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**Transitional Evaluation:  
A Special Case of External Evaluation of  
Higher Education in Estonia 2009-2011**

**Foreword**

In this paper, you will find a summary by the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (*Eesti Kõrghariduse Kvaliteediagentuur; EKKA*) of an atypical quality assessment in Estonian higher education, the so-called transitional evaluation that took place during the transition from one system of external assessment of quality to another.

Compared to traditional external assessment of quality in Estonia (and also elsewhere in the world), transitional evaluation had four substantial differences:

- 1) higher education institutions did not submit self-evaluation reports; the evaluation was based on written data submitted by higher education institutions, background information at the Ministry of Education and Research, and additional data gathered during assessment visits;
- 2) assessment committees were comprised of local experts only;
- 3) the decision was made not on a study programme, but on the entire study programme group;
- 4) some decisions were made without an assessment visit, solely on the basis of written data.

**Transitional evaluation in figures**

- conducted during the period from autumn 2009 to autumn 2011
- 33 higher education institutions participated
- 28 study programme groups that included 670 study programmes were evaluated
- 158 Estonian experts took part in the evaluation process
- 254 assessments – 130 standard proceedings and 124 simplified proceedings – took place
- results:
  - 185 open-ended education licences, i.e., the right to conduct studies for an unspecified term
  - 51 fixed-term education licences, i.e., the right to conduct studies for a specified term

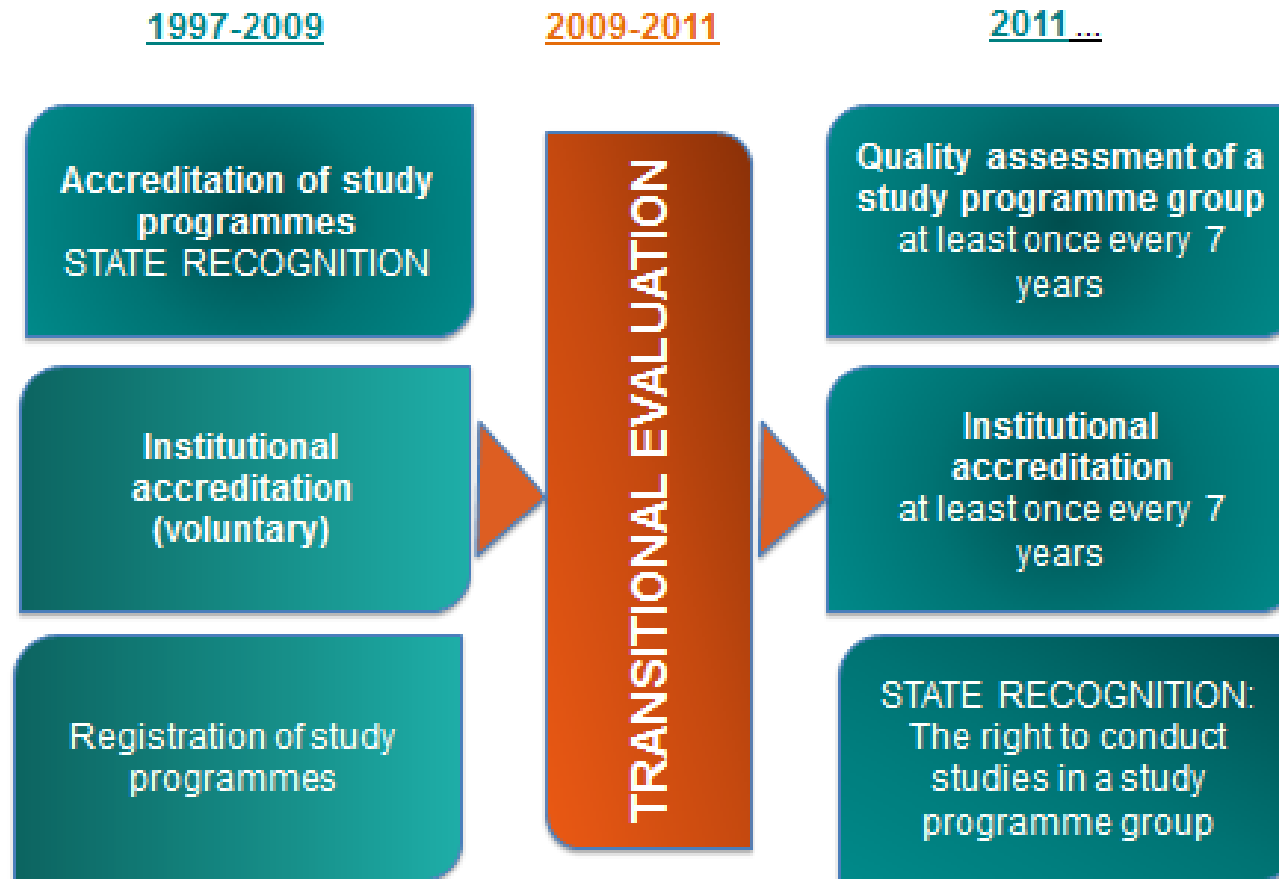
- 18 negative decisions, i.e., the right to conduct studies was not granted
- 89% of the representatives of higher education institutions agreed (51%) or partially agreed (38%) that transitional evaluation has increased the reliability of Estonian higher education

## **CONTEXT**

The need for transitional evaluation in Estonia resulted from the changes in the national system of quality assurance in higher education.

Figure 1: Higher Education Quality Assessment System in Estonia

## Higher Education Quality Assessment System in Estonia



### Differences between the old and the new system

1996–2009

since 2010

Study programmes were accredited.

The quality of a study programme was assessed (a study programme was accredited) after the study programme had been registered and the education licence had been issued.

When starting their studies, students did not have the certainty whether the diploma they receive would be recognized by the state or not.

Institutional accreditation was voluntary.

Accreditation of study programmes was a predominantly controlling (differential) evaluation – whether they meet the requirements or not – and resulted in sanctions (the closure of a study programme in the case of a negative decision).

Accreditation decisions were approved by a directive of the Minister of Education and Research.

The entire study programme group is assessed.

An expert analysis of the quality of a study programme group is conducted prior to the issue of the education licence. After the expert analysis of the study programme group, the right to conduct studies is granted by the Government of the Republic, the rejection thereof is confirmed by a directive of the Minister.

The right to conduct studies in a study programme group (the education licence) ensures that the diploma is recognized by the state.

Institutional accreditation is obligatory to all institutions of higher education.

A controlling evaluation is conducted when issuing an education licence, subsequent institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups are essentially developmental evaluations.

Final assessment decisions regarding institutional accreditation and quality assessment of study programme groups are made by the EKKA Quality Assessment Council.

According to the legislation, the implementation period for transition to a new system was 2009–2011. As of 1 January 2012, the higher education institutions may conduct studies only in study programmes that belong to the study programme group holding the corresponding right issued by the Government of the Republic. Therefore, the Government had to make its decisions on existing study programme groups and study cycles of all operating institutions of higher education before January 2012. Transitional evaluation had the role of a bridge connecting the new and the old system – re-evaluating the Estonian higher education during the transition from one system of quality assurance to another.

One of the distinctive features of the new system of quality assurance in higher education is the state's increased trust in higher education institutions. State recognition associated with an education licence applies to all study programmes of the study programme group, including those that did not exist at the time of assessment. Thus, the state, before issuing an education licence, needed confirmation of not only the existing quality of studies and recourses in the study programme group, but also the sustainability of the quality of higher education. Due to the time pressure of transitional evaluation (2009–2011) and given its controlling rather than developmental character, the Ministry of Education and Research considered it necessary and possible to launch transitional evaluation in the Estonian language and therefore to use local experts.

## PROCESS

## Who was evaluated?

A total of 33 institutions providing studies at a higher education level participated in transitional evaluation: 6 public universities, 4 private universities, 10 state institutions of professional higher education, 11 private institutions of professional higher education, and 2 state institutions of vocational education.

## What was evaluated?

A total of 28 study programme groups, including professional higher education (*PHE*), bachelor degree (*BA*), master degree (*MA*) and doctoral degree studies (*PhD*), and integrated study programmes of bachelor and master degree studies (*INT*) were evaluated by the following aspects:

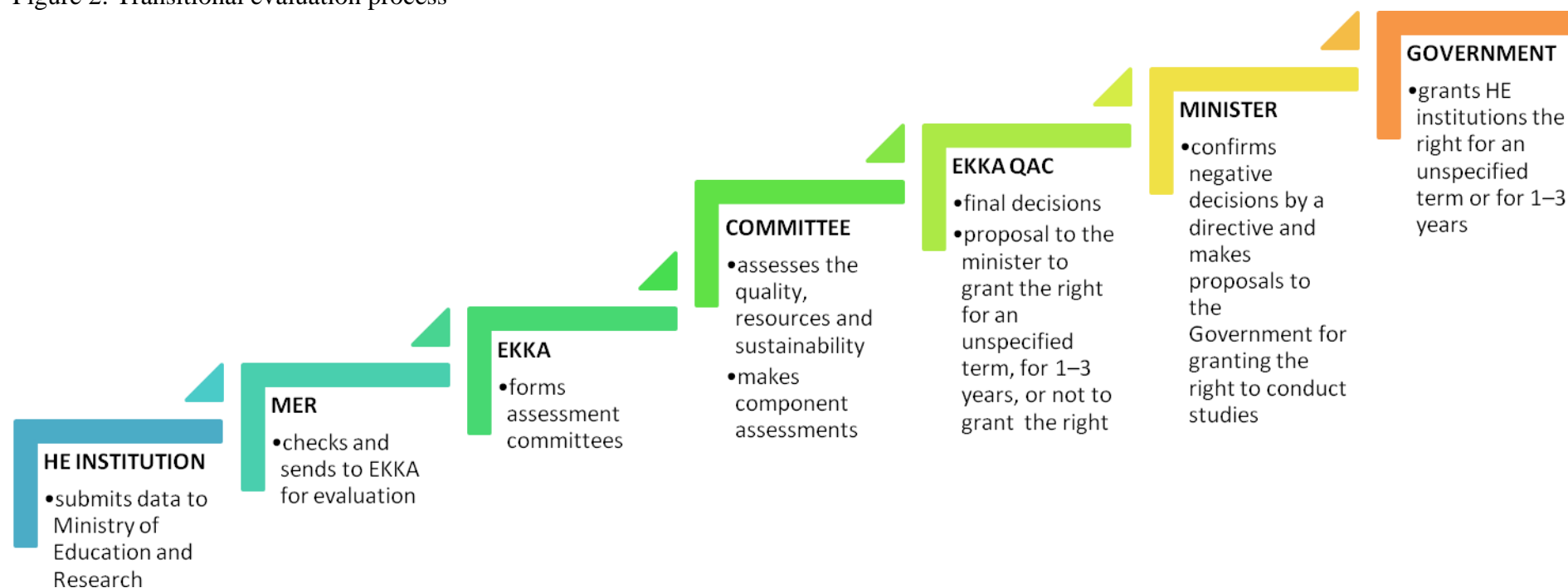
- 1) the quality of conducting studies – the learning outcomes, study programme development, organization of work practice, qualifications of the teaching staff, student counselling, etc.
- 2) the resources necessary for conducting studies – the availability of ordinary qualified teaching staff, adequacy of financial resources, suitability of infrastructure for the needs of the study programme group, etc.
- 3) the sustainability of conducting studies – trends in the number of students and graduates and the finances, planning for development, etc.

## Who evaluated and how?

Considering the Estonian recent tradition of assessing higher education, transitional evaluation was exceptional in many ways:

- 1) Higher education institutions did not write a report on study programme groups, their input was limited to submitting data through the Estonian Education Information System.
- 2) Under certain conditions, an assessment committee could make a decision without visiting the higher education institution, using the so-called simplified proceeding. In the case of a simplified proceeding, the assessment was based solely on the written data. A standard proceeding involved the conventional assessment visit. The breakdown of simplified and standard proceedings was quite equal in the end, the proportion of standard proceedings being 51%.
- 3) Assessment committees were comprised of local experts only (previously only foreign experts were used).
- 4) In addition to the members of the teaching staff of higher education institutions, an assessment committee also included a student and an employer representative from outside higher education institutions.

Figure 2: Transitional evaluation process



To form the assessment committees, EKKA announced a public competition. There were more than 500 candidates, from whom EKKA selected 158 people. The Director of EKKA approved the specific committees after having coordinated the committee compositions with the higher education institutions to be evaluated.

Any assessment is to some extent subjective, but the degree of subjectivity can be decreased by establishing various procedural rules. The rules of transitional evaluation were as follows:

- The composition of a committee was calibrated (five members from different organizations, including at least one expert from outside higher education institutions and one student).
- All committees underwent a two-day assessment training.
- The assessment was evidence-based (i.e., decisions were based on clear evidence) and, to ensure comparability of the results, detailed evaluation forms were prepared.
- The committee sent its preliminary report to the higher education institution for comments and formed its conclusions after the receipt of the comments from the higher education institution.

- The committees were predisposed to adopt decisions by consensus (done in 99% of the cases). If a committee did not reach consensus, decisions were made by a simple majority, and the decisions together with the reasons of the committee members of a dissenting opinion were included.
- The evaluation was a two-step process: on the basis of the component assessments by the committees, the EKKA Quality Assessment Council provided the final decision; if necessary, the Quality Assessment Council returned the component assessments to the committee to be reviewed and clarified (3% of the cases).

If certain formal conditions were met (at least 80% of students are enrolled in fully accredited study programmes, the lack of negative accreditations in recent five years, etc.), the assessment committee could make a decision by the simplified proceeding – without visiting the higher education institution. Past accreditation reports of study programmes formed one basis for transitional evaluation, but it was not always possible to consider them without reservations for the following reasons:

- 1) The education licence is issued for a study programme group that may include study programmes with very different accreditation terms and status.
- 2) Some study programmes were accredited seven years ago, and there could have been changes in the quality of the studies and resource sufficiency in the higher education institution.
- 3) Accreditation of the study programmes did not address the aspect of sustainability, an aspect that is an essential requirement under transitional evaluation to grant the right to conduct studies for an unspecified term.
- 4) The level of accreditation committees and the thoroughness of their reports were uneven.

For the reasons above, the simplified proceeding took place in only 49% of the cases, although the formal conditions to use it were met in 75% of the cases.

## **RESULTS**

The aggregate results of transitional evaluation are shown in Figures 3-5.

Figure 3: Breakdown of decisions by type of education licenses

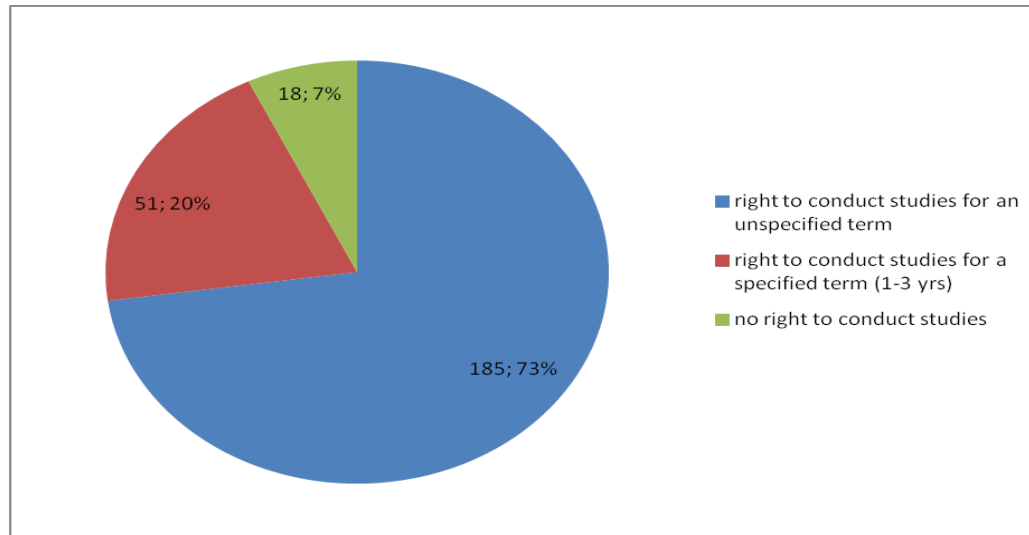


Figure 4: Breakdown of decisions by study cycle

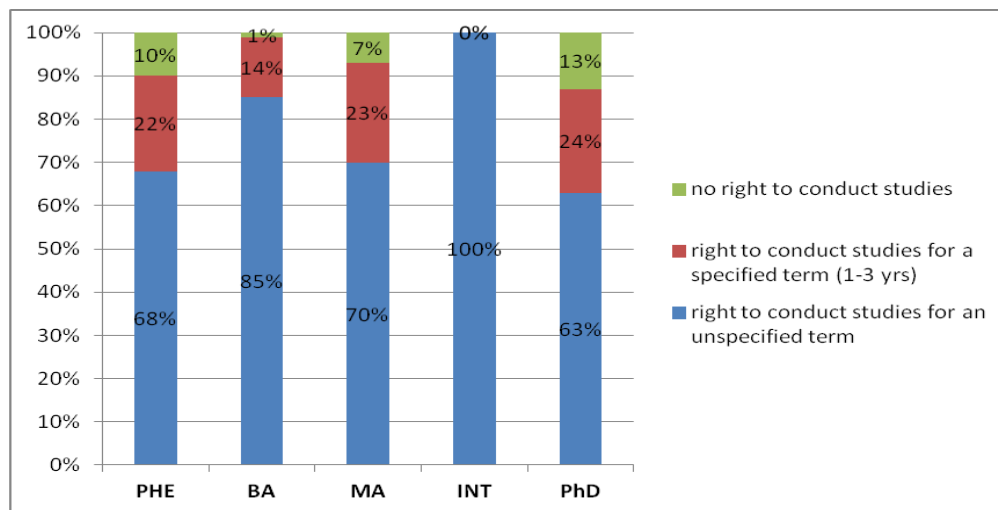
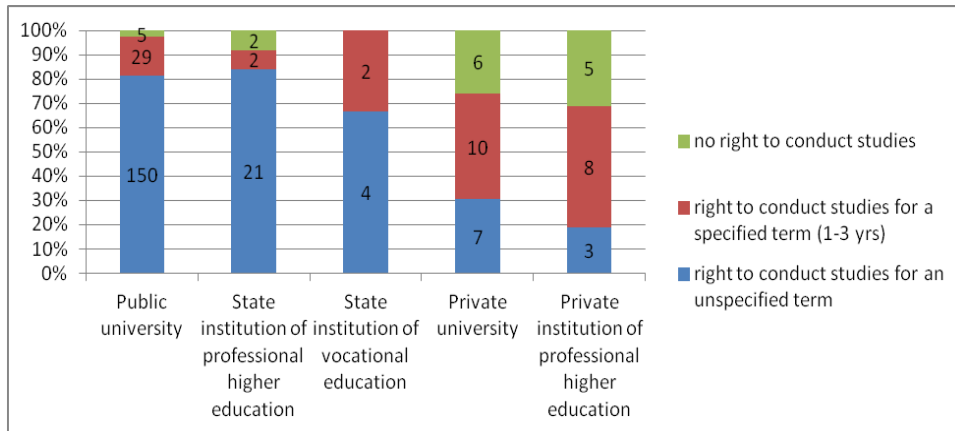


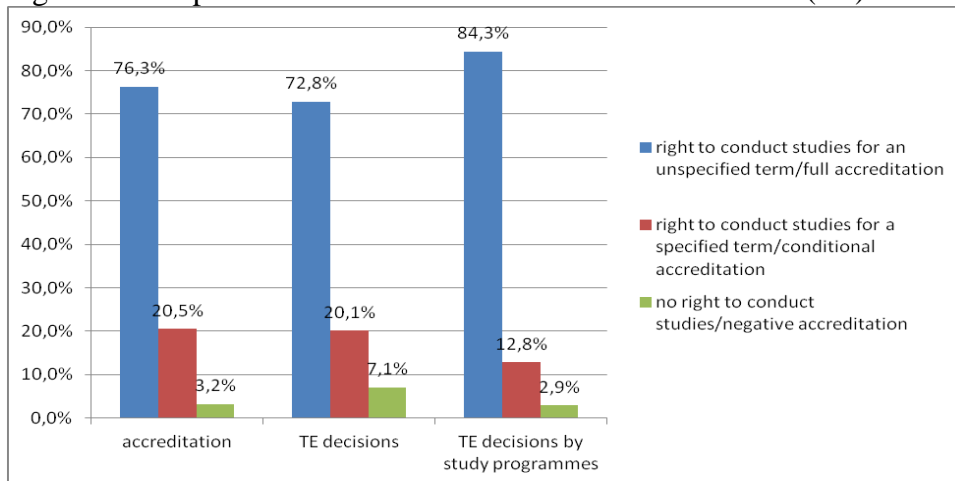


Figure 5: Breakdown of decisions by type of educational institutions



When comparing the results of transitional evaluation to the results of accreditation in the previous system, it appears that the proportion of different decisions has not changed much. Figure 11 is based on the results of accreditation of study programmes conducted in 1997–2009 (full accreditation for 7 years, conditional accreditation for 3 years, negative accreditation, i.e., not to accredit).

Figure 6: Comparison of the results of transitional evaluation (TE) and accreditation of study programmes



## **Frequently recurring problems by study cycle encountered in transitional evaluation**

### **PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION**

- The learning outcomes promise more than the study programme actually makes possible
- The study programme does not address all the requirements of the professional standard
- Studies are too theoretical, without enough practical assignments
- Links with the working world and professional associations are too weak
- Lack of specialized teaching labs, etc.
- Teaching staff lack practical work experience in areas related to their specialities
- Lack of a critical mass of ordinary teaching staff of specialty programmes
- Teaching staff are working for several employers (often having more than a double normal workload each)
- Distribution of teaching staff by age is not balanced, lack of young successors
- Teaching staff are not engaged in self-development, international mobility is low or nonexistent
- Foreign teachers are not being involved in educational activities
- Student admissions are declining
- International mobility of students is very low or nonexistent
- Financial resources are inadequate and the trend is declining, dependence on donations
- Practical international cooperation is nonexistent
- There is no specific action plan to solve the problems outlined by previous external evaluations

## **BACHELOR DEGREE STUDIES**

- The title of a study programme is not consistent with the content
- The number of ordinary teaching staff of specialty programmes is inadequate, most teachers work part-time at the higher education institution
- The proportion of practical assignments in study programmes is small
- Lack of special classrooms (labs, studios)
- Distribution of teaching staff by age is not balanced, lack of young successors
- Formal qualifications of the teaching staff do not meet the requirements of the Standard of Higher Education (a professor does not hold a doctoral level degree)
- A large part of the teaching staff does not participate in research and development
- Student admissions as well as graduation rates have been declining
- Students do not participate in international mobility programmes
- The higher education institution lacks sufficient financial resources for development activities (including staff development, study programme development)

## **MASTER DEGREE STUDIES**

- The study programme does not address all the requirements of the professional standard
- The academic degree awarded does not meet the requirements of the Standard of Higher Education
- The proportion of work practice in a study programme is small
- The number of teaching staff of specialty programmes is inadequate, lack of full-time teaching staff
- Distribution of teaching staff by age is not balanced, lack of young successors
- The needs of the labour market are not given enough weight, the teaching staff lack practical work experience in areas related to their specialities
- Lack of necessary lab resources for research-led studies
- Research of international quality is either inadequate or nonexistent
- The higher education institution does not have enough financial resources to finance development (including staff development, mobility support, etc.)
- Student admissions are declining, graduation rates are low, the number of students per study programme is very small
- International mobility as well as domestic mobility of students is low

## DOCTORAL DEGREE STUDIES

- The title of a doctoral degree programme is not consistent with the content
- Topics of doctoral theses are not related to the study programme group
- The study programme group lacks research projects (external funding) to support doctoral degree studies
- The number of qualified ordinary teaching staff is small – there is no critical mass to ensure sustainability
- Supervisors' research activities are low, the level and/or the number of their publications is inadequate
- Supervisors' research works are not related to the research works of their doctoral students
- Supervisors have little experience in (successful) supervision
- The previous performance of supervisors and the level of their research are not sufficiently taken into account when assigning doctoral students to them
- The efficiency of defence of doctoral theses is very low or nonexistent
- Long-term international mobility of doctoral students is low or nonexistent
- The proportion of state-commissioned education in a study programme group is very small, no emergence of a critical mass of doctoral students
- Cooperation with other universities is inadequate

### **In conclusion, we can highlight three main problem areas in higher education in Estonia:**

1. **Naked ambition** – the fragmentation and insufficient human and financial resources
2. **Not enough cooperation** – between higher education institutions and the working world; competition between higher education institutions that excludes cooperation
3. **Lack of outward focus** – despite the priority given, internationalization is progressing at a snail's space

## WHAT IS NEXT?

Transitional evaluation will formally end in 2011, but the assessment (the so-called re-evaluation) of the study programme groups that received fixed-term education licences may continue until 2017. That is, if there are higher education institutions that will be granted a fixed-term education licence in some study programme groups for a second time and they make a third attempt. The conclusion of the second re-evaluation can be either the issue of an open-ended education licence or termination of studies in that study programme group, because the fixed-term education licence is not granted for the third time.

When a higher education institution wants to start to conduct studies in a new study programme group, it has to undergo a similar procedure to transitional evaluation – assessment of the quality of studies.

Considering that the period of expansionary development in higher education is over and the key to the survival of higher education in Estonian lies in focusing and internationalisation, EKKA is not expected to be too much engaged in assessment of the quality of studies in the near future. We hope to focus on the main activities of EKKA – on institutional accreditation and assessment of the quality of study programme groups.

We certainly keep in mind the following lessons of transitional evaluation:

- International expert analyses are definitely necessary in evaluating higher education, but it is practical to involve Estonian experts as well.
- Involving potential employers and students adds value to the result.
- In the case of a controlling evaluation, in certain conditions, it is appropriate to waive self-evaluation reports and evaluate conformity on the basis of written data only.
- Alongside a predominantly developing function, assessment of the quality of study programme groups that hold open-ended education licence must also have a controlling function in order to be able to answer two main questions: (1) have the problems identified in the course of transitional evaluation been addressed; and (2) have all the requirements of legislation been met in the case of study programmes opened after transitional evaluation. This kind of controlling evaluation could be similar to the simplified proceeding of transitional evaluation which involves local experts and the results of which are evidence-based. Building on the latter, EKKA and the higher education institution agree to the emphases on evaluating the study programme group; and based on those emphases, EKKA forms a committee that is mainly comprised of international experts, whose main role is to support the development.

And finally – one of the most valuable results of transitional evaluation is that there is a critical mass of higher education evaluation experts in Estonia, most of whom have acquired an expressive assessment experience within a short period. By now, EKKA is much more than the Bureau and the Quality Assessment Council – it is also 158 Estonian experts. We shall definitely use many of the transitional evaluation experts for future institutional accreditation and assessment of the quality of study programme groups and recommend them to foreign agencies. Annual training days will ensure that the lines of student experts are not decreasing and there will be additions from the fields of employers and teachers.