

Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education

SELF- ASSESSMENT REPORT

FOR AGENCY
TARGETED
REVIEW

2022



SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT FOR AGENCY TARGETED REVIEW 2022

ESTONIAN QUALITY AGENCY FOR HIGHER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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ABBREVIATIONS

CEENQA	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
EQAR	The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ERC	Estonian Research Council
EQA	External quality assurance
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
HEI	Higher education institution
HEQAC	Higher Education Quality Assessment Council
IA	Institutional accreditation
INQAAHE	The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IQA	Internal quality assurance
MER	Ministry of Education and Research
SAR/SER	Self-Assessment Report/Self-Evaluation Report
SPG	Study programme group
QA	Quality assurance
VET	Vocational Education and Training

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

LEGISLATION

- [Higher Education Act](#)
- [Standard of Higher Education](#) (in Estonian)
- [Administrative Procedure Act](#)
- [Code of Administrative Court Procedure](#)

DOCUMENTS REGULATING EKKA'S ACTIVITIES

- [Statutes of the Education and Youth Board](#)
- [EKKA Development Plan 2017–2022](#)
- [Interim Development Plan Progress Report](#) (in Estonian)
- [Procedure for the formation of the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education and the Appeals Committee](#)

ASSESSMENT RELATED GUIDELINES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- [Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation](#)
- [Guidelines for Initial Assessment and Re-assessment of Study Programme Groups](#)
- [Guidelines for Thematic Review](#)
- [Guidelines for the Accreditation of Study Programmes](#) (cross-border assessments)
- [Guidelines for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Continuing Education](#)
- [Self-Evaluation Report for Institutional Accreditation](#)

INTERNAL GUIDELINES

- Quality Handbook
- Higher Education Coordinator's Handbook

QUICK LINKS TO RELEVANT INFORMATION ON THE EKKA WEBSITE:

- Assessment committees: [IA](#); [Initial and re-assessment of study programme groups](#); [Accreditation of continuing education study programmes](#); [Accreditation of study programmes](#)
- Assessment decisions: [IA](#); [Initial and re-assessment of study programme groups](#); [Accreditation of continuing education study programmes](#); [Accreditation of study programmes](#)
- [The Higher Education Assessment Council, minutes of the HEQAC meetings](#) (in Estonian)
- [The Supervisory Board, minutes of the Supervisory Board meetings](#) (in Estonian)
- [Thematic analyses](#) (Analyses, Publications and Presentations)

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT EKKA

The Estonian Quality Agency for Higher (and Vocational) Education (EKKA) was established in 2009 as an independent agency under the Archimedes Foundation, a foundation established by the Ministry for Education and Research. At the time, the name of the agency did not mention Vocational Education as EKKA launched QA activities in VET only in 2010, when EKKA was tasked with accreditation of study programme groups in vocational education and training.

EKKA's predecessor, the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre, had already been established on 1 September 1997 as a separate structural unit of the Archimedes Foundation.

In 1997–2008, the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre organised accreditation of study programmes of all higher education institutions. A positive accreditation decision on a study programme was a mandatory prerequisite for the higher education institution to issue state-recognised graduation documents. Institutional accreditation was voluntary during that period. The Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre conducted six institutional accreditations of HEIs. A total of more than 1400 study programmes were accredited in the years 1997–2009 in Estonia.

The 2008 amendments to the Universities Act envisaged a transition to a new quality assurance system of higher education which included initial assessments of study programme groups, regular quality assessment of study programme groups, and regular mandatory institutional accreditations.

In 2009–2011, EKKA conducted evaluations of all study programme groups (in total 28) of all HEIs (in total 33). The purpose of the transitional evaluation was to reach a situation in Estonian higher education whereby all HEIs had the right to issue state-recognised diplomas in the fields in which they operated. According to the amendments to the law passed in 2008, starting from 1 January 2012 studies can be conducted only on the study programmes within a study programme group for which a particular HEI has been granted the right to provide instruction by the Government of the Republic. Between 2011–2019, higher education institutions that had been awarded the right to conduct studies, were required, at least once in every 7 years, to undergo:

- **Institutional accreditation** – an external evaluation assessing the compliance of the management, administration, academic and research activity, and academic and research environment of the higher education institution, with the legislation, along with the purposes and development plans of that institution.
- **Quality assessment of study programme groups** – an external evaluation assessing the compliance of study programmes as well as the instruction and

instruction-related development based on them, with legislation, national and international standards, and trends, with the aim to make recommendations for improving the quality of instruction.

In 2017, before starting the new cycle of institutional accreditations in 2019 as well as the process of amending higher education legislation planned by the MER, EKKA convened a development working group, which included delegated representatives of all major stakeholders of external quality assessment. The task of the group was to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the existing EQA system and propose changes where appropriate. The outcome of the work was presented and discussed in the Spring Conference *Winds of Change* in May 2018. As a result of the consultations, the new EQA system proposed by EKKA was approved by the MER and adopted by the Parliament in the new Higher Education Act in 2019.

The biggest change was the phasing out of regular quality assessment of study programme groups in all cycles of higher education. This topic is elaborated in the [chapter](#) about changes since the last Agency Review. In parallel, [the system for QA in VET](#) also underwent changes, transitioning from the accreditation of study programme groups to quality assessment of study programme groups, and providing expert opinions to the Ministry of Education and Research by way of conducting initial and re-assessment of study programme groups in which VET providers wish to conduct studies.

As a result of the broadening of EKKA's scope of activities, amendments have been introduced into the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board. Among the most visible changes is the change in the name of the agency – the new name shall be Eesti Hariduse Kvaliteediagentuur (Estonian Quality Agency for Education) and acronym HAKA. The changes entered into force on 12 June 2022, one day before this SAR was submitted.

THE SCOPE OF EKKA'S ACTIVITIES

Since its last Agency Review, EKKA as an organisation has undergone substantial changes. In 2020, the parent entity of EKKA – the Archimedes Foundation – was merged with two other foundations responsible for education and educational IT. Thus, the Education and Youth Board was formed with EKKA becoming an independent agency within its structure. EKKA's independence is enshrined in the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board, with safeguards put in place to ensure no undue influence on EKKA's activities or decisions. This matter is elaborated further in [Chapter 3](#) of this SAR.

Moreover, since its last Agency Review EKKA has broadened its scope of QA activities to also include continuing education and general education in addition to QA in higher education and VET (Table 1).

Table 1. EKKA's areas of responsibilities along with respective EQA.

EKKA's ACTIVITIES 2022 IN A NUTSHELL

HIGHER EDUCATION	VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING	CONTINUING EDUCATION	GENERAL EDUCATION
Institutional accreditation		Developing the system for EQA in the area of continuing education	Developing the system for quality enhancement in general education
Initial assessment of study programme groups	Quality assessment of study programme groups	Quality assessment of continuing education (piloting)	Development programmes for quality enhancement
Accreditation of study programmes	Initial assessment of study programme groups	Accreditation of study programmes in continuing education	
Thematic reviews			
DEVELOPMENT OF STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES, TRAININGS, ANALYSES, INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES			

* The activities regulated by the ESG are marked in bold.

In the reporting period, EKKA has conducted **two institutional accreditations outside Estonia**, the IA of Tajik National University (2021) and Yerevan “Haybusak” University (2019) (elaborated in [Chapter 2 ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes](#)). An **accreditation decision for a continuing education programme** was adopted in 2018 for the Border Security and Management for Senior Leadership Course at the OSCE Border Management Staff College in Tajikistan (elaborated in [Chapter 1](#)).

The dynamic in the scope of EKKA's activities is characterized by various performance indicators (see Table 4).

EKKA'S ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

EKKA's main activities as well as structural units are listed in the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board. EKKA's strategic objectives and focus areas are agreed at the level of EKKA's **Supervisory Board**, comprising stakeholder representatives. EKKA's day to day operations are steered by the **Director of EKKA** and implemented by the **EKKA Secretariat** (see Figure 1).



EKKA Secretariat

- Assessment Directors for Higher Education
- Assessment Director for Vocational Education
- Assessment Director for Continuing Education
- Assessment Director for General Education
- Training Director in Vocational Education
- Director for Development
- Information Manager
- Assessment Coordinators
- Educational Technologist
- Project Coordinator

Figure 1. Organizational structure of EKKA.

The EKKA Secretariat has grown to 15 members (including the Director) and is expected to reach 18 full time staff members by the end of 2022.

We have acknowledged the gender imbalance among EKKA staff members, although the employees do not see it as a problem. The gender balance is much better in all other EKKA bodies: the Supervisory Board, Quality Assessment Councils, and assessment panels. Nevertheless, we shall try to design all future recruitments in a way that would be equally attractive to all potential candidates and hopefully make headway in achieving a better balance.

The achievement of EKKA's objectives would not be possible without the **experts and mentors** that EKKA employs on the basis of service contracts. On top of the expertise of assessment experts and mentors, EKKA also benefits from regular valuable input from the **Advisory Board for Continuing Education** as well as *ad hoc* consultative bodies (elaborated in subsequent chapters).

The role of both **EKKA quality assessment councils** – Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education and Quality Assessment Council for VET – cannot be underestimated. These top-level expert bodies comprised respectively of professionals from higher education or VET institutions as well as other stakeholder representatives, including student members, provide EKKA with guidance and feedback on its activities (i.e., the quality and relevance of assessment reports), approve the respective assessment regulations and adopt assessment/accreditation decisions based on assessment reports and other relevant assessment documents (self-evaluation reports). Quality Assessment Councils enjoy full autonomy in their decision making.

An **appeals committee** has been formed to process complaints and appeals and deliver independent verdicts.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

EKKA's office is located centrally in Tallinn at Tõnismägi 11. Its space of 180m² comprises four workrooms and one meeting room. There are four other meeting and conference rooms available for EKKA staff. The conference rooms are furnished with state-of-the-art video equipment and accommodate sessions of the EKKA's Councils as well as working meetings of the assessment committees.

Pursuant to law, the Estonian government finances regular external evaluation of higher education. In consultations with HEIs and the MER, EKKA prepares a long-term projection of expected external evaluations and based on that, requests funds for external evaluations from the state budget. Appropriations from the state budget cover both the costs directly associated with the external evaluations and the costs connected with broader quality development of higher education (trainings, conferences, seminars, publications of results, analyses). In the area of vocational education and training and continuing education, the Estonian state is covering the costs of accreditation of study programme groups and the respective development activities are financed from the European Structural Funds.

A higher education institution or VET institution, which wants to launch studies in a new study programme group covers the costs of the review itself. The rates and the calculations thereof are published on the EKKA website. Institutions have the obligation to pay the invoice prior to the beginning of the evaluation process. The rates include all costs related to the review. Table 2 provides an overview of the sources of financing of EKKA's activities and by main expenditure areas.

Table 2. Sources of financing of EKKA's activities and by main expenditure areas.

BUDGET	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
State funds	768 951	576 333	379 690	613 553	541 476
Incl. staff costs	197 557	170 982	175 426	147 311	117 876

Staff development costs	15 750	12 214	6 621	950	26 000
Remuneration of EQA experts	346 079	217 613	130 552	361 427	289 362
Administrative costs	209 565	175 524	67 091	103 865	108 238
EU structural funds	252 552	425 351	490 913	571 229	918 318
Incl. staff costs	127 398	186 067	203 447	232 348	305 460
Staff development costs	8 326	11 109	5 818	732	81 913
Remuneration of EQA experts	67 885	147 292	218 156	302 472	416 535
Administrative costs	48 943	80 883	63 492	35 677	114 410
Development projects and other type of income	91 838	241 461	194 160	119 027	176 387
Incl. staff costs	32 286	78 708	80 065	48 667	52 360
Staff development costs	5 489	37 854	18 172	18 455	11 660
Remuneration of EQA experts	37 432	70 762	66 131	41 860	63 402
Administrative costs	16 631	54 137	29 792	10 045	48 965
TOTAL	1 113 341	1 243 145	1 064 763	1 303 809	1 636 181

At present, both the infrastructure and financial resources satisfy our needs, apart from the perceived need for a fit-for-purpose information system, which we have touched upon in the agency SWOT section. During the current year, however, new staff members will be recruited due to the increase in the volume of activities in the field of general education. There are not enough working places in the existing premises for the new staff members, but judging by the lessons of the pandemic, there is no need to increase the number of working places in the office. We plan to apply the principles of an activity-based office and allow employees to choose whether they prefer to work mainly from the home office or at the office, while ensuring that enough meeting rooms are available and consciously planning activities with a view of strengthening collaboration.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

This self-assessment report (SAR) follows the Terms of Reference drafted collaboratively by ENQA and EQAR.

The process of drafting the EKKA SAR began already in early 2021, way before EKKA received information about or confirmation of eligibility to undergo a Targeted Review.

The process began with a mid-term review of the execution of EKKA's Development Plan 2017–2022. Each assessment criterion that was set to reach EKKA's goals for the period was analysed and a SWOT analysis conducted. All EKKA staff members were actively involved in this team exercise, which included seminars, group work etc.

Later in 2021, the process continued with monthly Development Seminars where EKKA's mission statement, vision and core values were discussed in detail and agreed among staff members. On top of that, the core competencies of EKKA staff members were discussed, also drawing inspiration from a similar framework document elaborated by ENQA.

In early 2022, the fruits of the work conducted on the Development Plan until then were presented to the EKKA Supervisory Board for discussion and were met with lively feedback.

When EKKA's eligibility to undergo a Targeted Review was confirmed, a more specific plan was drawn up for the preparation of the EKKA SAR. The plan included specific milestones and deadlines as well as a plan for involving stakeholders in the process. It was agreed from the outset that the SAR drafting process would be integrated into the process of preparing the new Development Plan for 2023–2027 and all EKKA staff members, regardless of their involvement in ESG-related activities, would be involved. A coordinator for the process was appointed from among EKKA staff members.

At the same time, work on the SAR started. Although Karin Laansoo was in charge of coordinating the process and preparing the draft for discussion, work on the SAR and on specific topics pertaining to EKKA's ESG-related activities continued in smaller groups. Tiia Bach, Hillar Bauman, Kaija Kumpas-Lenk, Liia Lauri, Heli Mattisen, Marit Sukk, and Jekaterina Trofimov provided substantive analysis and input into the SAR's chapters on EKKA's ESG related activities.

As the agency SWOT is in our opinion crucial to the agency's new Development Plan, reflecting on EKKA's strengths and challenges as an agency, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats were discussed on several occasions and in different formations involving EKKA staff as well as external stakeholders.

The drafting of the SAR included a complex analysis of regulations/guidelines for EKKA's ESG-based assessments/accreditations. Several clarifications were introduced into the

regulations resulting from this analysis. We also examined, once again, the recommendations made by the previous assessment panel to avoid any potential oversight.

The chapters of the draft SAR were submitted to all EKKA staff members for critique, for illustrating with examples and for further clarifications as well as analysis of our strengths and areas that merit further attention. The agency's SWOT also provided valuable input into the latter.

In parallel, work on updating the EKKA Quality Handbook intensified with most EKKA staff members involved at some stage of the process. The Quality Handbook is, first and foremost, a compilation of our agreed principles and processes and includes references to specific guidelines used by staff members that are used to ensure consistency and high quality of EKKA's processes and outcomes.

In February 2022, a reference group of EKKA's 'critical friends' was convened to the end of collecting critical feedback from stakeholder representatives on EKKA's development agenda and the SAR for the agency review. The group included partners representing all EKKA's core areas of activity: representatives from HEIs, VET schools, students, employers, former members of the HEQAC, representatives from the MER. With the support of our newly recruited educational technologist, we prepared an interactive learning object for the 'critical friends' to make it easier for them to grasp the outcomes of the development process thus far, but also to better visualize EKKA's challenges. The learning object also allowed for submitting written feedback. Despite some minor technical issues, the 'critical friends' appreciated this novel approach.

The 'critical friends' met three times either online or in hybrid format and provided valuable reflection and insight into the process. The outcomes of meetings with the 'critical friends' group were shared with members of the Supervisory Board and all staff members and as a result some principles that had already been agreed on, were re-opened, and reviewed. The Supervisory Board, in addition to providing input along the process, gave feedback to the almost completed draft of the SAR.

In August 2022, we are planning a joint seminar of EKKA staff, members of the Supervisory Board, members of the Assessment Councils and EKKA's reference group of 'critical friends' where we shall have the opportunity to discuss the draft EKKA's new Development Plan 2023–2028 in its entirety.

In conclusion we can say that the self-assessment exercise has proved to be beneficial for EKKA in several ways:

- It gave an impetus to review our regulations/guidelines and introduce clarifications where necessary.
- Some essential processes (i.e., thematic analysis) were analysed and better defined.
- It contributed to integrating new staff members to the tight knit team at EKKA.
- It contributed to constructive and meaningful dialogue between EKKA staff and stakeholders, which gave us a broader perspective of our present and future.

CHANGES SINCE THE LAST AGENCY REVIEW

LEGISLATIVE CHANGES AND THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A NEW QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN ESTONIA

In 2017, the Ministry for Education and Research (MER) initiated stakeholder consultations with the view of consolidating and harmonizing higher education legislation. The idea was to replace the Universities Act and the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act with a single act covering the entire higher education landscape.

EKKA provided input into this process in two ways: the Director of EKKA Heli Mattisen was a member of the steering group convened by the MER that prepared the legislative changes. Additionally, EKKA submitted a formal proposal for amendments concerning the QA system for higher education. EKKA's proposal was the result of extensive consultations with stakeholders. EKKA convened a working group to develop the mandatory external QA framework for higher education, including the principles and procedure for the next cycle of institutional accreditation of higher education institutions. The aim of the development process was to make the assessments less time and resource intensive, reducing overlaps between assessments and seeking ways to make them more interconnected, while maintaining the continuity of assessment processes. Another goal was to place special emphasis on previously overlooked assessment areas (e.g., mid-level management) and assessment areas for which previous assessments had indicated more cause for concern (e.g., internationalization).

Representatives of all the main stakeholders of EKKA (HEIs, students, employers, the MER) were included in the working group comprising 16 members¹. The responsibilities

¹ Ülle Ernits, Tallinn Health Care College (Estonian Rectors' Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences); Britt Järvet, Student at Tallinn University, Board Member of the Federation of Estonian Student Unions (EÜL); Paavo Kaimre, Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs at the Estonian University of Life Sciences (Estonian Rectors' Conference); Volli Kalm, Rector of the University of Tartu (Estonian Rectors' Conference); Tiit Kerem, Telora-E AS, Estonian Association of Architectural and Consulting Engineering Companies (Estonian Employers' Confederation); Liia Lauri, EKKA, Secretary of the IA Development Team; Heli Mattisen, EKKA; Maarja Murumägi, Estonian Business School; Margus Pärtlas, Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs and Research at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (Estonian Rectors' Conference); Katri Raik, Rector of the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences (Estonian Rectors' Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences); Siret Rutiku, Estonian Research Council; Kadi Steinberg, Eesti Energia AS (Estonian Employers' Confederation); Eneken Titov, Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences (Estonian Rectors' Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences); Maiki Udam, EKKA; Sigrid

of the working group included: analysis of alternative options for external QA in higher education along with their potential impact; consultations on the new conceptual framework for external QA in higher education and upon reaching agreement, submitting the concept paper to the steering group for the Higher Education Act for further development; stakeholder consultations on the principles and procedure for the new cycle of institutional accreditations, making amendments; approval of the said principles and procedure and submitting it to a broad range of stakeholders for consultations.

The process had two outcomes: the broad consensus among stakeholders resulted in the adoption of the *Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation* by the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education on 02.02.2018. The first institutional accreditations based on these guidelines took place in 2019.

The input into the drafting of the Higher Education Act bore fruit when the Act was adopted in March 2019 and entered into force on 1 September 2019. The new act consolidated provisions from the previous two laws, but also introduced substantive changes to the quality assurance system for higher education.

The previous system included three types of mandatory assessments: 1) initial (and re-assessment) for acquiring the right to provide instruction in a study programme group. After the right to provide instruction in a study programme group without a set term had been obtained by the institution, the study programme group entered the cycle of 2) regular quality assessments of study programme groups. 3) institutional accreditation (at least once in every seven years).

In the Higher Education Act in force, only two assessment types remain and only one is periodical. 1) Every higher education institution (HEI) must undergo an institutional accreditation at least once in seven years. 2) If an Estonian HEI wishes to launch a new programme (including a joint study programme) in a study programme group for which the HEI does not have the right to provide instruction, the study programme(s) would be required to undergo initial assessment of study programme groups. In the case of a joint study programme, a simplified procedure is foreseen in the respective regulation, provided that the eligibility conditions are met. Quality assessment of study programme groups, which played an important role in the Estonian higher education QA system until 2019, is no longer required by law. The abolition of study programme group (SPG) assessment was conditional – only HEIs with SPGs that had received the maximum assessment result (7 years) without conditionalities in the quality assessment of SPGs no longer needed to undergo such assessment. This meant that the last SPG in the third cycle of higher education underwent SPG assessment in 2021 and the last SPG assessment in the first and second cycle of higher education took place in 2022 and the assessment decision was adopted in May 2022. While there will be no more full assessments of this type, the assessment regulation will have to remain in force until the follow-up activities of the last assessments are duly completed.

Vaher, Ministry of Education and Research; Mariliis Vaht, Student at the University of Tartu, Board Member of the Federation of Estonian Student Unions (EÜL)

As a new feature in the QA system, thematic reviews are foreseen in the Higher Education Act. This title however is somewhat misleading, as in essence what is meant by 'thematic reviews' is a type of thematic analyses. The Statutes of the Education and Youth Board list conducting analyses and surveys among the core functions of EKKA and thematic analyses are therefore undertaken on a regular basis. The 'thematic reviews' mentioned in the law have been specifically mentioned because the decision to initiate such reviews is taken and the financial resources provided by the Ministry for Education and Research. These reviews are foreseen as a tool for gathering input into policy making, they fall outside the scope of the ESG for several reasons. First and foremost, they do not meet two essential criteria for ESG type activities (outlined [here](#)): 'Object': the activity concerns (an) organisational unit(s) such as (an) individual higher education institution(s), (a) study programme(s), (a) faculty(ies) or (a) department(s); and 'Nature': the activity follows a predefined process in which the object is evaluated/assessed against a set of predefined standards or another reference point, with limited or no flexibility; or the activity is undertaken for the purpose of awarding any kind of certificate, label or mark). None of the aforementioned criteria apply for thematic reviews; these are system level analysis focusing on specific topics agreed between EKKA and the MER. The role of thematic analyses, including thematic reviews, among the activities of EKKA is elaborated in [Chapter 5](#) that addresses ESG 3.4 Thematic Analysis.

On top of the assessment types required by Estonian legislation, EKKA offers two types of voluntary assessments: the accreditation of study programmes and the accreditation of continuing education programmes at EQF levels 6–8. Although there are no obstacles to conducting voluntary study programme accreditations in Estonia, there has not been any demand for such an assessment type domestically and we see the potential of the study programme accreditations mainly outside Estonia, The EQF level 6–8 continuing education study programme accreditation on the other hand can be used within as well as outside Estonia, including for the accreditation of micro-credentials.

CHANGES IN THE AGENCY LEGAL ENTITY AND STRUCTURE

On August 1, 2020, the former parent entity of EKKA – the Archimedes Foundation – along with three other entities was merged into a newly established public body called the Education and Youth Board.

The Statutes of the Education and Youth Board that were in force at the time of preparing the SAR had been revised as of January 1, 2021 and are publicly available also in [English](#).

§ 23 (1) of the Statutes states that *The Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (hereinafter the EKKA) is a structural unit of the (Education and Youth) Board, which performs independent functions.* § 23 (4) states that *In its quality assessment decisions, EKKA is autonomous and independent.*

According to § 23 (3) of the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board, the main functions² of EKKA are:

- Development and establishment of the principles of quality assessment of higher and vocational education and the procedure for conduct of 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 reviews.
- 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 educational institutions in Estonia by other quality agencies.
- Management of accreditation and quality assessment databases and enabling their public use.
- Preparation of analyses of quality assessment results and conduct of surveys.
- 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.
- Training activities and provision of advice related to assessment and quality of the field of education.
- Implementation of quality-related development projects and conduct of pilot evaluations in the field of education.

More information about the changes, status and structure can be found [Chapter 3](#) that addresses ESG standards 3.1 and 3.3.

CHANGES IN EKKA'S ESG RELATED ACTIVITIES

A number of significant as well as less substantial changes have taken place since our last Agency Review in 2017.

² In the new version expected to enter into force at the end of May, quality assessment of general education will be included in this list.

As described above, broad consultations were held and the conceptual framework for QA in higher education was developed in 2017. This resulted in the following changes in the mandatory QA system:

- The study programme group assessments in the first, second and third cycle of higher education were phased out.
- The institutional accreditation standards and procedure were overhauled and the assessment of a sample of study programmes was added to the scope of institutional accreditation.
- In 2017, an assessment procedure and guidelines were developed for the accreditation of study programmes in continuing education (described in detail in Chapter 1 of the SAR). This type of assessment was designed for continuing education programmes at EQF levels 6–8, and possible assessment of micro-credentials.

In 2020, the following changes were made:

- The adoption of the *Guidelines for initial assessment and re-assessment of study programme groups* which combined the two previously separate procedures/guidelines for initial assessment and the re-assessment of study programme groups into a single procedure in order to achieve more consistency.
- The adoption of the amended *Guidelines for the Accreditation of Study Programmes* which concern the procedure for cross border accreditation of study programmes. EKKA revised its assessment criteria by introducing more clearly references to student centred learning in its assessment process and by providing for more flexibility in the composition of the review panels.

In 2022, the following changes were made:

- The procedure for the assessment of joint study programmes was merged with the procedure used for initial and re-assessment of study programme groups. A simplified procedure was added into the *Guidelines for Initial Assessment and Re-assessment of Study Programme Groups* for joint study programmes that have already undergone an assessment by an EQAR-registered agency and received a positive result.
- A clause on follow-up was added to the *Guidelines for the initial and re-assessment of study programme groups*, placing an obligation on the HEI to submit a progress report on the areas for improvement listed in the assessment decision one year from the adoption of the assessment decision by the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education.
- The following more substantial amendments were made into the *Guidelines for the accreditation of continuing education programmes* (corresponding to EQF levels 6–8): the assessment committee now always includes a representative of students; the criteria for outcomes were clarified; provisions were added on challenging the assessment procedure or decision.

- The procedure for assessing progress made on a secondary condition was added into the *Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes (cross-border)* and the procedure for challenging the assessment procedure or decision was clarified.
- In order to keep up with developments regarding the inclusion of digital technologies in learning and teaching as well as other areas of higher education, these aspects were clarified in the assessment regulations on the basis of consultations and consensus reached with all major stakeholders (described below).

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, all higher education institutions in Estonia were precipitated into a temporary shift to e-learning. As one of the key functions of EKKA is to conduct thematic analyses on different aspects of the Estonian higher education, EKKA undertook to conduct a study exploring how well Estonian HEIs coped with the forced e-learning in the period from March until June 2020 (more on the study under the [Thematic Analyses chapter](#)). As it soon became clear that e-learning, online learning, and all kinds of hybrid modes of learning are here to stay, we decided to map best practices we could identify and based on what we learned; a working group convened within EKKA designed a package of proposals for updating assessment criteria and guidelines for different types of assessments. These proposals were then reviewed by the E-learning Quality Award working group, comprising educational technologists, and providing valuable professional input. Having received this input, EKKA convened an inclusive working group to which we invited 1–2 representatives familiar with digital matters (vice rectors, heads of IT departments and development units, educational technologists, and trainers on digital topics) from every Estonian HEI. The working group also included representatives of students and the Ministry for Education and Research. EKKA submitted our package of proposals to this working group for scrutiny, feedback, and amendments. Members of this working group collected feedback and input from within their HEIs and the discussions held at the working group were lively. There was a broad consensus that it is important to include the digital aspects in the assessment guidelines and thus clarify the expectations that would apply to all HEIs. Upon the completion of this round of consultations the amended proposal was once again sent to all Estonian HEIs for feedback, but this time none was received. As a result of the mandate from these consultations, the amended regulations for Institutional Accreditation as well as Initial and Re-Assessment of Study Programme Groups were adopted by the Assessment Council on 7.01.2022. More amendments were made into the *Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation*, however these only concern guidelines and not the standards to ensure equal treatment of all institutions undergoing institutional accreditation.

Other system level changes include changes in the way assessment committees work and assessment visits are carried out:

- The COVID-19 pandemic and advances in technology have given us an opportunity to develop a system for the training of and preparatory work by

assessment experts that is more inclusive, interactive, and collaborative (elaborated in the chapter about Part 2 of the ESG).

- The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns forced EKKA to find alternatives to traditional in person assessment visits. Since 2020, EKKA has gained extensive experience of and confidence in conducting assessment visits either in person, in hybrid format or fully online.

CHAPTER 1: ESG PART 2

THE ACCREDITATION OF CONTINUING EDUCATION

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard: External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

The mapping of assessment criteria and procedure has been carried out in [Chapter 4](#).

EKKA's *Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes in continuing education* have grouped the assessment criteria under five assessment areas: Study programme and study programme development; Learning and teaching; Teaching staff; Learners; and Resources. Under each assessment area the course provider needs to demonstrate how their procedures and practices ensure that the learners' needs, and educational objectives are supported. There is also a clause (point 21.5) in the *Guidelines* that grants the assessment committee the right to examine the internal quality assurance system for learning and teaching.

As with any non-mandatory evaluation, it is a challenge to ensure the periodic external review of the institution/programme/programme cluster. Having said that, the provider's QA system is reviewed in the context of the accreditation and attention is paid to the periodical nature of reviews, both internal and external. If the periodical external reviews are not a legal requirement, it is up to the provider to decide on the interval that they deem fit-for-purpose. However, EKKA has acknowledged the need to maintain a dialogue with the reviewed providers and can thus remind the provider of the nearing end of the accreditation term and the potential benefits of periodical re-evaluation.

Evidence of how these provisions have been put into use can be found from the [Assessment report](#) for the Border Security and Management for Senior Leadership Course – a blended learning course delivered by the OSCE Border Management Staff College located in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in 2017. In March 2022 the OSCE Border Management Staff College applied for the re-accreditation of the programme in the first quarter of 2023. No other examples can be given as no more accreditations have been carried out based on this regulation.

Conclusion

All standards in Part 1 of the ESG are covered in EKKA's guidelines and procedure for the accreditation of study programmes in continuing education.

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

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

The primary purpose of external evaluation, including the accreditation of continuing education programmes, is to provide educational institutions with feedback that supports their development. The purpose of accreditation of study programmes in continuing education is to determine whether: the objectives of the study programme are clear and appropriate; the teaching methods and tools used in teaching facilitate the achievement of planned learning outcomes; sufficient resources are available to implement the study programme; the studies are organized in a professional manner; the provider regularly analyses the level of achievement of the objectives of the study programme and, if necessary, plans improvement activities.

The assessment methodology was designed to be used both for single programmes as well as clusters of programmes from the same International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) study programme group. Accreditation of each individual continuing education programme may not always be reasonable or necessary. However, we found that in-service training providers should still have access to such an option (not an obligation). If an institution submits several programmes for accreditation at the same time, the accreditation decision, and the accompanying feedback for supporting development is given for each programme separately. We assume that passing a thorough assessment adds value to the learner, the curriculum, and the learning process, ensures the reliability of the offer for learners and employers and is therefore also an effective marketing tool for the provider.

When approached by OSCE in 2017 to conduct an accreditation of the OSCE Border Security and Management for Senior Leadership (BSMSL) Course at the Border Management Staff College in Tajikistan, EKKA decided to design the accreditation methodology in a way that would:

- a. Be in line with the ESG.
- b. Draw on EKKA's previous experience and expertise.
- c. Allow for it to be used for the accreditation of different types of continuing education programmes and clusters of programmes, including micro-credentials.

The methodology is designed primarily to assess the compliance of continuing education programmes or clusters of programmes with the ESG in institutions that are not higher education institutions but that offer programmes with intended learning outcomes related to the European Qualifications Framework for higher education (EQF levels 6, 7, 8).

At the time of the first (and so far, only) accreditation, awareness of the need for external quality assurance of continuing education was very low in Estonia. EKKA had evaluated continuing education provided by HEIs and VET providers in Estonia when conducting institutional accreditations (in higher education) as well as study programme group accreditations in VET (until 2018) and quality assessment of study programme groups in higher education (until 2022) and VET (from 2018). However, there was no mechanism in place for assuring quality in continuing education that was provided outside institutions of formal education, which only held a 20% market share. Furthermore, it had become evident that the role of continuing education was on the rise, which can be witnessed from the almost explosive emergence of micro credentials.

When developing the methodology for this kind of assessment, EKKA built on the experience of assessing continuing education provided by HEIs and VET providers. Moreover, higher education institutions and VET providers have been actively involved as key stakeholders in the design of assessment methodologies. Furthermore, stakeholders were also directly involved in the design of the methodology and *Guidelines for the accreditation of continuing education programmes*. During the preparatory phase, consultations were held with experts from the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences as well as with experts from OSCE.

Almost in parallel to this international accreditation, in 2018, EKKA embarked on a project aimed at developing a quality assurance system for continuing education in Estonia. Although our experience with the ESG was a source of inspiration, the quality assessment of continuing education does not fall within the scope of the ESG. Having said that, the experience has provided us with an understanding of the continuing education sector and its challenges.

To foster more permanent dialogue with sector stakeholders, we have convened an advisory body comprising representatives of continuing education stakeholders and experts called the Advisory Board for Continuing Education. The role of the Advisory Board is to provide input into the design of methodologies for the assessment of continuing education, to approve the quality assessment regulation for continuing education, to consult and approve proposals to the MER on enhancement measures for continuing education as well as to act as ambassadors for quality enhancement within the continuing education sector. Thus, we are closely monitoring the developments in the sector and receiving input from stakeholders to update the accreditation/assessment procedures where necessary.

On top of stakeholder consultations during the design phase of this assessment type, the *Guidelines* for the accreditation of continuing education programmes puts extensive emphasis on the involvement of stakeholders in the design and delivery of the study programme under assessment. The assessment committee is tasked with collecting evidence from the Self-evaluation report; other documents and interviews with the different stakeholders on whether the programme and its delivery meet the needs of participants as well as employers and other stakeholders.

The assessment procedure is designed with the view of not being excessively burdensome for the provider under assessment. For the same reason EKKKA tries to keep the assessment committees for this type of accreditations compact and procedures efficient.

Conclusion

The *Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes in continuing education* are designed and improved in accordance with the requirements set in ESG 2.2. Although there has been only one accreditation under this regulation to date, we decided not to repeal the procedure. One reason is undoubtedly that the OSCE College should be able to apply for a new accreditation. On the other hand, the national system for the quality assessment of continuing education in Estonia, which we are developing in close cooperation with stakeholders, will not focus on each individual curriculum, but on the institution's ability to provide in-service training in a cluster of study programmes. Moreover, not all in-service training is included in the scope of the ESG. Offering this type of accreditation will certainly not be one of EKKAs focus activities, but the possibility to obtain a confirmation from an authorised agency that a programme complies with the ESG and the specific EQF level of higher education should be available for the providers that are not higher education institutions. As it is a voluntary process, it is up to each institution to calculate whether the benefits of the accreditation process outweigh the investment in human and financial resources required to complete it. However, the future of external quality assurance in continuing education is still under development. We see the involvement of several stakeholders in this process as one of our strengths. The actual role of the Advisory Board for Continuing Education convened by EKKKA has exceeded preliminary expectations and this body has become a think tank for the development of a national EQA system for continuing education in Estonia.

ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

Standard: External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- a report resulting from the external assessment;
- a consistent follow-up.

Before a contract for carrying out an accreditation is concluded between a provider and EKKKA, EKKKA conducts a training to explain the assessment criteria and methodology so that the provider is aware of what will be assessed and how and they can be best prepared for it.

Points 9 and 10 of the *Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes in continuing education* foresee that a self-evaluation report is prepared by the institution/programme under assessment. A template for the self-evaluation report is provided by EKKA.

Point 20 of the *Guidelines* describes an assessment visit as a mandatory component of each accreditation. Depending on the circumstances, the assessment visit may be conducted either face-to-face, in hybrid format or online.

Point 21 of the *Guidelines* lists the 'tools' on top of the Self-evaluation report at the disposal of the assessment committee: access to documents, learning materials and sessions, possibility to interview stakeholders, an examination of the infrastructure and the internal quality assurance system of learning and teaching etc.

The assessment report template is designed to provide as much information as possible on whether the assessment criteria are met. An assessment committee shall include in their report an analysis of information gathered under five assessment areas: study programme and study programme development, learning and teaching, teaching staff, participants and resources that form the 'component assessments'.

The assessment report also provides the opportunity for the assessment committee to give some recommendations that fall outside the assessment criteria. This enables committee members to give further input into quality enhancement of the programme under assessment.

Based on an Assessment report prepared by the assessment committee, the EKKA Higher Education Quality Assessment Council shall adopt the ultimate decision on the accreditation outcome of the programme. The regulation establishes clear criteria for outcomes and defines the margins of discretion that can be exercised by the Assessment Council.

Point 38 of the *Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes in continuing education* states that *One year after the issuing of the certificate, EKKA asks the provider to give the Council a written review of the planned and implemented activities deriving from the recommendations presented in the assessment report, as well as their results.* Different follow-up is foreseen for the scenario where the accreditation decision is adopted with attached conditions. In these cases, the Council shall allow the provider a time to rectify the deficiencies identified in the accreditation decision. The Council has the right to convene an assessment committee to check the fulfilment of the condition(s). If the conditions are met in a timely manner, the Council shall decide that the accreditation of the study programme for a period of five years remains in force. If the secondary condition is not met by the provider, the Council shall decide whether to establish a new secondary condition or to revoke the conditionally granted accreditation.

In the case of the OSCE College, the accreditation decision stated that the provider is expected to submit a written overview of the planned and implemented improvement activities. Unfortunately, the submission of the report was construed as an opportunity by the college, not as an obligation, and EKKA failed to remind the college of the need for it. EKKA learnt a lesson from this – the need to maintain contact and dialogue with

institutions having undergone cross-border evaluations and remind them of their obligation to follow up on progress made if need be. This lesson learnt has already been implemented in our subsequent cross-border evaluations.

The OSCE College has, in early 2022, applied to undergo a new accreditation and in this context reported on their progress regarding the recommendations made in their accreditation decision. A more detailed overview will be included in their next Self-Assessment Report (to be submitted in January 2023).

Conclusion

The accreditation of study programmes in continuing education is implemented in accordance with the standards and guidelines of ESG standard 2.3. Relevant information concerning the accreditation procedure is published on the EKKA website. Criteria for outcomes are pre-defined and clear. The whole procedure follows the rules and principles EKKA is applying in all types of evaluations to ensure the reliability and consistency of EQA activities. In this particular type of EQA activity, it is not possible to demonstrate consistency as there has only been one accreditation of this kind but taking into account that EKKA applies the same principles to all EQA activities, EKKA has enough experience to ensure consistent implementation when accrediting continuing education programmes.

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard: External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

Point 11 of the *Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes in continuing education* stipulates that: *Assessment committees (hereinafter referred to as committees) shall have at least four members. A committee shall comprise an employer representative, a representative of students, a training expert in the respective field of specialization and an expert in the field of quality assurance.* In order to keep accreditations affordable for educational institutions, EKKA tries to conduct them using compact assessment committees.

Experts are selected into assessment committees based on their previous experience and expertise, making sure that the right balance is struck. The *Guidelines* also establish the requirements to committee members and conditions for avoiding conflict of interest. Duties of committee members as well as those of the Chair of the assessment committee are also described.

All assessment committee members shall undergo a training by EKKA focusing on the particular assessment type/assignment upon embarking on an accreditation.

Because of regular domestic assessments of continuing education, EKKA has developed a pool of trained continuing education assessment experts, some already having previous assessment experience. Assessment experts with experience in QA of higher

education are also eligible. Each assessment committee is supported by an experienced assessment coordinator.

EKKA is aware of the requirement in ESG 2.4 to include a student member in the expert panel and recognizes the importance of this practice. This approach has been followed consistently and meticulously in all higher education assessment conducted by EKKA. However, in the 2017 accreditation of the OSCE Border Security and Management for Senior Leadership (BSMSL) Course at the Border Management Staff College in Tajikistan, there was no student representative in the assessment committee. This was a compromise with a view to keeping the costs of the accreditation reasonable while making sure that the professional expertise necessary to assess whether the requirements of the highly regulated field are properly met. An employer representative as a 'potential participant' in the meaning of someone who falls within the intended target group of the course was involved in the assessment committee. However, after some consideration, we deemed it important to include in each evaluation of in-service training offered at higher education level a student who is enrolled at or has recently graduated from a higher education curriculum and who belongs to the potential target group of the programme. In 2022, amendments were introduced to the *Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes in continuing education* with a view of ensuring that a student representative is included in each assessment committee.

Conclusion

The composition of the expert committee, the requirements for experts and the preparation of experts for an accreditation is fully in line with the requirements of ESG standard 2.4. After lengthy discussions on who can represent the student viewpoint in a committee (stemming from the diverse nature of continuing education programmes and their target audiences), EKKA has now decided and enshrined in the accreditation *Guidelines* that a student representative should always be involved as a member of each expert committee accrediting continuing education programmes.

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

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

For the purpose of accreditation of continuing education programmes, EKKA has devised a set of clear criteria listed in the *Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes in continuing education*. The criteria are listed under section II of the *Guidelines* and grouped into five assessment areas: *Study programme and study programme development; Learning and teaching; Teaching staff; Learners; and Resources*.

On the basis of the self-evaluation report drafted by the educational institution under assessment, other documents and public information as well as interviews conducted

and observations made during the assessment visit, the assessment committee drafts an assessment report, providing an analysis of all the criteria listed in the *Guidelines* as well as the assessment committee's judgement on whether the criteria under each assessment area *conform to requirements, partially conform to requirements; or do not conform to requirements*. On top of the judgements and analysis, the assessment committee can outline commendations and make recommendations to the educational institution/programme under assessment. The draft assessment report is scrutinized by at least two EKKA staff members before it is sent to the educational institution for fact-checking and then the final report submitted to EKKA.

The decision on a programme is adopted by the EKKA Higher Education Quality Assessment Council. The *Guidelines* document provides clear guidelines to the Assessment Council for the adoption of the accreditation decision. The Council can, based on component assessments by the assessment committee, accredit the study programme for five years, accredit the study programme for five years provided that certain conditionalities are met within a set deadline, or adopt the decision not to accredit the study programme. In the case the Council is not satisfied with the analysis or conclusions in the assessment report, the Council can also send the report back to the assessment committee for clarifications.

The Council has quite a wide margin of discretion in this type of assessment: if one to five of the component assessments are 'partially conforms to requirements', the Council shall analyse the strengths and areas for improvement of the study programme and decide to accredit the study programme for five years with conditions, or not to accredit the study programme. If the Council weighs between two accreditation decisions and finds that if the provider were to satisfy certain conditions, a more positive decision would be possible, the Council may adopt that decision with a secondary condition. This means that the Council must consider the substance of the committee's assessments and give clear and sufficient reasons for its decision in each individual case.

In the case of full accreditation for five years without secondary conditions, EKKA shall issue a certificate to the provider attesting the accreditation. The study programmes that have received an accreditation for five years with conditions, shall be issued the certificate when the conditions have been met.

Conclusion

The criteria for accreditation outcomes are explicit and published and fully in line with the meaning of the ESG standard 2.5. At present, it is difficult to demonstrate the consistency of outcomes, as only one accreditation has taken place. But, considering that EKKA applies the same principles to all EQA activities, the consistency of outcomes is ensured by equivalent procedures also in the case of continuing education programmes.

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Standard: Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners, and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

The consistently high quality of reports is ensured by using competent experts that have undergone training by EKKK and are supported throughout the assessment process by an experienced coordinator. The draft report is checked by at least two EKKK staff members and if need be, returned to the assessment committee for clarifications prior to being sent to the provider for further fact checking. Moreover, the HEQAC can, if not satisfied with the quality and clarity of the report, likewise return it to the panel for further reasoning or clarifications.

All assessment/accreditation/review reports by EKKK are published on the EKKK website in the section designated to the respective assessment type. Assessment/accreditation decisions are adopted by the Assessment Councils; and published on the EKKK website as separate decisions for each individual assessment. Assessment reports for the assessment of fulfilment of secondary conditions along with the respective decision adopted by HEQAC would also be published on the EKKK website. However, as we have only conducted one accreditation of a continuing education programme to date and no conditionalities were imposed on the outcome, no examples can be given. Examples of this practice can be found for the outcomes of assessments/accreditation in higher education.

Conclusion

Based on the single accreditation report, it can be concluded that the current practice meets the requirements of the ESG standard 2.6.

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

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

The document *Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes in continuing education* states the following (in accordance with the procedure provided for in the *Administrative Procedure Act*): *A person who finds that his or her rights have been violated or his or her freedoms have been restricted by assessment procedures conducted by EKKK or by a decision made by the Council may file a challenge. The challenge shall be filed with the Council within thirty days after the person filing the challenge became or should have become aware of the contested finding. The Council shall forward the challenge to the Appeals Committee which shall provide an unbiased opinion in writing regarding the validity of the challenge to the Council, within five days*

after receipt of the challenge. The Council shall resolve the challenge within ten days of its receipt, taking into account the reasoned opinion of the Appeals Committee. If the challenge needs to be investigated further, the deadline for its review by the Council may be extended by a maximum of thirty days.

The decision by the Council may also be challenged within thirty days after the delivery of the final decision, by filing an action with the Tallinn courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court of the Republic of Estonia. So far, no appeals or complaints have been submitted under this type of assessment.

The constitution of the Appeals Committee is regulated in the EKKA document *Procedure for the formation of Estonian Higher Education Quality Assessment Council and the Appeals Committee* which is available on the EKKA website. Information about the appeals and complaints process is also included in the contract concluded between EKKA and the applicant.

Conclusion

Complaints and appeals processes are clearly defined in the *Guidelines for the accreditation on study programmes in continuing education* and communicated to the institutions.

CHAPTER 2: TARGETED STANDARDS FROM THE ESG

PART 2

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

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

EKKA builds its external assessment processes on the Continuous Quality Improvement approach, meaning the cyclical nature of the processes of planning, implementation, assessment, and improvement. EKKA has mapped its stakeholders in its Development Plan and is mindful of their needs and expectations. EKKA's current assessment concept as well as regulations have been designed in collaboration with EKKA's principal stakeholders. Even the smallest amendments to the regulations undergo scrutiny and approval by the HEQAC, which comprises EKKA's main stakeholder representatives: representatives of HEIs, labour market, and students. Furthermore, when one cycle of a certain type of assessment has been completed, we critically analyse the outcomes and areas for improvement with the stakeholders and evaluate whether it is fit for purpose to continue with a similar assessment procedure, introduce changes into the procedure, or completely discontinue the assessment type.

All EKKA regulations are based on European framework documents and existing legislation in Estonia, include clear aims and criteria and are published on the EKKA website. **The basic principles applied to all external reviews are as follows:**

- External evaluation procedures are in accordance with the legislation and strategies of the Republic of Estonia as well as with international trends and respect the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.
- The primary purpose of external evaluation is to provide educational institutions feedback that supports their development. EKKA believes that the responsibility for QA lies – first and foremost – with the educational institution itself, and EKKA's role is to provide some tools and guidance to the HEI. However, we consider the external assessment as a tool for supporting the strategic management, quality culture and receiving feedback on their development in a wider sense on the one hand, and we would like the institutions to perceive it in this way; on the other hand, these external QA procedures check the compliance with the agreed

criteria and standards, and both assessments have consequences for a HEI. Therein lies a certain challenge for us as an agency: to assess the compliance with the set criteria, while at the same time give feedback on the developments that have taken place at the HEI and give recommendations for further development.

- The focus of external evaluations is on the core processes of an educational institution. The core processes are teaching and learning, strategic management, research, and development. As an example, in the case of institutional accreditation, the purpose is to support the development of strategic management and a quality culture that promotes learning-centeredness, creativity, and innovation in the higher education institutions, as well as to increase the societal impact of education, research and development delivered by the HEIs.
- All expert panels for EKKA's assessments falling within the scope of the ESG are, as a rule, international; panels consisting of only local experts are also possible in the case of initial and re-assessment of study programme groups. When evaluating educational institutions, experts take into consideration the local context (i.e., legal framework) as well as international perspectives.
- Standards and requirements are formulated in a way that allows for the assessment of input, processes, and output, and guides educational institutions to compare themselves with similar institutions in Estonia and abroad.
- EKKA is mindful of the resources (including time, human and financial resources) invested both by the Agency and the institution under assessment. For example, we try to integrate assessments whenever possible, e.g., IA with quality assessment of study programme group in vocational education, as was the case in the Estonian Military Academy or the Tartu Health Care College, or, for instance, assessing the fulfilment of secondary condition of a study programme group in conjunction with institutional accreditation in the Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary. Also, internal evaluation of programmes taking place within a HEI should be closely connected with external review, meaning that internal reviews should be an integral part of external evaluations and not an extra activity that an institution should undertake solely for the purpose external assessment.

Although EKKA was assessed as fully complying with ESG standard 2.2 during EKKA's previous Agency Review, the Review Panel noted: *The review panel acknowledges the good suggestion from EKKA on the need to streamline assessment procedures in order to eliminate duplication of activity for both the HEIs and EKKA. This suggestion should be implemented in the next cycle of assessments. Approaches to integration of assessment types should be explored more fully.*

EKKA can report that this suggestion by the ENQA Review Panel has been implemented. After one cycle of assessments was completed, EKKA decided to discontinue the quality assessment of study programme groups in the first, second and third cycles of higher education. As EKKA no longer conducts quality assessment of study programme groups at doctoral level, the risk of overlapping of EKKA's assessment with the evaluations of

research conducted by the Estonian Research Council (ERC) no longer exists. R&D is one standard (out of 12) in institutional accreditation, and in evaluating this standard, EKKA panels use the results of research evaluation by the ERC and data from the research information system. There is no overlapping between the evaluations anymore.

In small higher education institutions, different types of assessments have been conducted by the same expert panel (e.g., institutional accreditation and quality assessment of a study programme group). This has been done, for instance, in small theological seminaries (the Estonian Methodist Theological Seminary) and professional higher educational institutions (the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences). Furthermore, in those professional higher education institutions, which also provide vocational education and training (VET), the institutional accreditation has been combined with the quality assessment of VET programme groups. Whether different assessments can and should be combined is always agreed with the institution under review. EKKA considers such flexibility in external assessment procedures as one of our strengths. From spring 2019, the main tool for external evaluation in higher education is institutional accreditation, which includes the assessment of study programmes on a sample basis during the accreditation procedure.

Institutional accreditation (IA)

§ 38 (1) of the Higher Education Act stipulates that institutional accreditation is *an external assessment in the course of which the compliance of the management, work organisation, teaching and research activities, and of the teaching, learning and research environment of a higher education institution with the goals, objectives and development plan of the institution is assessed.*

The methodology for the current IA model was developed in 2017 in close collaboration with various stakeholders, including students. The concept and its elaboration process are described in the document [Higher Education Assessment Concept 2020](#). The accreditation is carried out on the basis of 12 distinct standards that are elaborated by guidelines; the indicators that accompany each standard are mandatory for the institution.

As IA remains the single compulsory periodic assessment for HEIs in Estonia, aspects pertaining both to the strategic management of the entire HEI and to study programmes are taken into consideration. The sample of programmes that are reviewed in the process of institutional accreditation are agreed with the HEI; they include programmes from different cycles of higher education and their number depends on the size of the HEI and the number of study programme groups in which instruction is provided. The results of previous study programme group quality assessments are likewise taken into consideration as well as suggestions made by the institution. The sample of study programmes is analysed in three assessment areas: 1) planning and management of studies, 2) learning, teaching, and assessment, and 3) development, cooperation, and internationalisation of teaching staff. The evaluation of the sample programmes provides important input into the assessment of the IA standards and vice

versa – allows to assess how the principles agreed at the level of the institution are implemented at the study programme level.

EKKA has designed the methodology for institutional accreditation taking into consideration the following aspects:

- All standards from ESG Part 1 are covered.;
- The accreditation time frame is known for all parties years in advance of the accreditation.
- A comprehensive SER is required from the HEI.
- A training for the HEI is organised by EKKA a year before the institutional accreditation to explain the standards.
- An expert panel includes sufficient expertise and experience, members from outside Estonia, a student member, and an expert from outside academia. We also endeavour to include an expert from Estonia with the aim to bring expertise of the local context into the panel.
- A site visit or online interviews constitute an important element of the assessment.

The principle of stakeholder involvement in the development of the *Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation* has been set out in Section XI (implementing provisions) of the Guidelines as follows: *Changes to this document will be introduced by the Council following feedback from stakeholders on Council's preliminary amendments and their justifications.* EKKA tries to find a balance between the need to reflect important developments in higher education as well as society at large in the accreditation framework on the one hand and ensure a level playing field and comparability of accreditation results on the other hand. The IA Guidelines were amended at the beginning of 2022 resulting from discussions in the working group that included representatives of all HEIs and was tasked with providing input into the revision of the IA guidelines pertaining to aspects of digitalisation. For example, the current IA procedure now assesses the management, development and application of digital technologies, digital infrastructure, use of various digital environments, digital security issues, development of the digital competences of students and teaching staff.

Initial assessment and re-assessment of study programme groups

§ 9 (3) of the Higher Education Act stipulates that *The Ministry of Education and Research reviews the application [to provide instruction in a study programme group] within seven months. Involving the Higher Education Quality Agency specified in § 37 of this Act, it is assessed whether the quality of the studies meets the requirements for studies at the level of higher education and whether the resources and sustainability required for the studies are sufficient.*

Point 2 of the EKKA *Guidelines for Initial Assessment and Re-assessment of Study Programme Groups* states that *When an institution applies for the right to provide*

instruction, it is ascertained whether the quality of instruction meets the requirements laid down for the relevant cycle of higher education; and whether resources and sustainability are adequate for the provision of instruction.

EKKA has designed the methodology for initial assessment taking into consideration the following aspects:

- All standards from ESG Part 1 are covered.
- The assessment needs to be completed in a relatively short period of time.
- According to the Higher Education Act an institution submits supporting documents such as the curriculum for the study programme(s) to be launched, information about the adequacy and qualifications of teaching staff, financial sustainability, and justifications for launching studies along with endorsements from professional bodies. Additionally, EKKA requires the institution to analyse some of the criteria as outlined in the document *The list of information to be provided for the expert evaluation for obtaining the right to conduct studies.*
- Due to the need not to incur prohibitive costs, the number of experts on the panels are kept to a minimum, while always including a student member and a labour market representative from the field under assessment.
- A 'site visit' or online interviews with representatives of the HEI and stakeholders constitute an important element of the assessment.

The three assessment areas are as follows:

- 1) **The quality of instruction**, which includes aspects pertaining to study programmes, learning and teaching, incl. student-centredness, as well as how the studies are organised.
- 2) **Resources**, which includes financial and human resources and the infrastructure for providing instruction; and
- 3) **Sustainability**, which focuses on key strategies and analyses by the HEI for ensuring consistently high quality in the study programme group.

The *Guidelines* that EKKA currently uses for initial and re-assessment of study programme groups entered into force in 2020 and have been amended twice since then: on 07.01.2022 and 31.03.2022. The amendments included elaborating some digitalisation aspects based on broad stakeholder consultations on the matter, e.g., use of digital technologies in teaching and learning, development of digital competences and skills of academic staff. The more substantive change was the inclusion of the entire Chapter VII, which facilitates the assessment process for joint study programmes that have already undergone an assessment by an EQAR-registered agency. This procedure was designed based on best practices from elsewhere in Europe and was welcomed by the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, which was the first Estonian HEI that benefitted from the simplified procedure when they submitted a new joint study programme, which had already been assessed by NVAO (Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders) for initial assessment in early 2022.

Accreditation of study programmes (cross-border)

The accreditation of study programmes is, first and foremost, designed for accreditations conducted outside Estonia, as the accreditation of study programmes is not required in Estonia. Awarding the accreditation certifies that an individual programme complies with the quality standards of the European Higher Education Area, but for the HEI the accreditation also serves as an enhancement tool.

The document *Guidelines for the Accreditation of Study Programmes* sets out that *Each educational programme for which an institution seeks accreditation must be consistent with national legal requirements. Furthermore, the programmes should be in line with the core requirements of the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area, the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG) and the ECTS Users' Guide. The following assessment framework is therefore based on these key documents of the European Higher Education Area.*

In addition to the above-mentioned frameworks, EKKA has drawn on its experience of accreditation of Law study programmes in Moldova in 2015. Moreover, knowledge and experience from the quality assessment of study programme groups in the first, second and third cycles of higher education in Estonia (including input received from stakeholders) has been valuable in the design of the accreditation methodology. As the specificities of legislative framework in every country are different, local stakeholders are, as a rule, involved in the planning phase of the accreditation process - EKKA seeks information that is relevant for the assessment process either from the local external QA agency (if it exists) or the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, local experts are included in the panels.

EKKA assesses the study programmes in five assessment areas: **Study programme and its development; Teaching and learning; Teaching staff; Students; and Resources.**

The expert panel includes at least two members from academia, a student member, and a labour market representative where possible. The requirements to and duties of panel members are listed in the *Guidelines*.

Accreditation of each individual study programme may not always be reasonable. The institution can also submit several programmes in the same study programme group for accreditation at the same time. The accreditation decision and the accompanying feedback for supporting development are given individually to each programme. We assume that passing a thorough assessment adds value to the students, the programme development and the learning process as well as ensures the reliability of the education provided by the HEI.

EKKA's strengths in the context of the ESG standard 2.2 are:

- EKKA considers as one of its strengths its ability to react quickly and flexibly to the current needs of HEIs in terms of where the focus of external assessments should be, making amendments in the assessment procedures in collaboration with its

stakeholders. This flexibility needs to be balanced with the need to achieve consistency and comparability of assessment outcomes.

- Combining different assessments allows to reduce administrative and financial burden on the HEI.
- Proactive approach by EKKA in ensuring that higher education legislation is up to date and in line with the international and national developments in higher education, e.g., taking initiative in revising the learning outcomes of all three cycles of higher education described in the Appendix of the Higher Education Standard.

There are still further possibilities that we see in terms of decreasing the number of various external assessments for HEIs. Discussions are being held with the Estonian Research Council (which is currently responsible for conducting research evaluation at HEIs) and the Ministry of Education and Research on whether in the future EKKA could take on the task of conducting research evaluations and whether it might make sense to fully integrate research evaluation with institutional accreditation.

Conclusion

EKKA has demonstrated its compliance with standard 2.2 of the ESG. All external assessment procedures have clearly formulated aims, the procedures have been updated in order to comply with both Estonian legislation as well as European guidelines. Some assessment types have been discontinued. All stakeholder groups have been involved in reviewing and developing the assessment procedures, one of the goals being finding possibilities for limiting the number of various types of assessments and combining them whenever feasible.

ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

Standard: External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- a report resulting from the external assessment;
- a consistent follow-up.

EKKA ensures the reliability, usefulness, and consistency in implementation as well as the dissemination of outcomes of external quality assurance processes in the following way:

- The assessment process follows the guidelines designed specifically for the respective assessment type. The guidelines are publicly available on the [EKKA](#)

[website](#). All guidelines are available in English, the guidelines used for assessments conducted within Estonia are also available in Estonian.

- The schedule for IAs that are conducted in Estonia is known for years in advance as it stems from the outcomes of previous accreditations. A detailed schedule is agreed with foreign HEIs for their institutional accreditation. The initial assessment of study programme groups is initiated by the HEI seeking the right to provide instruction. The HEI submits the application to launch studies in a new study programme group to the Ministry for Education and Research, which forwards the documents to EKKA to conduct the assessment. These assessments cannot be scheduled in advance; normally HEIs submit their documents to the Ministry of Education by the 1st of December and the assessment visit organised by EKKA should take place before the end of March, meaning that in the case of initial assessments the schedule is quite tight. The time frame for the re-assessment of study programme groups is known well in advance of the assessment as it is set out in the initial assessment decision. The cross-border accreditation of study programmes is initiated on the request of the commissioning party and then follows the time frame which is agreed with the institution requesting the accreditation as well as set out in the respective *Guidelines*.
- For HEIs in the preparatory phase of institutional accreditation and the cross-border accreditation of study programmes, EKKA provides training on how to draft a comprehensive and well-structured Self-Evaluation Report (SER), but more importantly the assessment standards and criteria are discussed to ensure that they are well understood by the institution involved in the assessment. The HEI submits a SER on a template prepared by EKKA. The EKKA coordinator checks the submitted SER and if necessary, requests clarifications or amendments to the SER. The SER for an institutional accreditation is published along with the assessment report and decision upon the adoption of the said decision. One of the improvement activities scheduled for the next period of the EKKA Development Plan 2023–2027 is to further support HEIs in their self-evaluation and thus improve the quality of the institutions' self-evaluation reports; the first activities towards this goal are being planned for this year. At present, we often find the self-evaluation reports to be too descriptive rather than analytical, failing to adequately demonstrate the institution's strengths or analyse the improvement areas. Building the capacity for self-evaluation should also facilitate the work and preparation of the expert panel for the assessment visit. In the case of initial and re-assessment of study programme groups, a HEI submits the documents and information specified in the law and further elaborated by EKKA, EKKA requests from the institution a more detailed analysis of some criteria.
- While every expert panel is supported by an assessment coordinator, EKKA now assigns a tandem of two coordinators to every institutional accreditation process. In the new IA procedure, where there are 12 assessment standards and the

assessment committees are rather big, this is useful for the management of the whole assessment process, helping to manage the heavy workload involved and share responsibilities between the coordinators. The panel members have two contacts who can assist with their needs and requests.

- After the approval of the composition of the expert panel, the panel starts preparatory work individually and as a team. The preparation includes an introductory training by EKKA and a thorough analysis of the SER. In addition to the analysis of the SER, the panel should collect relevant information from public sources, e.g., the HEI's website, and other documents. A major and positive change since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic has been that the introductory meeting for the expert panel is organised immediately after the panel has received all the evaluation documents, i.e., about 2 months prior to the assessment visit, whereas formerly the introductory seminar and panel training took place in Tallinn one day prior to the start of the site visit. Having this introduction and training as early as possible in the assessment process allows for the panel members to be better prepared for the assessment. The panels now hold numerous meetings online before the visit to discuss the outcomes of their individual analysis and agree on their roles and specific tasks within the panel. The assessment procedure always includes an assessment visit. Due to COVID-19, online and hybrid visits (meaning some panel members being onsite and some participating online) have also been used during the past couple of years as an alternative to a fully physical site visit. In most cases both the HEIs and experts prefer a face-to-face visit and discussions. However, we have learned from feedback from the institutions as well as panel members that especially in the case of initial assessment and re-assessment it is not always necessary for experts to travel long distances to meet with a handful of people and, instead an online visit can be very successful and timesaving. Online visits during COVID-19 have become the new normal, we have learned many lessons and have on a regular basis reflected on the experiences and implemented improvement activities. For example, in the case of fully online evaluations, the coordinator with a couple of panel members visits the HEI and inspects the facilities. In general, we have introduced a lot of flexibility into conducting assessments, considering every situation both from the point of view of the institution as well as the circumstances of panel members. Reflections take place among all assessment coordinators at least twice a year at the end of each assessment period (June and December accordingly), or more frequently if necessary. Based on the reflections and discussions among coordinators and Assessment Directors (who are also coordinators), a special handbook for coordinators has been developed and updated.
- The findings of an expert panel are outlined in an assessment report. Although the chair of the panel has the main responsibility for the report in terms of its content, accuracy of information presented in it, and justification of the panel's assessments, all panel members are expected to contribute to the writing process according to the distribution of tasks agreed within the panel. See more

detailed information about the assessment report under the analysis on the ESG standard 2.5.

- Follow-up activities are included in all accreditation/assessment procedures.
 - Regardless of the type of assessment, a HEI is requested to submit a written overview of its activities that have been planned and implemented based on the recommendations in the assessment report, along with the results of such activities. For IA and study programme accreditations, an institution is expected to submit a report two years from the adoption of the decision. This progress report is reviewed by the HEQAC. If a secondary condition has been attached to an institutional accreditation decision, some members of the expert panel are included in assessing whether the secondary condition has been met by the institution. This change has been implemented in 2018 because experts are often in a better position than the HEQAC members to decide whether the institution has made the necessary progress in areas where concerns and non-compliances to standards/criteria have been identified. In the case where a progress report presented by the institution is deemed by the HEQAC to be superficial and not addressing the recommendations and actions taken by the HEI in a satisfactory manner, the Council may send it back to the HEI for improvements.
 - Until 2022 when amendments were made to the *Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes*, there was an oversight in the *Guidelines* for this assessment type, which did not include explicit provisions about follow-up. In 2022, this provision was added. For the accreditations conducted in Moldova in 2015, it was requested by and agreed with the contracting party – the Moldovan Ministry of Education – that the follow-up be carried out by the national quality agency. Unfortunately, due to the high workload of the agency, this was not followed through in a timely manner. We have learned a lesson from this and for new accreditations follow-up activities shall be planned from the outset as an integral part of the accreditation.
 - Until 2022 no follow-up was foreseen in initial and re-assessment of study programme groups. Previously the study programme groups were either to undergo a re-assessment within the set deadline (3 years) or be assessed within the study programme group assessment cycle. As the study programme group assessment was phased out with the last assessment taking place in 2022, we decided to include a follow-up procedure to the *Guidelines for initial and re-assessment of study programme groups* to collect information on the progress and make informed decisions on which study programmes to include in the sample of study programmes assessed within the IA. The *Guidelines for initial and re-assessment of study programme groups* were amended accordingly.

- EKKA collects various types of feedback: from the participants of assessment interviews after the site visit, from expert panel members at the end of the assessment process, and from the institution after the decision has been adopted and the deadline for challenging the decision has elapsed. Namely EKKA organises a feedback seminar with the HEI, analysing the process, discussing the findings of the assessment report and other issues related to the assessment that the institution may wish to discuss, and collects ideas for improving the assessment process. Whereas this was previously only possible for assessments conducted in Estonia, with online meetings having become the new normal, it can now also be used in international reviews. The purpose of collecting feedback is to receive information from different parties in the process and to consider what kind of amendments to make in the assessment regulations, assessment procedures, selection, and work of panel members, and in conducting the assessment visit.

Although EKKA was deemed in its previous Agency Review to fully comply with the ESG standard 2.3, the Review Panel suggested a further development: *The balance between assessment, feedback and implementation of recommendations should be reviewed so that more attention is focused on the implementation of assessment recommendations.*

EKKA can report that it now puts more emphasis on follow-up activities. In institutional accreditation there is a discussion with the representatives of the institution after the assessment, where we discuss the findings of the panel and ask for feedback from the institution on the whole assessment process. Furthermore, the institution reports within two years from the assessment on the improvement activities that have been carried out based on the assessment panel's recommendations and gets feedback from the HEQAC. As mentioned above, in 2018 we have decided that in the case a secondary condition has been set by EKKA Quality Assessment Council, some of the members of an assessment panel will be involved in the follow-up assessment and, on the basis of the report submitted by the institution, EKKA in consultation with panel members shall decide whether to evaluate the fulfilment of the secondary condition by analysing the presented documents, or if it is necessary to include a site-visit. In the new institutional accreditation procedure, the study programme sample is based on the analysis of previous evaluation results.

In the assessment regulation for initial and re-assessment of study programme groups a section on follow-up activities has been included, requesting the HEI to submit an overview of its activities one year from the adoption of the assessment decision.

Likewise, a follow-up provision has been added to the *Guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes*, stating that EKKA requests one year from the adoption of the accreditation decision that the provider, which was granted accreditation for five years, submits a written overview of its activities that have been planned and implemented based on recommendations in the assessment report, alongside with the results of such activities. No examples of this can be given as no accreditations of this kind have taken place during the reporting period.

Moreover, a selection of the improvement areas that have been identified in the assessment reports are also addressed in thematic analyses, including thematic reviews which we started to conduct in 2018. Such thematic analyses and reviews help to generate new, innovative solutions and provide a better understanding of the situation in the given area.

EKKA's strengths in the context of the ESG standard 2.3 are:

- Institutional accreditation panels are assigned two coordinators from EKKA, allowing to better share the workload. For other types of assessments, the need for two coordinators is individually assessed in each case.
- The introductory seminar and training for expert panels is conducted nearly two months prior to the site visit, followed by several panel meetings online, thus allowing more time for achieving efficient and thorough preparation work by experts for the assessment visit.
- Substantive feedback is provided by the HEQAC to the higher education institutions on their progress reports.
- In the self-evaluation reports for institutional accreditation, the HEIs analyse in more detail the actions and improvement activities implemented since the previous accreditation; expert panels are better able to provide their expert feedback on the progress made.
- Regular cooperation between coordinators (including Assessment Directors, who are also coordinators) to raise issues, reflect and seek ways to improve processes. The coordinators follow the Coordinator Handbook and EKKA Quality Handbook.

Conclusion

EKKA has demonstrated its full compliance with standard 2.3 of the ESG. EKKA's assessment procedures are pre-defined, publicly available and implemented consistently. The latter is achieved by adhering to the internal procedures and principles that are available to staff members in the form of the Coordinator Handbook and the EKKA Quality Handbook.

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

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

The consistency and clarity of assessment outcomes is achieved through the following system:

- Clarity and comprehensiveness of assessment Guidelines as well as guidelines for experts and HEIs.

- Competent and experienced experts.
- Competent and adequate support from EKKA staff.
- Broad-based expertise and independence of the HEQAC.

All regulations that EKKA uses for assessments/accreditations:

- List the assessment areas/standards.
- List the requirements for and duties of members of expert panels (including the clause on no conflict of interest).
- Outline the different judgements available to the expert panel.
- Describe the criteria for outcomes that are mandatory for the HEQAC. The HEQAC is left with a defined margin of discretion within the framework established by the regulation.
- Describe the ways for challenging the assessment proceedings or outcomes.

EKKA selects its members of expert panels from among experienced academics as well as including a student and a panel member from outside academia in each panel. While the substantive work of the panel is steered by the chairman of the panel, EKKA provides a working environment, training and facilitates the teamwork of panel members for the entire duration of the assessment process. Each panel is supported by an assessment coordinator, in the case of IA a tandem of two coordinators.

Although, in general, we are satisfied with our experts, we plan to take steps to harmonize through a more rigorous selection procedure the level and areas of competency that should be included of each panel. For instance, we wish for each expert panel to include in depth expertise of outcome-based learning and teaching. One of the challenges will probably be the identification of such competences with inflicting minimum bureaucracy on the experts. This extra level of consideration is to serve as a tool for achieving improved consistency and comparability of assessment outcomes.

Assessment report

Expert panels draft comprehensive assessment reports on the basis of the SER submitted by the HEI, input from assessment interviews, publicly available or requested documents, assessment Guidelines, national and international regulatory documents.

In the assessment reports the panel give their evidence-based judgment on each of the standards/assessment areas listed in the Guidelines for the respective assessment type using the designated report template prepared by EKKA.

The assessment report templates are designed so that the panel's report recognizes the strengths of the HEI as well as underlines the areas of concern and suggests further improvement activities. There is a clear distinction made between 'areas of concern', which imply non-compliance with a standard/criterion; and are accompanied by panel recommendations on improvement activities; and 'opportunities for further improvement', which do not refer to a non-compliance with standards/criteria, but to

areas where the panel may make suggestions on further development opportunities. Such differentiation makes it very clear both for the HEI and the HEQAC, in which aspect(s) the institution does not comply with the standard/criteria; the concerns raised by the panel are mandatory to address by the institution. The panel gives their judgement on each standard/assessment area/subarea using the following options: 'conforms to standard/requirements'; 'partially conforms to standard/requirements'; or 'does not conform to requirements.' In the case of institutional accreditation, standards where the institution has shown outstanding results and/or initiatives, can be marked with an additional note 'worthy of recognition'.

EKKA does not interfere with panels' substantive assessments. Final assessment reports should be consensual or in exceptional cases contain reasoned dissenting views of committee members. Every assessment report prepared by an expert panel is read by the coordinator and at least one more experienced EKKA staff member. EKKA staff give feedback on the report by pointing out inconsistencies, needs for clarification of the wording or messages, discrepancies between the analyses and assessment, etc. In institutional accreditation every panel has one member acting as a secretary, whose responsibility is to achieve an accurate, well-composed report. Initial and re-assessment panels do not have a secretary; the chairperson holds the main responsibility for the high quality of the final report. We recognise, as also described in the agency SWOT, that there is room for improvement in achieving a consistently high quality of all assessment reports. We have already taken some steps to improve the quality of reports, e.g., clearer guidelines in report templates, explanation of standards and criteria for experts, and separate meetings with chairs and secretaries of the panels to explain principles of writing a good report. We consider that the equally high quality of all assessment reports submitted to EKKA is a continuous challenge and are planning further improvement activities.

The draft assessment report is sent to the HEI under assessment for fact-checking before it is submitted. The panel will analyse the feedback received (which shall be made available to the HEQAC in its entirety) and decide whether or where to amend the assessment report based on that feedback when finalising the assessment report.

Assessment decision by the HEQAC

The *Procedure for the formation of the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education and the Appeals Committee* is designed with a view to achieve a composition of the HEQAC with a balance on the following aspects:

- Each broad group of studies is represented.
- No more than two members from the same organisation may belong to the Assessment Council.
- A member of the Assessment Council cannot be a rector or a vice rector of a higher education institution nor an official of the Ministry of Education and Research or a member of the Supervisory Board of EKKA.

- No person may be a member of the Council for more than six years.
- At the election of members of the Council, at least 1/3 of the members of the Council shall be replaced and at least 1/3 of the members shall continue their work in the Council.
- The Council members include members both from universities and professional higher education institutions.
- At least one employer (member from outside academia) and one student member belong to the composition of the Council.
- Gender balance is maintained in the Council.

The Higher Education Quality Assessment Council comprises 13 members. Members of the HEQAC are independent in their activities. Members of the HEQAC do not represent in the Council either the interests of the organisation that submitted their candidacy or the interests of their employer. Members of the HEQAC confirm the obligation to maintain the confidentiality of information that has become known to them by way of their membership in the Council and the lack of conflict of interests by signing a relevant declaration. Minutes of the meetings of the HEQAC are published on the EKKA website.

The following documents are made available to the HEQAC prior to each Council meeting:

- 1) The Self-evaluation reports by the HEIs/study programme (group)s under assessment (where applicable) and supporting documents.
- 2) The assessment reports drafted by expert panels*.
- 3) Feedback from the HEI/programme (group) under assessment to the draft assessment reports.
- 4) Any additional explanations and/or documents the HEI has submitted to the HEQAC in time for the Council meeting.

* In most cases the decision by the HEQAC is adopted on the basis of the assessment report by an assessment committee. A derogation is foreseen for joint study programmes already having received a positive assessment decision by another EQAR-registered agency. In such cases the HEQAC shall use the assessment report by the agency registered on EQAR; and shall verify the conformity of the assessment procedure and outcome with the requirements stipulated in point 37.2 of the *Guidelines for initial and re-assessment of study programme groups*.

On the basis of rigorous examination of the documents, members of the HEQAC have a discussion on the findings of the expert panel and adopt a decision. All assessment Guidelines clearly outline the principles of the decision-making process of the HEQAC and foresee a possibility to choose between different outcome options taking into consideration the strengths and improvement areas outlined in the assessment report. The Council ensures that the decision-making mechanism is clear and transparent, applied consistently across all assessments and can easily be followed in the minutes of

the Council meeting. The framework for the decision-making process can be summarised as follows:

- The HEQAC shall base its decisions on the expert panels' assessments. The HEQAC interprets assessment reports and adopts the subsequent decisions in a consistent way, taking similar decisions when comparable circumstances are present. While preparing and taking decisions, the HEQAC also must comply with the provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act.
- In the case of contradictions or inadequate justifications in a report, the HEQAC has the right to return it to the expert panel to be clarified or supplemented. The work by experts is deemed to be completed only after the HEQAC has taken its decision based on their report. During the reporting period of 2017–2022, no reports have been returned to expert panels.
- In the case of IA and cross-border accreditation of study programmes, the decision can be to accredit the HEI/programme for a fixed term (full or shorter) or not to accredit the HEI/programme. The HEQAC can also adopt conditional decisions, where the HEI is granted an accreditation for the full term, provided that the shortcomings underpinning the secondary condition outlined in the accreditation decision are eliminated within the set deadline and the HEI presents proof of this to the expert panel reviewing the progress made. If the HEI fails to provide evidence of its progress to the assessment panel and the HEQAC, the HEI is either given a new deadline for demonstrating sufficient progress; or the conditional accreditation decision is revoked and a new accreditation decision adopted.
- The procedure is different for the initial and re-assessment of study programme groups, where the decision whether to grant the right to provide instruction in a study programme group for an unspecified term, for a fixed term or not to grant the right to provide instruction is taken by the Minister for Education and Research. The decision adopted by the HEQAC serves as an expert recommendation for the Minister to make an informed decision. As a rule, the decision made by the Minister is in line with the recommendation by the HEQAC.
- All accreditation/assessment decisions are communicated to the HEI prior to their publishing on the EKKA website.
- The accreditation/assessment procedure or decision can be challenged in the Appeals Committee or in Tallinn Administrative Court. In the period 2018–2021, the Appeals Committee has intervened only once: in 2018, the private HEI Euroacademy challenged its negative institutional accreditation decision. In May 2022 the Tajik National University filed an appeal against the decision by the HEQAC to repeal the conditional institutional accreditation decision. The Appeals Committee, on the basis of examination of documents and deliberations, submitted its expert opinion to the HEQAC in early June. The HEQAC shall adopt its position on the appeal in June.

- The accreditation/assessment decisions are published along with full final accreditation reports. In the case of IA, self-evaluation reports of the HEIs are also published on the EKKKA website. All decisions regarding higher education are uploaded to DEQAR.

Since the last review, the HEQAC has adopted 94 assessment decisions in total: 59 decisions for the quality assessment of study programme groups, 17 institutional accreditation decisions and 18 decisions of initial and re-assessment of study programme groups. The details of the outcomes in all procedures are highlighted in Table 3.

Table 3. Overview of assessment decisions from 2018 until May 2022.

QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF STUDY PROGRAMME GROUPS 2018 – MAY 2022				
Assessment decision by the HEQAC	7 years	7 years with conditions	3 years	
Number of HEI SPGs	43	11	5	
INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION 2018 – MAY 2022				
Accreditation decision by the HEQAC	7 years	7 years with conditions	3 years	No accreditation
Number of HEIs	6	5	6	2
INITIAL AND RE-ASSESSMENT OF STUDY PROGRAMME GROUPS 2018 – MAY 2022				
Assessment decision by the HEQAC	Right for an unspecified term		Right for a fixed term (3 years)	
Number of HEI SPGs	8		10	

Among the institutions that have passed institutional accreditation, there are also two foreign universities – Tajik National University and Haybusak University (Armenia). In the case of both universities, the assessment reports were very critical, with 2 out of 12 standards deemed not compliant. In such a case, the HEQAC may consider whether to take a negative accreditation decision or to attach a condition to the 3-year accreditation decision. In both cases, the HEQAC decided to give the university an opportunity to eliminate the significant shortcomings and imposed a secondary condition. Haybusak University managed to fulfil the secondary condition (albeit with a delay due to the war

situation on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan), but the University of Tajikistan did not submit the required report to EKKA by the deadline and on 31.03.2022 the HEQAC decided to repeal the decision adopted on 27.01.2021 to accredit Tajik National University for three years with a secondary condition. The accreditation decisions and the assessment reports can be found [here](#).

EKKA's strengths in the context of the ESG standard 2.5 are:

- The guidelines developed for experts and the assessment report template provide instructions for panels on compiling a comprehensive assessment report. The assessment report distinguishes between 'areas of concern and recommendations' and 'opportunities for further improvement' to make it very clear in which aspects the institution does not comply with a standard or criterion and what kind of improvement activities should be planned.
- The assessment process (incl. the process of adopting an assessment decision) as well as the assessment standards/criteria are discussed with and explained to the representatives of a HEI before the HEI begins to draft its SER, and they are also explained to the members of the expert panel, so that they are well understood by everyone concerned.
- The fact that HEIs have not contested the proceedings of assessments conducted by EKKA or the decisions taken by the HEQAC nor submitted any challenges to the Appeals Committee during the past years proves that the decisions adopted by the HEQAC are clear and transparent.

As already mentioned, we would like to achieve a more uniform level of competency of expert panels. In addition to the general principles for the composition of expert panels that are outlined in the assessment regulations, we plan to review and put in place more detailed criteria for selecting panel members.

We also acknowledge the need to continuously increase the uniformity regarding the quality of assessment reports. Therefore, we are currently revising the guidelines for experts by making them more explicit (e.g., clearer principles on report writing, guidance regarding preliminary feedback given by the panel to the HEI post site visit) and interactive.

Conclusion

EKKA has demonstrated its compliance with standard 2.5 of the ESG. Standards and criteria of assessment are clear and publicly available, the decision-making process is transparent.

CHAPTER 3: TARGETED STANDARDS FROM THE ESG

PART 3

ESG 3.1: ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard: Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

EKKA has proven its compliance with the ESG Part 2 in its previous Agency Review as well as in some chapters of this SAR. EKKA's core functions are listed in the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board as well as the Higher Education Act and in other sectoral legislation.

All our assessments falling within the scope of the ESG, whether part of the regular assessment cycle or initiated by a commissioning entity, meet all seven standards in Part 2 of the ESG.

Since 2017, EKKA's activities have been guided by the [Development Plan 2017–2022](#). EKKA's mission statement in force since 2017 states that **EKKA's mission is to support the development of a culture of quality in the field of education and enhance the openness and competitiveness of the Estonian society thereof.**

EKKA's vision for 2025 in the Development Plan 2017–2022 states that EKKA shall be an internationally recognised competence centre in the field of enhancement led quality assessment, valued by its partners.

EKKA set three overarching objectives for the 5-year period in 2017, namely:

- I. EKKA is a reliable partner
- II. EKKA's activities are effective and efficient
- III. EKKA is internationally known and recognized

The achievement of these overarching objectives is measured under 17 criteria elaborated in the Development Plan.

In 2021, when the preparations started for the adoption of a new Development Plan, a thorough mid-term review of the progress made on the objectives of the 2017–2022

Development Plan was conducted, and the outcomes published on the EKKA website (in Estonian). Later in that year when the actual preparations for the next period started, these included numerous discussions among EKKA staff as well as consultations with an informal reference group of stakeholder representatives that earned the nickname of ‘EKKA’s critical friends’ (described in the section about preparing the SAR). The draft Development Plan was likewise discussed at length at and will eventually be adopted by the EKKA Supervisory Board.

The new Development Plan 2023–2027 will not be approved by the time of submitting this SAR, so the following draft statements are subject to amendments. For the upcoming development period, EKKA, with input from the Supervisory Board as well as ‘critical friends’, has agreed on the following.

EKKA’s mission from 2023 onwards will be to empower educational institutions and other partners in enhancing the quality of learning and teaching as well as supporting the development of learners.

Our vision for 2035 is: EKKA inspires the advancement of quality culture in education.

At the time of submitting the SAR, work on the Development Plan is still ongoing and the goals and objectives for the upcoming five years are yet to be finalized.

To plan the necessary actions for achieving the objectives in the Development Plan, EKKA prepares a work plan for each calendar year. Implementation of the planned developments are evaluated at EKKA’s development seminars at least twice annually (see Table 4). EKKA reports once a year to the Supervisory Board about the progress made on the objectives of the Development Plan.

Table 4. Performance indicators for EKKA’s activities.

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	2018	2019	2020	2021	MAY 2022
EQA decisions in total	35	335	747	445	41
Higher education, including:	27	34	10	17	7
Institutional Accreditations	2	5	3	5	3
Quality Assessments of Study Programme Groups	19	25	6	8	1
Initial and Re-assessments of Study Programme Groups	6	4	1	4	3
Accreditations of Study Programmes	0	0	0	0	0

Vocational education	8	55	67	63	3
Continuing education	1*	246	670	365	31
Number of experts involved	157	245	302	254	79
Higher education	124	110	48	70	39
Vocational education	33	121	129	120	10
Continuing education	3*	14	125	64	30
Number of thematic analyses	3	6	5	9	3
Satisfaction of educational institutions with review visits (scale 1-4)	3,73	3,71	3,77	3,76	3,74
Higher education	3,70	3,60	3,73	3,67	3,62
Vocational education	3,77	3,82	3,81	3,84	3,86
Number of appeals	1	0	0	0	1
International development projects	1	2	2	2	0
Cross-border quality assessments	1	1	1	1	1
Number of EKKA staff members	10	11	12	13	15
Budget (2018-2021 real costs, 2022 budget) in EUR	1 113 341	1 243 145	1 064 763	1 303 809	1 636 181
State budget	768 951	576 333	379 690	613 553	541 476
European structural funds	252 552	425 351	490 913	571 229	918 318
Development projects and other sources of income	91 838	241 461	194 160	119 0271	176 387

*Accreditation of the Border Security and Management for Senior Leadership Course at the OSCE Border Management Staff College in Tajikistan.

EKKA has set up a system for permanent as well as *ad hoc* involvement of stakeholders in its governance and work. The permanent measures include:

- The Supervisory Board (described in greater detail under the analysis on Standard 3.3 of the ESG).

- Higher Education and Vocational Education Quality Assessment Councils.
- Advisory Board for Continuing Education (elaborated in [Chapter 1](#)).
- Cooperation with the Federation of Estonian Student Unions under the umbrella of the Student Quality Network (elaborated in the [Annex](#) of this SAR).
- A systemic approach to collecting feedback on assessments (feedback seminars, questionnaires).

The *ad hoc* measures include (the list is not exhaustive):

- Stakeholder consultations with a view of introducing or amending assessment procedures (regulations).
- Thematic analyses and presentation of their outcomes (elaborated in the chapter about Thematic analyses).
- Thematic events (i.e., stakeholder roundtables on assessment results in a specific field, i.e., teacher training, aviation).
- The involvement of “critical friends” in providing feedback on EKKA’s mission and vision, agency SWOT and the Development Plan 2023-2027.

Although EKKA was deemed in its previous Agency Review to fully comply with ESG standard 3.1, the Review Panel suggested for further development:

EKKA should consider establishing a Stakeholder Advisory Board which would, inter alia, provide oversight of strategic planning, act as a conduit of information about key EKKA activity to a wide range of stakeholders and bring timely and relevant external activity to the attention of EKKA.

EKKA can report that this suggestion has been implemented by way of establishing a Supervisory Board comprising stakeholder representatives from all EKKA’s activity areas as already described above.

EKKA has identified its external communications as an area, where its activities could be more systematic and taken steps to achieve that. The aim should be that our experts and management take an active role in societal discussions, including social media. They should be encouraged to express their opinions and to bring forward the expertise of the agency in discussions that relate to its activities. In general, EKKA should take a more active role in communicating about its activities to the wider public especially through social media. We have taken steps to that end by way of developing a communications strategy in 2020. EKKA also took advantage of the post-agency-review progress visit and chose to request feedback on how to improve the agency’s communications efforts. Bryan Maguire, Director of Quality Assurance at QQI and Ronny Heintze, Senior-Consultant, Commissioner for International Affairs at AQAS were involved in this virtual exercise coordinated by ENQA. As a result of acknowledging the potential for improving external communications we have also put a lot of effort into keeping our social media channels active by launching series of Facebook posts etc.

Conclusion

EKKA has demonstrated its compliance with standard 3.1 of the ESG. EKKA's processes are based on our mission statement, defined goals, and objectives as well as the daily implementation thereof. EKKA considers the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders in its activities on regular or *ad hoc* bases, including the involvement of students and employers in its assessments, trainings, and other events as its particular strength. EKKA keeps track of the progress made on the objectives set in the Development Plan and can report that most of the objectives of the 2017–2022 Development Plan have been achieved. EKKA's stakeholders are involved on a regular basis through membership of the Supervisory Board and both Assessment Councils, as well as the Advisory Board for Continuing Education, stakeholders are likewise consulted in *ad hoc* formations for specific purposes and objectives.

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

Standard: Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operation and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

EKKA enjoys full independence in its activities while maintaining constructive cooperation with its stakeholders. EKKA's independence is ensured through the following measures:

- 1) EKKA maintains organisational independence within the Education and Youth Board (elaborated below).
- 2) Various stakeholders, although providing valuable input into EKKA's activities, have no effect on EKKA's decisions or assessment results. Stakeholders are represented in EKKA's Supervisory Board, however, the wide range of different stakeholders represented in the Board, and a cap on the number of members from any single organisation ensures that the best interests of learners and the society are at the heart of EKKA's activities, not the interests of individual stakeholders.
- 3) EKKA uses independent assessment experts. In higher education, most assessment experts are from outside Estonia. Experts confirm in the contract concluded with them that they do not represent their employers or HEIs they are enrolled at when in the role of a member of an assessment committee. Assessment experts are autonomous in their judgements.
- 4) Assessment decisions are adopted by the HEQAC. The HEQAC enjoys full independence, having no hierarchical relationships with the Director of EKKA, the staff of EKKA or the Supervisory Board (elaborated below).
- 5) To ensure transparency and accountability, EKKA follows explicit procedures that are publicly available on the EKKA website. Likewise, information on the

membership of assessment committees, Assessment Councils, Appeals Committees and Supervisory Board is available on the EKKA website. Information on assessment outcomes (assessment reports and decisions) is published on the EKKA website without undue delay.

Organisational independence of EKKA

On August 1, 2020, the former parent entity of EKKA – the Archimedes Foundation along with three other entities were merged into a newly established public body called the Education and Youth Board.

The Statutes of the Education and Youth Board that were in force at the time of preparing the SAR took effect on 1 January, 2021, with an [English translation of the Statutes](#) available. § 23 (1) of the Statutes states that *The Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (hereinafter the EKKA) is a structural unit of the (Education and Youth) Board, which performs independent functions.* § 23 (4) states that *In its quality assessment decisions, EKKA is autonomous and independent.* In March 2022, EKKA proposed new amendments into the Statutes which entered into force on 12 June 2022, one day before the final version of the SAR was submitted. Among the most visible changes is the change in the name of the agency – the new name will be Eesti Hariduse Kvaliteediagentuur (The Estonian Quality Agency for Education) and acronym HAKA.

EKKA has its own budget; budgetary decisions are taken by the Director of EKKA. Likewise, decisions on the recruitment of staff are taken by the Director of EKKA. EKKA also has its own visual identity, website, and other communication channels as well as communication activities.

To ensure the organisational and operational independence of EKKA, a Supervisory Board has been established, currently comprising nine members. Members of the Supervisory Board include and represent the main stakeholders of EKKA. According to the EKKA Development Plan, the main stakeholders of EKKA are the evaluated educational institutions, student associations, employers' representative organizations, professional and trade associations and the Ministry of Education and Research.

To avoid any party gaining excessive influence within the Supervisory Board, no organisation can nominate more than two members to the Supervisory Board according to the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board. Clause 8 (3) of the [Procedure for the formation of the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education and the Appeals Committee](#) also stipulates that a member of the Supervisory Board of EKKA cannot simultaneously act as a member of an Assessment Council. The mandate of each composition of the Supervisory Board lasts for 4 years.

The 9 members of the Supervisory Board cover all core activity areas of EKKA – higher education, vocational education, and continuing education. The current composition of the Supervisory Board includes the following members:

- 1) Ulla Preeden – Chairperson of the Supervisory Board; nominated by the Estonian Rectors' Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences; Rector of the Tartu Health Care College
- 2) Mait Palts – Vice-Chairperson of the Supervisory Board; nominated by the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Director General
- 3) Haana Zuba-Reinsalu – nominated by the Estonian Association for Advancement of Vocational Education; Head of the Luua Forestry School
- 4) Liina Põld – nominated by the Ministry of Education and Research, Deputy Secretary General for General Education and Youth Policy
- 5) Mait Klaassen – nominated by the Rectors' Conference, Rector of the Estonian University of Life Sciences
- 6) Marcus Ehasoo – nominated by the Estonian Student Union, Chairperson of the Board
- 7) Reelika Leetmaa – nominated by the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, Member of the Board
- 8) Renno Veinthal – nominated by the Ministry of Education and Research, Deputy Secretary General for Research and Development, Higher Education, and Vocational Education and Training Policy
- 9) Valdo Kalm – nominated by the Estonian Employers' Confederation; Port of Tallinn, Chairman of the Management Board.

The Composition of the Supervisory Board and its main functions have been described in § 24 subsections 2 and 3 of the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board. The Supervisory Board of EKKA:

- Makes proposals related to Chapter 4 “Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education” of these Statutes and approves amendments of the Chapter.
- Elects members of the assessment councils, members of appeals committees and the director of the EKKA.
- Approves the development plan and annual report of the EKKA.
- Makes recommendations on the development directions and activities of the EKKA.
- Approves the procedure for election and removal of the director of the EKKA.

The Supervisory Board meets regularly (three meetings have taken place in the first half of 2022) and provides valuable input on the expectations of various stakeholders. It has become an influential representative body, which has an opportunity to influence the entire EQA system in the area of education in Estonia.

Selection and appointment of EKKA Director

Responsibilities of the Supervisory Board include the selection of the Director of EKKA.

According to the § 24 clause (4) of the Statutes *The employment contract with the director of EKKA is entered into and terminated by the Director General of the Republic of Estonia Education and Youth Board on the basis of a decision of the Supervisory Board of EKKA.*

The procedure for the selection of Director of EKKA is as follows (Figure 2):

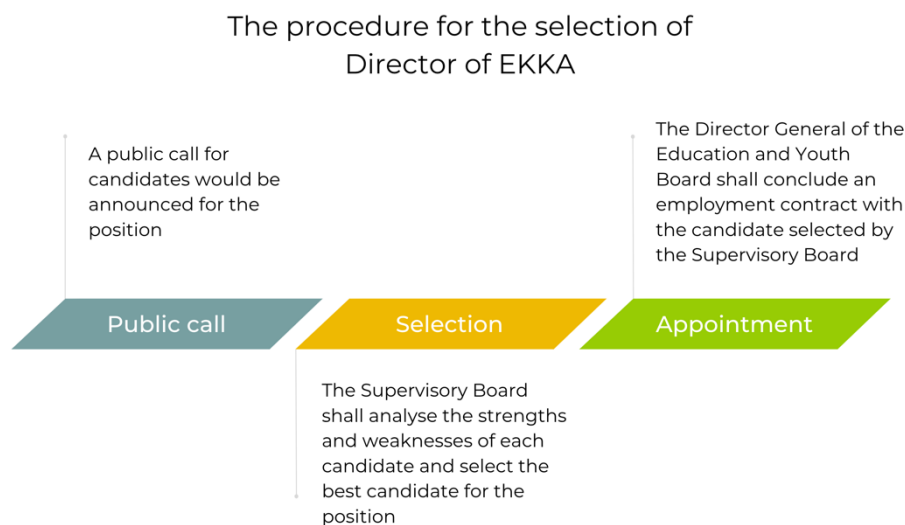


Figure 2. The procedure for the selection of Director of EKKA.

When the present Director of EKKA took office in 2009, an employment contract of indefinite duration was concluded with her. The legal framework only allows for concluding this type of employment contract under the circumstances. When the Education and Youth Board was established as a legal successor of the Archimedes Foundation (the former parent entity of EKKA) and three other organisations, the employment contracts of EKKA employees, including the Director of EKKA, were transferred to the new legal entity.

Although the Director General of the Education and Youth Board is responsible for concluding and terminating employment contracts, in the case of the Director of EKKA, the Director General can only act based on respective decisions by the Supervisory Board.

The Director of EKKA on the other hand is authorized to take decisions, conclude contracts, and take on obligations on behalf of EKKA.

The Higher Education Quality Assessment Council

The Higher Education Quality Assessment Council:

- Approves the rules governing the principles of and procedures for higher education quality assessment.
- Approves the principles of formation of expert panels and qualification requirements of panel members.
- Adopts assessment decisions.
- Approves thematic review reports.
- Submits an expert assessment of the quality of instruction to the MER when the right to provide education is applied for in a new study programme group.
- Reviews progress reports (follow-up reports) submitted by educational institutions.

Selection and appointment of members of the EKKA Higher Education Quality Assessment Council

One of the tasks of the Supervisory Board is to elect members of the EKKA Quality Assessment Councils and members of Appeals committees. The Director of EKKA concludes contracts with members of the Assessment Councils; the contract specifies the rights and obligations of a Council member, but also the observance of confidentiality and avoidance of conflict of interest. The contract is for a set period but can be terminated based on the relevant decision made by the Supervisory Board.

The Supervisory Board has adopted the *Procedure for the formation of the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education and the Appeals Committee* and held elections for the membership of the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education. According to point 6 of the *Procedure: Universities, professional higher education institutions, research, and development institutions, registered professional and trade associations, associations of employers, and associations of Student Bodies can submit candidates for the post of member of the Assessment Council*. However, as per point 4 of the *Procedure: Members of the Assessment Council shall be independent in their activities. Members of the Assessment Council shall not represent in the Assessment Council either the interests of the organisation that submitted their candidacy or the interests of their employer*.

Some exclusions are set down in the Procedure (point 8):

- No more than two members from the same organisation can simultaneously serve as members of HEQAC.
- Member of the Assessment Council cannot be the rector or the vice rector of a higher education institution nor an official of the Ministry of Education and Research or a member of the Supervisory Board of EKKA.
- No person may be a member of the Council for more than six years.

Rules for dismissing members of the Quality Assessment Council

According to clause 11 of the *Procedure for the formation of the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education and the Appeals Committee*, the Supervisory Board shall terminate the mandate of a member of the Assessment Council, in the case

- 1) The Council member violates the independence and confidentiality requirements stipulated in point 4³.
- 2) The Council member fails to participate in three consecutive Assessment Council meetings.
- 3) Of resignation by the Council member from the Assessment Council.

Appeals Committee

The task of the Appeals Committee is to provide the Assessment Council with an unbiased opinion regarding the administrative actions taken by the Assessment Council or the validity of the challenges filed upon the administrative decisions taken by the Council. The procedure for the formation and work of the Appeals Committee is regulated in the *Procedure for the formation of the Quality Assessment Council for Higher Education and the Appeals Committee*. The opinions of the Appeals Committee serve as recommendations to the Assessment Council, which according to Estonian legislation, maintains overall responsibility for decision making. Making the recommendations binding is not possible.

An educational institution seeking redress can also file an action with Tallinn Administrative Court.

Conclusion

EKKA has demonstrated its compliance with standard 3.3 of the ESG. Despite being under the umbrella of a public authority, EKKA's independence from the MER or the Director of the Education and Youth Board or any other party is ensured through the safeguards in the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board as well as procedures for the formation of Quality Assessment Councils.

³ Members of the Assessment Council shall be independent in their activities. Members of the Assessment Council shall not represent in the Assessment Council either the interests of the organisation that submitted their candidacy or the interests of their employer.

CHAPTER 4: ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard: External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

According to § 23 (3) of the Statutes of the Education and Youth Board, the main functions of the EKKA include: 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.

All EKKA's activities are based on the premise that the responsibility for the day-to-day quality assurance as well as quality enhancement lies with the educational institutions themselves. EKKA's role is to provide an external evaluation based on a set of criteria applied by experienced peers. EKKA, through its assessments and other activities also supports educational institutions in developing their capability of self-evaluation and internal quality enhancement.

EKKA's activities that fall under the scope of the ESG are:

- Institutional Accreditation
- Initial and re-assessment of study programme groups
- Cross-border Accreditation of study programmes
- Accreditation of study programmes in continuing education

EKKA's assessment procedures are in accordance with national legislation and strategies as well as with international trends and respect the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

Table 5 illustrates how the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG is addressed in specific requirements and standards in EKKA assessment regulations.

Table 5. ESG Part 1 in EKKA-s assessment regulations.

ASSESSMENT TYPE	Institutional Accreditation	Initial and re-assessment of study programme groups	Accreditation of cross-border study programmes	Accreditation of study programmes in continuing education
ESG PART 1 STANDARD				
<i>Title of the regulatory document</i>	<i>Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation</i>	<i>Guidelines for Initial Assessment and Reassessment of Study Programme Groups</i>	<i>Guidelines for the Accreditation of Study Programmes</i>	<i>Requirements and procedure for accreditation of study programmes in continuing education</i>
1.1 Policy for quality assurance	Standard 1: Strategic management Standard 3: Quality culture Standard 4: Academic ethics	Subarea of study programme Subarea of organisation of studies	Assessment area of study programme and its development Assessment area of teaching and learning Assessment area of students	Assessment area of study programme and study programme development Assessment area of teaching and learning
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	Standard 7: Study programme	Subarea of study programme	Assessment area of study programme and its development Assessment area of students	Assessment area of study programme and study programme development
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching, and assessment	Standard 7: Study programme Standard 8: Learning and teaching Standard 9: Student assessment	Subarea of learning and teaching Subarea of organisation of studies	Assessment area of teaching and learning Assessment area of students	Assessment area of teaching and learning
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition, and certification	Standard 8: Learning and teaching Standard 9: Student assessment	Subarea of learning and teaching Subarea of organisation of studies	Assessment area of teaching and learning Assessment area of students	Assessment area of students
1.5 Teaching staff	Standard 2: Resources	Subarea of academic staff	Assessment area of academic staff	Assessment area of teaching staff

	Standard 6: Teaching staff	Assessment area of sustainability		
1.6 Learning resources and student support	Standard 2: Resources Standard 10: Learning support systems	Subarea of financial resources Subarea of learning and teaching environment Subarea of organisation of studies	Assessment area of students Assessment area of resources	Assessment area of teaching and learning Assessment area of resources Assessment area of students
1.7 Information management	Standard 1: Strategic management Standard 2: Resources Standard 3: Quality culture Standard 8: Learning and Teaching Standard 10: Learning support systems	Subarea of learning and teaching environment Assessment area of sustainability	Assessment area of study programme and its development Assessment area teaching and learning Assessment area of resources	Assessment area of teaching and learning
1.8 Public information	Standard 2: Resources Standard 12: Service to the society	Subarea of organisation of studies Subarea of financial resources Subarea of sustainability	Assessment area of study programme and its development Assessment area of teaching and learning	Assessment area of resources Assessment area of students
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	Standard 3: Quality culture Standard 7: Study programme	Subarea of study programme Subarea of organisation of studies.	Assessment area of study programme and its development Assessment area of Teaching and learning	Assessment area of study programme and study programme development.
1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance	Point 3 in the regulation stipulates the obligation of a HEI to undergo IA once in 7 years	Point 3 in the regulation stipulates that in the case the right to provide instruction has been granted for a	This standard is dependent on the legal provisions of the respective foreign country.	This standard is dependent on the legal provisions of the respective foreign country.

		specified term (1-3 years), EKKA shall, within a specified period, conduct a re-assessment of the study programme group and cycle of higher education.		
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In its previous Agency Review, the Review panel made the following recommendation on ESG Standard 2.1: *EKKA must reconsider its approach to reviewing institutional compliance with the ESG standards on internal quality assurance in the three areas omitted from its mapping. The gaps in its framework in relation to information management and reporting on the new guidelines for Ph.D. Study Programmes should be addressed. On initial assessments, the approach should address comprehensively all ESG, Part 1, particularly on Teaching and Learning (Standard 1.3).*

The quality assessment of study programme groups at the level of doctoral studies has been phased out so the recommendation is no longer applicable.

Regarding addressing Standard 1.3 in the ESG (*Student-centred learning, teaching, and assessment*) for initial assessments: we amended the criteria for the initial assessment of study programme groups in 2020. The criteria covering the meaning of ESG standard 1.3 are as follows:

Standard 2. Learning and Teaching:

- (Criterion 2.3) The proposed learning methods motivate the learner to take responsibility for their own learning and to achieve learning outcomes.
- (Criterion 2.4) Appropriate methods have been devised for the assessment of learning outcomes, the assessment is transparent and objective and supports the learner's development.
- (Criterion 2.6) The academic staff involved have sufficient teaching skills to encourage the learner's sense of autonomy and to provide adequate and competent guidance.

EKKA's regulations focus very much on students, supporting their development and the objective of students becoming self-directed learners. At the same time, analysis of assessment reports has led us to the conclusion that outcome-based and student-centred learning and teaching are not touched upon in equal measure in assessment reports, there are substantial variations in the depth of analysis of this topic. The approach of assessment experts in the committees to learning and teaching plays a crucial role in this outcome, and we have concluded that this should be taken into consideration in the process of putting together assessment committees. For example, we plan to request that experts applying to become panel members, submit a brief description of their approach to learning and teaching in higher education that we can consider. among other criteria, in the selection of experts into panels.

Conclusion

EKKA has aimed to have all the standards and guidelines described in Part I of the ESG covered by its regulations and key processes at different levels, avoiding superfluous overlaps between assessment criteria.

CHAPTER 5: SELF-ENHANCEMENT STANDARD

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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

This chapter provides insight into the purpose, target groups, process, and resources of thematic analyses. Moreover, the types of analysis that EKKA conducts, and examples of thematic analyses are presented. At the end of the chapter the dissemination of the results is analysed, conclusions, strengths and areas of improvement are highlighted.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS IN EKKA

“EKKA’s activities are based on the needs of the Estonian education system and learners as well as guidelines and agreements in the areas of European higher and vocational education. In its daily work EKKA draws on up-to-date know-how tailored to the local context and informs stakeholders of the results of external assessments and analyses conducted thereof.”

EKKA Development Plan 2017–2022, p. 1

One of EKKA’s functions is to analyse the results of quality assessments and to conduct thematic analyses, including thematic reviews as well as to disseminate best quality assurance practices. The EKKA Development Plan 2017–2022 specifies that one of the critical success factors and indicators of professionalism of EKKA is that the reports prepared by EKKA assessment committees and the analyses of assessment results are professional, inspirational, and feed into organisation and educational institutions’ development activities.

The principles and process of thematic analyses are set out in the EKKA Quality Handbook which sets the **purpose** of thematic analyses to:

- Highlight developments, trends, best practices, and problem areas in the education system at large.
- Prepare educational policy decisions and measures or to evaluate the impact and implementation of these decisions and measures.
- Provide feedback to educational institutions on the outcome of their QA activities.
- Receive input on the relevance of principles, procedures and criteria for quality assessments and make suggestions for improvements.

EKKA's stakeholders are identified in our Development Plan. Considering all the thematic analyses by EKKA, we have addressed various target groups (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Target groups for thematic analyses.

In addition, EKKA as an organisation for quality enhancement is also one of the target groups of thematic analyses, for example the analysis give input into changing the procedures.

PROCESS AND RESOURCES FOR THEMATIC ANALYSES

Process

The stakeholders' growing need for evidence-based approach on specific topics and the development of the thematic review regulation in 2020 has led us to rethink the aims and processes of thematic analyses. As a result, the process and use of thematic analyses has become more systematic since the previous Agency Review.

EKKA systematically collects feedback from participants of assessment interviews and institutions undergoing assessment through feedback seminars that are conducted after the institutional accreditation decision has been taken by the HEQAC. This feedback is analysed and used as input in detecting areas for improvement in assessment procedures as well as in the selection of assessment experts. For example, in the case of thematic analyses, feedback on the usefulness of the outcomes of the analysis is discussed in the dissemination seminars. For the new cycle of institutional accreditation from 2019, new standards that were introduced were identified as problem areas in the analysis of accreditation results: internationalisation, quality culture and academic ethics. Based on the analysis of forced distance learning in 2020, the

institutional accreditation guidelines were amended with a bigger emphasis on digitalisation-related teaching and learning topics.

Furthermore, EKKA regularly compiles analytical summaries of its assessment results. One example of regular publications: The summaries of thematic analyses drafted by EKKA are included in annual publications of the Ministry of Education and Research on external evaluations in the educational system.

In addition, the guidelines and process for thematic analysis and thematic review have been updated clearly describing the process as well as follow-up activities for EKKA and HEIs. The HEIs and the Ministry participated in developing the guidelines and procedures for thematic reviews and were able to give input on the relevant topics for thematic analyses.

The process for conducting thematic analyses in EKKA is shown in Figure 4. The topics for thematic analyses may stem from:

- Regular analyses of assessment results.
- Feedback from parties on the need to make changes in the assessment process.

The process of thematic analysis



- Topical issues in society/education, such as the quality assessment of continuing education, forced distance learning (due to COVID-19).

- Topics proposed by the MER, Unemployment Fund or other partners or topics stemming from (international) projects that have links to EKKA's objectives and priority actions. Examples: Teaching and learning of international students in Estonian HEIs, traineeships in higher and vocational education and VET.

The needs for the topics of thematic analyses are negotiated with the MER and other stakeholders. The Director and the Head of Development discuss the topics for thematic analyses and the resources needed with the Assessment Directors at least once a year.

Figure 4. The process of thematic analysis in EKKA.

The Director of EKKA approves the topics and person(s) responsible for carrying out the analyses. The responsible person/team then starts carrying out a thematic analysis – specifying the terms of reference and purpose of the analysis, preparing an analysis plan and schedule, agreeing on the format of the analysis, communication of outcomes and follow-up activities.

For each analysis, a critical reader/readers will be assigned from within EKKA, who will provide recommendations to complement the analysis. Where necessary, experts from outside EKKA can be involved in the conduct and review of thematic analyses. Once an analysis is complete, its outcomes are presented first within EKKA and then to the main target groups of the analysis. Based on the outcomes of the analysis, further activities will be planned and implemented.

Resources

Analytical skills constitute an important element in the competence model for EKKA employees and are considered and assessed when recruiting staff. This approach provides a favourable basis for, inter alia, thematic analyses. Moreover, analysis is also included in the staff job descriptions of half of the staff members. To enhance analytical competences, learning alongside work and participation in training is encouraged. The themes of master's and PhD theses of EKKA staff members are often related to quality assessment. Mostly, thematic analyses are carried out involving multiple people, providing an opportunity to learn from each other. It has also been agreed that the outcomes of analyses are presented to the EKKA staff and that each analysis is scrutinized by at least one critical reader. This makes it possible to harmonise the quality of analyses and share best practices and outcomes of analyses.

At the same time, EKKA's SWOT analysis suggests that since the workload of employees is relatively high at times due to assessment commitments, it is sometimes difficult to fit the thematic analyses within working time. It takes quite a long time to prepare analyses, especially alongside other commitments. This has led to situations where the completion of an analysis is delayed or the analysis is carried out in a hurry, leaving some auxiliary activities, e.g., communication and the organisation of presentation of outcomes as well as follow-up activities, to the background.

To better cope with the time constraints caused by the high workload, we have clarified the process of carrying out thematic analyses, to keep the workload under control we have involved more external experts, and, as we have gained more experience, we have paid more attention to how to improve time management. Due to the increased demand for analyses, there have been discussions on how to decide whether EKKA should carry out the analysis itself or when it might be worth to outsource the service.

TYPES OF THEMATIC ANALYSES

EKKA conducts several types of thematic analyses and based on their nature they can be divided into **two groups**:

- 1) Analyses of assessment periods
- 2) Needs-based thematic analyses

The different types of thematic analyses are shown in Table 6 and explained in more detail below.

Table 6. The types of thematic analyses that EKKA conducts.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS	
Analysis of assessment periods	Needs-based thematic analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Analyses of outcomes and feedback of assessment periods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Analyses focusing on specific topics ▪ Analyses that serve as a basis of strategic planning and policy in EQA ▪ Analyses and reports of international cooperation and development projects

Analyses of assessment periods

Analyses of assessment periods are thematic analyses conducted regularly. They include annual/periodical summaries of assessment results, interim reports with a view to identify needs for amendments, analyses conducted for the purpose of developing new assessment types or procedures (i.e., pilot assessments). These analyses constitute an integral part of EKKA's activities. We analyse assessment outcomes annually, in the middle of assessment periods or at the end of assessment cycles. Regular analyses provide a valuable overview of where the main areas of progress and challenges lie in education. Regular analyses of outcomes and feedback of assessment periods are a valuable tool for EKKA, educational institutions, and policy makers.

One example of periodical summaries is the Ministry of Education and Research's annual education system overview that consists of articles from various authors about best practices in external assessment, new trends or external assessment results at all levels of education. EKKA has regularly been contributing with articles about quality assurance assessment results in this annual publication. For example, in 2021 EKKA published 4 articles in this publication, one of them titled *Research and development in professional higher education institutions: bottlenecks and examples of good practice in institutional accreditation*. This analysis condensed the assessment results of one institutional accreditation standard which has been shown to be challenging for professional higher education institutions.

One example of an analysis for the purpose of developing a new EQA system: *the Higher Education Assessment Concept 2020* is an analysis with a view of developing new institutional accreditation standards and guidelines. The report shows how different stakeholders were included in the process and what were the grounds for developing

the enhancement led assessment model for higher education institutions. Based on this analysis the relevant provisions were included in the Higher Education Act, which included those on the new EQA system.

Another example of developing a new assessment type is the *Analysis of the quality assessment process in continuing education institutions: bottlenecks and opportunities*. This analysis highlights the results of piloting the threshold-based quality assessment model in continuing education –the lessons learnt and improvement areas.

Needs-based thematic analyses

Alongside regular analysis of assessment periods we conduct needs-based thematic analyses. Based on the content and purpose these are analyses (see also Table 6):

- 1) Focusing on a specific topic.
- 2) Analyses that serve as a basis of strategic planning and policy making in EQA.
- 3) Analyses for international cooperation and development projects.

Needs-based thematic analyses are driven by changes in the environment and the topical needs of stakeholders. We use a flexible approach for gathering the topics for needs-based thematic analyses. The analysis format may vary depending on its purpose: it may be comprehensive or focus on specific questions, it may be intended for a wider audience or for internal planning and decision making. The activities that stakeholders have conducted as a result of or after the thematic analysis gives us input for assessing whether the analyses have been fit-for-purpose and addressed the most pertinent issues for change.

The three types of needs-based thematic analyses are outlined below.

Analyses focusing on specific topics

The analyses focusing on specific topics is quite a broad category. It covers research papers, analyses focusing on topics stemming from the needs interest of stakeholders and thematic reviews.

- A) Analyses with a defined topic based on the needs of stakeholders or analysis of assessment periods.

For example, an analysis of forced distance learning that emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Udam, Maiki (2020). *How did higher education institutions cope with the forced distance learning from March to June 2020? Summary*.

- B) Peer reviewed research publications These include analyses that are published as research articles, Master's thesis, PhD thesis or other.

For example, an analysis conducted as a part of a PhD studies that focuses on the issues with Information overload. This study is helpful for the universities in preparing the SER. Lauri, Liia; Virkus, Sirje; Heidmets, Mati (2021). *Information cultures and strategies for coping with information overload: case of Estonian*

higher education institutions. Journal of Documentation. DOI: 10.1108/JD-08-2020-0143.

- C) Thematic reviews in higher education are regulated by the Guidelines for Thematic Review.

Since thematic reviews are fairly new, a more detailed description is provided on the process of developing the guidelines and gathering of relevant topics for analysis.

In accordance with the Higher Education Act (in force since 2019), the Ministry of Education and Research initiates thematic reviews, involving EKKK. At the beginning of March 2020, EKKK sent draft guidelines for thematic reviews to higher education institutions, the Estonian Federation of Student Unions and the Employers' Confederation for feedback, briefly describing how thematic review topics are selected and outlining the procedure for conducting thematic reviews. In addition to the guidelines, we also requested feedback on a number of possible evaluation topics, which we drew mainly from the analysis of the results of the previous period's quality assessments. We requested that the stakeholders pick three topics from the list proposed by EKKK, which they deemed most relevant along with a short justification of why these topics should take priority in designing future reviews. We also gave the possibility of adding new topics in case EKKK had not included in the selection topics that the recipients thought should be investigated in thematic reviews in the coming years.

The topic *Learning, teaching and assessment on output-based curricula* proposed by EKKK was the choice that received the biggest support. We highlighted that learning in higher education is still largely carried out in traditional ways, with the learner playing a passive role being the problem. The competence among faculty to design a coherent learning process, where learning outcomes, learning methods and assessment methods are aligned and support the students' motivation, self-reflection, and active participation in the learning process, is low. We also found, based on both the assessment reports, and conducted studies, that learning outcomes often do not reflect the development of higher cognitive skills such as critical thinking and analysis skills, and that although curricula list different general competences, they are largely neither developed nor assessed. Most higher education institutions that provided feedback on the topics felt that it would be useful to address this topic in depth and to learn from each other. Example of the feedback received from one higher education institution:

“As a school Director and trainer, I know how important the topic of actual implementation of output-based assessment and the coherence between assessment and the learning process is. As one of the tools for analysis, I propose an analysis of the syllabuses along with feedback from students, on whether the syllabus served as a basis for their learning. A separate analysis could be carried out by comparing e-learning, blended learning, and predominantly face-to-face training. Low cognitive levels and teacher-centred learning methods may be

driven by a lack of teaching staff experience of different approaches. There are many topics the analysis and development of which would be helpful”.

Topics such as 'Supporting academic staff development and their attestation', 'Interruptions', 'Academic ethics' were also supported by higher education institutions and students. The topics, their justifications and the results of feedback from partners can be found on the EKKA website.

EKKA presented to the MER a selection of topics coordinated with its partners, but by then the pandemic had already changed the world and the topic of urgency was distance learning. In autumn 2020 EKKA conducted a study on forced distance learning in higher education. Due to different crises, the MER did not formally initiate any thematic reviews in the period 2020–2022, but to launch a study on the first-ranked topic of learning outcomes, EKKA received additional funding from the MER Research Fund and started analysing the need to update the Higher Education Standard and the implementation of outcome-based learning.

By the time of the submission of the SAR, two analyses have been conducted: *Regulation of the learning outcomes in higher education at national level: Comparative analysis based on Estonian, Finnish, Dutch, Czech, Slovenian, Irish and Australian legislation*, and *Implementation of outcome-based curricula in Estonian higher education institutions: external experts' view*. Both analyses provide input for the updating of the Higher Education Standard and the learning outcomes described therein, while also including concrete proposals for higher education institutions for ensuring that outcome-based learning is applied consistently and meaningfully.

Before the guidelines for thematic reviews were developed, a pilot thematic review was conducted on the *Learning and Teaching of International Students in Estonian Higher Education Institutions. Summary report* (2019). This analysis was initiated by the MER for receiving input into policy making. Moreover, the results of the analysis and discussion seminars on best practices were also insightful for higher education institutions that have developed their curriculums, policies, and procedures for international students. For EKKA, the experience of piloting the methodology for such thematic review gave valuable input into developing the overarching guidelines for thematic reviews.

Analyses that serve as a basis of strategic planning and policy making in EQA

This includes analyses that are undertaken to make amendments into assessment regulations, preparing (national or organisational) strategies and giving input to the amendments of legal acts. For example, based on the findings of thematic analyses in higher education, VET and continuing education, the summaries of strengths and weaknesses have been analysed as an input into the development of the new Estonian Education Strategy 2035. An example from higher education is the *Higher education: current situation and challenges* (2019) that was used in the development of the new strategy.

In 2021, an [overview of the current state of higher education](#) was commissioned from EKKA for the discussion on the financing of higher education in the Parliament, which has been published in the collection of materials of the Parliament.

In higher education, an analysis of enhancement led EQA system titled *The Higher Education Assessment Concept 2020* was prepared in preparation for a new assessment cycle. The analysis gave input into the Higher Education Act.

Similarly, in vocational education an analysis of the EQA system titled *The Quality assessment of Vocational Education. Conceptual framework* was prepared. Based on this analysis, the provisions on the new EQA system were adopted within the Vocational Education Act.

Analyses and reports for international cooperation and development projects

This category includes reports and analyses that are drafted to support or analyse international development activities conducted by EKKA. For example, [Proposal for the development of the external quality assurance system of higher education in the Republic of Tajikistan in line with European standards](#) (2021).

A complete overview of thematic analyses conducted from 2018–2022 is available on the [EKKA website](#).

Dissemination of results

Discussions on the results of the analyses will take place first within EKKA and the outcomes will be presented to the members of Assessment Councils and Supervisory Board. The findings of thematic analyses drafted by EKKA are presented at annual gatherings of vice-rectors for academic affairs of HEIs, and at the meetings of the Rectors' Conference (public universities) and the Rectors' Conference of Professional Higher Education Institutions.

The analyses are published on the EKKA website under the section [Analyses, articles, presentations](#) and information is disseminated on social media.

Depending on the objective and content of an analysis, the following aspects and follow-up actions are considered:

- How to inform the target groups (via mailing lists, direct emails)?
- Whether to organise a seminar, workshop, or training?
- How to present the analysis at other events including internationally?

The aim is to reach out to key target groups to maximise the effect of the analysis. Therefore, we have also used a practice whereby we already involve the target groups in the phase of agreeing on the topics and terms of reference for the analysis, which facilitates the involvement of the target groups after the analysis has been completed. Discussion seminars on the outcomes of analyses and meetings for sharing best practices have also been effective.

Some examples on the communication and follow-up activities of thematic analysis are:

- 1) For sharing best practices and making proposals to the MER:
 - A seminar for disseminating the results of the analysis *Learning and Teaching of International Students in Estonian Higher Education Institutions. Summary report* was held in 2019. There were over 80 participants at the seminar. They were mostly from the HEIs that participated in the thematic review, but also other stakeholders, e.g., ministry and employers' representatives, student representatives etc. The program for the seminar can be found [here](#).
 - A seminar for disseminating the results of the analysis *How did higher education institutions cope with the forced distance learning from March to June 2020. Summary*. The program for the seminar can be found [here](#) and a [YouTube recording](#) for those who were not able to participate. There is a follow-up event planned to take place in May 2022 to discuss the developments in digitally enhanced teaching and learning in the Estonian HEIs 2020–2022.
- 2) The dissemination of analyses internationally with a view to increase EKKA's visibility:
 - A presentation at the ENQA Forum about research and development in professional higher education institutions *Trends and innovations: what's new in the ENQA family?*.

Conclusion

EKKA has demonstrated its compliance with standard 3.4 of the ESG. EKKA is committed to implementing the PDCA quality cycle, gathering and analysing data on its quality assurance activities including feedback from different sources. Based on the outcomes of analyses, we implement evidence-based changes, plan our future activities, and inspire our stakeholders to strive for higher quality.

Regarding this standard EKKA considers its strength to be the systemic approach to conducting both regular analyses of assessment periods and needs-based thematic analyses. In addition to that the trustworthiness of the analyses results is supported by the high research qualifications of EKKA staff.

We have identified staff work overload and the difficulty of measuring the impact of the analyses as areas for improvement. We plan to streamline the processes and plan the time for conducting analyses more efficiently, also involving external partners in conducting analyses for achieving a more balanced workload. For measuring the impact of thematic analyses and activities related to the analyses, we plan to gather best practices from other agencies and relevant institutions to improve the assessment of the impact of our activities.

Strengths

There is a clear and agreed process for producing analyses, defining the beneficiaries of the analyses and communication of the results.

The number and volume of analyses prepared by the EKKA are substantial, there is academic qualifications and the ability to conduct research within the agency. Research qualifications of EKKA staff ensure the trustworthiness of the analyses results.

Analyses are conducted in cooperation with stakeholders and take into consideration their needs. This also ensures the use and usefulness of the analyses' results.

Stakeholders see the usefulness of needs-based assessment analyses results for better planning of their activities.

The analyses provide a good opportunity for EKKA to be visible both domestically and internationally, bringing together different actors.

Areas for improvement

Due to a flexible and needs-based approach to the preparation of analyses, the workload related to producing analyses may be high at times and communication and the organisation of promotional events may not always receive due attention, for example in the case of analyses of assessment periods.

It is relatively difficult to measure what impact the EKKA analyses have on the developments in the field of education or on the institutions in the longer term, as the changes depend on a number of factors.

AGENCY SWOT

EKKA has prepared a SWOT analysis for the SAR in three stages. Stage one involved a thorough analysis of the discharge of the EKKA *Development Plan 2017–2022* and started already at the beginning of 2021. All EKKA staff members were involved in the analysis of EKKA's progress towards the objectives set in 2017. This analysis included a review of numerical performance indicators for 2017–2020, but more importantly, analysis of the progress made on the three key overarching goals set for 2022. These **three objectives** were:

- I. EKKA is a reliable partner
- II. EKKA's activities are effective and efficient
- III. EKKA is internationally known and recognized

Under these three goals we had listed 17 criteria in the 2017–2022 Development Plan, and we used all these criteria to assess whether we have reached the foreseen milestones. To cover all 17 criteria, we drew up 10 separate SWOT analyses that we collated into one aggregated SWOT analysis at the end of 2021.

This aggregated SWOT was then discussed at length and in detail at two development seminars held among EKKA staff in early 2022. A review was conducted in smaller groups focused on higher education, VET, and continuing education. Then the outcomes from these groups were discussed with the active participation of all EKKA staff members. We agreed on the following definitions for the SWOT (Figure 5).

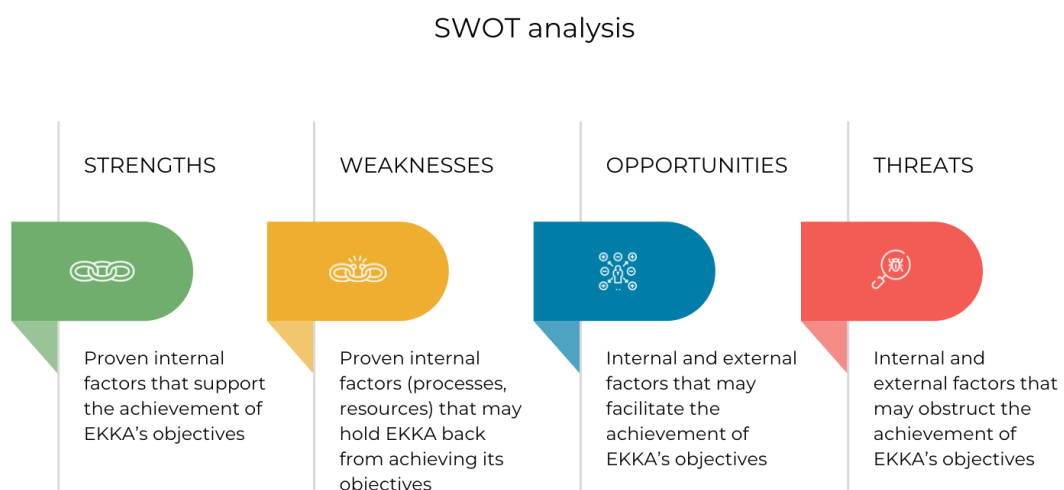


Figure 5. The definitions of EKKA SWOT.

The SWOT was then submitted to the EKKA Supervisory Board and stakeholder representatives ('critical friends') for discussion and feedback. EKKA is very grateful to both groups for their honest feedback and input. The analysis is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. EKKA's SWOT analysis.

STRENGTHS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p>▪ EKKA's UNIQUE ROLE in advancing the quality of education in Estonia</p> <p>EKKA as a Competence Centre for quality assessment, development activities on the quality of education, international cooperation.</p> <p>▪ PROFESSIONAL TEAM THAT IS CONSTANTLY DEVELOPING</p> <p>An experienced team comprising members of different ages, backgrounds, and competencies, including staff members with PhDs. When EKKA's functions undergo changes, staff members can and are capable of re-training and changing their profiles.</p> <p>▪ EXCELLENT WORKING ENVIRONMENT</p> <p>The physical environment is modern and cosy, staff is motivated, show initiative, staff turnover is low, and succession ensured. EKKA is attractive as an employer.</p> <p>▪ PROFESSIONAL EXPERTS</p> <p>We use practical exercises in the training of experts; an emphasis on ensuring constant renewal of our expert pool, strict selection criteria, educational institutions rate the experts highly.</p> <p>▪ THE INVOLVEMENT OF STUDENTS in the QA of higher education and VET</p> <p>EKKA supports raising awareness of quality of education among students, activities of the students' quality network.</p> <p>Increasing participation of students in the Assessment Councils, committees, at trainings.</p> <p>▪ THE INVOLVEMENT OF EMPLOYERS ACROSS ALL EKKA'S ACTIVITIES</p> <p>The active participation of employers in all assessment committees.</p> <p>Substantive cooperation with professional and representative organisations, roundtables (especially in VET).</p> <p>▪ QUALITY ASSESSMENT AS A MANAGEMENT INSTRUMENT FOR THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS UNDER ASSESSMENT</p> <p>The suggestions for improvement by assessment committees facilitate dialogue between employers and educational institutions, the providers appreciate discipline- and trade-specific development recommendations that reflect the development needs of the sector. Recommendations outlined in assessment reports serve as catalysts for improvement activities undertaken by educational institutions, assessment reports serve as management tools for school heads.</p> <p>▪ THE FLEXIBILITY OF ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES</p> <p>Assessment procedures allow for taking into account the context and development needs of educational institutions, joint assessments of higher</p>
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WEAKNESSES

education and VET, drawing of the sample of study programmes in Institutional Accreditation.

- **INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION IN ALL EKKA'S ACTIVITIES**

We learn from international experience, share our knowledge, and develop our activities.

EKKA is internationally visible and contributes to the advancement of quality culture in third countries.

- **ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT IN LEGISLATIVE CHANGES AND POLICY MAKING**

Education Strategy 2035; input into the amendments of the Vocational Education Institutions Act, Higher Education Act, development of the concept for quality assessment in continuing education, participation in the process of amending the Adult Education Act, participation in the MER curriculum committees for higher education and VET.

- **VARIABILITY IN THE QUALITY OF ASSESSMENT REPORTS**

Experienced and competent experts still tend to interpret criteria in different ways, therefore, thorough explanations and constant input from the coordinator is needed.

- **THE PROCEDURAL DIVERGENCES OF VARIOUS ASSESSMENTS** (in higher education, VET, continuing education) disrupts smooth shifting between tasks. The plurality of tasks (including technical) causes fragmentation.

- **HIGH WORKLOAD OF STAFF**

The workload is unevenly distributed and at times very high. It is not possible to keep highly qualified staff 'on hold' or outsource tasks. The high workload may make finding opportunities for individual and team self-development challenging.

- **LACK OF LONG-TERM PLANNING OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND CROSS-BORDER ASSESSMENTS**

Reactive approach (to calls and invitations) rather than long term planning of projects and cross-border assessments. This may temporarily impact staff workload and consequently the quality of EKKA's core activities.

- **LACK OF EFFICIENT DIGITAL TOOLS FOR MANAGING THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS AND FOR THE PUBLICATION OF ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES**

The database of assessment results is not user-friendly and assessment reports that are uploaded in pdf-format do not allow for thematic searches. A digital solution is required for the effective management of the growing number of assessments.

- **EKKA AS AN OPINION LEADER**

EKKA has potential to be more widely known as an opinion leader in its area of expertise; an opportunity to stimulate interest and explain topics, if need be,

OPPORTUNITIES

react rapidly to topics emerging in the society. An opportunity to initiate and participate in inclusive discussions and round tables.

- **TAPPING INTO THE POTENTIAL OF THEMATIC REVIEWS AND ANALYSES**

Application at national level. Find ways for the thematic analyses to better support national, sectoral strategies as well as those of educational institutions.

- **BROADENING THE SCOPE OF EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION**

Increase planned communication with media outlets, set the agenda among the public on the quality of education. Reaching the target group for continuing education is challenging (the providers as well as participants).

- **PEER LEARNING AMONG EXPERTS**

Find a balance among experienced experts and ensuring succession, increasing the role of experienced experts at trainings, involving international experts in the assessment committees for VET. Targeted efforts to increase the expert pool for continuing education – mentoring, coordinators. Actively recommending experts trained by EKKA to other agencies.

- **ENHANCEMENT OF THE CAPABILITIES FOR SELF-EVALUATION AMONG EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**, which would allow to make the quality assessment processes more efficient and increase its impact: trainings on self-evaluation, trainings on various quality assurance systems, guidelines for conducting self-analyses.

- **STREAMLINING AND SIMPLIFICATION OF PROCEDURES FOR EKKA'S ACTIVITIES**

Initiate discussions on possibilities for combining and linking various assessments and reporting obligations (i.e., merging the evaluation of research with institutional accreditation, retrieving data from the national statistical database for education for self-evaluation reports etc.).

THREATS

- **FREQUENT CHANGES IN REGULATIONS FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENTS**


Excessively frequent changes in regulations may cause confusion among educational institutions and are detrimental to the comparability of assessment results.

- **THE RECRUITMENT RATE OF NEW EMPLOYEES IS SLOWER THAN INCREASES IN THE WORKLOAD OF EKKA**

Difficult to forecast staffing needs in continuing education because of the voluntary nature of the assessments. Fragmentation across different areas and projects may increase the risk of staff burnout and failure to meet deadlines.

- **THE SMALL SHARE OF STATE BUDGET RESOURCES IN THE BUDGET** poses a threat to the sustainability of activities financed from the EU structural funds (vocational education, continuing education, general education) after the financing from EU ends.

- **DIFFICULTIES IN KEEPING UP WITH THE RISING COST OF LIVING AND INCREASED EXPECTATIONS FOR REMUNERATION**



EKKA's expert fees and remuneration of staff may not be able to keep up with experts' and staff members' expectations for competitive remuneration if the governmental funding fails to take into consideration the increases in the cost of living and salary levels.

The weaknesses and threats presented in the SWOT as well as the strengths and opportunities, form an important input into setting the goals in EKKA's Development Plan for the next period. We have already started working on some of the weaknesses. For example, a business analysis of the EKKA information system has already been completed and an application for financing the development has been submitted to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications. We have cooperated with the MER to link the EKKA information system with the state education information system to ensure the implementation of the so-called 'one-door-policy': the educational institution submits data only once; the information systems find the necessary data from other systems. The deadline for the completion of the development is 31.12.2023.

To improve the quality of our reports, we have already implemented several improvements in the preparatory phase of the assessment process, which are described in [Chapter 4](#) of the SAR.

The temporary very high workload of EKKA staff is a problem that is difficult to find a good solution to, as the work of the agency is in a sense seasonal. However, we are planning to recruit additional staff due to the addition of new areas of activity. Switching between different types of assessments is difficult at times, but at the same time staff appreciate the possibility of not being limited to one area of education. Undoubtedly, it is possible to further harmonize and streamline the various (technical) procedures to make switching from one type of assessment to another as smooth as possible.

Some of the threats identified are, in a sense, already addressed in the part of opportunities, e.g., difficulties in keeping up with the rising cost of living and increased expectations for remuneration can be overcome by the diversification of financing sources through international projects and cross-border assessments.

ANNEX 1

New activities outside the scope of the ESG launched since EKKA's last Agency Review

In 2018, EKKA in collaboration with the Estonian Federation of Student Unions initiated the **Student Quality Network**. The main objective of the network is to empower students and to increase their role in analysing and contributing to the high quality of higher education. The Student Quality Network acts as a platform for cooperation and systematic exchange of ideas and best practices. Several seminars have taken place to raise students' awareness of their role in ensuring the highest standards in education, and of aspects affecting its quality. For EKKA, the network has also acted as a tool for selecting student experts into assessment panels and preparing them for the assessment process. In 2021, the cooperation with the Federation of Estonian Student Unions was formalised in a Memorandum of Cooperation. Until 2022, the Network was coordinated by Jekaterina Trofimov from EKKA, who also wrote her master's thesis on the role of student experts in expert panels and factors influencing it. We are currently reviewing the cooperation format with the Federation of Student Unions, outsourcing the coordinating role whilst continuing to support the activities both in terms of expertise and financing.

In 2018, EKKA concluded a contract with the MER to launch a pilot project with the aim of **developing a system for quality assessment in non-formal continuing education system**. A study was conducted in 2018–2019 to map the current situation, followed by actions to develop a concept for quality assessment in continuing education. An expert group comprising stakeholders and EKKA employees was convened to that end. The proposed model – threshold-based assessment – was approved by the EKKA Advisory Board for Continuing Education in August 2019 and has been implemented to date. Several analyses have been conducted based on assessments of continuing education programmes that serve as an input into the further development of such assessment type.

In 2008, the Educational IT Foundation launched a competition for the best e-learning courses. The voluntary competition is open to all e-course providers and the best courses are awarded the **E-Course Quality Label**. From 2020, the competition was taken over by EKKA. The objective of the competition is to raise the quality of e-courses in higher education, VET, and general education and to exchange best practices. The Quality Label proves the outstanding quality of an e-course. It recognizes the author's achievement in the application of digital technologies as well as assures the learner that the course and its delivery are of provenly high quality. EKKA has also drawn inspiration from the experience and knowledge gained from this initiative when designing and implementing its other, including ESG-based activities.

In 2021, EKKA together with Tallinn University launched a pilot project for **enhancing the quality culture in general education**. The pilot project focuses on six schools, supported by a team comprising 12 mentors with general education management background as well as members from Tallinn University and EKKA. Further work in this direction is to be financed from the EU structural funds for the period of 2022–2029. During that period, the quality monitoring system of educational institutions and the quality evaluation model and guidelines for self-evaluation will be developed and the external quality assessment model of educational institutions will be introduced. Development programmes will be offered to the institutions facing serious challenges, and a digital solution for evidence-based quality management for educational institutions and school keepers will be created.

International activities

Since 2013, EKKA has been a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education ([ENQA](#)). EKKA is registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education ([EQAR](#)). A prerequisite for extending the membership of ENQA and registration on EQAR is an external evaluation of the agency, which assesses its compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area ([ESG](#)). EKKA passed the evaluation successfully in 2013 and 2018. The results can be found on the [EKKA website](#).

EKKA participated in the DEQAR project launched by EQAR to create a database of higher education assessment results from the very outset and was among the first agencies to make all its assessment results available on DEQAR.

EKKA actively participates in several quality assurance networks: [INQAAHE](#) (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education), [CEENQA](#) (Central and Eastern European Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education), and [EQAVET](#) (European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training).

EKKA staff members are active participants in different **international working groups**.

- Kaija Kumpas-Lenk participated in MICROBOL project (2020–2022) working group on Quality Assurance. Microbol (Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments) project was co-funded by Erasmus+ KA3 Support to Policy reform, and more specifically the *Support to the implementation of EHEA reforms*.
- Jekaterina Trofimov participates in ENQA working group on academic integrity (2021–2022).
- From 2020 Kaija Kumpas-Lenk has participated in QAN – Quality Audit Network. QAN is an informal group of audit-oriented external quality assurance agencies within ENQA. Once a year the members of the network gather for two days to share their experiences in external QA and discuss topics of interest (new practices, assessment procedures etc.).

- Liia Lauri participated in the ENQA working group on quality assurance and e-learning (2017–2018, [outcomes](#)). She was involved also in TeSLA – Adaptive trust e-assessment system project 2018–2019.
- Marge Kroonmäe has participated in EQAVET Member States (Slovenia, Finland, Croatia, and Estonia) project *Promoting the use of Transnational PRA by updating the criteria*.
- Heli Mattisen chairs the ENQA Appeals and Complaints Committee.

EKKA hosted the **9th ENQA Members' Forum** which took place on 25–26 April 2019 in Tallinn.

Since the last review EKKA has carried out two extensive **international development projects**:

- In 2018–2021 the *Technical Support for Capacity Development in Quality Assurance and Piloting of Experimental Accreditation Process, Standards and Guidelines* in Tajikistan. EKKA was chosen by the Ministry of Education and Science of Tajikistan as a strategic partner to develop the quality assurance system of higher education in the country and to make sure it conforms to the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area. During the three-year project, EKKA conducted pilot studies (institutional accreditations) in three higher education institutions in Tajikistan and helped design the terms of reference for the development of higher education quality information system. The project included various sub-activities and the total amount of the project was 285 000 euros.
- In 2019–2021 the *Twinning project to support education in Georgia*. The aim of the project was to develop the quality assessment system in Georgia, promote the implementation of qualification framework and increase the capabilities of the specialists and support systems involved. Together with the German Academic Exchange Service DAAD, the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) supported the activities of the Georgian national quality agency (NCEQE) and its partners in securing the quality of education and training in lifelong learning and qualifications quality assurance. The project incorporated general education, vocational education, higher education, and continuing education.

In the period 2016–2018, EKKA also conducted **work shadowing projects** in Estonia funded by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research and targeted specifically at EQA institutions in ASEM Asian countries. Thus, in autumn 2017 we hosted two colleagues – one from the Malaysian Qualifications Agency in Malaysia, and the other from the National Institution for Academic Degrees and Quality Enhancement of Higher Education in Japan.



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