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SOTSIAALTEADUSTE DISSERTATSIOONID

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BIRGIT VILGATS

THE IMPACT OF EXTERNAL QUALITY
ASSESSMENT ON UNIVERSITIES:
ESTONIAN EXPERIENCE

Abstract

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The Impact of External Quality Assessment on Universities: Estonian Experience

Abstract

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VÄLISE KVALITEEDIHINDAMISE MÕJU ÜLIKOOLOILE: EESTI KOGEMUSE ANALÜÜS

Resümee

Töö eesmärgiks on analüüsida Eesti kõrghariduse välise kvaliteedihindamise mõju ülikoolile kui organisatsioonile. Alaeesmärkideks on: a) selgitada kõrghariduse välise kvaliteedihindamise mõju aspekte ning analüüsida nendest lähtuvalt Eesti välise kvaliteedihindamissüsteemi mõjusust; b) analüüsida ülikooli kui organisatsiooni välise kvaliteedihindamise mõju objektina; c) viia läbi empiiriline uuring hindamiseks Eestis ajavahemikul 1997–2009 kasutusel olnud välise kvaliteedihindamise mõju avalik-õiguslikele ülikoolidele ning d) uuringu tulemustele toetudes pakkuda välja soovitusel Eesti kõrghariduse välise kvaliteedihindamissüsteemi uuendamiseks.

Eestis ajavahemikul 1997–2009 kasutusel olnud välise kvaliteedihindamise mõju uurimiseks ülikoolile analüüsisin õppekavade akrediteerimise mõju kaheteistkümne õppekava näitel, mis olid läbinud akrediteerimisprotsessi ajavahemikus 2004–2006. Õppekavad pärinesid Eesti kolmest suuremast avalik-õiguslikust ülikoolist, kuna suurem osa kolmanda taseme hariduse omandajatest õpib just nendes. Valimisse kuulusid nii täis- kui tingimisi akrediteeritud õppekavad hariduse; sotsiaalteaduste, äriduse ja õiguse; loodus- ja täppisteaduste; tehnika, tootmise ja ehitus ning tervise ja heaolu valdkonnast. Uurimismeetoditena kasutasin dokumendi-analüüsi Eesti kõrghariduse välise kvaliteedihindamise seadusandliku konteksti ja akrediteerimise ekspertraportite analüüsimiseks ning pool-struktureeritud intervjuud õppekava juhtide ning ülikoolide juhtidega. Intervjuude aluseks oli välise kvaliteedihindamise mõjukaart, mille koostas toetudes:

- a) eelnevatele kvaliteedihindamise mõju-uuringutele,
- b) organisatsiooni käsitustele,
- c) erinevates riikides kasutatava välise kvaliteedihindamise fookuse analüüsile ning
- d) Eesti õppekavade akrediteerimise hindamiskomisjonide raportite analüüsile.

Mõjukaart koosnes kümnest välise kvaliteedihindamise mõjuvaldkonnast ülikoolis, mis jagunes omakorda kahekümne kolmeks üksikteemaks.

Uurimistulemustena võib välja tuua järgmist:

- 1) Analüüsides Eesti õppekavade akrediteerimise seadusandlikku konteksti võib täheldada mitmeid globaliseerumise ja neoliberalismi mõjusid, mis viitab, et Eesti on kõrghariduse kvaliteedialases seadusandluses globaaltrendidega kaasa läinud. Ülikoolidele antud ulatusliku autonoomia kontrollimiseks on vabariigi valitsus kehtestanud nõuded kõrgharidus-õppele, millele vastavust kontrollitakse õppekavade akrediteerimise käigus. Teisalt on ülikoolidele pandud kohustuseks arendada välja sisemine kvaliteedikindlustamissüsteem, millega samaaegselt nõuetele vastavuse tagamisega, soodustatakse ülikooli kui organisatsiooni pidevat parendamist. Kõrgharidus on muutunud „kaubaks” – alates 90ndate algusest on tekkinud eraülikoole ning ka avalikud ülikoolid pakuvad tasulist kõrgharidust, mis on seadnud ülikoolid ning üliõpilased „uuele avalikule juhtimisele” omasesse lepingulisse suhtesse. Lepingulised suhted iseloomustavad ka vabariigi valitsuse ning ülikoolide vahelist koostööd, kus riikliku rahastamise ulatus ja tingimused on kehtestatud riikliku koolitustellimuslepingutega.
- 2) Senine õppekavade akrediteerimine on olnud vähe mõjus ülikooli kui organisatsiooni arendamise seisukohast. Õppekavade akrediteerimise eesmärk - hinnata õppekava ja selle alusel toimiva õppe vastavust õigusaktidele ja standarditele, selgitada välja õppekava põhilised puudused ning anda edaspidiste tegevussuundade suhtes soovitusi – on kaheosaline, millest esimene pool kannab kontrolli- ning teine arendusfunktsiooni. Akrediteerimine on

olnud mõjus kontrolli aspektist, kuna mitmed tingimisi akrediteeritud õppekavad on liidetud tugevamatega ning negatiivse akrediteeringu saanud õppekavad suletud. Uuringu tulemused näitasid, et kümne mõjuvaldkonna kahekümne kolmest üksikteemast peeti nii eneseanalüüsi kui hindamiskomisjoni ja raporti mõju puuduvaks kümnes, nõrgaks kolmes ning tugevaks vaid ühe üksikteema lõikes, mis lubab järeldada, et senine akrediteerimissüsteem ei ole olnud piisavalt mõjus ülikooli arendamise seisukohast.

- 3) Kuigi õppekavade akrediteerimise fookus on lai ning välise kvaliteedihindamise käigus keskendutakse institutsionaalsele struktuurile, hariduspoliitilisele töökorraldusele, õppekavale, õppeprotsessile, üliõpilastele, õppekeskkonnale, koostöösidemetele ning kvaliteedikindlustussüsteemile, hindavad õppekava ja ülikoolide juhid õppekavade akrediteerimise mõju kõige tugevamaks siiski õppekavale. Uurimise tulemusena selgus, et õppekavade akrediteerimise mõju hinnatakse puuduvaks ülikoolielu osadele nagu ülikooli struktuur, strateegiad, eesmärgid, juhtimine ja võimustruktuur, poliitikad, motivatsioonisüsteem, sooritusindikaatorid, rahastamine ja ülikoolisisene rahajaotus, õppekava kureeriva struktuuriüksuse juhtimine ja võimustruktuur, kuna need ei ole vahetult seotud õppekava realiseerimisega. Puuduva mõju põhjuseks toodi asjaolu, et õppekava on ülikooli tasandil liiga väike üksus, et selle akrediteerimise käigus kerkinud üleülikoolilised arenguvajadused ja nende realiseerimisvõimalused võiksid põhjustada muutusi ülikooli tasandil laiemalt. Ühtlasi väljuvad mitmed üleülikoolilised akrediteerimise fookuses olevad aspektid õppekava juhi, kes vastutab õppekava ja selle vahetu realiseerimise eest, vastutusalaast.
- 4) Õppekavade akrediteerimise üheks vähese mõjususe põhjuseks on eeldatavalt akrediteerimissüsteemi aluskontseptsiooni ja eesmärkide, korralduse ning tulemuste kasutamise ebakõla. Õppekavade akrediteerimissüsteemis domineerib usaldusvääruse hankimise aluskontseptsioon, mistõttu on samuti õppekavade akrediteerimise eesmärgiks olev „õppekava ja selle realiseerimise parendamine” tagaplaanil. Õppekavade akrediteerimise fookus, mis tingib hindamiskomisjoni keskendumise kaheksale ülikoolielu osale, on liiga lai, eneseanalüüsi koostamine on aja- ja ressursimahukas, eneseanalüüsi juhendis nõutud informatsioonil ei näe õppekava juhid otsest seost õppekava ja selle realiseerimise kvaliteediga ning eneseanalüüs ei võimalda esitada ausalt kõiki arenguvajadusi, kuna akrediteerimise tulemustest sõltub õigus väljastada riiklikke diplomeid. Hindamiskomisjoni külastuse ja raporti kui meetodi kasutamise puuduseks on seadusandluses kajastuvad üldsõnalised ekspertide valikupõhimõtted, mistõttu pooltel juhtudel ei olda rahul hindamiskomisjoni liikmete pädevusega õppekava spetsialiseerumiste või Eesti konteksti tundmise osas. Õppekavade akrediteerimise järeltegevused on ülikooli siseasi ning kontrolli puudumise tõttu tajutakse välist kvaliteedihindamist ühekordse, vastavat õppekava puudutava aktsioonina, mis viitab ka ülikoolisisese kvaliteedikindlustamissüsteemi puudulikkusele, mida tuleks intervjueeritud õppekava ja ülikoolide juhtide hinnangul tugevdada eelkõige läbi regulaarsete õppekava ja selle realiseerimise seotud eneseanalüüside rakendamise.
- 5) Hinnang õppekavade akrediteerimise mõjususele sõltub hindaja positsioonist, mis tähendab, et õppekava juhtide hinnangutes on mõjusam eneseanalüüsi protsess, samal ajal kui ülikoolide juhid hindavad mõjusamaks hindamiskomisjoni külastust ja raportit. Õppekava juhid väärtustavad hindamisprotsessi – arutelusid eneseanalüüsi käigus, kohtumisi ekspertidega, kriitikat ja ettepanekuid. Ülikoolide juhid on seevastu orienteeritud positiivsele lõpptulemusele, mis kinnitab nõuetele vastavust. Positsioonist sõltuvat vaateviisi kinnitab ka tulemus, mille kohaselt õppekava juhtide mõjususehinnangud ei erinenud täis- või tingimisi akrediteeringu saanud õppekavade puhul, ülikoolide juhid seevastu pidasid akrediteerimisprotsessi oluliselt mõjusamaks juhtumitel kui tulemuseks oli tingimisi akrediteering.

- 6) Õppekavade akrediteerimise meetodite – eneseanalüüsi ning hindamiskomisjoni külastuse ja raporti – näol on tegemist kahe eristuva ja erineva mõjuväljaga hindamissüsteemi osaga. Eneseanalüüs keskendub arenguvajaduste kaardistamisele ning edaspidiste tegevussuundade kavandamisele, hindamiskomisjoni külastus ja raport keskendub nõuetele ja standarditele vastavuse kontrollimisele ning lõpptulemusele – positiivse/negatiivse akrediteeringu omistamisele. Eneseanalüüsi mõju hindasid õppekava ja ülikoolide juhid tugevaks või nõrgaks õppekava, õppevahendite ja ruumide, akadeemilise personali, üliõpilaste, vilistlaste, õppetegevuse ning organisatsiooni õppimise osas ning hindamiskomisjoni külastuse ja raporti tugevat või nõrka mõju nähti akadeemilise personali, õppetegevuse ja organisatsiooni õppimise puhul.
- 7) Õppekava ja ülikoolide juhid kasutavad igapäevatoos paralleelselt erinevaid lähenemisi kõrghariduse kvaliteedile, kuid domineerib arusaam kõrghariduse kvaliteedist kui vilistlaste edukast toimetulekust. Sellele järgnevad mõtteviisid kvaliteedist kui „positiivse hoiaku kujundamisest elukestvaks õppeks” ja „õppejõudude kõrgest tasemest”. Intervjuude analüüsi tulemusena võib väita, et õppekava ja ülikoolide juhtidel puuduvad piiravad kõrghariduse kvaliteedialased arusaamad ja hoiakud, mis mõjutaks välise kvaliteedihindamise protsessi ja tulemuste rakendamist. Õppekava ja ülikoolide juhid töid välja mitmeid puudusi senises õppekavade akrediteerimissüsteemis, mis on ka põhjuseks akrediteerimise ebapiisavale mõjule ülikooli arendamise aspektist. Puuduste tõttu senises akrediteerimissüsteemis toetavad õppekava ja ülikoolide juhid pigem institutsionaalset hindamist koos õppesuuna/valdkonnapõhise hindamisega.

PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE THESIS

- I. Birgit Vilgats. 2008. Quality Conception in Higher Education Legislation – Estonian National Profile. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, vol 8, 151–163.

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INTRODUCTION

As higher education becomes a mass education system, the higher education sector is increasingly applying the principles of public management as a manifestation of globalisation and neo-liberal policy. Introduction of the *new public management* principles has been accompanied by a decrease in state funding of higher education and partial transfer to project-based budgeting. Higher education institutions are more and more managed like businesses, management inside institutions is becoming decentralised, along with the introduction of a market-driven philosophy and customer-centred views, including implementation of performance targets, indicators and outcomes and monitoring of these through quality assessment and the systems of performance-related salary (Vanttaja & Rinne 2008; Stensaker 2004; Deem 2001; Kogan & Hanney 2000). This means that in national higher education policy, directives and regulations are being replaced by more indirect mechanisms, such as financing policy, selective grants for investments, and quality control. Because political will is implemented in academia through quality assessment procedures, the quality systems in higher education, their objectives and logic of action have recently become the focus of attention.

In many countries, including Estonia, the primary method of external quality assessment is the accreditation of curricula. Within the Bologna process framework, accreditation is treated as a means of national control and an instrument which should guide higher education institutions in both self-development and the introduction of an internal quality system. High expectations are placed on quality assessment in higher education but there are some serious issues involved as well. The need for the development of a quality assessment system for higher education arises from the different cultural backgrounds and higher education traditions of European countries, and their higher education policies. Authors, who have researched issues in external quality assessment (Costes, Crozier, Cullen, Grifoll, Harris, Helle, Hopbach, Kekäläinen, Knezevic, Sits & Sohm 2008; Stensaker 2007; Vaira 2007; Frazer 1997), point out the following salient issues:

- quality assessment focuses heavily on accountability while the aim for continuous improvement remains in the background;
- external quality assessment stands apart from internal work on quality in universities;
- bureaucracy involved in the quality assessment systems, where externally imposed inspections of quality standards of the university do not allow the academic community to determine the quality of their academic work;
- the emphasis is laid upon universal quantitative quality indicators which ignore qualitative indicators of the quality of higher education nor take into account specific features of a particular field of study or research;
- differences in the aims of quality assessment, focus, methods and the use of results across stakeholders and the context, thus creating a quality assessment landscape featured by a constant fight between parties with differing interests and positions attempting to shape the quality assessment system;
- external quality assessment agencies rely on third parties, such as other universities, government agencies, and lack autonomy.

These issues have decreased legitimacy of higher education quality assessment and also raise doubts about the efficiency, effectiveness and quality of the external quality assessment systems. For this reason the number of studies into systems of quality assessment of higher education is increasing.

The aim of accreditation in Estonia is to “assess a curriculum and whether studies under it conform to standards and legal documents” (Procedure for Accreditation of Universities, Institutions of Professional Higher Education and their Curricula and Requirements for Accreditation, 2003). Any potential shortcomings of the curriculum are identified during the accreditation and recommendations are made for further work, including development of areas of study. Accreditation in Estonia not only focuses on curricula, but also inspection and assessment of the majority of an institution activities. The self-analysis report should contain information on the structure of the institution, the educational policy about the organisation of work, the study process, students, the learning environment, partnerships and the internal quality assurance system.

In 1997–2007 a little over 1200 curricula underwent external quality assessment in Estonia, 76% were fully accredited, 21% conditionally and 3% were not accredited (Heidmets 2008). Various conditionally accredited curricula have been merged with stronger ones and those resulting in negative accreditation have been closed. Overall, at a cost of about 30 million kroons (Heidmets 2008: 30) this is quite an expensive process. There is though no information about the impact of external quality assessment on development in universities. Neither do we know whether external quality assessment (accreditation) is merely “mapping the situation and punishing those who lag behind” or if the process has had a deeper impact on the university as an organisation. From 2010 the national quality system of Estonia will be revised and therefore analysis of earlier experience may assist in designing the new system.

Deriving from the higher education quality assessment situation described above, the central *issue* of this research is: what is the impact of external quality assessment of higher education on the university as an organisation?

The subsequent sub-questions are:

- What are the aspects that define the impact of external quality assessment?
- Which are the spheres of influence of external quality assessment from the point of view of the university as an organisation?
- What has been the impact of external quality assessment carried out in Estonia in 1997-2009 on the university – which spheres of the university as an organisation experienced stronger/weaker impact, which experienced no impact at all and how were these impacts expressed?

The *aim* of the dissertation, deriving from the research issues, is to analyse the impact of external quality assessment in higher education upon selected Estonian universities as organisations.

The sub-objectives of the thesis are:

- to establish components of the impact of external quality assessment of higher education and consequently analyse the situation in Estonia;
- to analyse the university as an organisation when subject to the impact of external quality assessment;
- to carry out an empirical survey which evaluated the impact of external quality assessment, as used in Estonia from 1997 to 2009, on public universities;
- based on the findings, to propose ways for the revision of the external quality assessment system of Estonian higher education.

The following *research tasks* were established to achieve the aim of the dissertation:

- to identify the major driving forces raising the issues of quality in higher education;
- to explain different approaches to the quality of higher education and to analyse the Estonian approach on the basis of legal acts and documents on the quality of higher education;

- to establish aspects of the impact of external quality assessment of higher education and then analyse the effectiveness of the Estonian external quality assessment system on the basis of quality-related legislation of Estonia;
- to analyse earlier surveys into the impact of external quality assessment coupled with the university as an organisation on the basis of works of organisation theory researchers in order to pinpoint those spheres of the university that can be affected by external quality assessment;
- to conduct an empirical survey to measure the impact of external quality assessment in Estonia from 1997 to 2009, and compare the results with prior surveys on the impact of external quality assessment;
- thereafter, to make recommendations for the revision of the Estonian quality assessment system in higher education.

The theoretical part of the dissertation describes the more important forces driving the increased significance of quality in higher education in order to show the topic in a wider context. These driving forces include globalisation and the spread of neoliberalism. While various approaches to higher education quality are elaborated on, the paper also maps components of the quality assessment system of higher education and links between them to find aspects which determine the impact of quality assessment. Thereafter, previous surveys into impact of external quality assessment are analysed in terms of their content, methods and findings in order to build my approach to the current survey. Approaches to organisational theory will be analysed in order to gain a more detailed understanding of which spheres of the university as an organisation may be impacted upon by external quality assessment.

In the empirical part of the dissertation I provide an overview of the procedural issues of the survey, the sample and methods, and then present the findings of the empirical survey in accordance with the sub-questions: a) I analyse internal integrity of the Estonian higher education external quality assessment system on the basis of quality-related legislation; b) I describe and analyse the content and intensity (strong, weak, or absent) of the impact of external quality assessment on various spheres of the university as an organisation, and this is based on opinions of the university management and programme managers, and I show differences in the impact made by two components of external quality assessment, that is self-analysis report and experts' visit and report; c) I compare opinions of the university management and programme managers regarding the impact of external quality assessment; and d) I describe how the heads of some public universities in Estonia and programme managers view and comprehend quality and external assessment of higher education.

The chapter on discussion and conclusions presents the more important conclusions on the impact of the accreditation of curricula in Estonia, compares survey results with prior research findings, evaluates aspects regarding reliability of the survey, suggests further issues for research, and makes recommendations for the development of a new external quality assessment system in Estonia.

1. EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON UNIVERSITY

1.1. DRIVING FORCES INCREASING THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Interest in quality-related issues in higher education has been increasing since the late 1980s when higher education ceased to denote shaping the new academic generation (Askling 2009:10) but rather came to be treated as an essential input of the economy. Primary driving forces responsible for bringing quality issues to the foreground may include globalisation and the spread of neoliberal views, although the latter according to Olssen and Peters (2005) may also be a dimension of globalisation. Globalisation has brought along global integration of cultures and values, (also referred to as “McDonaldisation”), international trade and investments, and transnational organisations, such as EU, OECD, UNESCO, whose tasks include the creation of policies and regulations that nation states must follow (Verhoeven 2007). These processes also influence higher education where policy is no longer about resolving national issues but has taken on a completely new non-national dimension (Vanttaja & Rinne 2008). An expression of the latter is signing of the Bologna declaration in 1999, which was followed by the preparation of universal quality assurance principles and procedures by international organisations, such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, European University Association, European Students’ Union and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education.

Neoliberal higher education policy has been applied since the late 1980s and is expressed through “new public management“ in institutions of higher education. “New public management“ is characterised by key words like “efficiency”, “effectiveness”, “accountability”, “quality”, “outcome-based”, and “contractual” (Olssen & Peters 2005; Stensaker 2004). The neoliberal higher education policy has ensured a wider access to higher education; contractual relationships between the government, universities and students; a rise in the importance of university management, and centralised decision-making processes, preparation of outcome-based objectives, changes in financial management of universities (primarily evidenced by the partial transfer to project-based budgeting); termed contracts of academic staff and assessment of their performance. Governments have declared in legal acts that universities have a higher level of autonomy but now quality assessment has been introduced as a tool for “checking” and ensuring accountability. Quality assessment agencies have been set up for conducting assessments and they act as buffers between the state and institutions of higher education (Kogan & Hanney 2000). National quality assurance systems featuring a variety of approaches and activities are intended to act as control mechanisms over higher education and restrain the rapidly rising costs of higher education sector as it moves towards becoming a mass education and universities gain more extensive autonomy (Westerheijden, Hulpiou & Waeytens 2007). The task of quality assessment, apart from cutting expenses, is to stimulate and increase efficiency, effectiveness, quality and transparency of the higher education system and institutions (Vaira 2007:136).

1.2. EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In the course of external quality assessment of higher education information is gathered about the quality of a university or its structural unit, a curriculum, study and research activities. External quality assessment falls into four types of activities: accreditation, audit, assessment

and examination (Harvey & Newton 2004:150). External quality assessment systems use, either together or separately, a number of forms of quality assessment (Costes, Cullen, Grifoll, Harris, Helle, Hopbach, Kekäläinen, Knezevic, Sits & Sohm 2008; Harvey & Newton 2004; Hämeläinen, Mustonen & Holm 2004; Kells 1999; Frazer 1997) but according to F. van Vught and D. Westerheijden (1994) a universal model for external quality assessment has been developed. This model contains a) an independent agency responsible for arranging quality assessment; b) self-analysis or self-assessment within the university; c) a visit by the assessment committee and d) the committee's report. External quality assessment models used in European countries typically contain the above four stages but models differ in terms of *objectives* and *rationale* (accountability, improvement); the *subject of assessment* (e.g. university or its structural unit, curriculum); the *focus* (e.g. content of the curriculum, financial resources, internal quality assurance, management); *methods* (e.g. self-analysis, inspection, document analysis, satisfaction surveys of stakeholders, visit of the assessment committee); *functions, work arrangements and status of the quality agency* (Costes et al 2008; Vlascenau et al 2007; Harvey & Newton 2004; Hämeläinen, Mustonen & Holm 2004; Kells 1999; Frazer 1997).

Objectives of quality assessment are expressed in national regulatory acts, however, other often hidden objectives may become evident when a country's higher education policy starts to be implemented (Burnetto & Farr-Wharton 2005). The objectives arise from the rationale of external quality assessment, which also forms its philosophical basis, and when written into legislation may be considered as the reason why external quality assessment has been introduced in the first place. The rationale can be:

- *Accountability* is related to the aim of increasing accountability of higher education for various stakeholders, to inform students and employers, to help governments in their financial decisions and amending legislation, to distinguish between universities in terms of performance level, to regulate access to higher education, to provide for international benchmarking. Additionally, rationales exist for *control* and *compliance* (Harvey 2006; Harvey & Newton 2004), both of which are used to establish whether national policies are adhered to (Harvey & Newton 2004:151–152). The aim of control is to monitor the use of financial resources, and professional associations require information on compliance with standards (Harvey & Newton 2004:151–152). In the present dissertation my starting point is that “control” and “compliance” are covered by the rationale of accountability.
- *Continuous improvement* which is linked to the development of universities and is seen as a stimulus for the establishment of the internal quality assurance system.

It depends on the rationale whether quality assessment focuses on the past, present or future. From previous surveys it can be said that of all the rationales of national quality assessment systems the principle of accountability is applied most frequently, and is followed by continuous improvement (Hämeläinen, Mustonen & Holm 2004; Frazer 1997). There is a risk, however, that placing too much weight on accountability may upset the balance of the universal four-stage quality assessment model, which lies somewhere between the control and development functions.

In external quality assessment of higher education four wider subjects of assessment are mentioned and these are the institution of higher education, teaching, research, and the quality assurance system of the institution. Which spheres of the university as an organisation are actually inspected in the course of quality assessment, depends on the focus. Following a comparative analysis of a number of papers on external quality assessment systems of higher education (Costes et al 2008; ENQA 2007; Hämeläinen, Mustonen & Holm 2004; van Damme 2004; Ohnami & Hokama 2004; The National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment in Saudi Arabia; Ülikooli ja rakenduskõrgkooli... 2003), the following are nine

spheres of the university as an organisation which are under the focus of external quality assessment (beginning from the most frequently used issue):

1. the quality assurance system within the university
2. material resources
3. academic staff
4. students
5. the curriculum
6. the study process
7. the mission and objectives of the university
8. strategic management and policies of the university
9. foreign relations and cooperation

Dill (2000) has pointed out that external quality assessment with a narrower focus may have a stronger impact on the improvement of quality of teaching and learning.

External quality assessment is conducted by a specialised agency which should be autonomous in its activity and independent to provide assessment results and make recommendations (ENQA 2007). Also, the quality assessment agency should be approved by a national or another competent representative of public authority in the European higher education space (ENQA 2007). ENQA carried out a survey which shows that independence of external quality assessment agencies may be problematic since only 75% of agencies included in the survey are responsible for their assessment results and recommendations (Costes et al 2008).

External quality assessment primarily uses combined methods: 1) self-assessment/ self-analysis, and 2) visit of the assessment committee and report (Costes et al 2008; ENQA 2007; Vlascenau et al 2007; Frazer 1997; Harvey & Knight 1996; van Vught & Westerheijden 1994). The use of combined methods involves a number of issues. Self-analysis as a method is questioned when quality assessment only has the control function. This might create a situation where attempts are made to present information so that it shows the subject of assessment in the best light thereby inhibiting reflection, the latter of which actually helps to identify development needs (Frazer 1997; Moitus & Pyykkö 2009). Whereas the assessment committee, as a rule, is international, suitability of the visit and the report as evaluation methods should be considered carefully when assessing curricula teaching and research in national sciences or in a field of specific national characteristics (e.g. the Estonian language and culture, teacher training) where foreign experts may not possess the relevant competence and cultural background for conducting assessment (Kekälä 2000). Another aspect of using the visit and report as evaluation methods is that the various parties involved – members of the assessment committee, organisers of the visit, academic staff members involved in the visit, users of the assessment results – should be thoroughly prepared in order to achieve an objective and efficient outcome which, in its turn, make the visit and the report methodology expensive (Daniel, Mittag & Bornmann 2007).

The content, length, and confidentiality of decisions of assessment committees, and parties to whom the report is targeted at, differ across countries (Frazer 1997). Where the primary objective of external quality assessment is to achieve accountability, various stakeholders need as brief and concise a report as possible (Frazer 1997:356), which also may serve as the basis for determining status awarded. Should the priority be continuous improvement, a detailed and confidential feedback is requested (Frazer 1997:356), publication of which in the public arena is often impossible or renders comments very mild in tone (Costes et al 2008).

Results of external quality assessment are frequently linked with sanctions applied to the subject of the assessment, consequently inhibiting the effectiveness of self-analysis. A widely used practice in Eastern Europe is that external quality assessment results in awarding the

subject of the assessment a status and authority, and the outcome of assessment is a decision: a) to accredit in full; b) to accredit conditionally; c) not to accredit (Frazer 1997). Implementing change in universities can be a long and complicated process, therefore it is essential that external quality assessment should not merely end with the issuing of an assessment decision but follow-up activities should form part of the quality assessment system. A survey conducted by ENQA showed that these follow-up activities do not always form part of the quality assessment system (Costes et al 2008). Absence of follow-up on the assessment is undoubtedly a cause of the poor effectiveness of external quality assessment.

Objectives, the rationale, focus, methods, results of external quality assessment of higher education and their use are, when considered as separate entities, highly significant aspects which determine the impact of quality assessment but in order to ensure the effectiveness of the system as a whole, these components must be kept in balance.

1.3. STUDIES OF THE IMPACT OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT

The impact of external quality assessment in higher education has been studied since the 1990s. Researchers have mostly looked at the impact of quality assessment on the university as an organisation (e.g. Huisman, Rebora & Turri 2007; Brennan & Shah 2000; Välimaa, Aittola & Konttinen 1998), though its impact on academic staff and teaching (Kogan, Bauer, Bleiklie & Henkel 2006) and on students and learning (Horsburgh, 1999) have also been treated. There have also been studies which analyse systems of quality assessment and suggest ways of designing higher education policies through more efficient quality procedures (Costes et al 2008; Dill 2000; Kells 1999; Frazer 1997).

The impact of external assessment on the university as an organisation has been most widely studied and the principal issues covered have included the impact of external assessment on the university's internal quality assurance system (Brunetto & Farr-Wharthon 2005; Välimaa, Aittola & Konttinen 1998), university management (Huisman, Rebora & Turri 2007; Brennan & Shah 2000), the structure of the university (Huisman, Rebora & Turri 2007; Brennan & Shah 2000), policies (Välimaa, Aittola & Konttinen 1998) and strategic planning (Carr, Hamilton & Meade 2005). There has been research into the impact of quality assessment on curricula and organisational learning (Horsburgh 1999; Välimaa, Aittola & Konttinen 1998), the organisation of studies (Wahlen 2004), and in-service training for academic staff (Carr, Hamilton & Meade 2005; Wahlen 2004), and researchers have also looked at the impact quality assessment has had on the allocation of funds within the university (Brunetto & Farr-Wharthon 2005), cooperation with partners (Wahlen 2004), performance indicators (Brunetto, Farr-Wharthon 2005), research work and doctorate studies (Välimaa, Aittola & Konttinen 1998), and reputation and financing (Huisman, Rebora & Turri 2007).

The studies imply that in general, external quality assessment leads to changes in various spheres of academic life. The management of the university is most frequently emphasised, with quality assessment resulting in improvement or changes to the university's structure, strategies, policies and internal quality assurance system. Brennan and Shah (2000) state that the value of quality assessment lies in the fact that it provides the university management staff with information from a new viewpoint on occurrences within the organisation. Several authors (e.g. Brunetto & Farr-Wharthon 2005; Carr, Hamilton & Meade 2005; Brennan & Shah 2000; Välimaa, Aittola & Konttinen 1998) suggest that the renewal of an organisation commences when changes in management are made and that external quality assessment primarily influences the administrative level, and through this the other areas of the institution (Wahlen 2004; Välimaa, Aittola & Konttinen 1998).

Some authors refer to the impact of quality assessment, both positive and negative, on funding (Burnetto & Farr-Wharthon 2005), with funding for research improving in some cases while in other cases funding of the university from the national budget fell following an external assessment process. One reason given in the latter case is the need for increased efficiency in the institution. Several studies of quality assessment's impact (e.g. Wahlen 2004) identify improved cooperation within the university and with its external partners, and it is also shown that quality assessment may affect the reputation of an institution (e.g. Huisman, Rebora, Turri 2007) and can be either positive or negative depending a great deal on the assessment results. The impact on curricula and teaching is also shown but it is usually fairly limited and is mostly indirect rather than direct (Välímää, Aittola & Konttinen 1998). The impact of quality assessment of studies appears to be weakened by the novelty of the concept of assessing the quality of studies when compared to, for example, assessment of research activities. The latter has a longer tradition and is seen central to the assessment of effectiveness and the remuneration of the academic staff (Huisman, Rebora & Turri 2007).

However, some authors (Carr, Hamilton & Meade 2005; Harvey & Newton 2004; Horsburgh 1999; Wahlen 2004) point out that there are complications in establishing the impact of external quality assessment. Causes for changes in a university are normally varied and intertwined and it is usually hard to pinpoint the immediate impact of external quality assessment. For instance Stensaker (2003) holds the view that in reality there is not enough evidence today of the impact that quality assessment may have on organisational culture.

Therefore, despite researchers' growing interest in the content and implications of the impact of external quality assessment, the findings in the various surveys are still insufficient for drawing up a comprehensive view of the role and impact of external quality assessment on a university. The impact assessment is further complicated by the variety of national quality assessment schemes, where the "impact" is frequently dependent on the assessment models used, and on established practices in the given country or cultural context.

2. EMPIRICAL STUDY

2.1. SURVEY DESIGN

The first step in designing the survey was to identify potential areas of influence of the accreditation process. We based our arguments on views of organisation theory (Daft 2001; Dawson 1992; Hatch 1997; Jones 2001) and previous surveys into the impact of higher education quality assessment (Huisman, Reborá & Turri 2007; Carr, Hamilton & Meade 2005; Brunetto & Farr-Wharthon 2005; Wahlen 2004; Brennan & Shah 2000; Dill 2000; Horsburgh 1999; Välimaa, Aittola & Konttinen 1998). I also considered the administration of external quality assessment in other countries (Costes et al 2008; ENQA 2007; Hämeläinen, Mustonen & Holm 2004; van Damme 2004; Ohnami & Hokama 2004) and reports from the assessment committees accrediting Estonian curricula. This gave a basis for determining potential spheres of influence of the accreditation process, and this resulted in a map of spheres of influence, containing ten larger spheres further subdivided into 23 topics.

Table 1. Map of spheres of influence

Spheres of influence	Topics
1. STRUCTURE	university's structure structure of unit supervising the curriculum (institute/faculty and department)
2. AIMS, STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT AND POLICIES	objectives and strategies of the university and objectives and strategies of the structural unit supervising the curriculum (institute/faculty and department) administration and administrative system of university administration and administrative system of the structural unit supervising the curriculum (institute/faculty and department) intra-institutional policies motivation system performance indicators
3. MATERIAL RESOURCES	teaching materials and rooms funding of the universities internal allocation of funds in the university
4. STUDY PROCESS	curriculum organisation of studies teaching methods studies in general
5. ACADEMIC STAFF	academic staff
6. STUDENTS AND ALUMNI	students alumni
7. THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF THE UNIVERSITY	the quality assurance system of the university
8. FOREIGN RELATIONS AND COOPERATION	foreign relations and cooperation
9. REPUTATION	reputation of the curriculum for lecturers involved in it reputation of curriculum
10. ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING	organisational learning

These ten spheres of influence were dependent variables in the current survey. Independent variables were two elements central to external assessment: the process of self-analysis and the visit and report of the experts' committee. The impact of self-analysis and the impact of the committee visit and report are treated separately because in Estonian practice these may be two distinctive and different parts of the sphere of impact of the assessment procedure.

2.2. SAMPLE

The survey uses the curriculum as its unit of analysis. Three criteria were set for the selection of curricula: 1) the curriculum should have been accredited between 2004 and 2006; 2) the sample should include both fully and conditionally accredited curricula in different areas of study; 3) the sample should contain similar curricula (from the same field) from different institutions. The sample was compiled using the database of the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre where curricula which matched the selection criteria were identified.

This resulted in a sample containing 12 bachelor's and master's programmes from three public universities in Estonia: the University of Tartu, Tallinn University and Tallinn University of Technology. Five fields of study were represented: education; social sciences, business and law; natural and exact sciences; engineering, production and construction; health care and welfare. The survey aimed to assess the impacts of the accreditation of these 12 curricula on the university as an organisation.

2.3. METHODS AND PROCEDURE

Document analysis and semi-structured interviews were the methods used. The analysis of the impact of the accreditation process was carried out in three stages.

In the *first stage* reports from experts on the 12 curricula were analysed. Views, proposals and comments in the reports were then classified separately for each curriculum, according to a previously prepared map of spheres of influence. The outcome was a report-based map of topics which showed how topics were distributed between ten spheres of influence. The map of topics was used to prepare interviews.

The *second stage* involved interviews with all twelve programme managers. A programme manager is the member of teaching staff who is responsible for the curriculum. Interviews were carried out between December 2007 and May 2008.

The following questions were asked on all 23 topics of impact:

- Have you implemented the comments and proposals made in the assessment committee's report, and if so, how?
- Which development-related issues and possible solutions to them arose in the course of self-analysis? Have these solutions been implemented, and if so, how?

The programme managers were also asked to rate separately as strong, weak or none the impact of the process of self-analysis, and of the assessment committee and its report for all 10 spheres of influence and 23 topics.

During the *third stage* interviews with staff members responsible for studies and the accreditation of curricula in each university were carried out. They had to judge the programme managers' opinions gathered during the second stage on the self-analysis and effectiveness of the assessment committee and their reports, and provide a general rating of the impact of the self-analysis process, the committee's visit and the report as strong, weak, and none in each sphere of influence. Their evaluation was to be based on the standard practice of the university.

Altogether 18 interviews were carried out, 12 of them with programme managers and six with heads of institutions.

The analysis of the interviews with university and programme managers yielded an overall evaluation of the impact of curriculum accreditation in all 10 spheres of influence.

2.4. RESULTS

2.4.1. Estonian system of external quality assessment

The aim of accreditation is to “assess a curriculum and whether studies under it conform to standards and legal documents” (Procedure for Accreditation of Universities, Institutions of Professional Higher Education and their Curricula and Requirements for Accreditation, 2003). Any potential shortcomings of the curriculum are identified during the accreditation and recommendations are made for further work, including development of areas of study, enhancement of staff qualifications and so on. Documents which regulate accreditation underline the importance of the control function over the development function. The curriculum is the focal point, together with studies that follow it, and compliance of the studies with legal acts and standards is checked. The self-analysis report, however, should contain information on the structure of the institution, the educational policy about the organisation of work, the study process, students, the learning environment, partnerships and the internal quality assurance system. It could therefore be said that an Estonian-style accreditation primarily does not focus on the assessing the internal quality assurance system of an institution, but how the curriculum is applied within its institutional and financial context is evaluated, although, accreditation in Estonia in 1997-2009 has largely meant inspection and assessment of nearly all activities of the institution being accredited.

Estonia adopted a four-level quality assessment model (see also van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994) which was implemented by the co-ordinating agency responsible for accreditation, which in Estonia was the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre and the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council. The final decision made by Assessment Council was then approved by the Minister of Education and Research. Standards of quality assurance of higher education in Europe compiled by ENQA derive from the principle that external quality assurance agencies should be independent. Independence also assumes a capacity for making final decisions following the conclusion of the assessment. In the external quality assessment system in force until 2009 in Estonia, the minister had the responsibility for the final decision. This is one reason why the Estonian Higher Education Quality Assessment Agency was established in January 2009.

The assessment process contains a self-analysis of the curriculum by the institution providing it, visits from experts, an experts' report. According to previous surveys the use of self-analysis as an assessment method can become complicated when the external quality assessment process emphasises a controlling function since this raises doubts on whether teaching staff involved in delivering the curriculum have reflected upon the curriculum and aspects related to its realisation, and if the self-analysis report covers all development needs or puts forward an unrealistically positive image, hiding or minimising significant drawbacks (Moitus & Pyykkö 2009; Frazer 1997). This limitation to an external quality assessment arising from methods used is also evident in the Estonian curriculum accreditation system.

Members of the assessment committee have to meet the following criteria: expertise in the relevant field, which is demonstrated by a minimum of five years experience in the given field of studies and research, or being an outstanding specialist in the given field (Procedure of... 2003). The higher education standard provides for eight fields of study which include more narrowly defined areas of study. The requirement that committee members need to be specialists in particular field is thus far too general and creates a situation where a member may lack competence in the particular narrow area of study. It is also required that at least two committee members should be foreigners but in most cases the assessment committee includes foreigners only, and they are accompanied by a representative from the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council who intervenes only in cases of dire need. After a study of

papers on external quality assessment it can be pointed out that using the assessment committee visit and their report as a method presupposes a thorough preparation of the committee members, organisers of the visit, academic staff involved in the visit and users of assessment results (Daniel, Mittag & Bornmann 2007). However, Estonian legislation on accreditation includes no relevant acts which would regulate preparation of various parties mentioned above. Kekälä (2000) pointed out that the use of external assessors for the assessment of national sciences or curricula in a field of specific national characteristics, may be problematic. Legislation on accreditation in Estonia does not provide specific requirements for assessors in the case of specific national sciences or curricula.

Under the Universities Act the accreditation process can result in a full accreditation, valid for seven years, or a conditional accreditation, which is valid for three years. In both cases the curriculum is considered to have been accredited and the institution is allowed to issue national higher education diplomas to students who complete the programme. The other possible result of accreditation is a negative decision, in which case the institution must immediately terminate the programme and transfer students into another programme. This feature of the Estonian accreditation system is quite a repressive one since in practice the negative result in many a case indicates a failure to meet students' expectations and it places the institution in a very awkward situation.

In the existing practice of accreditation of curricula follow-up activities do not form part of the external quality assessment system. In Estonia, universities are responsible for the follow-up activities.

2.4.2. Opinions on the impact of external quality assessment on the university

Table 2 presents those spheres of influence (their sub-topics) where at least 50% of interviewees identified the existence of the impact. The opinions of programme and institution managers are given separately, as is the impact from the self-analysis process, and the impact generated by the assessment committee. Spheres of university as an organisation are ranked according to their impact starting from the strongest.

Table 2. Overall Evaluation of the Impact of the Accreditation Process

	The self-analysis process influenced...	The visit and report of the assessment committee influenced...
In the opinion of programme managers	1-2. Organisational learning. 1-2 Curriculum 3. Teaching and studies 4. Teaching materials and rooms 5. Academic staff 6. Students 7. Relations with alumni	1. Organisational learning. 2. Teaching and studies 3. Teaching materials and rooms 4. Relations with alumni 5. Foreign relations and cooperation 6. Academic staff
In the opinion of institution managers	1. Organisational learning. 2. Teaching and studies 3. Curriculum 4. Strategies and objectives of the structural unit which supervises the curriculum 5. Teaching methods 6. Academic staff 7-9. Teaching materials and rooms 7-9. Students 7-9. Relationships with alumni	1. Reputation of the curriculum 2. Curriculum 3. Funding of the university 4. Organisational learning. 5. Academic staff 6. Strategies and objectives of the structural unit which supervises the curriculum 7. The quality assurance system of the university 8. Teaching methods 9. Teaching and studies 10-11. Allocation of funding in the university 10-11. Foreign relations and cooperation 12-13. Teaching materials and rooms 12-13. Relationships with alumni

As we can see, both the programme and institution managers thought that the strongest impact of both the self-analysis and the experts' report was on *organisational learning* and on the *curriculum with its content and structure*. The opinions of the programme managers on the impact of the visit and the report are more contradictory and differ across curricula while the institution managers have a more uniform opinion of the strong impact of both. According to the programme managers, the issues which are most frequently touched upon in the course of self-analysis are how to integrate subject courses, amend them and add them into the curriculum. According to the institution managers, however, the accreditation process has an impact on the whole of the content, objectives, outputs, size and structure of the curriculum. The analysis of the experts' reports suggests that an issue that the experts often looked at is the specialisation of the curriculum.

Both groups of managers found that self-analysis had a strong effect on *organisational learning*. For the programme managers it was the self-analysis that really made them view the curriculum as an integrated whole, and they also underlined that team working skills and a feeling of togetherness develop most during the self-analysis process. In the opinion of the institution managers the impact of accreditation on organisational learning lies in placing the curriculum in a wider university, and even international, context through self-analysis and the experts' feedback. They considered that the experts' visit and report have a stronger impact because they allow experience to be shared.

As for teaching materials and rooms, both groups of managers said that there is an impact from the self-analysis, expert visit and report but that is fairly weak. The programme managers stated that further acquisitions of teaching materials received most attention during the self-analysis process. The institution managers said that the reason being the weak impact on teaching materials and rooms is that the self-analysis report often already includes information on problems related to teaching materials and rooms (e.g. laboratories) and that if this information appears again in the experts' report, the university often allocates funds to fix the shortcomings. The analysis of experts' reports shows that the topics most frequently commented upon are the need for improvements to laboratories, auditoria and staff offices, and acquisitions of study literature.

The programme managers found that the impact of self-analysis, the expert visit and experts' report on *academic staff members* is weak, whereas the institution managers found it strong. The programme managers indicated that the workload of staff members is often discussed but the impact of this discussion is perceived as weak. The institution managers found that the accreditation had a strong impact on the academic staff, as their qualifications are compared with the Higher Education Standard, and some teaching staff are replaced. They emphasised that recommendations made during the visit and the experts' report have a significant role in staff-related issues as they generally confirm shortcomings already identified in the self-analysis report, and thus improvements are made as a result of the self-analysis, expert visit and experts' report together. It may be said from analysis of experts' reports that most of the recommendations they make concern the content and amount of research, an area where the programme managers see no impact at all, and further training, where both a weak or no impact were noticed.

The impact of external quality assessment on the *alumni* in terms of teaching and learning was seen as weak by both groups of managers. The programme managers explained the existence of the weak impact on the alumni by the fact that the impact the self-analysis process, the expert visit and the experts' report led to a number of changes in several aspects of the teaching and learning process that have been realised and that have also influenced the knowledge and skills of the alumni. The institution managers reckoned the reason the impact was only weak was the conservativeness of higher education and the slow response to change.

Both groups of managers found that the impact on the students was weak and that there was no impact from the expert visit and the experts' report. The programme managers' opinions did not identify a single reason for the weak impact, whereas the institution managers saw the reason for the weak impact of self-analysis in the inclusion of the students in the accreditation process. The analysis of the expert reports shows that the experts most frequently comment upon the improvement of student mobility and promotion of the study subject, where the institution managers saw no impact at all.

Both groups said that self-analysis had no impact on *foreign relations and cooperation*, and that the visit and experts' report had only a weak one. Generalising the opinions of the institution managers does not offer one single reason for this but they felt the curriculum had foreign relations and cooperation anyway and because the time for writing the self-analysis report was short, new and meaningful relations could not be forged in such a limited period of time. They found the impact of the visit and the experts' report was weak since it only offers feedback on placing the curriculum in the international context.

Among both groups of managers opinions regarding the impact of self-analysis on the *internal quality assurance system in the university* are rather contradictory, while the expert visit and their report are considered not to have no impact by the programme managers and to have a strong one by the institution managers. Both groups of managers stated that self-analysis had no impact makes on the arrangement of the internal quality assurance system but the programme managers judged that self-analysis had a weak impact through the analysis of feedback from various stakeholders'. The institution managers saw a strong impact on quality assurance activities which can be used to introduce a culture of quality at the structural unit level. They thought that the impact of the expert visit and the report was strong when accreditation was carried out for the first time and the experts gave essential input for the development of the internal quality assurance system in the university.

The programme managers had a somewhat contradictory view of the impact of the self-analysis on the *organisation of studies* as somewhat and saw that the visit and report had no impact. According to the institution managers no impact was made on the organisation of studies by the external quality assessment. Both the programme and institution managers found that accreditation may impact the organisation of teaching and learning in the structural unit supervising the curriculum when the Regulations for the Organisation of Studies become clearer to the teaching staff members or when comments by the experts identify to some failure to follow the current procedures.

The programme managers had mixed opinions about the impact of external quality assessment on *teaching methods*. The institution managers found that the impact of self-analysis on teaching methods was strong and that the impact of the visit was weak. They identified a strong impact on teaching methods in terms of cooperation between teaching staff members and sharing of experience. The impact of the visit and the report was considered only weak because of the short duration of the visit, in the course of which the experts could not get a full picture of the teaching methods. The analysis of the experts' reports led to the conclusion that most comments from the experts were about methods which encourage active participation from learners.

The programme managers had varied opinions about accreditation's impact on the *reputation of the curriculum* and its *reputation for lecturers involved in the curriculum*. The institution managers noted a strong impact of the visit and the report on the reputation of the curriculum as the final decision is linked to the status of the curriculum and state commission of student places. The institution managers did not think that self-analysis had an impact on the curriculum for the lecturers involved because they already had a good enough opinion of the curriculum before the accreditation process, as no lecturer would want to work on a curriculum they did not themselves perceive as having a good reputation.

Both groups of managers found that the impact of self-analysis on the *study process* was strong and that of the visit and the report was weak. The programme managers found the impact of self-analysis on the study process was strong because in discussions problems arose that had gone unnoticed previously, and solutions were found which provided a clearer idea of the future. According to the institution managers the teaching staff members learn in the process of self-analysis and this is accompanied by explicit or implicit changes in thinking which will influence the teaching in general.

The generally held view was that external quality assessment had no impact *on the structure of the university, strategies and objectives of the structural unit, financing of the universities or allocation of funds in the university*. Other areas where accreditation had no impact are *the university administrative system and administration, intra-university policies, strategies and objectives of the university, the structure of the academic unit supervising the curriculum, the motivation system and performance indicators*.

The institution managers found the accreditation process had a stronger impact on conditionally accredited curricula than on fully accredited ones. They felt the effect was particularly marked where experts' comments highlighted shortcomings already presented in the self-analysis report and therefore the curriculum was conditionally accredited. This opinion was not repeated among the programme managers.

When comparing two elements of external quality assessment, the self-analysis and the expert visit and report, the programme managers consider self-analysis more effective, while for the institution managers it is the visit and the report. The programme managers thought the self-analysis was more effective because in the course of the self-analysis process, lecturers teaching the curriculum or their representatives in the working group, with other stakeholders could identify current problems and suggest possible solutions. According to the institution managers issues presented in the self-analysis report had no effect unless they were highlighted in the experts' report. They also concluded that in the case of fully accredited curricula people perceive the accreditation decision as confirmation of a high-quality study process and in the absence of any follow-up activity, the experts' comments are not considered much.

Both the programme managers and members of the university administration criticised the selection of members in the expert groups. In the opinion of the programme managers the university should be allowed to suggest people who were experts in the narrow subject specialisation of the curriculum. The institution managers said that expert teams came at varied levels and with varying qualifications which led in some cases to an unreasonably negative rating and also made the accreditation less effective. It was thought that the team of experts should have more than four members, as is current practice. The reason given for the low levels of effectiveness of the self-analysis and recommendations from experts was that the current external quality assessment is a very time and resource consuming one-off event which usually has no follow-up activities.

After analysis of interviews it may be argued that when defining the concept of quality of higher education none of the interviewees expressed their negative attitude towards the concept of quality. Approaches to quality of higher education that programme managers and heads of universities use in their daily work are dominated by the outcome approach to quality where successful coping of alumni is the most significant indicator of quality. This is followed by the point of view that quality higher education shapes positive attitudes towards life-long learning.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

3.1. THE IMPACT OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT

The following research findings should be pointed out:

- 1) The analysis of the legal context of the accreditation of Estonian curricula reveals a number of impacts from globalisation and neoliberalism which are indicative of Estonia having followed global trends in legislation related to quality in higher education. The Estonian government has introduced specific requirements with regard to higher education in order to control extensive autonomy awarded to universities whereas conformity of higher education to these requirements is examined in the course of accreditation of curricula. On the other hand, universities are obliged to develop their internal quality assurance systems, which, concurrent with assuring these meet the set requirements, also further the continuous improvement of the universities as organisations. Higher education has become a “commodity” with private universities, which have been established since the early 1990s, and public universities alike offering fee-paying programmes and thus universities and students find themselves in contractual relationships characteristic of the “new public management”. Such relationships also characterise cooperation between the national government and universities where the amount of government financing and associated conditions are determined through contracts of state funded student places.
- 2) To date, accreditation of curricula has made little impact from the point of view of the development of the university as an organisation. The aim of accreditation – to assess a curriculum and studies based on it and how these conform to legal acts and standards; to identify deficiencies in the curriculum; and to provide recommendations for further developments, has two aspects to it, the first of which has a control and the latter a development function. Accreditation has been efficient from the control aspect since various conditionally accredited curricula have been merged with stronger ones and those resulting in negative accreditation have been closed. Findings of the survey have shown that ten topics out of 23 topics in ten spheres of impact were considered to have made no impact by neither the expert committee nor the report, weak impacts in three topics and a strong impact in just one topic, which allows the conclusion that the current accreditation system has not been sufficiently influential from the university development perspective.
- 3) Even though the focus of accreditation is wide and external quality assessment mostly concerns institutional structures, educational policy regarding organisation of work, the curriculum, study processes, students, the learning environment, partnerships and the quality assurance system, both programme and institution managers claim the strongest impact is primarily on the curriculum. It appeared that people do not think accreditation made an impact on any particular field of the university, such as its structure, strategies, objectives, administration and administrative system, policies, the motivation system, performance indicators, funding and allocation of the funds within the university, or administration and administrative system of the academic unit in charge of the curriculum, since these are not directly linked to the realisation of the curriculum. An explanation for the absence of impact is that a curriculum is too small a unit at the university level for the development needs of the entire university and their realisation opportunities which may have arisen in the course of accreditation to cause changes at this more general level. Also, some of the aspects that lie in the overall focus of all-university accreditation are actually beyond the area of responsibilities of the programme managers who are in charge of the curriculum and its immediate realisation.

- 4) Another cause for the low effectiveness of accreditation might derive from the underlying concept of the accreditation system and discrepancies between its objectives, organisation and use of results. The accreditation system of curricula is dominated by the fundamental concept of accountability which pushes the aim of the accreditation “improvement of the curriculum and its realisation” to the background. The focus of accreditation which requires the expert committee to concentrate on eight areas of the university work is far too wide, and compiling the self-analysis report is both time and resource consuming. Data required by the guidelines for the self-analysis report are not directly linked to the curriculum and quality of its realisation according to the programme managers, nor does self-analysis allow a frank presentation of all development needs since accreditation outcomes define whether or not the institution may issue diplomas. Another shortcoming of the expert committee visit and their report as a method is that legislation sets only rather vague principles for selection of experts, therefore, in about 50% of cases interviewees were not happy with the experts’ competence with regard to specialisation of the curricula or understanding of the Estonian context. Follow-up activities of accreditation are considered an internal matter of the university and since these are not monitored in a systematic manner, external quality assessment is often perceived as a one-off event with regard to any particular curriculum, which, in its turn, also highlights possible deficiencies in the quality assurance system of the university. According to the programme and university managers interviewed, the latter should be strengthened through regular self-analysis of the curriculum and its realisation.
- 5) How the efficiency of accreditation is perceived is dependent on that person’s position, which means that programme managers see the self-analysis process as a more efficient tool, while institution managers consider the expert visit and their report more useful. The programme managers value the assessment process highly, including discussions in the course of self-analysis, meetings with experts, their critical comments and recommendations. The heads of universities, however, are strongly oriented towards a positive outcome which proves conformity to standards. That views depend on the viewer’s position was also shown when programme managers did not differentiate between fully and conditionally accredited curricula, while university leaders found the accreditation process much more useful when conditional accreditation was granted.
- 6) Methods of accreditation, that is the self-analysis report, expert committee visit and expert report, represent two distinctive parts of the assessment system, each with their individual sphere of influence. Self-analysis concentrates on the mapping of development needs and planning further activities, while the visit and the expert report focus on identifying whether requirements and standards are met and whether a positive or negative accreditation is awarded. In the opinion of the programme and institution managers the impact of self-analysis was either strong or weak in terms of the curriculum, teaching materials and rooms, academic staff, students, alumni, studies and organisational learning; and similarly strong or weak impacts were described regarding the expert visit and report in the case of academic staff, studies and organisational learning.
- 7) Both groups of managers apply, parallel but contrasting approaches to the quality of higher education in their work, whereas their understanding of quality which equates with successful coping of alumni in their later life is dominant. This is followed by a view on quality as “shaping positive attitudes for life-long learning” and “high-level expertise of academic staff”. Following the above interview analysis it can be shown that both programme and university managers lack sufficient understanding of quality of higher education and also relevant attitudes which could make an impact on the application of the external quality assessment process and results. They highlighted a number of shortcomings in the cur-

rent accreditation system which results in a low level of impact of accreditation on university development. Deriving from the above shortcomings the programme managers and university leaders rather support institutional assessment and associated assessments of fields of study or disciplines.

- 8) When the outcomes of this survey and previous surveys into the impact of external quality assessment are compared, a number of similarities and differences can be identified. Several previous surveys indicate that external quality assessment affects university administration the most and its implicit impact on other areas of the university is expressed through management decisions (Brunetto & Farr-Wharthon 2005; Carr, Hamilton & Meade 2005; Wahlen 2004; Brennan & Shah 2000; Välimaa, Aittola & Konttinen 1998). Results of this survey show that in Estonia this kind of impact is generally not noticeable. Another major difference is the impact on the curriculum which was considered indirect in previous studies (Välimaa, Aittola & Konttinen 1998), while the effect of accreditation is regarded the strongest for Estonian curricula. This reason might be due to the heavily curriculum-centric approach taken in the system of external assessment in Estonia. The previous studies also referred to the impact quality assessment may have on the financing universities receive (Burnetto & Farr-Wharthon 2005), which does not seem to be common in Estonia. Results of the survey were similar to those of some earlier surveys (e.g. Huisman, Rebora & Turri 2007) which showed quality assessment's impact on the reputation of both the curriculum and the educational institution. The impact on reputation, however, may be either positive or negative, and is directly dependent on the results of the accreditation. A survey by The International Centre for Higher Education Research Kassel (Daniel, Mittag & Bornmann 2007) showed that judgement of the effect of both the expert committee visit and report and its use as a method depends on the position of the person making the judgement, which our survey also confirmed. When The International Centre for Higher Education Research Kassel compared the opinions of academic staff and members of the assessment committee on the effect of the visit and the report as a method, they found that the assessment committee members reported a stronger impact in every aspect considered. Our survey confirmed too that opinions depend on the respondent's position in the university hierarchy. The institution managers find the expert committee visit and the report more effective than do the programme managers, who find the self-analysis process has a stronger impact.

3.2. PROPOSALS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT SYSTEM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In 2010 quality assessment through accreditation of curricula, the method used for 12 years, will be terminated. What messages and discussion issues could this survey offer to those designing the new quality assessment procedure? What should be retained and what should be discarded?

The programme managers and university leaders suggested in their interviews to terminate the external quality assessment system based on the accreditation of single curricula and replace it with an institutional accreditation which gets support from accreditation of an area/field of study. This suggestion may have arisen as a result of changes already initiated in quality assessment of higher education. Institutional and area/field of study-based accreditation would allow time to be saved that would otherwise be spent on accrediting every single curriculum. This area/field of study-based accreditation would also facilitate identification of overlaps in the content of curricula, create opportunities for cooperation within the university and enable better use of resources in the realisation of curricula. Institutional accreditation can define

university's development needs on a broader scale and ensures a greater impact of external quality assessment on a larger number of spheres in the university as an organisation rather than the curriculum and its realisation alone.

Institutional accreditation along with the accreditation of area/field of study supplies information to stakeholders on both general developments and details on curricula and issues related to their realisation. Therefore, the focus of the future two-part quality assessment system should be narrower in the case of the accreditation of area/field of study where efforts are concentrated on the content of the area of field of study and how to realise it. The focus of institutional accreditation should allow for more attention on the context of teaching, research, development and creative activities.

Since the accreditation method, which employs foreign experts as assessors, is expensive and the aim of accreditation in Estonia is primarily to check whether the curriculum and teaching in it comply with requirements and standards, the internal balance in the new quality assessment system should be shifted from control towards the execution of the development function. Regular checks on compliance with requirements and standards could be conducted either by the new higher education quality agency or the Ministry of Education and Research. Tasks of external assessors, first and foremost, should be making recommendations for development, which also take account of international and national standards of the particular speciality. The assessment committee should comprise representatives from both Estonia and other countries which should decrease the number of inadequate assessment conclusions resulting from insufficient knowledge of the Estonian context. Area/field of study-based assessment should not be tied up with the right to issue national diplomas, this should allow for an honest presentation of development needs in the self-analysis report that arose in the course of reflection. This approach would create prerequisites for the external quality assessment to change from "a single act" into a component of regular self-development, and also provide opportunities for strengthening the intra-university quality assurance system, which according to interviews carried out in the survey, should primarily focus on regular self-analysis. Concurrently, this indicates a transfer from a result-based approach, which manifests in the orientation to achieve a full accreditation, to a process-based approach where quality-related activities are centred around self-reflection. The proposed change requires that the objective and the rationale of the new quality assessment system should, in the first place, be continuous improvement whereby external assessment results would be used for the development of various parts of the university as an organisation, including curricula, and thus to enhance implementation of a quality culture in the university. The idea of the continuous improvement of external quality assessment of higher education should also be reflected in the Universities Act. Also, at the national level, the Estonian Higher Education Strategy, 2006–2015 should provide more explicit detail on the objectives and criteria for quality in higher education.

When the new external quality assessment system is introduced, the format of the self-analysis report should be amended so that it can show and explain links between various indicators and quality criteria of teaching. Quantitative indicators in the self-analysis report should also derive from the concept of continuous improvement, that is, they should be linked to future objectives and not merely remain descriptions of the past.

In terms of developing the methodology of the new external quality assessment system the principle for the selection of members of the assessment committee must be more specific and clearly express requirements concerning particular details of experts' area or field of study, understanding of the Estonian higher education situation and labour market, and quality assessment expertise. The situation, where accreditation mostly takes place within the academic arena, must also change. A larger number of representatives of employers, and professional

unions and associations should be involved in external quality assessment. The assessment of area/field of study should also be allowed to use international quality assessment organisations from within relevant specialisms which would improve the reputation of the subject and enable better positioning within the wider international context.

In order to implement a culture of quality in the university, the introduction of follow-up activities of external quality assessment should be considered, and it might be supervised by an independent agency, external to the university during the initial stages. When the institutional accreditation system has been implemented and the quality assurance system in the university strengthened, the follow-up activities should become the responsibility of the university.

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