC is offering a general type of advice and training events on preparations for external reviews. There is constant demand for this service. This by no means is meant to substitute internal work to be done by staff at universities and colleges or impose on them, but rather as a form of voluntary support. We do not consider such work being consultancy, as this is only general type of training and advice, without interference into internal processes within HEIs.

However, following panel’s suggestion “to invest in a more formal network of HEI staff concerned with internal quality assurance” it should be noted that some years ago SKVC started an annual event devoted to discuss relevant issues with HEI’s staff responsible for internal quality assurance. For example, in 2016, the event was devoted to implementation of ESG-2015, in 2017 – improvement of study programmes on the basis of student feedback, in 2018 the topic was quality assurance in the time of changes. SKVC feels obliged to organize an event for HEI staff every year as a way of maintaining dialogue, promotion of learning from each other, learning from both doing and reflection, and follows this line.

⁹ <https://www.university-autonomy.eu/>

PANEL SUGGESTION REGARDING REPORTING

„In general, the panel advises SKVC to consider the outcomes of the EQArep project including useful guidelines for summary reports and recommendation for comprehensive reports. In all reports read by the panel, some basic information was missing (e.g. functions and/or short résumés of experts, contact details of HEIs and SKVC, and details of some steps in the evaluation procedure). These can easily be added in the introductory chapters, also for future reference. Content-wise the panel observed that evidence presented was not always referring to the subject under review. This was particularly the case in the advisory reports for Slovenia. The reports on institutional reviews missed an executive summary. From the prospective of quality culture and SKVC's intention of reaching a broader, more general public, a summary as the opening chapter of the reports might tempt potential readers more easily. For this reason, the panel suggests moving the summary in the programme reports to the beginning of the document also because the summary will include the experts' final conclusions. For reasons of clarity and unambiguity, it might be advisable to separate the recommendations more general in nature intended for Lithuanian authorities from the external evaluation report, and list those in a separate document.“

Status quo

As already mentioned, soon after an external review of SKVC, a new model of study field evaluation was started to be drafted together with the Ministry. The first round of Institutional review was also finished and discussions regarding changes also began. It took a long time to discuss new approaches and recommendation regarding additional information in evaluation reports as well as an executive summary in institutional review reports is going to be implemented in the new processes when the new cycle of evaluation of study fields and institutions will commence.

SKVC discussed the recommendation to move the summary in the programme reports to the beginning of the document, but it was decided that experts' final conclusions should be at the end of the document as a logical consequence of what is stated in the report. Regarding missing information (e.g. functions and/or short résumés of experts, contact details of HEIs and SKVC, and details of some steps in the evaluation procedure) in the report, the introduction part of reports was extended by adding such parts as background of the evaluation process, information about additional documents provided before, during or after the site visit, background of the HEI/Faculty/Study field and short introduction of expert team.

Regarding the recommendation to separate the recommendations more general in nature intended for Lithuanian authorities from the external evaluation reports, we think that higher education institutions also need to know what is being recommended not only to them, but also in the broader context. It may have been a slight misunderstanding during the ENQA site visit, but it needs to be stated that general recommendations on the system/political level and dedicated to other authorities are always formulated as a separate document.



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