

Estonia's way in reforming higher education – from soviet-style system into the Bologna process

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Summary

Since late 1980s four systems of stages of higher education and qualifications have been in force in Estonia. The higher education system has been changed or reorganized through three phases of reforms, important periods were in 1989-1991, 1995-1996 and 2001-2002. The latter phase of reforms was clearly facilitated and conducted by the progressive Bologna process. Similarly to other CEE countries and many from EU, the Bologna process in Estonia can not be seen as the beginning of higher education reforms. Estonian Higher Education Assessment Council was set up in 1995 while in 1996 a student workload-based accumulative credit point system was introduced in Estonian higher education. The article discusses the background of the reforms and follows the dynamics of the higher education legislation in Estonia. It also examines the outcomes of the different phases of reforms and surveys the reasons of failures if progressive changes were not implemented. Overview of current curriculum built-up and degree system is given and expected future developments are discussed.

Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine reforms in Estonian higher education (HE) sector in 1989-2004, and to identify the main trends together with the convergences and divergences between Estonia and the developments in European Union (EU), lately with the Bologna process. Since 1989 Estonia has undertaken several extensive reforms in the field of HE, taking into account the aim of integrating into the structures of the EU. Therefore the purpose of the reforms was not only to reflect political and socioeconomic developments in Estonia but also to respond to higher-educational trends worldwide.

Since the beginning of reforms, four different systems of stages of higher education and qualifications have been in force in Estonia. Owing to high degree of autonomy of public universities, often substantial changes in HE preceded the nation-wide upgrading of legal acts. First two-three years of reforms were actually performed in conditions when Soviet Union's laws were still legally valid. In the former Soviet Union the tertiary – or post-secondary level education – consisted of three distinct types: vocational preparation, specialized college, and conventional higher (university) education (review on Estonia see in Saar, 1997). New objectives and levels of education were defined by the Estonian Law on Education, adopted in 1992. Also the rules of market economy were legally introduced into the education sector with that law. Few distinct phases and particular trends may be distinguished in HE developments to its current state in Estonia. Measured as the share of full-time employees with higher education, the stock of human capital in the Baltic states is rather high: the year 2000 figures were 25, 22 and 19 percent in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, respectively, compared with, for example, 10% in the Slovak Republic, 13% in Poland, 15% in the Czech Republic and 18% in Sweden (Hazans, 2003). However, the current situation in Estonian HE – which will be discussed below – does not satisfy its stakeholders and further strategic initiatives are planned. Currently the Estonian HE system is binary and consists of universities and applied higher education institutions (HEI). The pre-tertiary level education lasts 12

years, 9 years of compulsory basic education and 3 years of secondary education (Higher Education in Estonia, 2000). In the following we shall discuss mostly the reforms in the university-type higher education.

First phase of the reforms – cease out of the Soviet-style university education in 1989-1991

In 1989 the Estonian Education Committee was reorganised to create a new Ministry of Education, to administer general, vocational and higher education. Thereafter the structure for the administration of education in Estonia was repeatedly reorganised. Through amendments to the old Soviet legal acts, higher education in Estonian was considerably decentralised and responsibilities were much devolved from state to education institutions. The autonomy of universities gave the right to independently determine their academic and organisational structure, the content of the teaching and research work, the curricula, the conditions for admission and graduation (Higher Education in Estonia, 2000). In the end of 1980s, following that freedom, all study programmes were exempted from earlier compulsory courses of Marxism-Leninism, History of the Communist Party of Soviet Union and other that type of subjects, and from compulsory military training. As the result, although not centrally coordinated, the 5-year old university-level study programmes were substantially reorganised, restructured and in most cases ended up in 4-year programmes. Then new first cycle programmes were leading to the “university diploma”, which in nature was a graduate degree. In 1990 government adopted a regulation on the approval of HE qualifications, following which, the two systems, the Soviet system and an Estonian system became equally valid. In fact, the Soviet system qualifications ceased to function in the spring 1991 (Higher Education in Estonia, 2000). The Estonian university diploma was awarded with a certain qualification (matematician, biologist, teacher) or with an indication of specialisation. In parallel, in 1991, 2-year master’s - and 4-year doctorate programmes were composed and introduced into the university level education system. Compared with the old Soviet system, the master’s programmes made a new level of study between the two then existing degrees – university diploma (graduate) and candidate (postgraduate) degree.

As the result of the first phase of reforms, the 2-level Soviet higher education (diploma and candidate) was replaced by 3-cycle system – university diploma, master’s degree and doctorate degree. However, the length of the tertiary education, leading to the doctorate degree has increased from 9 nominal years, as it was in Soviet style system (university diploma - 5, candidate degree – 4 years), to 10-11 years (diploma 4-5, master 2, doctorate 4 years). The Estonian university diploma was supposed to be relevant to the bachelor’s level/degree in Europe and elsewhere. Actually, according to expected learning outcomes both, the Estonian university diploma and the master’s degree were graduate degrees, while the undergraduate degree was lacking and the master’s degree was predominantly a research degree. One-tier structure in university level graduate (specialist) training persisted. If the diploma programme would give a specialist education, then the master-level education was somewhat unclear between specialist and high qualified researcher (doctorate) training.

During this phase of reforms, legal framework of HE, quality control and accreditation remained to be subjects of intensive debates and discussions without any substantial agreements concluded in legal acts. There was in general a lack of comprehensive HE development and reform policies. At times, the situation in Estonia could be described in terms of participative democracy and a bottom-up revolution (Kreitzberg & Priimägi, 1998). The draft version of the Law on Higher Education has been discussed for almost four years (1992-1995) and the parliamentary approval postponed several times because of inability to lead the process on national level, and the conflict of interests between HE stakeholders. As

concluded by V. Tomusk (1995) this has severely limited the development of democratic decision-making processes in Estonian HE system.

In the background of all this in early 1990s the public universities had entered into the market economy conditions as the private HE institutions emerged. The Law on Private Schools was adopted in 1993. Massification of HE in Estonia started in early 1990s and in 1993-2003 the number of students has increased 2,6-fold. The number of fee-paying students has increased 3,5 fold only in 1997-2003. It is worthy to mention here, that also public universities were given the right to admit fee-paying students beyond the national schooling quota, set by the Ministry of Education and Science.

Building up a legal framework of HE in 1995-1996

The second phase in reforming Estonian HE structure, degree system, contents and programmes (curricula) was undertaken in 1994-1995 and ended with the adoption of the Law on Universities (1995), the Law on the University of Tartu (1995) and the governmental decree on the Standard of Higher Education (1996). The Law on Universities postulates that in Estonia “a university shall be a legal entity of public law, which shall operate on the basis of the present law, other legal acts and its own statutes”. The Standard of Higher Education specifies general requirements to HE in Estonia and is a fundamental act for granting education licences and for accreditation of study programmes or HE institutions. The Standard introduced a student workload-based, accumulative credit point (CP) system in Estonia (Higher Education in Estonia, 2000). Following the Scandinavian model one academic CP corresponds to 40 hours (one study week) of study performed by a student. The academic year consists of 40 weeks and therefore the nominal workload of a student is 40 CP per year. Up to 2002 the bachelor degree required 160-200, master’s degree 80 and doctorate degree 160 national CP. The Standard of Higher Education is valid for all cycles and forms of HE irrespective of legal status of HE institution, ownership or the way education is provided (full-time, in-service, e-learning, distance learning).

As to the study programmes and degree system, only the latter was changed and replaced by simpler, more unified but only seemingly comparable to Anglo-Saxon bachelor-master system. The first cycle of HE, earlier giving university diploma, was renamed into bachelor studies and in 1995 universities started to issue bachelor diploma’s. Since the admission in 1995 the academic degree of bachelor is issued in Estonia.

Unfortunately, lengthy and sometimes heated discussions over the aims, nominal duration, content, relevance to the labor market and other matters related to bachelor and master’s programmes ended with “no change” compromise, as far as legal acts are concerned. Academic conservatism, little knowledge in labor market needs and in other nation’s education systems, also different fears in academic community – fear of devaluating academic degrees, fear of losing authority in composing study programmes – are responsible for the failure in introducing 2-cycle specialist education and shorter (3 years) bachelor programmes in the middle of 1990s. As a result, the 4+2+4 system in terms of nominal study years was written into The Law on Universities in 1995. Most of substantial feedbacks in study programme’s structure – one-tier graduate programmes, unclear position of master’s degree, too lengthy studies to reach the doctorate – persisted further.

Higher education in late 1990s and the birth of quality assessment system

Convergence of Estonian HE structure and organisation with the EU structures is indicating the developments in late 1990s. Although several papers review curriculum developments in Estonia in particular subject areas, for example in library science (Lepik,

1996; Virkus, 1997), information technology (Jaakkola and Kalja, 1997), public administration (Randma, 2000), a generally agreed consensus in HE aims, content and levels were still lacking. Not surprisingly already in 1995 locally and internationally (Bollag, 1995) became obvious that Estonia needs to prepare for a new round of HE reforms. J.Aaviksoo (1997) concluded, that the legal framework in which HEI operated had to be entirely rewritten and the fundamental mission of institutions had to be reconsidered. The Law on Universities (1995) and the Law on Tartu University (1995) with contiguous legal acts did not create a conceptual basis for the development of educational system.

The quality matters in HE became important in early 1990s with massification of HE and emergence of new HE institutions. However, the legal basis for assessing the HE quality was created only in 1995 with adoption of the Law on Universities. In accordance with that law the Estonian Higher Education Assessment Council (HEQAC) was set up in 1995. In the institutional structure of HE quality assessment the leading role is performed by the HEQAC with its final decisionmaking powers, and the Higher Education Accreditation Centre (AC) that organises accreditation procedures. The AC is a member of the network of the agencies of quality assurance of Europe (ENQA) and the entire world (INQA). Pursuant to the laws of Estonia accreditation is not compulsory; however, it is the only possibility for a HE institution to acquire the right to issue officially recognised documents certifying higher education. The primary method for the assurance of quality in HE in Estonia is the accreditation. Accreditation was described (Eesti kõrghariduse kvaliteedikindlus, 1995) as the process by which an institution or a curricula periodically evaluates its educational activities and seeks and independent judgement by experts that it achieves substantially its own educational objectives and meets the established standards. Accreditation should be understood as a continuous evaluation process with the purpose of defining and improving the quality and effectiveness of the educational process (Eesti kõrghariduse kvaliteedikindlus, 1995). Consequently the process, the quality assessment, was clearly of a “meet a standard” character, while the standard was mostly given by the Standard of Higher Education, adopted in 1996.

In 1996 the first few programmes were accredited and in the following year an active study programmes accreditation began by international evaluators. Each programme or institution was expected to be accredited in 7 year period (Laasberg et al., 2003). The results of the first round of accreditations (1996-2002) show that only 15 programmes (3%) out of 500 assessed, were not accredited, while 100 (25%) were accredited conditionally (Laasberg et al., 2003). During that period only two HE institutions out of ca 50, volunteered to have an institutional evaluation. Both were evaluated, University of Tartu by experts of the European University Association (EUA) and Estonian Academy of Music by the Estonian HEAC. International reflections to the HE quality assessment in Estonia and the other CEE countries – for example: “two major trends are evident in Eastern Europe: 1) towards the definition of national standards; and 2) towards competence-based (as distinct from knowledge-based) assessment” (West and Crighton, 1999), or “control, rather than quality enhancement” (Temple and Billing, 2003) – were mostly justified and adequate. According to V. Tomusk’s (2000) controversial opinion East European states continue controlling HE politically through quality assurance, while B. Bollag (1998) credited Russia’s Ministry of Education which is taking steps to close the Russian universities that opened unauthorized branches in Estonia without obtaining permission from either country.

In late 1990s there were many other, however fragmentary developments in structure and content of Estonian HE. For example in 1997 the school-leaving state examinations at secondary level were introduced and since then they are used in student selection process in most of the universities, resulting to some degree the harmonisation of admission procedures.

For the purpose of making true and fair recognition decisions of foreign qualifications, in 1997 the Estonian National Academic Recognition Information Centre, which is also operating as the Estonian ENIC/NARIC Centre, was founded. The following year (1998) Estonia ratified the Lisbon Convention (11 April 1997, Lisbon) on recognition of higher education certificates and documents providing access to higher education in the European region.

In 1998 a Law on Applied Higher Education Institutions was admitted and with this, starting from 1999, some vocational schools were given the right to offer professional higher education curricula. As a consequence, the binary HE system (vocational and academic higher education) in Estonia was obscured. V. Tomusk (2001) described how over a few years “university education” as the meaning of higher education was replaced by much broader “post-secondary education”.

Widely realised need for principal basis for subsequent development of education system in Estonia stipulated for an adoption by the government a “Strategic Plan for Developing the Educational System in Estonia up to the Year 2010” in March 1999. This plan centered on the concept of lifelong learning and aims to make Estonia in learning society. The mission of the educational system was said to be twofold: to create conditions for Estonian society to develop into a learning society and to offer each of its members lifelong learning opportunities corresponding to his/her capabilities, interests and needs. The Strategic Plan set out an age participation rate at 50% of the student population by 2010 and prioritized the development of teacher training, first level education (comprehensive schools), vocational education and technology education. Soon after V. Tomusk (2001) argued that recent reforms and developments in Estonia did not encourage private initiative to offer HE and support orthodox positions with regard to content of HE studies. Four years ago one could not foresee that for today many then prestigious private educational institutions, because of financial misuses, lack of academic competence and low quality of instruction have bankrupted (Concordia), joined public universities (Law Institute, Institute of Humanities) or just concluded their existence (LEX). Already in 2003 V. Tomusk (2003) found that while in the early period many of the new private universities saw their purpose as challenging and replacing the existing institutional order, more recently this mission has disappeared from their agenda. Instead, their primary interest lies, under the market regime, in facilitating access to traditional institutions (Tomusk, 2003). Obviously the “market regime” does not only mean the fight for students and money, but also and increasingly the competition in quality of tuition.

Internationalisation of HE and introduction to the third phase of reforms

Since the basic legal framework of HE was created, the HE policy has increasingly been the focus of interest and the subject of international comparison. Internationalisation of HE in Estonia was one of important factors facilitating next curriculum reform in universities. In Estonia the number of EU courses has increased with the involvement in the European integration process. In 1993, initiated by the Council of Baltic Sea States, an Eurofaculty started operating in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and has facilitated the development of several new EU courses and contributes to training future faculty through the support of an interdisciplinary Masters programmes. Early 1990s are also characterized by rapidly increasing number of foreign academics, employed by Estonian universities. In many cases they were financed with the help from foreign countries/embassies, for example from Sweden, Finland, Germany, France, Denmark, Turkey, Japan. Since November 1998 Estonia has participated in the EU programmes on education Leonardo da Vinci and Socrates. This has allowed exchanges with more than 60 European universities, in great part in the Baltic Sea

region. The Socrates programme has essentially contributed to the increase of international students to 2-3% of student bodies in leading Estonian HE institutions. And on the contrary, under state commissioned education approximately 6% of the students admitted to doctoral studies in Estonian universities are currently sent to foreign universities.

Common academic interests and values, together with new challenges in distance and continuing education have led Estonian universities to several important cooperative networks: Baltic Sea Region University Network (see overview in Hypponen, 2000); EUCEN - European Universities Continuing Education Network; EDEN - European Distance Education Network; EURASHE - European Association of Institutions in Higher Education; IROBALT – International Relations Offices Network of Baltic Universities, and others. Three largest Estonian Universities – University of Tartu, Tallinn Technical University and Tallinn Pedagogical University – together with Estonian Rector’s Conference are members of the European University Association (EUA). All three mentioned universities have received EUA’s ECTS/DS site visits in 2000-2003. University of Tartu is participating in EUA’s Quality Culture Programme and in Doctoral Programmes Project, and in 2002 was invited to join the Coimbra group which incorporates Europe’s oldest and most widely known institutions of higher education (University of Tartu. Yearbook 2002).

For Estonia the Nordic dimension in international cooperation has always been very important. The Nordic Council of Ministers has initiated several programmes of grant and/or exchange in the education sector, for example guest professorship grants, doctoral courses and research networks. The Baltic Countries are also addressed in the Nordic Grant Scheme for Network Co-operation, offered in co-operation with the Nordic Academy for Advanced Study (NorFA) and the Nordic student exchange programme, Nordplus (Ericsson, 2000).

Intensified international cooperation and communication attested to wide range of academic community and students, that Estonia’s problems in reforming HE are not unique in Europe. There are many common problems – incomparable degrees and study levels, international recognition of studies and diplomas, different systems in grading and in calculating student workloads, aims of programmes and employability of graduates, if to name few – and the practice applied or lessons learned by different universities in the course of reforms, are worth in studying them. Academic and administrative staff with direct experience of HE or scientific research in the West, or the returnees from the West, were among most consistent advocates for further reforms. Even though the supporters experience was from very different models of Western educational systems, they realized the need in change in Estonia and were open to discussions. The reforms completed to the start of Bologna process in 1999 proved to be insufficient in introducing in Estonia an efficient, high quality, internationally recognised and comprehensible HE system. But similarly to the countries which shared the Estonia’s recent history – Latvia and Lithuania (Rauhvargers, 2003), and many others in Europe (Scott, 2002, Ahola & Mesikämnen, 2003), the Bologna process in Estonia can not be seen as the beginning of HE reforms. For the application of the Bologna Declaration in Estonia, a working group, consisting of the representatives of academic circles, employers and students, was formed under the leadership of the Minister of Education and Research. Since the academic year 1999/2000 a unified 6-point grading scale (A to F), with the 50% minimum level of knowledge for positive grade, was introduced with the Decree of the Ministry of Education (Higher Education in Estonia, 2000). In 2000, several strategies related to specific fields of education were developed under the guidance of the Ministry of Education: programme "Tiger University", the "Action Plan for Developing Vocational Education System in Estonia in 2001-2004" and "Higher Education Reform in 2001-2002".

Third phase of reforms in 2001-2002: two cycles prior doctoral studies

The rationale for this phase of reforms, from the Bologna Declaration, was to introduce in Estonian HE institutions

- comparable levels and qualifications of HE;
- transfer to the two-tier model of HE that precedes doctoral study;
- implementation of ECTS and Diploma Supplement in order to facilitate the understanding of levels, degrees and learning outcomes;
- to facilitate e-learning, in-service training and life-long-learning through developing the means of distance learning and by recognition of outcomes of informal learning.

The necessary amendments to the valid legislation, concurrent with the implementation of the Bologna Declaration, were authorised by the approved reform plan for higher education of the government of Estonia from June 2001. Proceeding from the principles agreed upon, all relevant acts of the Parliament regulating HE – the Law on Universities, the Law on Professional Higher Education and the Standard of Higher Education were amended in one year. One of important decisions was the approval of the Estonian Strategy for Research and Development 2002-2006 “Knowledge-based Estonia” by the Parliament of Estonia in December 2001. “Knowledge-based Estonia” reflects an understanding of the increasingly greater role of science and innovation in shaping Estonia’s future. In order to realize the objectives of the strategy, it is intended that by 2006, total expenditure on research, development and innovation will be 1,5% of GDP (cf. with 0,75 % in 2001) (Excellence in Research 2002).

Although the focal point in this phase of HE reforms was at study programmes, the overall process of redesigning the curricula was actually led by the few most respected universities – University of Tartu, Tallinn Technical University and Tallinn Pedagogical University, and the Estonian Rectors Conference. Regular meetings of rectors and vice-rectors were decisive in setting up the principles of, and a deadline for preparing new curricula’s to the spring 2002. Since the very beginning it was clear that a real reform cannot end at cutting the one-tier first cycle programme – 4-year bachelor programme in Estonian case – into two, leaving the curricula unchanged. Commonly, but not in all departments or HEI, the need in restructuring of bachelor and master programmes together was realised. Regardless the name of the first degree (university diploma, bachelor diploma, bachelor degree), until the admission in 2002, at least 75% of graduates were expected to leave the university with the first degree.

Transition to the new system of study programmes and cycles took place in 2002/2003 academic year upon the amendment of the Law on Universities and the acts in conjunction with it in the Parliament in June 2002. The transition has taken place in the majority of Estonian universities and 62% of those admitted in the academic year 2002/03 study in accordance with new curricula (Implementation of Bologna ..., 2003). In the reorganized in 2001-2002 programmes the first cycle concentrates on acquiring general job skills and knowledge. The new curricula are modularized (ca 16AP or 24 ECTS credits) and provide wider basic education while specialisation is transferred mostly into masters-level studies. Thus the newly designed first cycle programmes improve the opportunities of students in changing track while moving from Bsc/BA to Msc/MA level programmes both inside a university and between universities. Student has to take all together six standard 24 ECTS credit modules plus three standard 6 ECTS credit modules of electives to pass through the 120-credit bachelor’s curriculum.

The second cycle – the master’s studies – involve further development of knowledge and professional skills necessary to pursue a specialist job in a certain field. In addition to the two-cycle general model, the curricula of medicine, dentistry, pharmaceutical, veterinarian, architectural and civil engineering training are one-cycle studies with a nominal length of 5 –

6 years and with a capacity of 300 – 360 ECTS credits. The bachelor degree or equivalent qualification is a prerequisite for admission to master's studies. The person who holds an applied higher education diploma can also commence master's studies in a university under the conditions and pursuant to the procedure established by the university.

Resulted from the more general nature, in 2001-2002 the overall number of bachelor programmes has decreased approximately 35-40%, while the number of master's programmes increased in 10-15% compare to the pre-reform situation. In the new two-cycle system, bachelor studies take three (exceptionally four, e.g. in music) nominal years (180-240 ECTS credits), and master studies two (exceptionally one) nominal years (60-120 ECTS credits), as compared to the previous system of a 4-5 year bachelor study. However, the total time required to earn a master's degree, is now five nominal study years (300 ECTS credits). It should be noted that in Estonia, the national academic credit point system and the ECTS exist contemporarily alongside each other. It is expected that the latter should be introduced on a general basis from the 2006/2007 academic year, when Estonia joins the today's pool of over 1000 HEI in Europe, who are already using ECTS (Reding, 2003). In March 2003, the form and statute of the diploma and diploma supplement (DS) in English were established by the decree of the Government. The DS is mandatory in Estonia since 1 January 2004, and is issued automatically, free of charge, when HE qualifications are awarded. With regard to the regulation pertaining to both the Estonian and English document the format of the Diploma Supplement elaborated by the European Commission, European Council and UNESCO/CEPES has been complied with.

The curriculum reform affected also the Estonian HE accreditation system, which faced a serious capacity problem in assessing a great number of new programmes, since only accredited programmes lead to state-recognized diplomas and degrees. Solution was agreed in transferring the accreditation of old 4-year bachelor programmes to the new 3-year bachelor programmes in cases when the subject area was identical. This solution was legalized through the amendments to the Law on Universities in 2002.

Aside traditional university training an e-learning developed increasingly. Although five years ago S. Virkus (1997) had resumed that the main obstacles in delivering distance education widely in Estonia were old-fashioned academic staff, subject-oriented teaching and lack of ideology at the strategy level, in 2002 the leading public universities together with some participation of private HEI created a consortia named "Estonian e-university". The e-university is initiating virtual learning and developing e-based courses, giving information on virtual study, video conferences and lectures. In parallel, the State and big enterprises launched in 2002 an extensive project called "Look at the World". The Look@World Foundation started in April 2002 a project to provide free of charge basic computer and internet training for 100.000 persons – the equivalent of about 10% of Estonian adult population. The courses will take place at 200 points all over Estonia to achieve maximum geographical coverage (Sprogøe, 2003).

Lessons learned and problems to be solved

When comparing CEE higher education systems with those of the West, one is confronted with Western HE systems that are quite heterogeneous themselves also going through change (Scott, 2002) and obviously the "copy-paste" method in reforming Estonian HE does not work.

The Baltic countries feature combination of unusually low returns to secondary education with rather high marginal payoff to higher education (Hazans, 2003). Massification of HE in Estonia resulted an 2,6-fold increase in student numbers in last ten years. On top of that, in the years of 2002-2005, two sets of programmes – old 4 year (160 ECTS) and new 3

year (120 ECTS) bachelor level programmes are taught parallel, because the students in Estonia, once admitted to the HEI, have a right to graduate from that particular programme. All this has resulted a considerable increase in lecturer's load and relevant financial load to the universities, which is, with no doubt, a serious threat to the quality of tuition. Permanent "revolutionary situation" in HE has created a considerable amount of reluctance and hesitation in academic community to all changes, regardless the aim of the change. In many cases at all levels of administrations the big picture and fundamental problems were lost from focus when dealing with details. Not always the faculties could avoid a "fight for territory" when composing new curricula's.

Unfortunately central financing of the reforms has always been extremely limited and majority of the direct costs (e.g. parallel running of two sets of curricula; site-visits to learn international experience, analysis and consultancy) and all indirect costs (e.g. labor cost for additional workload of people involved in reforms) were covered by the universities involved.

Estonian HE accreditation system faced a capacity problem in assessing a great number of new programmes, since only accredited programmes lead to state-recognized diplomas and degrees. All the interest groups of the evaluation process – the universities, the ministry, employer's representatives and the HE quality assessment council – have realized, that the role of institutional evaluation must increase in expense of the single programme's accreditation. As of today only the University of Tartu and the Academy of Music have applied and received in 2002 the institutional accreditation by the EUA and Estonian HEQAC experts respectively. In 2004 a working group, led by professor J.Engelbrecht, prepared a Report on Quality Assurance for the Ministry of Education and Research (Engelbrecht, 2004). The purpose of the project was to examine the progress that has been made in Estonia for the quality assurance of HE. The working group concluded that due to the speed of changes and a rather liberal education policy, the HE in Estonia faces serious problems. Their analysis aims to support further development of the quality assurance in higher education in Estonia and relevant recommendations are summarized here:

- The aims of the HE should be formulated clearly balancing research-based HE with practice-based HE with comparison of vocational training, all against the demographic situation in Estonia.
- The system of HE should be brought into order, concentrating on quality requirements and critical mass. In this sense the rules for public and private HEI should be the same based on efficient and effective organizational structures.
- The legal acts governing the HE should be amended in order to link them to each other and to balance the quality requirements.
- The quality assurance system means not only the control and sanctions but a teamwork with HE institutions who should permanently be engaged in a follow-up procedures. The Government should in its turn pay more attention to creating the registry of diplomas, continuous analysis and public awareness.
- The formalities of accreditation and evaluation should be made rigorous and clear. The institutional accreditation /evaluation should play more role. The accreditation through international professional institutions should be encouraged.
- The initiatives of the Rectors Conference and the Federation of Estonian Student Unions in order to improve the quality of higher education are to be approved of.

Future perspectives

The newly designed programmes are still in phase of development (see for example Kõrgesaar, 2002; Tampere, 2003) – defining of study outcomes and correction of programme's content continues in the lines of the EC/Socrates "Tuning" project (Conzalez

and Wagenaar, 2003) results. A major shift is occurring in the years 2004-2006: master's level education is in great part replacing diploma or bachelor level education as the focal point of access, selection and entry to future careers. Fair recognition and comparison of earlier offered degrees and qualifications has become very important in providing equal opportunities in further career or learning possibilities. Since late 1980s, four systems of stages of higher education and qualifications have been in force in Estonia. In order to ensure equal opportunities and rights, work has been started to determine the equivalence of earlier qualifications in the new system. The equivalence of the qualifications used in former systems with the qualifications of the new system will be governed by a decree of the Government (Implementation of Bologna ... , 2003).

Another development is related to recognition of informal learning and its relevance to the formal study programme. At present Estonia lacks a uniform system of registering previous studies and work experience but the matter has become topical and essential on both the levels of legislation and the activities of institutions of HE. The amendments made to the Law on Universities in 2003 bind universities to develop by 2005 a system of registering previous studies and work experience (Implementation of Bologna ... , 2003).

A growing number of universities (University of Tartu, Tallinn Technical University, Tallinn Pedagogical University, Estonian Business School, Mainor University) are developing master's programmes in English, making foreign study feasible for many.

Well in line with developments in Bologna process, the reform has moved into doctorate level programmes which currently are designed for four nominal years (240 ECTS credits). Estonian universities had already in early 1990s chosen the programme-based, formalised and accountable system of doctoral studies, instead of solely individual tutoring. Now the generally accepted consensus is to move further towards doctorate schools model, in which the experience of Scandinavian countries is mostly followed. Excellence Centres of Estonian scientific research (Lippmaa, 2004) in the universities will be the formal "hosts" of the doctorate schools.

In May 2004 a new commission consisting of HE specialists, administrators and politicians was called to formulate new Estonian HE strategy. Proposals and suggestions regarding principal system of HE, its financing and quality assessment in the light of Lisbon Strategy and the Estonian Strategy for Research and Development 2002-2006 "Knowledge-based Estonia" are to be presented to the Government by February 2005.

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