

# Foreign Systems for Institutional Level Assessments in Higher Education Institutions

## ANALYSIS

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## Introduction

The purpose of this review and analysis was to map external institution level evaluation systems in selected countries that would support the development of a new assessment model for the new institutional accreditation cycle in Estonia. We included in our sample developed European countries and agencies from outside the European Higher Education Area.

For a more in-depth analysis, we selected institution-level assessments in the following countries and agencies: Finland – Karvi/Fineec; Sweden – UKÄ; Australia – TEQSA; New Zealand – AQA; Switzerland – AAQ and Norway – NOKUT. In addition, we included Scotland – QAA in our analysis. In the pre-analysis, we also considered the inclusion of the Slovenian and Flemish-language Belgian evaluation practices, but ultimately decided to exclude them as the added value compared to the system in force in Estonia remained modest.

We obtained information on evaluations from the websites of the assessment agencies and, for some countries, also from legislation (e.g. Norway, Australia).

In this analysis, we focused on the following questions:

1. What is assessed and how are the evaluation areas/criteria formulated?
2. What is the evaluation process like?
3. What are the outcomes of the evaluation and what follow-up activities are undertaken?

In addition, we wanted to highlight aspects from other systems which might be of interest in the development of Estonia's updated assessment model. While for most countries details of assessment models that are quite similar to the current Estonian system can be highlighted, this analysis pays particular attention to two systems: Australia and Scotland. In the case of Australia, in parallel to periodic assessments, data-driven risk monitoring system is in place. This system, together with process and follow-up, is described in the chapter focusing on the first evaluation question. In the case of Scotland, the analysis focuses on a comprehensive system that incorporates a number of elements in addition to the classical external evaluation. As the Scottish evaluation system is in a transitional phase, the information available on the future periodic external evaluations was incomplete at the time of preparing this analysis, but interesting aspects can nevertheless be highlighted at this stage. For this reason, the information on Scotland is presented in this analysis in a separate chapter and is not structured according to the three questions listed above.

The country/agency-specific overview of assessment systems is followed by a chapter summarizing the most interesting findings.

## I What is assessed and what are the evaluation areas/criteria

### Finland

Since 2005, Finland has implemented **enhancement-led quality system audits** in higher education institutions, the objectives of which are as follows:

- To assess whether the higher education institution's (hereinafter also referred to as HEI) quality activities are in line with European quality standards;
- To assess whether the quality system produces relevant information for the implementation of the strategy and the continuous development of the HEI's activities, and whether it results in effective enhancement activities;
- To encourage internationalisation, experimentation and a creative atmosphere at HEIs;
- To accumulate open and transparent information on quality work at Finnish HEIs.

### Evaluation areas

#### I HEI creates competence

- The planning of education
- The implementation of education
- The evaluation and enhancement of education
- Examples of successful enhancement activities

#### II HEI promotes impact and renewal

- Managing societal engagement and impact
- Research, development and innovation activities and artistic activities with impact
- Promoting renewal through the organisational culture
- Examples of successful enhancement activities

#### III HEI enhances quality and well-being

- Using the quality system in strategic management
- Supporting the competence development and well-being of the staff
- Functionality and development of the quality system
- Examples of successful enhancement activities

#### IV HEI as a learning organisation

- An evaluation area selected by the HEI

For evaluation area IV, the HEI will select an area which is central to its profile or strategy for which it would like to receive feedback for the enhancement of the selected area. The focus and concrete aims of the assessment are specified in the agreement negotiations between the HEI and FINEEC. Evaluation area IV selected by the HEI will not be taken into consideration when deciding whether the HEI will pass the audit, and no grading based on the assessment scale is given.

## Sweden

Sweden carries out **institutional reviews** focusing equally on whether higher education quality assurance processes contribute in a systematic and appropriate manner to the quality and development of both education and research.

Assessment criteria for research:

1. Established procedure and quality culture
2. Continuous monitoring
3. Periodic reviews
4. Research development and renewal
5. Support activities and research infrastructure
6. Competence supply, professional development and career support
7. Gender equality
8. Good research practice

Assessment criteria for education:

1. Established procedure and quality culture
2. Continuous monitoring
3. Periodic reviews
4. Establishment and discontinuation
5. Student support, learning resources and infrastructure
6. Competence supply and professional development
7. Connection between research and education
8. Student-centred learning

## Australia

Australia has regulations in place stating that, in order to **obtain or extend the right to provide instruction, a HEI has to undergo institution-level assessment**, upon a successful completion of which a higher education institution will be registered in the corresponding category. The thresholds for higher education are regulated at legislative level (Higher Education Framework Standards 2021) and are divided into the following evaluation areas:

- I. Student participation and attainment
  - a. Admission
  - b. Recognition of prior learning and work experience
  - c. Orientation & progression
  - d. Learning outcomes and assessment
  - e. Qualification and certification
- II. Learning environment
  - a. Facilities and infrastructure
  - b. Diversity and equity
  - c. Wellbeing and safety

- d. Student grievances and complaints
- III. Teaching
  - a. Course design
  - b. Staffing
  - c. Learning resources and educational support
- IV. Research and Research Training
  - a. Research
  - b. Research training
- V. Institutional quality assurance
  - a. Course approval and accreditation
  - b. Academic and research integrity
  - c. Monitoring, review and improvement
  - d. Delivery with other parties
- VI. Governance and accountability
  - a. Corporate governance
  - b. Corporate monitoring and accountability
  - c. Academic governance
- VII. Representation, information and information management
  - a. Representation
  - b. Information for prospective and current students
  - c. Information management

Higher education institutions are registered in a specific category, for which additional requirements are laid down in the same piece of legislation. In addition, the legislation provides for the possibility for higher education institutions to apply for **authority to self-accredit one or more of their own courses**, (comparable the Estonian initial and re-assessment system where a HEI, if granted authorization to provide instruction without a fixed term, can open new programmes in the respective curriculum group).

As an interesting feature of the system, an **annual risk-based assessment** of all registered higher education institutions is conducted, in addition to the assessment an institution needs to pass for registration. *For the risk assessment*, the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency* (TEQSA) works with the Ministry to collect data from different education information systems, national surveys and the results of previous evaluations, in order to reduce the burden of data provision for higher education institutions.

Risk assessments focus on data that can be collected and analysed on a regular, structured and systematic basis. TEQSA analyses risk indicators based on agreed thresholds, trends and formulae, etc. The data-driven risk assessment shall also take into account the HEI's history, context and internal risk management system, where appropriate, and TEQSA officials will engage with the HEI to understand, for example, the risks inherent to innovation and the risk mitigation measures implemented. TEQSA shall calculate the overall risk scores and, if significant risk is identified, the scores will be accompanied by explanations from the Agency. In most cases, HEIs are assessed as a whole, but it is possible to apply such a risk assessment also to certain categories of students or fields of study.

The following risk indicators shall be taken into account in the data-driven risk assessment:

Students:

- Student load
- Attrition rate
- Progress rate

Graduates

- Completions
- Graduate satisfaction
- Graduate destinations

Staff

- Senior academic leaders
- Student to staff ratio
- Academic staff on casual work contracts

Financial viability and sustainability

- Financial viability
- Financial sustainability

Other identified risk(s)

The results of the risk assessment may be as follows:

- I. No action is taken – unless significant risks are identified or risks are known to the Agency and appropriate measures are already implemented to mitigate them, the risk assessment will not be followed by other activities.
- II. Recommendation – The Agency may recommend that the provider closely monitor the identified risks and/or put in place appropriate controls or improvement strategies. A recommendation arising from risk assessment does not constitute a formal condition on registration.
- III. Request for information – The Agency may identify risks that require further consideration by the Agency. In such cases, TEQSA may seek additional information from the provider so that TEQSA may determine if further action is necessary. Requests for information may also be used to monitor identified risks between regular risk assessment cycles.
- IV. Regulatory action – the Agency may consider it necessary to take regulatory action outside of regular evaluations if a significant risk is identified. This may include a compliance assessment based on the Threshold Standards or additional formal conditions may be imposed on the registration.
- V. To be considered in regular assessment process – once the HEI is undergoing the assessment of re-registration, the risks arising from the risk assessment may be further addressed in the course of the scheduled assessment.

## New Zealand

In the course of an **academic audit**, the external evaluators in New Zealand assess whether the HEI's quality assurance procedures (both internal and external), results and standards are adequate, implemented and achieved. The 6th cycle of the academic audit runs from 2017 to 2024 and consists of two phases: an improvement phase was implemented in 2017-2020 and an audit phase will be implemented in 2022-2024. The topic of improvement will be agreed between higher education institutions, with the 6th cycle theme being *Access, outcomes and opportunities for Māori and Pasifika students*.

The objective of the audit framework is twofold:

1. Provide added value to higher education institutions through guidelines against which the HEI can assess itself; and receive feedback from the evaluation panel thus enhance its activities.
2. Provide assurance on the quality of New Zealand higher education institutions.

The guidelines describe the outputs/results to be expected from a higher education institution of international standing. These are not fixed minimum standards, they are relative and dynamic. The 30 guidelines are divided into five evaluation areas.

- I. Leadership and management of learning and academic quality
  - a. Planning and reporting
  - b. The student voice
  - c. Teaching and learning environment
  - d. Academic delegations that support decision-making and accountability
  - e. Management of academic risks
  - f. Progress on the enhancement team (two topics: Māori students and Pasifika students)
- II. Student profile, life cycle, support and well-being
  - g. Access
  - h. Transitions
  - i. Academic advice
  - j. Academic complaints, appeals and grievances
  - k. Learning support
  - l. Safety and well-being
- III. Curriculum, assessment, and delivery
  - m. Programme approval
  - n. Course/paper and programme monitoring
  - o. Regular review of curricula
  - p. Students are aware and achieve the expected learning outcomes and profile at graduation
  - q. The assessment is appropriate and effective
  - r. Assessment and outcome standards are appropriate
  - s. Academic integrity
  - t. Assessment in te reo Māori, if applicable
- IV. Quality of teaching
  - u. Staff recruitment
  - v. Induction and ongoing expectations
  - w. Teaching development
  - x. Quality of teaching
  - y. High quality teaching is recognized and rewarded



- V. Postgraduate research *students*
  - z. Supervision quality
  - aa. Resourcing of research students
  - bb. Research student progress
  - cc. Thesis examination

## Switzerland

Switzerland has established by law that **institutional accreditation is an instrument to regulate access to the higher education landscape**. All public or private higher education institutions that wish to call themselves a 'university', 'university of applied sciences' or 'university of teacher education' – including the compound and derivative designations in all languages must undergo institutional accreditation. The HEI's quality assurance system will be evaluated to ensure the quality of teaching; research and services.

The quality standards cover the following areas:

- I. Quality assurance strategy
- II. Governance
- III. Teaching
- IV. Research
- V. Services
- VI. Resources
- VII. Internal and external communication

## Norway

The Norwegian Quality Agency for Higher Education has the mandate to conduct periodic reviews and supervisions to ensure quality assurance and quality enhancement at the institutions in accordance with higher education legislation. Higher education institutions that do not have the right to accredit curricula themselves can also apply for this right through the assessment.

The HEI will be assessed against the following criteria:

- (1) The institution must have education, research and/or artistic research and academic development work at an academic level that meets the requirements set out in Sections 3-6 to 3-8 of the Regulations concerning Quality Assurance and Quality Development in Higher Education and Tertiary Vocational Education.
- (2) The institution must have a strategy for teaching, research and/or artistic research and academic development work.
- (3) The institution's systematic quality assurance practices must be approved by NOKUT.
- (4) The institution must have regular admission of students and a satisfactory number of candidates who graduate within the normal length of study.

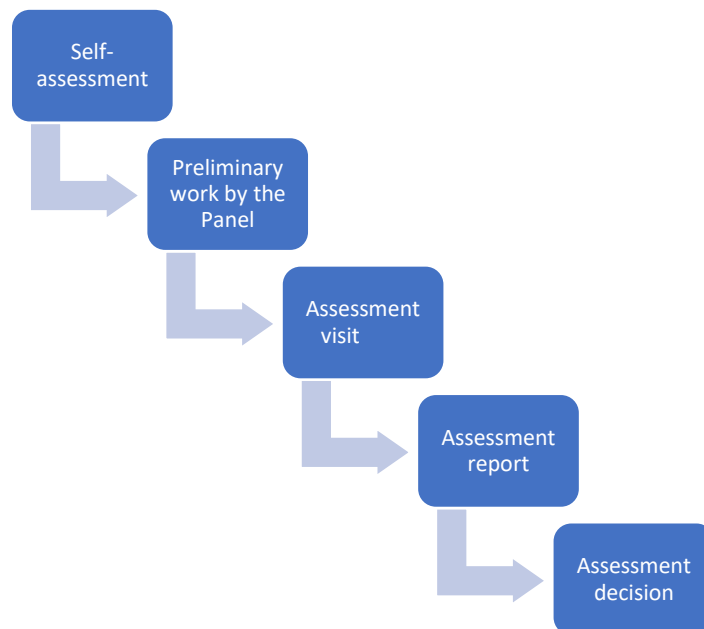
(5) The institution's research and/or artistic research and academic development work must be conducted in cooperation with the institution's educational activities.

(6) The institution must have a relevant competence profile, and the overall competence must be commensurate with comparable institutions in the same institutional category.

## II Assessment process

For the most part, a similar evaluation process to Estonia is used, consisting of:

- I. The HEI preparing a self-assessment
- II. External evaluation panel examines the documents
- III. Assessment visit
- IV. Drafting of the assessment report
- V. Adoption of the assessment decision;
- VI. Follow-up activities



**In the Norwegian** system, the HEI provides information on the whole institution and on selected curricula. Documents at institutional level show how quality assurance is organized in the higher education institution, and through curricula the Panel can assess the quality work in practice. In addition to the above, the HEI provides two additional documents:

1. A **voluntary statement from the highest acting student body** at the institution
2. A **summary** from the leadership **about institutional characteristics in the institution's quality work**.

NOKUT divides the HEIs undergoing assessment into “**projects**”, which allows to disseminate information together to all the HEIs undergoing assessment at the same period (academic year), but also provides an opportunity for peer discussion and support.

In the case of **Sweden**, although different decisions are taken on education provision and research, the HEI submits a joint self-analysis report covering both topics. The documents to be submitted by the higher education institution include a self-assessment report with annexes, and a **report prepared by the student union of the HEI**.

A **meeting between the assessment panel and the higher education institution at an early stage of the evaluation** takes place, which is not part of the current Estonian system. During this meeting the HEI presents the HEI's quality system to the evaluation panel. Based on the meeting and the information provided, the **evaluation panel selects up to three audit trails** for which the HEI will provide additional evidence. Such documents may include summaries of internal evaluations, action plans and reports of follow-up activities or other documents related to planning or decision-making processes. Audit trail documents are documents already existing at the HEI, no new documents are expected to be produced for evaluation purposes.

In **Finland**, **bench learning** is part of the evaluation process. The HEI under evaluation chooses an objective for mutual learning from among any field of evaluation. The HEI also finds a peer learning partner, which can be another HEI or other type of cooperation organisation in the HEI's field of activity.

The role of the Agency's staff member is broader than the role of assessment coordinator in today's Estonian system. In Finland, a **project manager** is working with the evaluation panel and is responsible for:

- Organising trainings and instructing the auditors;
- Participating in the panel's discussions as an expert of audits to guide the audit team on the criteria and the decision-making policy of the Evaluation Board;
- Being an intermediary between the HEI and the audit team;
- For editing the audit report and communicating the audit results.

In the case of **New Zealand**, panels are presented with a large number of template questions in in the annex to the regulation, covering all areas of evaluation, from which panel members can draw inspiration when preparing the evaluation interviews.

### III Results and follow-up activities

In most cases, a decision is taken as a result of the evaluation, although in **New Zealand**, for example, the AQA Board approves the report of the evaluation panel, but **neither the Panel nor the Agency takes an assessment decision**. The panel's report only sets out the panel's conclusions on each guideline.

One year after the report is finalised, the HEI will report on how recommendations have been followed up and progress made on the area of improvement.

Two years after the report is finalised, an informal follow-up visit to the HEI will be carried out either by the AQA Executive Director or another representative of the Agency. The visit will address developments in academic quality assurance and the HEI will provide an informal overview of developments regarding the audit conclusions.

The mid-cycle report shall be submitted to the Agency's Governing Council for approval. If the Council is dissatisfied with the report, clarifications may be requested, or the

outstanding issues taken into account in the planning of the subsequent audit of the higher education institution.

**Finland** uses the scale *excellent; good and insufficient* for evaluation results. In order to successfully complete the audit, evaluation areas I to III must at least achieve a 'good' outcome. If an evaluation area is assessed as insufficient, the audit team decides whether the HEI has nevertheless passed the audit or whether to oblige the HEI to undergo a re-audit.

The Higher Education Evaluation Committee shall take a decision on the basis of the recommendation of the presenting official and with the aim of ensuring a fair decision.

**The Head of the Audit Team or Deputy Head of the Audit Team shall present the results of the audit at a meeting of the Committee and answer questions** from the Committee.

The decision of the Evaluation Committee may differ from the assessment of the audit team and the proposal of the presenting officer.

If the HEI has been deemed "excellent" in at least one of the mandatory evaluation areas (I-III) in an audit report, it shall be proposed as a candidate for **Quality Label for Excellence**. The Quality Label shall be awarded by the Evaluation Committee and shall be valid for 6 years.

If the Evaluation Committee decides that the HEI has to undergo a re-audit, the evaluation decision shall identify the evaluation areas to be improved and that will be re-assessed in the course of the re-audit.

As follow-up activities, the Finnish Agency organizes regular enhancement workshops aimed at giving higher education institutions the opportunity to talk about post-audit improvement activities and to exchange experiences and good practices.

In the case of **Sweden**, the evaluation panel will assess the fulfilment of the evaluation criteria. The overall assessment of the HEI's quality assurance processes is given on a three-point scale. UKÄ decides whether to *approve the quality assurance processes*, to *approve the quality assurance processes with reservations* or to *decide that the quality assurance processes at the HEI will be under review*.

At the end of the evaluation, the Agency will organize a meeting between representatives of the higher education institution, the student representation and the evaluation panel, with the participation of the Agency, providing feedback and discussing the evaluation process. The Agency may also involve a higher education institution in conferences for the exchange of experience.

The HEIs that have received a positive evaluation, report to the Agency about the recommendations and developments about a year after the decision is taken.

Higher education institutions with quality processes under review shall report to the Agency on the improvements made to the non-compliant evaluation criteria two years after the decision is taken. In order to assess the improvement activities, a panel shall be

convened, and additional documentation may be requested and evaluation interviews conducted.

The registration process for an **Australian** higher education institution ends either with the *decision to register or not to register* the higher education institution. A registered higher education institution must undergo a reassessment within seven years in order to extend the right to provide instruction.

In **Switzerland**, the Accreditation Council has the option to choose between three decisions:

1. *To grant accreditation without conditions*
2. *To grant accreditation with condition(s); or*
3. *To refuse accreditation.*

Higher education institutions shall be accredited for a period of seven years.

On the basis of the evaluation report, *the Board* of the **Norwegian** Agency (NOKUT Board) adopts one of three decisions:

1. *Satisfactory*: all requirements in the rules and regulations are approved. The periodic review in this round is concluded, and a new periodic review will be initiated in six to eight years.
2. *Partially compliant*: One or more requirements do not fulfil the minimum requirements. Dependent on the extent of partial compliance, the institution must introduce measures to enhance their mechanisms for securing educational quality within three to twelve months. After that a new assessment will be made by the committee and addressed in a new Board meeting at NOKUT.
3. *Non-compliance*: One or more requirements do not fulfil the minimum requirements. Dependent on the extent of non-compliance, the institution must introduce comprehensive measures to enhance their mechanisms for securing educational quality within twelve months. After that a new review will be initiated and addressed in a new Board meeting at NOKUT.

The Council will adopt a new decision on partially corresponding and sub-optimal HEIs, which may be:

1. *Satisfactory*: all requirements in the rules and regulations are approved. The periodic review in this round is concluded, and a new periodic review will be initiated in six to eight years.
2. *Non-satisfactory*: Institutions with self-accrediting rights lose their right to establish new study programmes. Institutions which do not have self-accrediting right lose the possibility to apply for the establishment of new study programmes. One year after the decision is made, the institutions can demand from NOKUT to initiate a new review. This review can result in re-installing the institution's self-accreditation rights or that the former decision will be sustained.

In special cases, NOKUT may establish a **quarantine period of up to two years** before considering a new application from the same institution.

Two years after the end of the evaluation, the Agency shall organize a follow-up seminar.

## IV Scotland

Scotland started with enhancement-led evaluations *in* 2003, celebrating the 20th anniversary of the enhancement-led system in 2023. The system has evolved and requires mature quality arrangements also from higher education institutions. The Scottish system consists of five components:

- I. **Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR 2003 -2021)**, from 2022 **Quality Enhancement and Standards Review (QESR)**
- II. **Institution-led Review (ILR)**
- III. Enhancement themes
- IV. Student engagement
- V. Public information

**Student engagement** in the Scottish context means involving students in evaluations (both within higher education institutions and external evaluation panels), involving students in decision-making processes, and providing them with corresponding training, as well as conducting national and HEI specific student experience studies, including longitudinal studies.

**The public information** component is implemented through guidelines on disclosure of information established by the *Scottish Funding Council*, which guide HEIs to publish targeted information on the quality of teaching and learning, including:

- Information on the quality and standards of teaching and learning;
- Information that helps a (potential) learner to make choices and employers and other stakeholders to understand the nature of the Scottish higher education sector;
- Information that helps enrolled students to understand, contribute and best benefit from institutional systems put in place to ensure quality;
- Find out about the HEI's educational processes that guide reflection on academic practices (provision) and, more broadly, the sharing of good practice inside and outside the HEI.

**Enhancement themes** are agreed across higher education institutions for a certain period (3 years). Under the auspices of a theme, higher education institutions, academics, support staff and students are encouraged to work together to develop new ideas and innovative ways to improve the learning experience of students. Each enhancement theme provides an impetus to learn from the best national and external practices. You can read more about the themes here: <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/explore-the-enhancement-themes>.

The remaining two components of the system are evaluations: **institution-led review** and **external review**.

**The Institution-Led Review (ILR)** is an obligation for higher education institutions to assess the teaching and professional services offered by academic subjects. Higher education institutions are free to carry out such internal evaluations as they deem appropriate, provided that they meet the expectations set out in the *Quality Code* and the quality guidelines for higher education institutions established by the *Scottish Funding Council*.

The Guidelines set out the following requirements for the ILR:

- reviewing all subject provision in a maximum of a six-year cycle;
- using trained reviewers;
- involving students at various stages of the process including as full members of review panels
- involving at least one reviewer from outside the institution
- making use of external reference points when evaluating and reporting on subject provision

The quality agency has developed and updates on an ongoing basis **subject benchmark statements** (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements>) describing in detail the expectations for provision in the field concerned and the thresholds for completion (including with honours).

**Enhancement-Led Institutional Review** was conducted until 2022 (acronym ELIR), succeeded by **Quality Enhancement and Standards Review (QESR)**. The starting point is the five components described above and the assumption that higher education institutions in Scotland have mature quality arrangements. This means, among other things, a 'no surprise' approach to quality and standards implemented through an informal agreement, i.e. higher education institutions can contact the quality agency for advice or information. A more formalized part of a surprise-free approach consists of the annual submission of a set of data (Annex 2 to this analysis) to the quality agency. The data to be provided shall include, inter alia, a report on the follow-up of the previous full assessment, information on the time frame and method of the internal evaluations and on the changes to the quality system.

QESR method:

- Consists of interlinked elements, one of which is the **dialogue between the HEI and the Quality Agency** (discussion with representatives of the Quality Agency and a small number of HEI staff and students (**Institutional Liaison Meeting ILM**)), which will take place during the first evaluation phase in the year when the HEI is not undergoing an external evaluation; and the **external evaluation (QESR)**.
- The involvement of students in all aspects of their learning and learning experience (including in the context of QESR and ILM) is considered essential.
- Builds on sectorial regulatory documents such as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, ESG, Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the Scottish Funding Council Guidelines for HEIs.

- Emphasizes the data and evidence base of the HEI's decision-making processes (quantitative and qualitative information).
- Follow-up activities are part of the **Focus On** project of the Quality Agency, which aims to promote inter-university learning. These are **focus themes** for higher education institutions and student organisations for one academic year. The specific theme will be selected by the Quality Agency from among the topics emerging from the external evaluations (ELIR). The theme of the first phase of QESR currently underway is *The Future of Learning and Teaching: how to deliver effective and inclusive digital/blended learning*.

The first QESR cycle is under development and is divided into two phases:

1. In the first phase of academic years 2022-2023 and 2023-24, smaller-scope **QESR evaluations** (7 evaluations carried out by the end of 2023) and the Agency's **dialogue with higher education institutions (ILM)** are carried out.
2. In the second phase 2024-2025, by which the Scottish Funding Council's *Tertiary Quality Framework* is expected to be operational, **full regular external reviews** will start. At the time of completion of this analysis, comprehensive information on the second phase was not yet available.

The first phase aims to provide an overview of what underpins the HEI's approach to academic quality management and standards and how progress has been made compared to the latest evaluation (ELIR). In the first phase, more emphasis will be placed on the evaluation of quality assurance, although with a view to enhancement. The amount of evidence to be provided by the HEI is smaller than for the regular assessment in the second phase.

### What is assessed?

An analysis of the results of the first QESR year ([https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/analysis-of-findings-qesr-2022-23.pdf?sfvrsn=ae99b381\\_3](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/analysis-of-findings-qesr-2022-23.pdf?sfvrsn=ae99b381_3)) shows that the following topics were assessed in the first year of QESR implementation (2022-2023) (where examples of best practice and recommendations were identified):

- Learning and teaching strategies
- Student Partnerships
- Support for students
- Cross-sectoral enhancement theme
- Institutional approaches to enhancement
- Development and implementation of a strategy/implementing change
- Use of data and evidence in self-analysis and decision-making processes
- Opportunities for students' professional development
- Professional service review



## Evaluation process

The review process follows a classical model, but the **assessment is done on the basis of documents provided, and the HEI does not prepare a bespoke self-analysis document for the evaluation**. A large number of documents are submitted, which are set out in Annex 1 to this analysis. The HEI does not produce separate documents for the evaluation, the requested documents already exist (are drawn up for other purposes). At the same time, the higher education institution has the opportunity to provide further explanations to the documents that help the evaluation panel to better understand the context in which a given higher education institution operates.

The first phase evaluation visit will last one day.

The evaluation panel shall be composed of academic reviewer, student member and coordinating reviewer (comparable to the Panel secretary in Estonian IA). In the second phase, the intention is to involve at least one member from outside the Scottish higher education landscape in each review panel; in the first phase, all reviewers may be from Scotland. Where possible, the Panel shall include at least one member of the higher education institution's previous evaluation (ELIR).

The Quality Agency selects members to the Panels from among the candidates proposed by higher education institutions and students.

Each evaluation is managed by a staff member of the Quality Agency, who advises the Panel, steers the agreed meetings and is also responsible for the revision of the review report.

## Results and follow-up activities

As a result of the first phase of QESR, the Panel assesses that:

- From the evidence presented, *the review team is confident* that the institution is making effective progress in continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision to enable effective arrangements to be in place for managing academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience; or
- From the evidence presented, *the review team is not confident* that the institution is making effective progress in continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision to enable effective arrangements to be in place for managing academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience.

In cases where the HEI has failed to convince the Panel of effective quality assurance,

- one member of the Panel (most often the academic member) will be involved in the dialogue between the HEI and the Agency for the following year (ILM)
- if necessary, the external evaluation of the second phase may be carried out earlier than the agreed schedule.

No later than 24 weeks after the publication of the review report (32 weeks after the evaluation visit), the HEI being assessed must publish an action plan based on the recommendations of the evaluation report, which may also be subject to review by the HEI before publication. **The action plan will be made public on the HEI website** and a link

to it will be published on the website of the Quality Agency. The action plan will also be presented as part of the evidence in the second phase evaluation.

## V Conclusions

### Purpose and outcomes of the different assessment models

The analysis shows that mandatory evaluations at institutional level are carried out under different names (accreditation, registration, audit, review), but the name of the evaluation does not always indicate unequivocally the outcome of the evaluation.

The stated objectives of the evaluations may in general terms be a combination of the following:

- To check compliance with agreements/regulations (ESG or corresponding) (all)
- Motivate enhancement in general and on selected topics (QAA, Fineec, AQA)
- Grant or extend the right to provide education (TEQSA, AAQ (indirectly others))
- Assess the performance of the quality system (Fineec, QAA (indirectly others))
- Grant/not grant higher education institutions the right to open/accredit programmes (TEQSA; NOKUT)
- Collect and analyse information at higher education or system level (all)
- Inform stakeholders and policy-making (all)

From the systems examined, the ones which assess the achievement of the threshold for standards/criteria, and which explicitly indicate whether or not the right to provide instruction is granted (Australia, Switzerland), were in the minority. The threshold may also be set in a multi-level manner, e.g. the right to provide instruction is granted if a lower-level threshold is achieved, if higher thresholds are exceeded, the HEI receives additional rights or privileges (e.g. the right to open new curricula without external evaluation/right to self-accredit the curricula) (Australia, Norway).

The majority of evaluations analysed combine elements of quality assessment and threshold-based assessment and in most cases they also end with a decision of some kind being taken. With the exception of New Zealand, where no decision is adopted. However, in systems where a decision is adopted, in the event of shortcomings, the higher education institution may be required to undergo a new assessment earlier than the agreed schedule or the decision may lead to a more in-depth re-evaluation, or losing certain privileges (e.g. the right to accredit curricula or open new curricula), while other supervisory measures (e.g. losing of the right to provide instruction) are not apparent from the evaluation regulations. However, the latter does not necessarily mean that such repercussions may not be one of the consequences of an evaluation, they may be outcomes of further procedures conducted by other authorities. In Estonia, the opening of new study programmes is regulated through the right to provide instruction that may be granted upon successful completion of initial or re-assessment and the obtained right to provide instruction without a fixed term. No further privilege at the level of study programmes or groups thereof is neither obtained nor lost as an outcome of the institution-level assessment.

Several of the assessment models examined referred to an enhancement element. Various approaches are used, either alone or in combination, for the enhancement element:

- the enhancement element is horizontally integrated into the assessment areas;
- the enhancement theme is selected by and across higher education institutions for a defined period of time (e.g. New Zealand, Scotland);
- the enhancement theme is chosen by the Quality Agency (Scotland *Focus on*)
- the enhancement theme is chosen by each HEI (Finland).

The enhancement theme will enable the HEI in particular to get valuable feedback. Enhancement themes, often agreed for a shorter period, provide an opportunity to pay attention to emerging topical issues within rather lengthy evaluation cycles (5-8 years), and are seen as a good opportunity for higher education institutions to share best practices and learn from each other. Enhancement themes may also be addressed in the evaluation in such a way that the Panel's feedback on the enhancement theme does not feed into the decision-making of the evaluation (e.g. Finland).

### What is assessed – interesting examples from the systems analysed

All the assessments examined are based either on the European Higher Education Area Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance or a similar framework from outside Europe and are broadly very similar in terms of the themes to be assessed. Differences between systems appear mainly in detail and focus, and in the structuring of the themes and the formulation of specific standards/criteria. There are also differences as to whether the performance of the higher education institution as a whole is assessed or whether the focus is more on the quality system.

However, it is clear that the formulation of the areas/standards/criteria to be evaluated has a major impact on the priorities of higher education institutions in advancing quality. You will find some interesting examples of the analysed systems below.

In Finland, the evaluation theme of the HEI's own choice is analysed under a separate evaluation area *Higher education as a learning organization*, which allows the HEI to address a topic of relevance to it in depth. As regards the topics that are mandatory for all higher education institutions, Finland differs from the other systems examined in terms of the emphasis on impact and, if not strictly innovation, then on the assessment of renewal. The second of the three mandatory evaluation areas analyses, for example, the extent to which a higher education institution promotes impact and innovation in relation to society, effective research, development and creative activities as well as through an organization culture that fosters renewal.

New Zealand pays attention to the student lifecycle, including the smoothness of the different transitions it contains, as well as the security and well-being of students, as separate evaluation areas. Supporting students' research competences, e.g. through mentoring, research resources and monitoring, is also considered as a separate evaluation area.

In the case of Sweden, the evaluation of research and learning takes place at the same time – the HEI prepares one self-analysis report, but there are separate evaluation criteria for each topic and two separate decisions are adopted.

### Comprehensive external quality insurance schemes of interest

As this analysis does not include an analysis of comprehensive quality assessment systems of all the countries examined, only two examples analysed in this analysis can be mentioned here: Australia and Scotland. In both cases, the common objective is to monitor the performance of HEIs outside the more in-depth assessments in order to avoid (unpleasant) surprises. The common feature of both systems is the data-based approach to such monitoring. HEIs do not produce separate datasets or reports for the purpose of monitoring but use the data that the HEI is required to provide to other authorities for other purposes.

In the Australian approach, the threshold-based (registration-oriented) regular external evaluation is complemented by a risk-based approach whereby, based on data collected from higher education institutions at system level, the Quality Agency calculates annual risk scores using predetermined (publicly available) formulas. Based on the results obtained, the quality agency will be able to discuss the risks with the HEI and, in the case of a high risk identified, make changes to the timing or terms of reference of the periodic evaluations. The results of the risk assessment shall not be made public, nor shall they provide estimates of compliance with the threshold.

In Scotland, the system provides for the regular sharing of comprehensive information on quality assurance at higher education institutions with various national agencies, including the Quality Agency. While the amount of information to be provided is significant, there is a positive avoidance of duplication – it is not necessary to provide an additional self-analysis report to the Quality Agency for external evaluation and likewise it is sufficient to provide available information annually. An annual dialogue takes place between the HEI and the Quality Agency, with the exception of the external evaluation years, which, on the one hand, allows the HEI to explain further the context of the data to be reported and to receive feedback from the Quality Agency, on the other hand, provides the Quality Agency with a continuous, contextual and evidence-based picture of the state of play of higher education institutions. Frameworks put in place at different levels help to ensure the comparability of the information provided, however it is essential that they are perceived as a cross-sectoral agreement in higher-education.

An important element in this system is the obligation to carry out an internal evaluation of the programmes taught every six years. As certain requirements for internal evaluation are prescribed (e.g. who must participate in the evaluation – e.g. student representative and external reviewer, participants need to be trained, study fields have their own subject benchmark statements) and internal evaluations must be carried out at least once every six years, independently of the external evaluation cycle, the system ensures a consistent sector-level quality review. The obligation to carry out regular internal reviews should ensure that the main burden of the internal assessment does not fall to the time before the external assessment. For a quality agency, the internal assessment obligation imposed on higher education institutions implies the need to keep the sectoral reference

requirements up to date and to analyse on an ongoing basis the relevance of the methodology used for internal evaluations of higher education institutions.

The regular exchange of information and dialogue between higher education institutions and the quality agency, on the one hand, forces HEIs to interact with the enhancement theme (Focus on) on an annual basis and in three-year cycles (inter-institutional agreement) and, on the other hand, it also gives them a much timelier opportunity to learn from each other, than could be achieved through periodic external evaluation.

While the Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) or the corresponding framework followed by all assessed agencies already set their requirements for information provided by higher education institutions, special attention is paid in Scotland to the public availability of quality assurance information on HEIs. The guidelines set out the quality information that higher education institutions publish on their website, as well as the obligation for higher education institutions to share on their website information on the improvement activities post-evaluation. Such a system has two positive effects:

1. the HEI reports directly on its quality system and the quality achieved to the target audience - current and potential learners - who are the direct beneficiaries of the quality;
2. a situation where a (potential) student, lecturer, representative of a competing higher education institution has access to information about the quality assurance systems of different HEIs and the recommendations made to higher education institutions increases overall quality awareness and quality-based competition between higher education institutions.

### Evaluation process

Although the assessment process is in broad terms similar in all the systems examined, it is also possible to highlight some differences compared to the Estonian system today, that might be of interest.

In the preparatory phase of the Scottish approach no self-analysis or other documents are produced for evaluation purposes only, but there is a rather extensive set of documents, which must nevertheless be provided. Student involvement is ensured through different levels (participation of students in the annual Higher Education Institution-Quality Agency dialogue, internal evaluations, external evaluation panels), but in addition the HEI submits to the Panel a partnership agreement between the HEI and students.

In other systems, the HEI provides a self-analysis report. In Norway and Sweden, the self-analysis shall be accompanied by a statement by the body representing students. Although Estonian higher education institutions have also involved students in self-analysis processes, it would be worth considering structuring the system of student engagement and giving them a clear platform. Consideration could also be given to seeking the position of the student representation at the stage where the HEI is submitting an overview of the planned and implemented improvement activities.

In the case of Sweden, a meeting between the evaluation panel and the higher education institution is organized at an initial stage of the evaluation. During this meeting the HEI presents its quality system to the panel and, on the basis of the meeting and the information provided, the evaluation panel selects up to three audit trails, for which the institution provides additional evidence in the form of documents already available at the HEI. A selective approach to the evidence collected by the evaluation panel, based on risk analysis, merits consideration due to the potential to reduce the burden on both the higher education institution and the Panel.

Finland applies a 'bench learning' model aimed at stimulating learning between higher education institutions or from outside the higher education sector. While the goal is noble, it may be difficult to ensure equal motivation by the partner (the institution that is not under assessment) to sign a partnership agreement and to commit to mutual learning.

Splitting the evaluation cycle into different phases is also an interesting approach, e.g. in New Zealand the cycle is divided into an enhancement phase and an audit phase. During the enhancement phase, all HEIs will focus on the agreed enhancement topic, only then will a cycle of external evaluations be carried out.

In the case of Scotland, the evaluation is divided into two phases, one with a smaller scale evaluation and dialogue between the HEI and the Quality Agency and a more in-depth external evaluation in the second phase. This may be a transitional solution, as the system is moving from the previous model to a new one and details of the comprehensive new model were not available at the time this analysis was prepared. A structured internal assessment of subjects (curriculum groups?) is carried out by higher education institutions at least every six years, irrespective of the evaluation cycles.

## Annex 1 List of documents/evidence to be submitted under Scottish QESR Phase 1

1. Annual Report to Scottish Funding Council (most recent submission)
2. Annual Outcome Agreement Self-Evaluation Report (most recent submission)
3. Update to ELIR 4 follow-up report (including response to QESR where this has taken place) Enhancement topic-related evidence
4. A copy of the HEI's current Learning & Teaching Strategy (or equivalent), supported (where appropriate) by:
  - any action plan (or equivalent) supporting the delivery of this Strategy for the current academic session
  - evaluation of previous session's action plan (or equivalent) Data used by the HEI internally for oversight of:
    - retention and progression
    - degree outcomes
    - complaints and appeals
    - student disciplinary cases These should include analysis of any trends and attainment gaps for the last five years
5. The HEI's current mapping to the UK Quality Code and information on when this was last updated
6. A copy of the HEI's approach and process for undertaking institution-led review, including arrangements for considering Professional Services review
7. Institution-led review (ILR) reports since submission for ILM in 2021-22
8. Follow-up from any previous ILR reports discussed at the 2021-22 ILM
9. A copy of the HEI's approach to annual monitoring Sample to illustrate annual monitoring in operation through different levels of scrutiny from the most recent cycle Institution-level analysis of:
  - annual monitoring
  - institution-led review
  - external examiner feedback
  - student feedback
10. Minutes from meetings of key institutional committee(s) responsible for the oversight of quality and standards from the last academic session
11. A copy of the current Student Partnership Agreement (or equivalent) with the students' association

Annex 2 List of documents/evidence to be submitted in the framework of the Scottish Agency-ILM dialogue

Documentation/evidence	Required	Updates only
Annual Report to Scottish Funding Council (most recent submission)	✓	
Annual Outcome Agreement Self-Evaluation Report (most recent submission)	✓	
Update to ELIR 4 follow-up report (including response to QESR where this has taken place)	✓	
Enhancement topic-related evidence	✓	
A copy of the HEI's current Learning & Teaching Strategy (or equivalent), supported (where appropriate) by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>any action plan (or equivalent) supporting the delivery of this Strategy for the current academic session</li> <li>evaluation of previous session's action plan (or equivalent)</li> </ul>	✓ ✓	✓ (if submitted previously)
Data used by the HEI internally for oversight of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>retention and progression</li> <li>degree outcomes</li> <li>complaints and appeals</li> <li>student disciplinary cases</li> </ul> <p>These should include analysis of any trends and attainment gaps for the last five years</p>	✓	
The HEI's current mapping to the UK Quality Code and information on when this was last updated		✓
A copy of the HEI's approach and process for undertaking institution-led review, including arrangements for considering Professional Services review		✓
Follow-up from any previous ILR reports discussed at the 2021-22 ILM	✓	
A copy of the HEI's approach to annual monitoring		✓
Institution-level analysis of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>annual monitoring</li> <li>institution-led review</li> <li>external examiner feedback</li> <li>student feedback</li> </ul>	✓	
A copy of the current Student Partnership Agreement (or equivalent) with the students' association		✓ (if submitted previously)