

1. The quality assurance system in Estonia

1.1. The quality assurance system in higher education

In Estonia, only institutions of higher education which have passed the evaluation of quality of studies are allowed to provide higher education. As of 2012, studies at the level of higher education may only be conducted if the Government of the Republic has provided a so-called education licence for this purpose – the right to conduct studies in this study programme group and at this level of studies. This includes the right to issue state graduation certificates.

Applying for right to conduct studies

If an institution of higher education (private, public or state) wishes to apply for the right to conduct studies in a new study programme, it must submit its application with data describing the quality, resources and sustainability of the studies to the Ministry of Education and Research. The application is then proceeded with the help of EKKA. If approved, the right to conduct studies was till September 2019 confirmed with a regulation of the government of the republic in annexes to the standard of higher education. Starting September 2019 the Minister of Education and Research has the right to make the final decision.

Quality assessment of study programme groups

From 2010 to 2019, the quality of study programme groups has been assessed instead of the former assessment of study programmes. Quality assessment involves assessment of the compliance of study programmes, teaching and study-related development efforts based thereon with legislation, national and international standards and developments the study programme, study programme development, availability of resources, the study process, teaching staff and students are assessed).

Quality assessment takes place once every seven years, unless the Agency has established a term of up to three years based on the results of quality assessment. The result of quality assessment is a decision made by the Assessment Council of the Agency.

Institutional accreditation

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

Higher education institutions are required to undergo institutional accreditation once every seven years, but if the Agency has detected any defects in the previous accreditation, it may grant a term of up to three years and during the term the educational institution must undergo the institutional accreditation again. The decision on institutional accreditation will be made by the Quality Assessment Council of the Agency.

Thematic Evaluation

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

Thematic evaluations shall be conducted in some or all higher education institutions. The topics are horizontally relevant and as a rule, related to the quality improvement proposals made during external

assessments of study programme groups (i.e. Purposefulness and up-to-dateness of teaching methods; Student assessment; Development of students' key competencies; Involvement of students from all cycles of higher education in RDC activities; etc.). Thematic evaluations predominantly use a research-based assessment method. Thematic evaluations can be sample-based, but preferably include all of the HEIs (also the vocational education institutions, if appropriate).

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

- [Republic of Estonia Education Act](#)
- [Universities Act](#) (in force until 31.08.2019)
- [Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act](#) (in force until 31.08.2019)
- [Higher Education Act](#) (in force since 01.09.2019)
- [Organisation of Research and Development Act](#)
- Standard of Higher Education

1.2. The quality assurance system in vocational education

External quality assurance of VET in Estonia is regulated by the [Vocational Educational Institutions Act](#). The quality assurance activities delegated to EKKA have been laid down in the [EKKA Conceptual Framework Document for QA in VET](#).

The objective of the quality assessment of vocational education is to foster the development of learning-oriented school culture and to increase the reliability of vocational education.

EKKA is in charge of two types of assessment in VET:

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

The school submits an application and the materials needed to commence the proceedings to the Ministry of Education and Research. The ministry establishes whether the materials comply with the requirements set out in the legal acts and commissions an initial assessment of the group of programmes from EKKA on the basis of the regulation laid down by the vocational education assessment council. The vocational education assessment council makes one of the following proposals to the Minister for Education and Research based on the assessment report:

- a) to grant the school the right to provide instruction without a term;
- b) to grant the right to provide instruction for three years;
- c) not to grant the right to provide instruction.

If the group of programmes receives the right to provide instruction without a term, it will undergo regular quality assessments in the future, taking place at **least once every six years**. The result of the quality assessment is not linked to the right to provide instruction. Unlinking quality assessment from the right to provide instruction means that the assessment focuses more on the school's development. A shorter term of assessment does not necessarily indicate non-compliance with national regulations but rather shows new development needs and opportunities.

If a school receives the initial right to provide instruction for three years, a re-assessment will be conducted on the basis of the relevant regulation adopted by the vocational education assessment council. The Minister for Education and Research is entitled to revoke the right to provide instruction if EKKA vocational education assessment council makes a recommendation for the third time to grant the right to provide instruction in that group of programmes for three years.

Quality assessment of study programme groups

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

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

1.3. The quality assurance system in continuing education

The quality assurance system in continuing education is under the development since autumn 2018.

2. The responsibility and structure of EKKA (Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education)

Facts

Founded in January 2009 on the basis of Estonian HE Accreditation Center. EKKA is an independent agency functioning under the umbrella of the Foundation Archimedes.

Staff: 14 people, 4 people in higher education, 3 people in vocational education, 3 people in continuing education, information manager, accountant, director, project manager.

EKKA is the national quality assurance agency responsible for evaluations of higher and vocational education in Estonia. EKKA's mission is to promote quality in the field of education and thereby increase the competitiveness of the Estonian society.

EKKA is a full member of

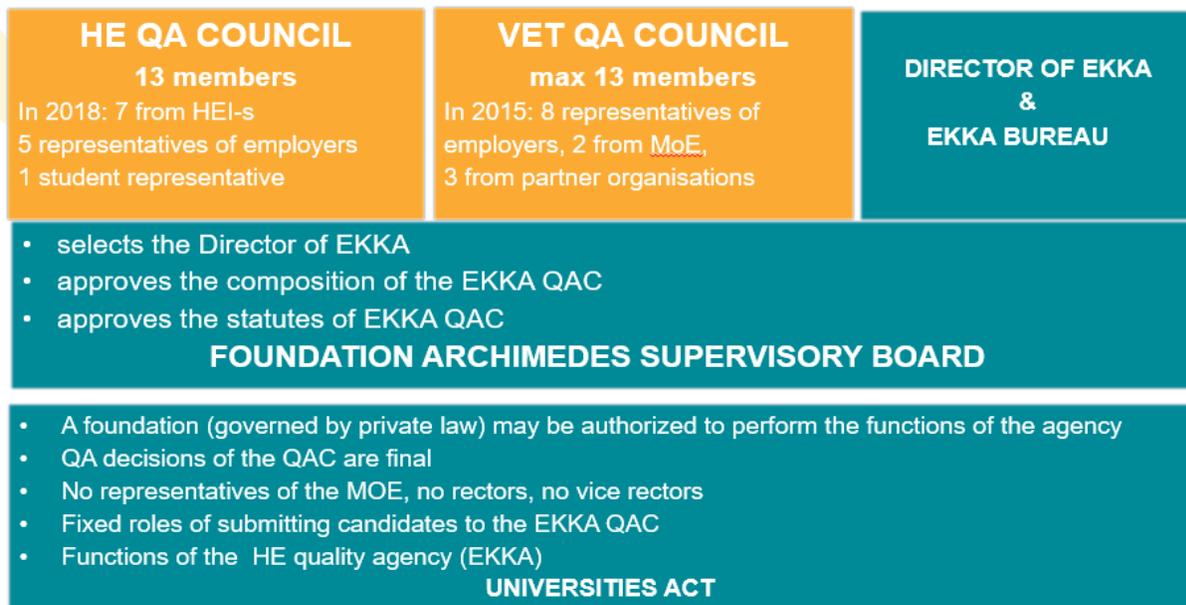
- [European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education \(ENQA\)](#),
- [International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education \(INQAAHE\)](#),
- [Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education \(CEENQA\)](#),
- and is included in [the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education \(EQAR\)](#).

The key activities of EKKA include external quality assessments in higher education, vocational education and in continuing education (under development); analysing the evaluation results and making recommendations for improvement to educational institutions and to the Ministry of Education and Research. Moreover, the activities include informing the general public of the outcomes of evaluations; training the assessment experts; counselling and training educational institutions and participating in international networks and projects. In the international level EKKA is currently participating in two international projects. The main activities of EKKA in 2019 is shown in Picture 1.

HIGHER EDUCATION	VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING	CONTINUING EDUCATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <u>Initial assessment of study programme groups</u> ➤ <u>Institutional accreditation</u> ➤ <u>Thematic assessment</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <u>Initial assessment of study programme groups</u> ➤ <u>Quality assessment of study programme groups</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <u>Quality label for providers of continuing education</u>
<p>Development of standards and guidelines, trainings, analyses, international activities</p>		

Picture 1. Activities of EKKA in 2019

The structure of EKKA and the short description of the functions of different parties is shown in Picture 2.



Picture 2. The structure of EKKA.