

Guidelines for Quality Assessment in Vocational Education

Approved by the Quality Assessment Council for Vocational Education of the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education on 01.07. 2019.

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I. General provisions

1. This Guideline outlines the requirements and procedures for conducting quality assessment at the level of vocational education according to subsection 14(1), section 19 and subsection 58(6) of the Vocational Educational Institutions Act and the regulation of the Minister of Education and Research “Rules and procedures for quality assessment at the level of vocational education”.
2. The quality assessment of vocational education (hereinafter *quality assessment*) is an external evaluation conducted by independent external experts based on an internal evaluation that takes place once every six years.
3. Quality assessment of vocational education is conducted by the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA). HAKA prepares a plan for quality assessment across years and study programme groups.

II. Assessment areas and criteria

4. Quality assessment focuses on the functioning and sustainability of teaching and education, including the functioning and sustainability of study programme development, learning and teaching, leadership and management and use of resources across three areas of assessment: study programmes and study programme development, learning and teaching, teachers.
5. The following criteria are used in assessing the **study programme and study programme development**:
 - 5.1. study programme development is targeted, systematic and managed; study programmes are prepared and developed keeping in mind the educational needs of learners and the labour market;

- 5.2. the studies shall be designed in the implementation plans of the modules of the study programmes, taking into account the uniqueness of learners, teaching content and methods, as well as assessment criteria and methods, shall support students in achieving their learning outcomes and developing their key competencies.
6. The following criteria are used in assessing **learning and teaching**:
 - 6.1. students' choice of specialisation is supported;
 - 6.2. the learning environment, including materials, tools and technology support the students in achieving their learning outcomes;
 - 6.3. the organisation of studies including practical work and traineeship is based on the specificities of students and forms of study, and it supports the student in achieving the learning outcomes;
 - 6.4. the teaching content, methodology and evaluation, including for practical work and traineeship, is based on the learning outcomes;
 - 6.5. Student support services are in place and available for students.
 7. The following criteria are used in **teacher**¹ assessment:
 - 7.1. Study programmes have teachers with relevant qualification, including practitioners and competent traineeship supervisors; the volume of work of teachers and job positions are pre-planned;
 - 7.2. Professional and occupational development of teachers is focused on the study programmes, the needs of learners, feedback from the stakeholders and self-analysis.

III. Organisation and schedule of quality assessment

Preparing a self-evaluation report of study programme groups

8. The HAKA Secretariat shall prepare a plan of assessments of educational institutions providing vocational education (hereinafter *schools*) for the following year across study programme groups and semesters no later than by 1 September the year before.
9. To undergo quality assessment, the school shall prepare a self-evaluation report (hereinafter *self-evaluation*) of study programme group(s) based on internal evaluation and according to guidelines established by HAKA. As a general rule, study programme groups in one field of study are considered together. Depending

¹ For the purposes of the guidelines, all employees in the field of schooling and education are referred to as teachers (including supervisors of practical work, traineeship supervisors at schools, and other)



on the school's specifics, self-evaluation may cover study programme groups from different fields of study if their content is similar.

10. HAKA Secretariat shall prepare the assessment visit and coordinate the dates with the school concerned. The school shall submit a self-evaluation to the HAKA Secretariat according to the schedule prepared by HAKA.
11. If necessary, HAKA may ask for further information from the school and employers relevant to the study programme group to be assessed. HAKA shall make all acquired information available both to the Assessment Committee and the school.
12. No later than one month before the assessment visit, the HAKA Secretariat shall forward the self-evaluation and any further information that may be required, to members of the Committee.

Formation and tasks of assessment committees

13. HAKA shall set up assessment committees. The Committee shall comprise at least three members and include representatives of employers in the fields of the study programme group under assessment, and experts of vocational education.
14. HAKA shall choose Committee members following the principles of:
 - 14.1. avoiding conflicts of interest;
 - 14.2. choosing Committee members from different organisations.
15. A member of the Committee shall:
 - 15.1. know the functioning of the vocational education system, be familiar with trends and organisational principles of vocational education;
 - 15.2. have management and/or development experience in the field of the study programme group under assessment and/or in the field of vocational education;
 - 15.3. preferably have experience in teaching and/or supervision (including traineeship supervision) in the field of vocational education;
 - 15.4. preferably have completed a study programme development, internal and/or external assessment or quality management training, and preferably have internal and/or external assessment experience;
 - 15.5. be independent in their work and not represent the interests of the organisation they belong to.
16. A Committee member shall confirm by signature an obligation to maintain the confidentiality of information that has become known to them in the course of



assessment, and a lack of conflicts of interest. If a conflict of interests occurs, the Committee member shall inform the Director of HAKA immediately and remove themselves from the work of the Committee. A conflict of interest is presumed to be present in the following cases:

- 16.1. a Committee member has an employment or other contractual relationship with the school under assessment at the time of assessment, or they have had an employment relationship with the school within three years prior to the assessment;
 - 16.2. a Committee member is participating in the work of a decision-making or advisory body of the school under assessment at the time of assessment;
 - 16.3. a Committee member is studying in the school under assessment, or graduated from it less than three years ago;
 - 16.4. any member of school staff connected to the study programme group under assessment is a person closely related to a Committee member (spouse or life partner, child or parent).
17. The HAKA Secretariat shall notify the school of the composition of a Committee, and the school may give its opinion on it within five working days.
18. The Director of HAKA shall approve the composition of a Committee by his or her order and appoint a chairperson of the Committee. The Director of HAKA shall appoint a Secretary to each Committee who is a member of the Committee. The appointed Secretary can also be one of HAKA's employees.
19. The objective of the Committee is to analyse the quality of studies in the study programme group and based on the analysis make recommendations for improving the quality of studies. The Committee shall base its analysis of the self-evaluation of the study programme group, study performance indicators of the study programmes of the group and information gathered during the assessment visit. The quality of studies is analysed for each of the criteria of assessment areas described in clauses 5–7 of this Guideline.
20. Tasks of Committee members:
- 20.1. to familiarise themselves with documents regulating the quality assessment of study programme groups and to complete HAKA's training on quality assessment of vocational education;
 - 20.2. to analyse the self-evaluation and materials related to the study programme groups;
 - 20.3. to participate in Committee meetings and discussions;



- 20.4. to prepare and participate in the assessment visit;
 - 20.5. to participate in the compilation of the assessment report;
 - 20.6. to perform other tasks related to assessment according to the division of tasks;
 - 20.7. to respect deadlines agreed upon in the Committee.
21. Tasks of the chairperson of the Committee:
- 21.1. to draw up the work plan of the Committee;
 - 21.2. to decide on the division of tasks of Committee members;
 - 21.3. to chair Committee meetings and discussions;
 - 21.4. to lead substantive preparation of the assessment visit and Committee's work during the visit;
 - 21.5. to provide initial feedback to the school after the visit;
 - 21.6. to ensure the validity of the Committee's opinions and proposals;
 - 21.7. to collaborate with the Secretary of the Committee in preparing the assessment report and to approve the report;
 - 21.8. to inform the Director of HAKA of Committee members' contributions.
22. Tasks of the Secretary of the Committee:
- 22.1. to familiarise themselves with documents regulating the quality assessment of study programme groups and to complete HAKA's training for Committee member/Secretary;
 - 22.2. to analyse the self-evaluation and materials related to the study programme groups;
 - 22.3. to participate in Committee meetings and discussions;
 - 22.4. to plan and organise assessment visits in cooperation with the HAKA Secretariat.
 - 22.5. to relay information between the Committee, the school and the HAKA Secretariat;
 - 22.6. to verify that schedule is respected and agreed topics are addressed during the assessment visit;



- 22.7. to compile the assessment report with the contribution of Committee members and in compliance with the information submitted in the self-evaluation and collected during the assessment visit;
 - 22.8. to perform other tasks related to assessment according to the division of tasks;
 - 22.9. to respect deadlines agreed upon in the Committee.
23. HAKA shall conclude contracts for services with members of the Committee and cover any transport and accommodation costs incurred in the performance of their duties.

Assessment visit

24. An assessment visit shall last up to three working days. If several study programme groups are assessed or if the studies are conducted at several locations, the Committee may split into corresponding parts.
25. The Assessment Committee shall prepare the assessment visit and questions and/or comments on the self-evaluation before the visit. The Secretary of the Committee shall formulate the schedule and activities of the assessment visit, including a list of additional materials to be requested, and a list of individuals whom the Committee would like to meet during the visit.
26. The Secretary of the Committee shall send a draft schedule to the school for modifications no later than ten working days before the assessment visit. The Secretary shall submit the final schedule of the visit prepared together with the school, to both the school and the HAKA Secretariat no later than five working days prior to the assessment visit.
27. Head of the school shall ensure adherence to the working conditions of Committee members and the availability of information material deemed necessary by the Committee according to the agreed schedule of the visit.
28. The visit shall be conducted according to HAKA's Guidelines to schools for organising assessment visits.
29. Members of the Committee shall familiarise themselves with auxiliary information materials provided by the school, complying with the confidentiality requirement.
30. During the visit, members of the Committee have the right to and the school shall enable them to:
 - 30.1. speak to members of the school's Advisory Board, representatives of the management, employees, students and partners;



- 30.2. access the school's documents;
 - 30.3. observe the school's working and study environment;
 - 30.4. visit the study programme group's different forms of study and traineeship.
31. After the assessment visit, HAKA shall ask the school to provide written feedback within five working days about Committee members' preparation, the relevance of their questions and other important aspects in the format established by HAKA. HAKA shall consider the feedback when choosing members to future assessment committees and planning assessment visits.

Assessment report and recommendations by the Committee

32. In the assessment report, the Committee shall:
- 32.1. present a concise analysis of the study programmes of the study programme group and the recommendations for improving the quality of instruction;
 - 32.2. point out the strengths and areas for improvement of study programmes submitted to the assessment under the study programme group according to the assessment areas described in clauses 5–7 of this Guideline.
33. Assessment Committees' recommendations shall preferably be adopted by consensus. If a consensus is not reached, the dissenting view(s) together with the reason(s) shall be included.
34. The Committee shall present the results of the assessment as a report in the format established by HAKA. The chairperson of the Committee shall electronically forward the assessment report to the HAKA Secretariat within 20 working days after the assessment visit.
35. The HAKA Secretariat shall send the assessment report to the school for examination no later than five days after receiving the report.
36. School may electronically forward its reasoned comments signed by the Head of the school to the HAKA Secretariat within 10 working days after the receipt of the assessment report. The Committee shall examine the comments and consider them when elaborating the final assessment report.
37. The chairperson of the Committee shall forward the electronic version of the final assessment report as approved by the chairperson of the Committee to the HAKA Secretariat no later than five working days after receiving the school's comments. The HAKA Secretariat shall send the final assessment report without delay to the school that was assessed.



38. The HAKA Secretariat shall submit the self-evaluation, the assessment report and the comments by the school received in a timely manner, to the Quality Assessment Council for Vocational Education.
39. The Guidelines for initial assessment and re-assessment of study programme groups in vocational education, a guide to schools for organising assessment visits, and assessment report forms are available on HAKA's website.

Decision by the Quality Assessment Council for Vocational Education

40. The HAKA Quality Assessment Council for Vocational Education (hereinafter *the Assessment Council*) shall base its decision on the self-evaluation report of a study programme group, the assessment report, the comments by the school received in a timely manner, and on additional materials submitted at the request of the Assessment Council. If necessary, the Assessment Council may ask the chairperson of the Committee or a member of the Committee assigned by the chairperson to attend the session for explanations.
41. In case of contradictions in the assessment report or inadequate justification, the Assessment Council shall have the right to return the report to the Committee to be reviewed and clarified.
42. The Assessment Council shall weigh the strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations outlined by the Committee and decide whether to conduct the next quality assessment of that study programme group:
 - 42.1. in six (6) years, if the teaching in the study programme group complies with the quality assessment criteria and legislation;
 - 42.2. in three (3) years if the Assessment Council finds that teaching and learning under the study programme group fail to conform with legislation and/or quality assessment criteria.
43. If the Assessment Council is undecided between two alternative decisions and finds that a more favourable decision could be adopted if the school would fulfil certain conditions, the decision can be taken with a secondary condition within the meaning of section 53 of the Administrative Procedure Act.
44. If the Council has added a secondary condition to the assessment report according to clause 43, the school shall submit a report on eliminating the shortcoming described in the secondary condition by the date set in the decision. The Council shall include members of the Committee in assessing whether the secondary condition has been met.
45. If the Assessment Council finds that the secondary condition is not met, the Council may ask additional information from the school, extend the deadline for fulfilling the secondary condition or change the assessment decision.



46. The Assessment Council shall inform the Ministry of Education and Research about any significant non-compliances with legislation and/or quality assessment criteria.
47. If serious non-compliance with legislation or quality assessment criteria exists in the study programme group, the Minister for Education and Research can initiate the process to revoke the right to provide instruction in this particular study programme group based on subsection 14 (5) of the Vocational Educational Institutions Act.
48. The HAKA Secretariat shall send the decision by the Assessment Council electronically to the school within 10 working days after the date of that decision and publish the decision along with the assessment report on its website within five working days from forwarding it to the school.

IV. Contesting of assessment proceedings conducted by HAKA and decision by the Assessment Council

49. A person who finds that their rights are violated or their freedoms are restricted by assessment procedures conducted by HAKA or by a decision made by the HAKA Quality Assessment Council, may file a challenge pursuant to the procedure provided for in the Administrative Procedure Act. The challenge shall be filed with the Quality Assessment Council within 30 days after the person filing the challenge became or should have become aware of the contested finding.
50. The Assessment Council shall forward the challenge to its Appeals Committee², who shall provide an unbiased written opinion regarding the validity of the challenge to the Assessment Council, within five days after receipt of the challenge. The Assessment 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 Assessment Council may be extended by a maximum of thirty days.
51. A challenge to the decision of the Assessment Council is possible within 30 days after its delivery, by filing an action with the Tallinn courthouse of the Tallinn Administrative Court under the procedure provided for in the Code of Administrative Court Procedure.

V. Follow-up activities

52. HAKA shall presume that the school is responsible for solving the shortcomings outlined in the assessment report and for continuous improvement. HAKA shall regularly hold seminars where schools receive feedback about the process and the

² The procedure for formation of and the work of the Appeals Committee of HAKA's Quality Assessment Council for Vocational Education are described in "Procedure for formation of the Quality Assessment Council for Vocational Education of the Estonian Quality Agency Education and the Appeals Committee", available on HAKA's website



results of the quality assessment of study programme groups. HAKA shall ask that a school having undergone the assessment submit a written overview to the Assessment Council listing post-assessment activities and their results as planned and implemented, based on recommendations of the assessment report, one year or in justified cases two years after the decision on quality assessment of the study programme group was adopted.

