

The quality assurance system in Estonia

May 2021

I. The quality assurance system in higher education

In Estonia, only higher education institutions that have passed the evaluation of quality of studies are allowed to provide higher education. From 2012, studies at the level of higher education may only be carried out if the HEI has been granted the right to conduct studies at the level of higher education in a study programme group by the government. This entails the right to issue national graduation documents.

Applying for right to conduct studies

If an institution of higher education (private, public or state) wishes to apply for the right to conduct studies in a new study programme group, it must submit its application with data describing the quality, resources and sustainability of the studies to the Ministry of Education and Research. The ministry involves the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) in the evaluation of the application. In case of a positive result, the Minister of Education and Research grants the HEI the right to conduct studies.

Institutional accreditation

Institutional accreditation focuses on the internal quality assurance system of the educational institution and the functionality thereof, incl. the fulfilment of the tasks, duties and functions of the educational institution and the compliance of the management system with the goals and development plan of the higher education institution.

Higher education institutions are required to undergo institutional accreditation once every seven years, but if EKKA has found shortcomings in the previous accreditation, it may grant a term of up to three years. During that term, the higher education institution must undergo the institutional accreditation again. The decision on institutional accreditation will be made by the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education at EKKA.

Thematic Evaluation

Thematic evaluation constitutes an element of the new higher education QA system. The purpose of thematic evaluation is to support the changes in the improvement areas that have been identified in completed assessments. Thematic evaluations allow to take stock of the situation, share best practices, and receive independent feedback and recommendations from experts.

Thematic evaluations are conducted in some or all higher education institutions. The topics are horizontally relevant and as a rule, related to the quality improvement proposals made during external assessments of study programme groups (i.e. purposefulness and up-to-dateness of teaching methods; student assessment; development of students' key competencies; involvement of students from all cycles of higher education in RDC activities; etc.). Thematic evaluations predominantly use a research-based assessment method. Thematic evaluations can be sample based, but preferably include all HEIs (also vocational education institutions, if appropriate).

General legislation for higher education in Estonia is detailed in the following legal acts:

- [Higher Education Act](#)
- [Republic of Estonia Education Act](#)
- [Organisation of Research and Development Act](#)
- [Standard of Higher Education](#) (in Estonian)

II. The quality assurance system in vocational education

External quality assurance of VET in Estonia is regulated by the [Vocational Educational Institutions Act](#). The quality assurance activities delegated to EKKA have been laid down in the [EKKA Conceptual Framework Document for QA in VET](#). The objective of the quality assessment in vocational education is to foster the development of learning-oriented school culture and to increase the reliability of vocational education. EKKA is in charge of two types of assessment in VET.

Initial assessment and re-assessment of study programme groups (granting the right to provide instruction in a new study programme group)

The school submits an application and all the necessary materials to the Ministry of Education and Research. The ministry establishes whether the materials comply with the requirements set out in the legal acts and commissions an initial assessment of the study programme group from EKKA on the basis of the regulation laid down by the vocational education assessment council. The vocational education assessment council makes one of the following proposals to the Minister for Education and Research based on the assessment report: a) to grant the school the right to provide instruction without a term; b) to grant the right to provide instruction for three years; c) not to grant the right to provide instruction.

If the study programme group receives the right to provide instruction without a term, it will undergo regular quality assessments in the future, taking place at least once every six years. If a school receives the initial right to provide instruction for three years, a re-assessment will be conducted. The Minister for Education and Research is entitled to revoke the right to conduct studies if the EKKA vocational education assessment council makes a recommendation for the third time to grant the right to conduct studies in that study programme group for three years.

Quality assessment of study programme groups

If a study programme group has been granted the right to conduct studies without a term, a regular quality assessment will take place at least once in every six years, targeted at fostering the development of learning-oriented school culture and improving the reliability of vocational education.

Quality assessment of vocational education is conducted according to a timeline adopted by EKKA and accepted by educational institutions and the Ministry of Education and Research. The assessment decisions are taken by the vocational education assessment council at EKKA. The results of the quality assessment are used by the schools' management and by the Ministry of Education and Research for policy making.

III. The quality assurance system in continuing education

The quality assurance system in continuing education is under the development since autumn 2018. The purpose of quality assessment in continuing education is to motivate training centres to increasingly base their training on the needs and abilities of the learner and labour market expectations.

In the autumn of 2019, EKKA started a threshold-based evaluation of continuing education institutions. Threshold-based assessment is a quality assessment, the purpose of which is to assess the ability continuing education institutions to comply with the continuing education quality principles defined in the Adult Education Act and the Continuing Education Standard.

Threshold-based assessment consists of two stages: website evaluation (it is assessed whether the institution's website contains the information required by the Adult Education Act) and assessment of the quality of studies (it is assessed whether the curriculum and the conduct of studies meet the requirements of the Adult Education Act and the Continuing Education Standard). The quality of studies is assessed only at continuing education institutions that have passed the website evaluation.

Responsibilities and structure of EKKA (Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education)

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I. General information

EKKA was founded in 2009 on the basis of Estonian HE Accreditation Centre. EKKA is a structural unit of the Estonian Education and Youth Board, which performs independent functions.

EKKA's mission is, in cooperation with its partners, to promote quality in the field of education and thereby increase the competitiveness of the Estonian society.

EKKA is a full member of

- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);
- International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE);
- Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA);
- European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET);
- and is included in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

II. Main functions of EKKA

The main functions of the EKKA are:

- development and establishment of the principles of quality assessment of higher and vocational education and the procedure for conduct for the quality assessment in line with the common European quality principles of higher and vocational education;
- improvement of the quality of vocational and higher education and the valuing and dissemination of the best quality assurance practices in cooperation with educational institutions providing vocational and higher education and other partners;
- institutional accreditation of higher education institutions;
- thematic evaluation;
- quality assessment of vocational education;
- expert assessment of the right to provide education in higher education institutions and vocational education institutions;

- review of applications for the use of the services of other quality agencies and provision of assessments of quality assessments carried out in Estonian educational institutions by other quality agencies;
- management of accreditation and quality assessment databases and enabling their public use;
- organisation of quality-related pilot projects, training, and counselling;
- participation in international cooperation on education quality, incl. representation of Estonia in matters pertaining to the quality of higher education, and in quality assessments carried out in foreign states.

Since 2018, EKKA has been developing the QA system in continuing education.

III. Management and structure

EKKA consists of:

- 1) **the Supervisory Board** (9 members representing the stakeholders related to the main functions of the EKKA, including students);
- 2) **the Bureau** (13 people: director, director for development, 3 assessment directors; 6 assessment coordinators, training director, information manager)
- 3) **the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education** (13 members representing Estonian universities and QA experts);
- 4) **the Quality Assessment Council for Vocational Education** (13 members representing Estonian Occupational Qualification Councils and employers).