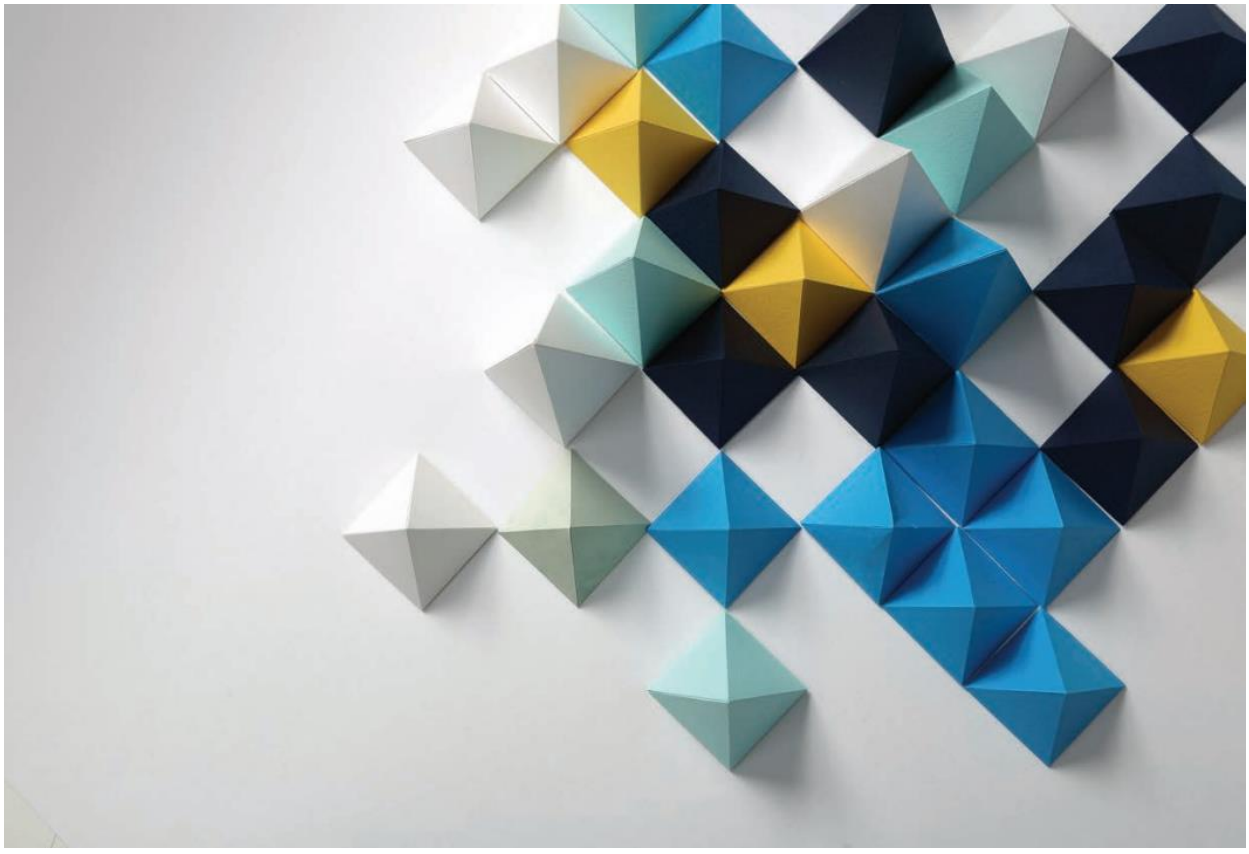
Ensuring Quality in VET and Higher Education: Getting Quality Assurance Right



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About this policy paper

This Education Policy Perspective serves as Part A in a two-part series of policy papers prepared by the OECD Higher Education Policy Team, in collaboration with the OECD Vocational Education and Training (VET) Team, on "Promoting Quality and Excellence in Higher Education and VET". This first paper (Part A) reviews recent policy developments in the external evaluation and quality assurance (QA) of VET and higher education undertaken by external quality assurance agencies or inspectorates in ten European jurisdictions: Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Scotland (United Kingdom). The second paper (Part B) examines other quality-focused policies that governments can use to promote pedagogical innovation and enhancement in VET and higher education, and how these relate to external evaluation and QA systems.

The paper was prepared by the OECD as part of the Project "Strengthening the system of evaluation and quality assurance in higher education and vocational education and training in Lithuania", funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument, managed by the European Commission. It was produced at the request of, and in close collaboration with, the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (ŠMSM). While the ten countries examined in this paper were selected in consideration of their similarities and relevance to Lithuania, the analysis and policy examples presented are relevant for policy makers across EU and OECD countries thinking about enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in VET and higher education.

Focus of this paper

This paper recognises that primary responsibility for the quality assurance of teaching and learning lies with VET and higher education providers themselves. It does not set out to review internal QA practices adopted by education and training institutions, but rather seeks to offer an overview of how external quality assurance policies can support the enhancement of institutions' internal quality management systems and promote teaching excellence.

VET and higher education, as defined in this paper, cover all programmes leading to the award of upper secondary and non-tertiary VET qualifications at levels 3 and 4 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) (UNESCO, 2012[1]), short-cycle tertiary education programmes at ISCED level 5, and degrees at ISCED levels 6 to 8 corresponding to the three-cycle qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (EHEA, 2005[2]). VET education systems are often complex and can consist of programmes which are offered as an integrated part of the general education system (often termed "initial" VET), and those programmes educating students that are returning to the education system (often termed "continuing" VET). Countries differ to the extent that regulations and quality assurance for these programmes are unified or separate. This paper makes the distinction between the two when there are important differences between them for the examples presented.

More information

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1 Quality assurance in higher education and VET

The external evaluation and quality assurance (QA) of teaching and learning is recognised as a key lever to enhance the quality and labour market relevance of education and training by governments across the European Union (EU) and wider OECD area. This is evidenced by the creation of dedicated, and often independent, national or regional agencies and inspectorates responsible for developing quality standards and conducting external reviews of education and training providers and their programmes. In primary and general school education, by the middle of the nineteenth century, some form of school inspection was already established within most OECD jurisdictions (OECD, 2013[3]; Maxwell and Staring, 2018[4]; Evertsson, 2021[5]). External QA in vocational education and training (VET) and higher education is a much more recent phenomenon. It was only within the last three decades that most governments across the OECD introduced some form of external QA for higher education and VET (Van Kemenade, Pupius and Hardjono, 2008[6]; ETF, 2014[7]; OECD, 2019[8]). A recent global mapping of external QA by UNESCO found that, in 2024, 85% of 146 countries analysed had established a national QA agency in higher education (UNESCO, 2024[9]).

In addition to assuring the quality of teaching and learning offered by VET and higher education providers, some countries have established dedicated structures for the quality assurance of work-based learning (WBL), especially in countries with a strong work-based VET sector (Musset, 2019[10]; OECD, 2023[11]). For example, in Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (UK), specific organisations carry out initial accreditation and periodic reviews of company WBL (SBB, n.d.[12]; Danish Industry, 2024[13]; DfE, 2023[14]). In higher education, such structures are limited to specific fields which require more direct practical learning (such as medicine, or specialist degree apprenticeships). Some QA agencies, however, have developed specific guidance to enhance the quality of WBL in higher education. Two examples are the UK Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA UK) guidance on work-based learning (QAA, 2018[15]) and the apprenticeship provider guidance developed by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (QQI, 2016[16]).

1.1 Different international quality frameworks guide VET and higher education

While external quality assurance models are developed within national systems and vary, QA agencies often follow regional or international QA frameworks to ensure comparability of programmes and credentials across countries, and to support international mobility (Jung, 2022[17]). In higher education, this role is fulfilled globally by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and its "International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education" (ISGs) (INQAAHE, 2022[18]). The Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES) supports the development of higher education QA systems in Central and South America (RIACES, n.d.[19]). In Europe, the development of QA in higher education has been driven by the Bologna process and the European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), which supports the implementation of the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)" (ENQA, 2015[20]). The ESG offer a set of common standards and guidelines for external QA agencies (ESG Parts 2 and 3) and higher education institutions (HEIs) (ESG Part 1). The ESG were first

published in 2005, revised in 2015, and a third version is expected in 2027, which will seek to better reflect trends such as digitalisation, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and inclusion (EHEA, 2024[21]).

A few years after the ESG were published, the EU adopted a European Quality Assurance Framework for VET (EQAVET) (Council of the EU, 2009[22]). EQAVET offers a set of common quality criteria and indicative descriptors at VET system and provider level to guide governments, QA agencies and VET providers in the development of internal and external QA systems. Another key document in the European context is the "European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships" (EAfA) (Council of Ministers EU, 2018[23]). The framework was adopted by the EU Council of Ministers in March 2018, contains 14 quality criteria and was accompanied by a broad European Commission-support package to strengthen the quality, supply and overall image of apprenticeships in Europe. More recently, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has published recommendations on quality apprenticeships, emphasising the importance of protecting apprentices and developing a regulatory system to support quality that includes monitoring and robust partnerships (with employers and internationally) (ILO, 2023[24]). VET quality assurance is also supported by several other international organisations, including UNESCO for the Asia-Pacific Region (UNESCO, 2017[25]) or the European Training Foundation (ETF) in South-East Europe and Türkiye, the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, and East Europe (Watters, 2015[26]).

1.2 Common principles and standards guide the development of VET and higher education quality assurance systems

While the transnational frameworks guiding VET and higher education QA systems are different, a comparison of frameworks shows that they follow rather similar principles. In Europe, the ESG and EQAVET frameworks are both structured around system- and provider-level standards. EQAVET offers indicative descriptors at system and provider level, and the ESG offers standards and guidelines for internal QA (ESG Part 1) and external QA (ESG Part 2). Two core principles underpinning both frameworks are the central role of providers themselves in assuring the quality of teaching and learning, and the need to include students, employers and other key stakeholders in quality enhancement. The ESG states that "higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance" and "quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society" (ENQA, 2015, p. 8[20]). Likewise, EQAVET states that "VET providers [should] have an explicit and transparent quality assurance system in place" and that "ongoing consultation with relevant stakeholders takes place to identify specific local/individual needs" (Council of the EU, 2009, p. 6[22]). A crosswalk of the ten ESG standards for internal QA and the 25 EQAVET provider-level descriptors shows that there are also many similarities at the level of indicators (see Annex 1, Table 4).

1.3 Three key policy questions for external quality assurance in VET and higher education

Policy makers thinking about the design of their VET and higher education QA systems face similar challenges. Three questions appear to dominate contemporary policy discussions on quality assurance in VET and higher education: the mission of QA bodies, the real impact of QA assessments on quality and the potential links between external QA systems for different parts of the education and training system. For each of these three questions, the paper reviews recent policy developments in the ten selected European jurisdictions (see Box 1).

Policy Question 1: What should be the mission of external quality assurance agencies in a wider eco-system of quality-focused policies?

Depending on the level of education, types of providers and programmes, and system maturity, QA agencies may be commissioned by governments to focus on ensuring the accountability of education and training providers or promoting enhancement of teaching and learning, or a combination of both (CHEA, 2016[27]; OECD, 2013[3]; ENQA, 2015[20]). Quality assurance for the purpose of accountability typically involves activities aimed at assuring the beneficiaries of education (i.e. students, employers, governments, civil society) that education and training "fulfils expectations and measures up to threshold minimum requirements" (Harvey, n.d.[28]). Quality enhancement, in contrast, refers to activities that seek to build institutions' capacity to elevate the quality of their provision beyond minimum standards set out in national, international or disciplinary and sectoral standards (OECD, 2018[29]; OECD, 2023[30]).

External quality assurance is only one of a wide range of policy levers that governments have at their disposal to enhance the quality of teaching and learning – other policies are discussed in Part B of this two-part paper series (OECD, 2025[31]). As providers' internal QA systems mature and other policies to promote teaching excellence are established, governments and QA agencies must reflect on the role of external QA within a wider eco-system of quality policies. The mission of VET and higher education QA bodies are examined in section 2 of this paper.

Policy Question 2: How can quality assurance agencies enhance the impact and relevance of their quality assessments and evaluations?

Quality assessment, evaluation and appraisal are widely accepted as a crucial element of effective external quality assurance systems and are the core activities of QA bodies. A key challenge for QA agencies and inspectorates is to minimise the potential burden of external quality assessments and to avoid unintended consequences, such as narrowing the curriculum or hindering pedagogical innovation (OECD, 2013[3]; OECD, 2019[8]; OECD, 2023[30]). External QA is often criticised for being too narrowly focused on assessing institutional compliance with specific sets of national or sectoral standards and for "bureaucratisation, administrative burden, stifling of creativity and lack of trust" (Giller, 2023, p. 32[32]). This was confirmed in a 2023 survey of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe, carried out by the European University Association (EUA), in which HEIs reported that they think external QA insufficiently reflects differences in institutional context and priorities, changes in higher education, the labour market and society, or drives experimentation and innovation (ENQA, 2023[33]).

Over the years, QA agencies in both the VET and higher education sectors have experimented with a range of approaches to overcome some of these challenges and enhance the overall relevance and impact of their activities. Recent developments in the quality standards, methods and procedures used by QA agencies for their external quality assessments are discussed in section 3 of this paper.

Policy Question 3: How can governments create synergies across quality assurance systems for VET and higher education?

As noted, over the past three decades almost all OECD and EU jurisdictions have established external evaluation and QA services for VET and higher education. In some jurisdictions, there have been efforts to create synergies across the evaluation and QA services for VET and higher education. For example, different QA agencies for VET and higher education have started to share data or collaborate on certain evaluation or quality enhancement activities; and some jurisdictions have established a single QA agency for VET and higher education.

In some cases, these efforts have been motivated by financial considerations, because maintaining quality inspection for different levels can be very costly and – in many ways – involves similar functions (OECD,

2013[3]; Williams and Harvey, 2015[34]; Beerkens, 2018[35]). In others, collaboration efforts have sought to support the development of a more coherent and aligned VET and higher education system (OECD, 2025[31]). Recent developments in relation to this policy question are discussed in section 4 of this paper.

Box 1. A focus on ten selected European jurisdictions

To analyse the three key policy questions introduced above, the OECD team selected ten European jurisdictions as case study countries for in-depth analysis: Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Scotland (United Kingdom). These countries were selected because, collectively, they offer a variety of system-design features, allowing for a meaningful international comparison (see Annex 2, Table 5).

- **Level of institutional and programme differentiation**: First, the country sample varies with respect to the level of institutional and programme differentiation present in their VET and higher education systems. Across the ten countries, there is a mix of systems where VET is primarily offered in a school-based context (i.e. in Croatia, Estonia and Lithuania) or the workplace (e.g. in Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands), and where both school-based and workplace-based VET programmes co-exist relatively equally (i.e. in Austria, Finland, Scotland and Norway). For higher education, the ten countries present a mix of binary systems, where a formal distinction exists between academically and professionally oriented institutions exists (i.e. in Estonia, Finland, Lithuania and the Netherlands); diversified systems, where a heterogeneity of providers varying in mission and size co-exist (i.e. in Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Ireland and Norway); and unified systems, where no formal distinction between provider types is made (i.e. in Scotland).
- **Formal responsibility for external evaluation and quality assurance**: The country sample also differs in terms of the number of agencies that bear formal responsibility for the external evaluation and quality assurance of VET and higher education. In four of the systems, one agency or inspectorate carries out external evaluation and quality assurance across the VET and higher education sectors (i.e. in Estonia, Finland, Ireland and Scotland). In all other systems this function is carried out by two or more agencies.
- **Approach to supporting pedagogical enhancement and innovation**: Finally, the countries differ in their approach to supporting pedagogical enhancement and innovation. In five of the ten systems, a dedicated national or regional structure for teaching and learning enhancement exists for both VET and higher education (i.e. in Ireland, Norway, the Netherlands and Scotland). In all other systems, public policy support for teaching and learning enhancement is either limited (e.g. Lithuania) or offered by private or professional associations or implemented by VET and higher education providers themselves.

As will be discussed in the paper, these overarching system-design features have a direct impact on countries' approaches to external quality assurance. For example, in systems with a more diversified network of higher education providers and where VET is delivered in both schools and workplaces, more differentiated approaches to standard-setting and evaluation may be adopted. Austria and Ireland adopt specific approaches in assuring the quality of private providers in higher education. They also have developed specific standards and processes to assure the quality of work-based learning and apprenticeships, in addition to quality assurance mechanisms for VET providers.

2 How do countries define the mission of external quality assurance agencies?

The work of QA agencies can be situated on a continuum, ranging from activities focused on assessing institutional compliance with baseline quality standards (i.e. an accountability function) to activities that seek to promote teaching excellence (i.e. an enhancement function). While the relationship between quality assurance for accountability and quality enhancement is a complex one (see Box 2), QA agencies are increasingly embracing the concept of "enhancement" in their activities to promote excellence in teaching and learning, in addition to assuring institutional compliance with baseline quality standards. As systems mature and the internal QA systems of education providers grow stronger, QA agencies tend to shift towards a more advisory role and re-think the types of activities and services they offer to the sector (OECD, 2008[36]). Supporting institutional autonomy and capacity for quality assurance is generally considered to be at the heart of all external quality assurance activity.

Box 2. The relationship between accountability and enhancement

In considering the relationship between quality assurance for the purpose of accountability (QA) and quality assurance for the purpose of enhancement (QE), Williams identifies a spectrum of views. First, there are those who believe that QA and QE "must be conceptually and practically distinct, with separate resourcing" (Williams, 2016, p. 98[37]). This creates the perception that QA and QE can work in isolation from each other, which has often been the case in the past, with national QA processes not leading to any significant QE outcomes. Some critics see QA as a negative and burdensome "naming and shaming" practice, which undermines the expertise of teaching staff, in opposition to QE which aims to support teaching staff.

Other perspectives view QA and QE as part of a continuum, where "quality enhancement is dependent on QA. This implies a need for good QA data that is then used to inform enhancement" (Williams, 2016, p. 100[37]). Finally, there are those who view QA and QE as an integral part of the same process, with the results of each process feeding into the other. According to this last view, external QA carried out by public agencies or inspectorates should inform and encourage QE. QE activity should also drive up the standards for QA and be informed by the institutional QA practices.

Source: Williams (2016[37]), "Quality assurance and quality enhancement: is there a relationship?", *Quality in Higher Education 22* (2), pp. 97-102, https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2016.1227207.

2.1 Two broad approaches for defining the mission of quality assurance agencies

In all ten jurisdictions analysed for this paper, national legislation specifies that, in addition to checking and ensuring institutional compliance with legal requirements, the purpose of external QA is to support the enhancement of teaching and learning. However, there are different ways in which governments ask QA agencies to do this. The first, more limited, approach consists of governments mandating QA agencies to support quality enhancement through external quality assessments and evaluations. The second, more wide-ranging, approach consists of giving QA agencies a wider mission and resources to also organise other types of activities that can support teaching enhancement, in addition to external quality assessments or evaluations.

Approach 1: Quality assurance agencies are commissioned to support enhancement primarily through external quality assessment and evaluation

In five of the ten countries analysed for this paper, the primary legal mission of QA agencies is to undertake external quality assessments and evaluations of higher education and VET. In addition to checking compliance with minimum quality standards – to inform (re-)accreditation decisions – these assessments are also meant to inform broader quality improvements.

In **Denmark**, for example, the National Act on Accreditation in Higher Education defines the main task of the Danish Accreditation Institution in relation to the accreditation of HEIs and their programmes and specifies that, through this, quality enhancement should be supported (Government of Denmark, 2021[38]). The legal mission of **Croatia**'s Agency for Science and Higher Education (AZVO) aims to improve higher education institutions primarily via external evaluation (Government of Croatia, 2023[39]). In **Lithuania**, the function of the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) is also narrowly focused on conducting quality assessment and accreditation, although these evaluations should seek to offer both recommendations for quality improvement and check compliance with legal requirements (Republic of Lithuania, 2009[40]). In contrast, Lithuania's Quality and Qualifications Vocational Education and Training Development Centre (KPMPC) has a broader role to also support VET teacher development (Republic of Lithuania, 2023[41]).

The **Netherlands'** Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO) focuses on HEI accreditation. The external evaluation of VET provision is shared by the Inspectorate of Education and the Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and Labour Market (SBB), and includes support for continuous professional development (Government of the Netherlands, 2024[42]). In **Finland**, enhancement is central to the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre's (FINEEC) quality assessments and reviews, as described in the agency's National Evaluation Plan (FINEEC, 2024, p. 7[43]):

> *FINEEC's evaluations are based on the approach of enhancement-led evaluation [...] Enhancement-led evaluation supports the achievement of the goals and promotes learning and change. Interaction, participation, an analysis of the operating environment and an understanding of the situation from the participants' point of view are essential in FINEEC's enhancement-led evaluation. The evaluation is aimed at achieving positive impact already during the evaluation and at using the evaluation results and the proposed recommendations to support change* (FINEEC, 2024, p. 7[43]).

While, legally, the mission and function of QA agencies in this first group of countries is limited to carrying out quality assessments and evaluations, in recent years, many have started to offer additional quality services, moving beyond their core legal mission. Such services include the organisation of training or peer-learning events or conducting and disseminating research on teaching and learning quality. Concrete examples of QA agency support for pedagogical enhancement and innovation are discussed in greater detail in Part B of this paper series on quality-focused policies (OECD, 2025[31]).

Approach 2: Quality assurance agencies support enhancement through a wide range of activities, in addition to conducting external quality assessment and evaluation

In the five other countries examined for this paper, a wider range of enhancement services is included as an explicit mission or function in the legal basis of the QA agencies for VET and higher education. These services supplement activities related to quality assessment and evaluation and agencies typically also receive a specific budget from the government to support them. These more enhancement-oriented approaches emerge in systems where QA agencies have adopted a more "hands-off" approach to external quality assessment and evaluation, giving greater autonomy to education providers.

For example, the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 requires the **Scottish** Funding Council to "secure that provision is made for (a) assessing and (b) enhancing the quality of fundable further education and fundable higher education provided by [post-16 education] bodies" (Scottish Government, 2005[44]). In **Austria**, the Federal Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education states that the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (AQ Austria) mission is "conducting studies and system analyses [...] providing information and advice in matters related to quality assurance and quality enhancement [... and] the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal competencies" (Government of Austria, 2011[45]). Regional quality co-ordinators for Austrian VET providers also offer hands-on support for the development of institutions' internal QA systems (EC, 2023[46]).

Similarly, the legal basis for the **Estonian** Quality Agency for Education's (HAKA) includes an explicit mission and budget to organise "training activities and consulting on evaluation and quality in the field of education" or "quality development projects and pilot evaluations in the field of education" (Government of Estonia, 2024[47]). **Norway's** Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) is also legally required to control compliance with legal requirements and carry out "targeted development work" to enhance the quality of VET and higher education (Government of Norway, 2010[48]). Finally, the legal basis of Quality and Qualifications **Ireland** (QQI) states that QQI should "develop enhancement initiatives and host events to learn from and share best practice with stakeholders", in addition to developing and assessing adherence with quality guidelines (Government of Ireland, 2012[49]).

Despite an increased focus on enhancement in the services offered by QA agencies across the ten countries examined, the core activity of these QA agencies – like those in many other OECD and EU jurisdictions – remains the development of quality standards and conducting institutional and programme-level evaluations based on these standards. This is confirmed in the latest Bologna Implementation Process Report, which states that "the most common role of [European] quality assurance agencies in relation to learning and teaching in higher education is to conduct quality assessment reviews (45 higher education systems out of 47 with data)" (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024, p. 165[50]). In about half of higher education systems, QA agencies develop reference points and guidance on teaching and learning for HEIs (26 systems). It is slightly less common for agencies to conduct or commission research on teaching and learning in higher education (15 systems).

2.2 Two key considerations for the positioning of external quality assurance in a wider eco-system of quality-focused policies

While the increased focus on enhancement and more light-touch approaches of QA agencies in their engagement with education providers can generally be considered positive – it can indicate greater capacity in education providers' internal quality management systems and higher levels of trust in the system – it also raises two important considerations for policy makers with regards to the mission and positioning of external quality assurance within a wider eco-system of quality-focused policies.

Key consideration 1: An effective and independent quality control function will always be necessary, even in the most developed higher education and VET systems

As QA agencies move towards the enhancement end of the accountability-enhancement continuum (i.e. a supporting function), it will remain important to maintain an effective accountability function in their activities and engagement with education providers. No matter how well-developed education providers' internal quality management systems become, governments will generally be inclined to check that minimum quality standards are being met. Mechanisms are also needed to be able to intervene swiftly in cases of bad provision. Several critics believe that if a QA agency moves too far towards engaging in collaborative enhancement work with the sector, it may no longer be able to act in a sufficiently independent manner to impartially assess quality – especially if some of the quality enhancement activities or services offered by a QA agency become fee-based (Williams, 2016[37]).

Key consideration 2: Linking the outcomes of external quality assurance to a wider eco-system of quality-focused policies

Countries also need to consider how the outcomes of QA agencies' activities relate to other quality-focused policies and initiatives that exist in their systems. As noted earlier and discussed in the second of this two-paper series on quality assurance, QA agencies are only some of a wide range of actors that play a role in influencing teaching and learning quality (OECD, 2025[31]). Depending on the system, the government (through the regulatory and funding conditions they set), sector representative bodies, private and non-governmental organisations, and education providers themselves will each carry out a range of activities aimed at improving teaching and learning quality. If not strategically managed, there is a risk that these different initiatives could work in isolation from each other, overlap or even impede each other. A parallel can be made with education providers' internal QA systems. A key challenge facing education providers in the implementation of internal QA is to integrate and link quality assurance with other activities and services in the institution. Often, QA staff work in a separate office and manage administrative relations with institutional management and the external QA agency (Jung, 2022[17]) (OECD, 2023[30]).

Across the ten jurisdictions analysed for this paper, evidence of a more strategic approach to governing the eco-system of quality policies was found in only two systems. In **Estonia**, the quality assurance agency for education, HAKA, is part of the Youth and Education Board (HARNO). HARNO is the government agency of Estonia's Ministry of Education and Research that deals with the implementation of education and youth policy. It has a single voice in policy discussions that affect the education system and, as such, plays a key role in ensuring that HAKA's work (as an independent agency) is connected to other policy initiatives and programmes that seek to support education quality (HARNO, 2024[51]).

In **Scotland (United Kingdom)**, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has developed a single Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF), with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) acting as the single QA body for VET and higher education. In November 2024, SFC published a document titled: "Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Quality Framework: Roles and Responsibilities of SFC Delivery Partner Agencies" (SFC, 2024[52]). In this document, SFC outlines the roles and responsibilities of the main agencies that play a role in supporting the quality assurance and enhancement of teaching and learning in Scottish VET and higher education. They are: QAA, the College Development Network (CDN), Education Scotland (ES) HM Inspectors, and sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland).

3 How do quality assurance agencies seek to enhance the relevance and impact of their activities?

Over the years, QA agencies across OECD and EU jurisdictions have been reflecting on how they can strengthen the enhancement dimension of their quality reviews, whilst maintaining sound compliance tools to intervene in cases of bad provision. The following sections review key trends and innovative practice in two main areas of external evaluation and monitoring activity in VET and higher education:

1. Policies and procedures to **regulate the market entry** of new education and training programmes and new providers and companies offering work-based learning;
2. Policies and procedures for the **evaluation of existing providers and programmes**.

3.1 Regulating the market entry of new programmes and providers

To ensure that VET providers and HEIs can effectively support student learning in diverse types of educational settings or disciplines, many countries have established entry requirements and carry out *ex ante* and near-term *ex post* review to prevent poor or fraudulent provision from entering the market. The challenge for governments lies in striking a balance between setting entry requirements that are sufficiently restrictive and avoiding the creation of unnecessary barriers to market entry that might hamper innovation and alignment with labour market needs. Three main trends can be identified in this area.

Trend 1: Increasing institutional responsibility to launch new programmes through self-accreditation

A first trend in regulation on the market entry of new VET and higher education provision is that providers with an established record of activity are given greater autonomy to launch new programmes, while newer market entrants or providers with recognised quality issues are subject to programme-level approval and evaluation. In many countries, professional standards leave VET providers with a degree of discretion to adapt curricula to their local context. In the higher education sector, some countries give some or all HEIs the right to independently launch and self-accredit new programmes (OECD, 2025[31]). Giving self-accrediting rights to HEIs can reduce the administrative burden associated with externally evaluating each new programme, promote institutional responsibility for quality, and support closer alignment with the needs of the economy. The European Commission's recent proposal for a "Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education" also recommends EU member states to:

> *give HEIs the possibility to demonstrate the trustworthiness of their internal quality assurance arrangements by going through an institutional external quality assurance. This would then give them the possibility to self-accredit programmes [...] and become exempt from (external) programme accreditation* (EC, 2024, p. 4[53]).

Across the ten countries analysed for this paper, VET and higher education providers tend to be granted self-accrediting rights in one of three ways: a) based on the level of education; b) based on the ownership of providers (e.g. private versus public); and c) based on an evaluation of their capacity for institutional quality management.

- **Self-accreditation based on level of education**: In **Finland**, all HEIs have self-accrediting rights while VET providers need to obtain approval for new programmes from the Ministry of Education and Culture. In **Norway**, all universities have the right to independently launch new programmes up to doctoral degree level. Colleges can independently offer bachelor's programmes, but must apply for accreditation if they want to offer master's and doctoral-level programmes. Vocational colleges' self-accrediting rights are limited to specific study fields at ISCED 5 (NOKUT, 2024[54]).
- **Self-accreditation based on legal status**: In **Austria**, only public universities have self-accrediting status. Private universities and universities of applied sciences must successfully complete an accreditation procedure by AQ Austria if they want to launch a new programme (AQ Austria, 2024[55]). The development of VET programmes is also closely managed by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. In **Ireland**, only public HEIs have "degree awarding powers" and, in principle, private HEIs and VET colleges must obtain approval for new programmes – although some can obtain self-accrediting rights after an evaluation by QQI (QQI, 2024[56]).
- **Self-accreditation based on evaluation**: In contrast to the ten comparator systems, in **Australia**, HEIs can obtain self-accrediting rights based on an assessment of their QA systems by the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA). Institutions can apply for either unlimited self-accrediting authority (i.e. the provider is allowed to self-accredit programmes in any level or field of education) or limited self-accrediting authority (i.e. the provider may self-accredit programmes in a limited set of levels and/or fields) (TEQSA, 2022[57]). To obtain full self-accrediting status, an institution must demonstrate "mature and advanced processes for the design, delivery, accreditation, monitoring, institutional quality assurance, review and improvement of courses of study, and the maintenance of academic integrity across at least three … fields of education" (Australian Government, 2021[58]).

The examples above illustrate that lighter-touch approaches are typically reserved for the university sector and publicly owned providers, with regulators maintaining closer oversight over professionally oriented HEIs, VET and private providers. In **Australia**, the government has launched a pilot for Technical and Further Education (TAFE) providers to obtain self-accrediting status in areas of national priority, such as net zero emissions, care and digitalisation. In addition to enabling the VET sector to respond more rapidly to emerging skills needs, it is hoped that the extension of self-accrediting rights to TAFEs will "improve parity of esteem and allow comparably large and professional institutions to operate on an equal footing" (Australian Department of Education, 2024, p. 239[59]).

Countries that do not grant self-accrediting rights will typically require some or all providers to submit new programmes for external approval. For example, in **Ireland** prior to being allowed to submit proposals for new programmes to QQI for external validation, private VET and higher education providers must apply for Initial Access Validation (IAV). The purpose of this procedure is to approve a provider's internal quality assurance procedures and described as "provid[ing] confidence to QQI and, through QQI, to the rest of the education system and prospective learners that a provider has the resources, governance and QA systems in place to successfully develop and deliver programmes which will be consistent with the standards of the National Framework of Qualifications" (QQI, 2022, p. 16[60]).

Some countries that have not given full self-accrediting rights to VET and higher education providers have nevertheless introduced external accreditation for specific study fields, rather than for individual programmes. This is the case in **Estonia**, where VET and higher education providers must undergo an initial assessment of study fields (for HEIs) and professional fields (for VET providers) in which they want to offer programmes. A positive evaluation by the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) will accredit providers to offer programmes in these disciplines for six years, without having to undergo *ex-ante* programme evaluation (HAKA, 2024[61]; HAKA, 2024[61]). In **Denmark**, too, accredited higher education providers can independently launch new programmes in pre-qualified and approved study fields (DAI, 2024[62]).

Trend 2: Increased focus on assessing the labour market relevance and student demand for new programmes

In systems where programme-level approval remains mandatory, a second trend that has been identified is that QA agencies or inspectorates often pay specific attention to the labour market relevance of – and student demand for – new programmes. In VET, this is typically ensured through professional standards, which guide curriculum design by individual VET providers (OECD, 2025[31]). In **Austria**, for example, employers often formulate new proposals and the Federal Vocational Training Advisory Board (B-BAB) – comprising social partners – then evaluates demand, potential training companies and school locations, and clarifies the apprenticeship structure. It then recommends experts to the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy for final evaluation of the programme (BMAW, 2022[63]). In **Denmark** the Council for Basic Education – composed of key social partners – monitors labour market trends and co-ordinates the introduction of new VET programmes (UVM, 2024[64]). Once new programmes are agreed, professional committees (numbering around 50 members, responsible for around 100 programmes) decide on the competence goals and education framework, in co-operation with the Ministry of Children and Education. Local training committees provide advice on specific regional education needs to education providers in their area. The **Netherlands** ensures strong employer engagement utilising its nine sectoral chambers to manage specific "market segments" – these segments describe the content and learning outcomes of new and ongoing programmes and are produced into qualification files, which are ratified by the Co-operation Organisation for Vocational Education and Business (SBB). These files provide a curriculum on which schools base their education (SBB, n.d.[65]).

In higher education systems where programme approval is required, QA agencies will typically include some indicators related to the labour market relevance and student demand in their *ex-ante* programme evaluation frameworks. An example is **Lithuania**, where one indicator specifically assesses "the conformity of the aims and outcomes of the field and cycle study programmes to the needs of the society and/or the labour market" (SKVC, 2019[66]). In **Ireland**, too, one of the eleven core criteria for initial programme validation for private higher education providers – which also apply to VET providers – focuses on ensuring that "the programme concept, implementation strategy, and its interpretation of QQI awards standards are well-informed and soundly based (considering social, cultural, educational, and employment objectives)" (QQI, 2017, p. 31[67]).

In some countries, a more in-depth assessment of the labour market relevance and student demand for new programmes is required before being allowed to start a programme. Such evaluations are typically carried out by a separate body or commission, either prior to or in parallel to the development of new qualification standards or programme accreditation. Among the country sample examined for this report, Denmark and the Netherlands are two countries where such commissions exist (see Box 3).

Box 3. Ex-ante workforce and student demand assessment in the Netherlands and Denmark

In the Netherlands and Denmark, specific commissions assess the labour market relevance and student demand for new VET and higher education programmes. In the Netherlands, this is carried out by the Commission Macro-Efficiency Higher Education (CDHO) and the Commission Macro-Efficiency VET (CMMBO). In Denmark, they are the Advisory Council for Initial Vocational Education and Training (REU) and the Advisory Committee to Assess the Range of Higher Study Programmes (RUVU).

Separate procedure to assess workforce relevance of new higher education programmes

CDHO was created in 2008 and assesses the "macro-efficiency" of all new higher education programmes seeking public funding in the Netherlands. "Macro-efficiency" is understood as alignment between the variety of programmes offered by HEIs (i.e. micro level) with local and regional labour market needs (i.e. meso level) and national priorities (i.e. macro level). The CDHO evaluations are separate from the *ex-ante* programme assessments carried out by NVAO and focus on two main criteria. For criterion 1 (labour market relevance), HEIs must prove that the programme fills a gap in the Dutch and/or international labour market (e.g. through an employers' survey, online vacancy analyses, or other relevant data). Criterion 2 (efficiency) assesses how many similar programmes already exist in the Netherlands and if the programme matches the institution's profile.

Similarly, RUVU in Denmark assesses all new study programme proposals separately from the Danish Accreditation Institution (DAI) by considering their labour market relevance (criterion 1) and coherence within the overall educational offer (criterion 2). For new programmes, HEIs must demonstrate that there will be sufficient demand for graduates by submitting supporting evidence, such as employer surveys or consultation results. When introducing an extension of a programme, the pre-authorisation focuses on the assessment of local or regional needs. To fulfil the coherence criterion, HEIs must demonstrate how their proposed new programme aligns with the rest of the national or regional educational offer (e.g. graduates' ability to pursue further studies in the region after completing their studies).

Assessing labour market demand for VET graduates

The functions of CMMBO and REU are slightly different. They mainly provide advice to the Dutch and Danish governments on system-level coherence of provision and do not engage in programme-level evaluations. REU meets 8-10 times per year, bringing together all the major social partners in Denmark, and formulates advice to the Ministry on the need for new qualifications or programmes in certain sectors or professional fields. CMMBO carries out three main tasks: evaluation and advice on macro-efficiency, and "merger" and "unique provision" assessment. Through the merger test, CMMBO advises the Dutch government on whether a merger of different VET providers is desirable. The assessment takes into account six criteria: a) regional context and demography; b) accessibility to a diverse educational offer for students; c) (financial) continuity and stability of schools before and after the merger; d) quality and responsiveness of provision; e) student-centred focus of provision; and f) internal and external support for the merger. The unique provision test seeks to protect smaller programmes.

Sources: Based on CDHO (n.d.[68]), *Commissie Doelmatigheid Hoger Onderwijs (CDHO) [Commission Macro-Efficiency Higher Education]*, https://www.cdho.nl/; CMMBO (n.d.[69]), *Commissie macrodoelmatigheid mbo [Commission Macro-Efficiency VET]*, https://www.cmmbo.nl/; UVM (2024[64]), *Om Rådet for de grundlæggende Erhvervsrettede Uddannelser [About the Advisory Council for Initial Vocational Education and Training – REU]*, https://www.uvm.dk/erhvervsuddannelser/ansvar-og-aktoerer/raad-og-udvalg/reu/om-reu; and Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science (2024[70]), *Prækvalifikation [Prequalification]*, https://ufm.dk/uddannelse/institutioner-og-drift/styring-af-uddannelsesudbud/praekvalifikation/kvalitetssikring-og-akkreditering.

Trend 3: Emergence of specific quality assessments for employer-based training

A third trend is the emergence of specific quality assessments for employer-based training, especially in the VET sector and countries where VET programmes have a large work-based learning component. In these systems, governments tend to play a stronger role in assuring that the training delivered by companies and in-company trainers is of sufficient quality, in some cases requiring them to apply for accreditation before they are allowed to offer WBL to VET students or take on apprentices. Such evaluations typically seek to examine the suitability of the infrastructure and facilities of the company, the qualifications of in-company trainers, minimum teacher-to-apprentice ratios, and alignment with professional or occupational standards (OECD, 2023[71]). In seven of the ten comparator systems analysed for this paper, companies need to be accredited before they can onboard VET students. It is required in Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway and Scotland (UK).

For some companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), it may be challenging to meet all the entry requirements listed in such accreditation procedures. Recognising this challenge, some countries will adapt their criteria or exempt SMEs from having to apply for accreditation, or link financial and non-financial incentives to successful accreditation (OECD, 2023[71]). For example, in **England (UK)** successful registration in the apprenticeship provider assessment register (APAR) grants employers (or providers nominated by employers) access to an online continuing professional learning platform as well as the government's "recruit an apprentice service", allowing them to create apprenticeship adverts. APAR organisations are also eligible for public funding to support the implementation of their apprenticeship, as well as extra funding if they take on apprentices who need additional support (e.g. apprentices between 16 and 18 years old, or apprentices between 19 and 24 years old with an education, care or health plan). For SMEs (less than 50 staff), 100% of funding for the cost of training and assessment of apprentices between 16 and 25 years old is covered by the government (DfE, 2023[14]). In the **Netherlands**, companies that wish to offer company-based training to lower and upper-secondary VET students have access to similar benefits when they apply for accreditation with the Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and Labour Market (see Box 4).

Box 4. Accreditation and support for VET work placement companies in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, companies that wish to offer work placements to VET students must apply for accreditation with the Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and Labour Market (*Samenweringsorganisatie Beroepsonderwijs-Bedrijfsleven – SBB*). SBB's evaluation checks whether the company: 1) can ensure a safe learning environment for students; 2) is able to offer adequate training opportunities that align with VET courses; 3) demonstrates that it has qualified in-house trainers; 4) demonstrates willingness to co-operate with SBB and the VET provider; and 5) agrees to being listed on a public website *Stagemarkt.nl,* where students and VET providers can find internship opportunities.

In addition to being able to advertise their internship opportunities on *Stagemarkt.nl*, accreditation grants companies access to comprehensive training opportunities offered by SBB, as well as assistance in communication with providers, help with recruiting students, and knowledge exchange within the sector. This approach fosters a partnership between the Dutch Ministry of Education, educational institutes, social partners, and companies to ensure high-quality work-based learning experiences.

Source: Adapted from SBB (2024[72]), *Regeling erkenning leerbedrijven SBB [Regulation recognition learning companies SBB]*, Samenwerkingsorganisatie Beroepsonderwijs Bedrijfsleven (SBB) [Collaboration Organisation VET-Labour Market (SBB)], https://s-bb.nl/media/m53nfrku/lr_2408143_regeling_erkenning_v3.pdf.

In the higher education sector, governments and QA agencies tend to play a less interventionist role in assuring the quality of WBL than in the VET sector. This is confirmed in an ENQA survey of how QA agencies assess the quality of WBL in higher education. The final survey report notes that in most countries where discussions on assuring the quality of WBL take place, this happens mainly in the context of VET. Few higher education QA agencies pay special attention to assuring the quality of WBL in their procedures (Kerber and Gourdin, 2018[73]). The report notes several possible reasons for this. First, in many higher education systems WBL does not constitute a major part of degree programmes (except in disciplines such as medicine, for example). Secondly, in countries where WBL at tertiary level does exist, its quality is primarily assured at the level of HEIs' internal QA policies.

In three of the ten jurisdictions analysed for this report, QA agencies have developed supplementary guidance to support HEIs with enhancing the quality of WBL. In **Ireland**, for example, statutory guidelines exist for VET and higher education providers involved in the design and delivery of apprenticeship programmes. These guidelines supplement the Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines and are used by QQI as part of initial and periodic reviews (QQI, 2016[16]). In the **Netherlands**, the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO) has developed a "Route-Map for High-Quality Work-Based Learning in Higher Education". NVAO states that the guidelines included in this route map are "not part of an NVAO assessment framework, but are intended to inspire, guide and advise" HEIs as they seek to effectively embed internships in degree programmes (NVAO, 2022, p. 3[74]). Similarly, QAA has developed a set of Expectations, Core and Common practices for quality work-based learning in UK higher education. The quality standards included in this document do not constitute regulatory requirements for providers in England, but the Practices should be demonstrated by providers operating in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in quality reviews.

3.2 Evaluating the quality of existing providers and programmes

In addition to assuring the quality of provision at entry level, QA agencies typically carry out (cyclical) quality audits or reviews to assess how providers comply with regulatory requirements and with an aim of enhancing teaching and learning quality more generally. While the exact method used for these external reviews varies from country to country, they typically involve some form of self-evaluation by the provider, based on a template developed by (or in co-operation with) the QA agency, and the submission of relevant documentation and other supporting evidence. The institution's self-evaluation is then followed by a site visit carried out by an independent expert panel, appointed by the QA agency, which then develops an evaluation report offering an assessment of the evaluated institution or programme, its compliance with regulatory requirements, and recommendations for improvement. Based on this report, the QA agency or government will then decide to extend or withdraw the institution's (self-)accreditation status, or to grant accreditation with certain conditions (e.g. the institution may no longer be allowed to offer programmes in a certain discipline, or will be required to develop an action plan and complete a follow-up programme to address quality concerns) (OECD, 2013[3]; Maxwell and Staring, 2018[4]; OECD, 2023[30]).

Depending on the number of providers operating in the system and the frequency and scope of external reviews, these evaluations can be costly and time-consuming for QA agencies, providers and governments (OECD, 2013[3]; Williams and Harvey, 2015[34]; Beerkens, 2018[35]). As a result, there has been some movement within the QA space to develop external review methods that are less intrusive, more targeted and formative. Especially as providers' internal QA systems mature, QA agencies and inspectorates are embracing an enhancement-focused approach to external evaluation, seeking to support the continued development of autonomy of the sector. The following sections discuss three major trends in QA agencies' external review activities to reduce administrative burden and enhance the overall relevance and effectiveness of quality assessments.

Trend 1: Emergence of more hands-off and risk-based approaches to quality assurance

A first major trend that can be observed in external quality assessment is to "move up" the level of quality assessment from programme evaluation, towards assessing quality at institution and system-level. In some systems, however, centralised student learning outcomes assessment remains in practice, especially in VET. A related development is the adoption of risk-based approaches to external evaluation – one of the major innovations in the last decade. Instead of systematically evaluating all providers or programmes, QA agencies increasingly focus their resources on those assessing providers with the highest quality risks.

A move away from programme evaluation, towards assessing the quality of teaching and learning at institution, school board and system level

In higher education, QA agencies are increasingly shifting their attention to assessing QA policies and practices at institution-level rather than individual programme-level. Table 1 shows that, across the country sample analysed for this report, HEIs are subject to an institution-level review at least once every four to seven years. In **Norway**, for example, all HEIs must undergo an external review of their institutional QA systems at least once every seven years. Three such evaluation cycles have taken place to date, and a fourth cycle is planned for 2025-28. Programme-level evaluation is mandatory only in study fields where HEIs have not obtained self-accrediting rights (NOKUT, 2024[75]). In **Finland** and **Scotland (UK)**, too, all HEIs must undergo an external review of their QA systems and programme-level evaluation is not routinely conducted (FINEEC, 2019[76]; QAA, 2024[77]). In the **Netherlands**, programme-level review is still mandatory and carried out at least once every six years. However, in 2010 NVAO introduced a voluntary institutional review procedure which, if assessed positively, can grant HEIs a simplification in the scope of their programme-level reviews (NVAO, 2024[78]).

Increasingly, programme-level evaluation in higher education tends to be maintained only in disciplines or institutions where higher quality risks are perceived (e.g. medicine, teacher education) or for certain types of providers (e.g. private providers). As discussed further below, some countries have started to develop risk-based quality monitoring systems to identify such "at risk" programmes. Others have moved towards clustered approaches to programme-level review and carrying out thematic evaluations (e.g. focused on digitalisation or social inclusion or internationalisation) to allow institutions and governments to gain a more system-level insight into the quality of their provision. For example, NOKUT publishes thematic and discipline-specific educational quality reports which provide research-informed views on the extent of development of various aspects of quality (e.g. improving work placements, or the experiences of first-year students) and recommendations for further development of disciplines (e.g. teacher education or economics). These research reports often integrate insights from the annual Student Survey (*Studiebarometer*) and the periodic higher education Teacher Survey (NOKUT, 2024[75]).

Looking at the level at which external evaluations is carried out in VET, two main systems can be identified: two-layer and three-layer quality assurance systems (Maxwell and Staring, 2018[4]). In two-layer quality assurance systems, there is a direct link between a national inspectorate or agency and individual VET providers. This appears to be the most common approach across the country sample analysed in this report and involves a national agency directly assessing the quality of all (or a sample) of VET providers. In three-layer quality assurance systems a stronger expectation exists that schools are managed and quality assured through local or regional authorities. There is then regular engagement by these regional or local bodies with individual VET providers, and monitoring of these agencies by a national inspectorate to evaluate the way in which they are carrying out their duties. Such systems exist in Austria, Ireland and the Netherlands (see Table 1). Whether a country uses a two- or three-layer quality assurance system depends strongly on the governance of its education system (or the governance structure of the country more broadly) and the organisation of the network of VET providers.

In **Ireland**, primary responsibility for the external QA of VET providers operating in the country rests with QQI. Over 90% of VET provision in Ireland is delivered through the 16 regional Education and Training Boards (ETBs), who are required to have QA approval, and are subject to annual monitoring and periodic review by QQI. QQI carried out an inaugural review of the QA systems of the 16 ETBs in Ireland between March 2021 and May 2021 (QQI, 2021[79]). Similarly, the main mechanism for assessing the quality of VET providers in the **Netherlands** is through four-yearly evaluations of Regional Education Centres (*Regionale Onderwijscentra – ROC*) and Agricultural Education Centres (*Agrarische Opleidingscentra – AOC*), which are responsible for managing the quality of programmes by different VET providers in their region (Dutch Inspectorate of Education, 2024[80]). In **Austria**, all schools (including VET providers and colleges) are part of an educational region (31 in total). Each region has a quality manager responsible for supporting the development of and assuring the effectiveness of each VET provider's internal quality management systems. At least once every three years, a review and target-setting meeting between VET providers takes place. In addition to this, each year a sample of VET schools is evaluated externally (EC, 2023[46]).

Table 1. Level and frequency of external review in ten selected case study countries

Country	Education level	Level of external evaluation or assessment				
		System-level	Regional level	Institution level	Programme level (individual, study field, thematic)	Student learning outcomes
OECD						
Austria	VET	✓	3 years	1 year (sample-based)	-	✓
	HE	✓	-	7 years	Individual programmes (for private providers)	-
Denmark	VET	✓	-	1 year (sample-based)	Thematic review	✓
	HE	✓	-	6 years	Individual programmes (for non-accredited disciplines)	-
Estonia	VET	✓	-	6 years	Study field clusters	✓
	HE	✓	-	7 years	Study field clusters	-
Finland	VET	✓	-	6-7 years	Study fields & thematic review	✓
	HE	✓	-	6 years	Study fields & thematic review	-
Ireland	VET	✓	1st review of ETBs in 2021	7 years	Individual programmes	-
	HE	✓	-	7 years	Individual programmes (for private providers)	-
Lithuania	VET	-	-	5 years	-	✓
	HE	✓	-	7 years	Study field evaluation	-
Netherlands	VET	✓	4 years	-	1 to 5 programmes	✓
	HE	✓	-	6 years	Programme level	-
Norway	VET	✓	-	8 years	Programme level	-
	HE	✓	-	7 years	Programme level (for HEIs without self-accrediting rights) & thematic review	✓
Scotland (UK)	VET	✓	-	Variable (sample of institutions)	-	-
	HE	✓	-	4 years	Programme level (only for short-cycle programmes)	-
OECD accession						
Croatia	VET	✓	-	1 year	-	✓
	HE	✓	-	5 years	Programme level	-

Source: OECD analysis, based on a desk-based analysis and expert interviews on the QA systems in the ten selected case study countries.

Thematic and system-level evaluations are also increasingly carried out by QA agencies. Unlike institution or programme-level evaluation, which seek to support quality improvements at the level of VET and higher education providers, thematic evaluations seek to identify sectoral trends and patterns that may inform strategic policy-making. Often, such evaluations will focus on themes of strategic importance for the government and providers (e.g. digitalisation, equity and inclusion, or internationalisation), and will be defined by the government, in consultation with the QA agency and the sector. Among the ten countries analysed in this report, all QA agencies carry out some form of thematic or system-level evaluation, except **Lithuania's** QA agency for VET (KPMPC). Here, it is the National Education Agency (NSA) that conducts system-level evaluations of quality (see Table 1).

In **Finland**, both thematic and system-level evaluations form a big part of FINEEC's activities. Thematic evaluations focus on specific issues, such as employability after VET, teaching practices, or student counselling methods. Systemic evaluations focus on broader aspects of the education system, such as policy implementation or the education system's adaptability to emerging trends and challenges such as lifelong learning (FINEEC, 2024[43]).

Centralised learning outcomes assessment remains a key feature of external quality assurance in some systems, especially in VET

While the general trend appears to be to "move up" the level of quality assessment, in some countries centralised or co-ordinated approaches to assessing student learning outcomes is a key feature of the external quality assurance system. This is mostly the case in the VET sector and not in higher education, where academic staff have greater autonomy over their teaching and assessment practices, and it is more difficult to compare student learning outcomes across a highly diverse range of programmes offered by different institutions (OECD, 2013[3]; Maxwell and Staring, 2018[4]).

Across the ten countries analysed for this report, evidence of centralised approaches to student assessment were identified in seven VET systems (i.e. Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Lithuania and the Netherlands). One reason for conducting centralised student learning outcomes assessment is to ensure impartial and standardised assessment. This is the case in **Estonia**, for example, where the Ministry of Education delegates the responsibility for the professional qualifications system to a dedicated authority (*Kutsekoda*) which is guided by representatives from employers, unions and the government. One of the tasks of this body consists of managing the assessment and certification of competencies in VET by verifying that VET students' competencies align with the established professional standards, regardless of how the skills were acquired (Kutsekoda, n.d.[81]). In **Lithuania**, too, regional competence assessment centres, managed by KPMPC, support VET providers with the assessment of students' theoretical and practical training. By contrast, in **Finland**, assessments of VET students' learning outcomes by FINEEC are used as an instrument to provide insight into the quality of education and training at system level (FINEEC, 2025[82]). This allows the government and stakeholders to monitor the VET system and inform the relevant policymaking.

Evidence of a more centralised or co-ordinated student assessment approach was identified in only one system. In 2021, **Norway**'s Ministry of Education has introduced national examinations for certain subjects in nursing education, primary school teacher education and child welfare programmes delivered by HEIs. These national student assessments are carried out twice per year by NOKUT and seek to ensure that students graduating from these programmes in different institutions obtain the same level of learning outcomes in subjects considered as crucial by the Ministry. For primary school teacher education, for example, the central examination focuses on mathematics, as this is seen as a subject of national priority in which the government wants to improve student learning outcomes (NOKUT, 2024[83]).

Emergence of risk-based approaches to quality assurance

As noted, the biggest innovation in quality assurance is perhaps the adoption of risk-based and data-driven approaches to monitor and assure quality. Such approaches seek to "reduce the regulatory burden on the regulated and the regulator and to ensuring the efficient use of resources" (Mishko, 2015, p. 7[84]). The premise of risk-based quality assurance is that quality risks are not equally distributed across the sector, and that the resources for external evaluation should be focused on where the greatest risks to quality are observed. This puts the onus of QA on individual providers and exempts providers meeting expected standards from unnecessary regulatory burden or extensive external evaluation. The identification of high-risk institutions and programmes is based on a regular (often annual) analysis of a wide range of evidence, including provider track records of regulatory compliance, sound financial management, or evidence of a well-functioning internal quality management system and good student outcomes (e.g. low drop-out and time-to-completion rates, good student employment outcomes, etc.). A risk-based approach to QA promotes institutional responsibility for quality (OECD, 2013[3]; Giller, 2023[32]; OECD, 2008[36]).

Across the ten countries analysed in this report, evidence of risk-based approaches were identified in three higher education systems (i.e. in Lithuania, Norway and Scotland), with several other countries reporting to the OECD that they were actively reflecting on the introduction of such systems (i.e. in Estonia, Norway and the Netherlands). In **Lithuania**, the foundational components of a risk-based quality monitoring system in higher education were introduced in 2021. SKVC has been monitoring study-field performance for the last two years by collecting data on seven indicators (SKVC, 2024[85]). If an upward or downward change of 30% or more is observed in the indicators of at least three study fields, SKVC will ask institutions to explain or justify the figures, and how it plans to address the concerns identified. To address severe quality risks, SKVC may ask the Minister of Education, Science and Sport to launch an extra quality assessment.

Scotland's Funding Council (SFC) is currently introducing a new outcomes framework and assurance model across all higher education providers and colleges. The framework sets out expectations for colleges and universities across seven system-level outcome indicators, without requiring providers to define any more specific outcomes or activities that they will deliver in the following academic year. Instead, colleges and universities will need to develop their own strategic and operational plans, which will be monitored yearly by the SFC using a mix of quantitative data collection and analysis (i.e. monitoring) as well as regular dialogue and collaboration with providers and key stakeholders, including a cyclical review by QAA every four years (i.e. engagement) (QAA, 2024[86]). The new outcomes and engagement framework is seen as a tool for SFC to be in more regular contact with institutions to identify both risks and best practices that could inform its wider enhancement work for the sector.

Outside of Europe, **Australia**'s risk-based quality assurance system is often cited as being one of the most progressive in the world (see Box 5). In Europe, risk-based approaches have been slower to develop, in part due to the requirement of QA agencies operating under the ESG (ENQA, 2015[20]) to carry out regular, cyclical external evaluation of all providers. **England (UK)** is the first country in Europe to have experimented with a more data-driven approach to risk-based quality monitoring. Since October 2022, the Office for Students (OfS) has been monitoring student progression, experience and outcomes against seven key performance conditions, using a mature and comprehensive data system. It uses whistleblowing and complaints assessments to supplement narrow reliance on quantitative assessment. Indicators are published and used for ratings, with the intention of informing student choice and reputational standing. A provider is only reviewed more closely when data shows that the quality of courses may be of concern (OfS, 2020[87]). However, criticism of this approach (including from the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee on the OfS) has led to the re-introduction of elements of regular inspection for HEIs with perceived poor quality (House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee, 2023[88]).

Box 5. Risk assessment at provider and system level in Australian higher education

Australia's Risk Assessment Framework (RAF) for providers

First introduced in 2015, TEQSA's Risk Assessment Framework (RAF) seeks to identify potential risks of non-compliance of higher education providers with regulatory requirements. The main purpose of the risk assessments is to reduce the administrative burden on the sector and strengthen the protection of student interests and the sector's overall reputation. The regular collection and assessment of data on provider performance is also seen by TEQSA as a way to engage in more regular dialogue with providers about emerging issue and support sectoral enhancement (TEQSA, 2024[89]).

TEQSA's risk assessment is carried out yearly for all Australian higher education providers and covers ten risk indicators across four main areas: 1) regulatory history and standing; 2) students (study load, experience and outcomes); 3) academic staff profile; and 4) financial viability and sustainability. For each indicator, risk thresholds have been developed, taking into account provider context and risk controls (where information is available). Each year, TEQSA makes an overall judgement against "Risk to Students" and "Risks to Financial Position", using a high, moderate or low rating (i.e. a traffic light system). If the risk assessment identifies potential concerns, then TEQSA will undertake one of five actions: 1) no action (if a risk was already known by TEQSA and the provider is already implementing a response); 2) request additional information from the provider to determine if further action is required; 3) issue a recommendation to the provider to closely monitor the risk in the coming years; 4) take regulatory action, for example by carrying out an additional compliance assessment outside of the regular assessment schedule; or 5) embed the identified risk in the upcoming assessment.

Monitoring sector risks to academic integrity through the Higher Education Integrity Unit (HEIU)

More recently, the Australian government provided TEQSA with additional funding to establish a Higher Education Integrity Unit (HEIU). Established in June 2020 with the initial purpose to address the risks posed by commercial academic cheating services, the HEIU is responsible for monitoring sector risks to academic integrity more broadly. It accomplishes this by engaging in regular consultation with the sector, organising peer-learning events, and developing sectoral guidance. A recent example is the HEIU's response to the rise of generative Artificial Intelligence (gen AI). In addition to collecting and disseminating best practices, HEIU asked all registered HEIs to develop and submit an institutional action plan, in which they reflect on meaningful governance mechanisms to mitigate the risks posed by gen AI to award integrity. The action plans were collected in July 2024 and, based on these, TEQSA has developed toolkit with emerging practice on gen AI (TEQSA, 2024[90]).

Sources: Based on TEQSA (2022[91]), *Key findings from the 2021 risk assessment cycle*, Tertiary Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA), Melbourne,, https://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/key-findings-from-2021-risk-assessment-cycle_0.pdf and TEQSA (2024[92]), *Higher Education Integrity Unit*, Tertiary Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA), Melbourne, https://www.teqsa.gov.au/about-us/teqsa-overview/higher-education-integrity-unit.

VET institutions can be smaller and more numerous than HEIs. This can present logistical challenges for QA agencies or governments who may not have the resources to conduct regular inspections of each individual provider. In this scenario, the adoption of a sampling methodology, prioritising institutions where the greatest quality risks are observed, can offer a practical solution to make the best use of available resources (Maxwell and Staring, 2018[4]). Across the ten countries analysed in this report, sample and risk-systems exist in Denmark, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Norway (see Box 6 for a description of examples from Denmark and the Netherlands).

Box 6. Risk-based quality monitoring of VET providers in Denmark and the Netherlands

Risk-based inspection of VET providers in Denmark

Denmark has implemented a system of quality assurance in which it focuses its resources on inspecting only those institutions deemed at higher risk of inadequate quality. The Danish Agency for Education and Quality (STUK) determines which institutions to inspect based on a number of quality indicators, which are defined in the legislation. The indicators focus on politically agreed objectives and are broadly-defined.

VET institutions are subject to annual risk-based quality supervision. This supervision identifies institutions with ongoing quality challenges, ensuring that they work towards improving their outcomes. Institutions are evaluated based on performance indicators covering student retention, dropout rates, absenteeism, and student satisfaction.

Supervisory goals align with the reform targets for VET to increase the number of VET students entering after primary school, ensuring more students complete their vocational education, challenging all students to achieve their potential and strengthening trust and student well-being within VET schools.

STUK also embarks on thematic projects based on challenges identified by broader stakeholders. In 2024, it plans to review admission procedures of VET institutions, sustainability and student well-being in programmes with few students.

Partially automated performance and risk analysis in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the Inspectorate of Education carries out inspection visits to all Regional Education Centres (ROC) and Agricultural Education Centres (AOC) at least once every four years. As part of these inspections, one to five VET providers and/or programmes may be assessed in greater depth. The selection of these providers and programmes is based on an annual performance and risk analysis, carried out by the Inspectorate for all levels of education and training, except higher education.

The risk analysis starts with a partially automated analysis (using algorithms and a wide range of quantitative evidence) to form a “risk estimate” of each VET provider and programme. Four main sources of evidence are used: 1) information provided by institution itself; 2) central administrative data registers; 3) annual student satisfaction survey; 4) other signals received by the Inspectorate (e.g. social media). Seven areas are examined: 1) education outcomes; 2) financial figures; 3) material and human resources; 4) development of student population; 5) management; 6) research on safety of the institution; and 7) satisfaction results on the institution. If the risk estimate shows signs of quality risks, then a more in-depth analysis of the data will be carried out by a team of experts, including data analysts and experts on educational quality and financial management. If, after this analysis, the Inspectorate identifies a serious risk to quality, then a more in-depth inspection will be carried out in a specific VET provider or programme, as part of the four-yearly inspections of ROCs/AOCs.

Source: Based on UVM (2024[93]) *Tilsynsplan [Supervisory Plan 2024]*, Danish Ministry of Children and Education (UVM), https://www.stukuvm.dk/-/media/filer/uvm/aktuelt/pdf24/feb/240223-tilsynsplan-2024.pdf and Dutch Inspectorate of Education (2024[94]), *Jaarlijkse prestatie- en risicoanalyse [Annual performance and risk analysis]*, Dutch Inspectorate for Education, https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/onderwerpen/werkwijze-van-de-inspectie/jaarlijkse-prestatieanalyse.

Trend 2: Enhancing the relevance of standards and methods for external evaluation

A second trend is experimentation with the standards, methods and procedures used in external review to increase their relevance for providers. Three major innovations can be identified: a) the adoption of a more flexible, open and collaborative approach to standard-setting and evaluation; b) supporting peer learning and benchmarking with similar institutions as part of external review; and c) embedding common global or sectoral developments in evaluation frameworks. Each of these are discussed in the following sections. The reason QA agencies have introduced these changes is to ensure that quality assessments are relevant to the challenges specific to each individual institution, as well as wider national and international developments (e.g. the emergence of micro-credentials, digitalisation or internationalisation). It is widely recognised that one-size-fits-all approaches are not desirable, and that evaluation frameworks should also consider how institutions respond to wider societal and economic developments in their day-to-day activities, beyond their disciplinary content or teaching practices (OECD, 2013[3]; OECD, 2023[30]).

Adopting a flexible, open and collaborative approach to standard-setting

A first way in which QA agencies are seeking to increase the relevance of their quality assessments is by introducing greater flexibility and openness in the quality standards and criteria used for institutional self-assessment and peer review. The articulation between these two processes typically takes one of three forms: a parallel, sequential or co-operative model (Kyriakides and Campbell, 2004[95]; OECD, 2013[3]). In *parallel models*, self-evaluation and external review run side-by-side, with self-evaluation geared towards internal development and possibly following different standards than those used for external review, which is seen as dominating over self-evaluation. In *sequential models*, which are quite common in Europe, the results of self-evaluation serve as the basis for external evaluation. The external QA body uses the findings of self-evaluation to guide its assessment, creating a seamless and connected evaluation process. The *co-operative model* consists of external QA agencies and institutions collaborating to develop a common approach to evaluation, including the standards against which they are evaluated. A related distinction or continuum exists between external QA that makes use of more "open" evaluation frameworks, and systems where more "prescriptive" evaluation frameworks are used (Bensimon et al., 2023[96]). In *open frameworks*, the focus of evaluation lies on assessing institutions' compliance against the aims and objectives that institutions have defined themselves, often in co-operation with the QA agency or inspectorate. In *prescriptive frameworks*, assessment focuses primarily on assessing institutional compliance against a set of pre-defined quality standards and related indicators, defined by the QA agency or embedded in legislation.

Based on a survey of 16 QA agencies in the European higher education area, Bensimon et al. (2023[96]) have found that most agencies use evaluation frameworks that apply the same standards to all institutions. However, as QA systems mature, they note a trend towards simplifying evaluation frameworks (i.e. reducing the number of standards/criteria) and flexibilisation (e.g. waiving some criteria that are not relevant to some HEIs or allowing institutions to select one or more evaluation areas themselves). The advantage of such a flexible, open and collaborative approach to evaluation and standard-setting is that it can make external QA more responsive to the needs of individual institutions. It can also make institutions more willing to engage in open and critical reflections with peers or inspectors about challenges and areas for improvement. The disadvantage is that it can leave more room for interpretation in the application of criteria, and make assessment less transparent and objective. In the Flemish Community of Belgium, for example, recent criticism on the evaluation framework used for school inspection argues that it has become too dialogical and insufficiently strict on assessing institutional compliance against academic standards (Michiels, 2023[97]). This underscores the importance of finding the right balance between using an open evaluation framework that enables institutions to choose and defend their own choices in a flexible manner, and detailed requirements allowing experts to make objective and informed judgements on quality.

In most of the ten VET and higher education systems analysed for this paper, QA agencies tend to use a prescriptive evaluation framework, where all providers and programme types are assessed against the same standards and providers have limited to no flexibility to adapt standards to their local institutional context. An example is **Lithuania,** which uses a highly prescriptive evaluation framework for the external evaluation of HEIs and programmes. All universities and colleges are assessed against the same four standards in institutional evaluation, and the evaluation of short-cycle, bachelor's and master's programmes also follows the same seven criteria. The only exception applies to short-cycle programmes, which are exempt from one criterion (i.e. criterion 2: links between education and research). Examples of more open evaluation frameworks were identified in Austria, Finland and the Netherlands. In these systems, a common set of standards/criteria applies to all providers, which is supplemented with a voluntary/in-depth review theme that can be chosen by the institution. AQ **Austria**'s guidelines for the audit of universities' internal quality management systems covers five broad standards, as well as a "voluntary in-depth focus", the purpose of which is described as follows:

> *The university may agree on a specific in-depth focus of the audit with AQ Austria which presents an addition to the certification with a sole view to enhancing the quality. It does not, however, influence the certification decision. AQ Austria offers to include an in-depth focus of the audit free of charge. The university may make use of this offer on a voluntary basis* (AQ Austria, 2021, p. 8[98]).

A similar system exists in **Finland**, where one of the four themes of the institutional evaluation framework for higher education is "the HEI as a learning organisation". This theme allows HEIs to select an area which is central to its profile or strategy, and on which it would like to receive external feedback for enhancement. The assessment area can relate to any of the HEI's core duties, and is not considered or graded by FINEEC when deciding whether the institution has passed the institutional audit (FINEEC, 2019[76]). In the **Netherlands**, HEIs can request a so-called "special feature" assessment of one of four themes as part of their programme evaluations: internationalisation, entrepreneurship, sustainable higher education, and small-scale and intensive provision. The special feature assessment is free of charge when it is carried out by NVAO in combination with a regular programme assessment (NVAO, 2024[99]).

Another example of a highly open and collaborative approach to external evaluation in higher education can be found in the **Flemish Community of Belgium**. Here, NVAO has moved away entirely from using any kind of fixed criteria, format or template. Instead, institution and programme evaluation cover eight broad standards, which are assessed based on the institution's own internal QA plan (NVAO, 2020[100]; NVAO, 2020[101]). In some systems, these specific and targeted evaluations are offered as a separate and fee-paying service, outside of regular institution or programme evaluation cycles. In **England (United Kingdom)**, for example, QAA has introduced a new and targeted quality and standards service for HEIs (QAA, 2024[102]). In **Austria**, too, HEIs can contract AQ Austria for topic-specific evaluations or consulting services outside of the regular programme and institution-level evaluation cycles (AQ Austria, 2024[103]).

Facilitating peer learning and benchmarking among institutions

A second way in which QA agencies are trying to increase the relevance of their quality assessments is through the integration of inter-institutional peer learning or benchmarking approaches in formal review cycles. Peer learning "involves individuals exchanging knowledge and experience with each other, and diffusing this learning back to their organisations to ensure an impact [...] It recognises that ultimately learning takes place between individuals and it facilitates interpersonal interchanges that are well-matched and that are based on trust and commitment" (Andrews and Manning, 2016, p. 5[104]). Benchmarking goes one step further and involves peer learning centred on the practices of (a) leading organisation(s) in a given field or industry approach. Drawing on an international review of definitions and approaches to benchmarking, Anand and Kodali (2008[105]) define benchmarking as:

> *a continuous analysis of strategies, functions, processes, products or services, performances, etc. compared within or between best-in-class organisations by obtaining information through appropriate data collection method, with the intention of assessing an organisation's current standards and thereby carry out self-improvement by implementing changes to scale or exceed those standards.*

The integration of peer learning or benchmarking in formal evaluation involves a joint evaluation by the QA agency of multiple institutions or programmes, grouped together based on similar challenges or characteristics. Giller (2023[32]) calls this a "horizontal" evaluation model. It is different from (more traditional) "sequential" evaluation, in which each institution or programme is evaluated separately by the QA agency or inspectorate, and peer learning remains limited to the institution and a small group of external peer reviewers responsible for conducting the site visit and preparing the evaluation report. The advantage of horizontal evaluation is that it can help institutions to not only improve their own internal QA practices, but also foster inter-institutional collaboration and partnership-building as part of external evaluation. A combination of horizontal and sequential approaches is described by Giller (2023[32]) as a "T-shaped model" and consists of maintaining in-depth review and support for providers where there is a perceived risk to quality.

Among the ten countries analysed for this report, examples of horizontal evaluation were identified in Finland and Norway. The third cycle of institutional quality audit in **Finland**, which runs from 2020 until 2024, includes a benchlearning component. The purpose of benchlearning is for institutions to receive feedback on the activities of their own organisation, and to learn from the good practices of another institution. The entire process is facilitated by FINEEC and the HEI is responsible for selecting its partner institution, which can be another HEI or "any other type of co-operation organisation" (e.g. an employer, research institute or VET provider). The HEI is also responsible for selecting the stakeholders from its own institution to be included in the benchlearning process, as well as the focus area of benchlearning. This must be one of the four main evaluation areas of FINEEC's institutional evaluation framework: 1) HEI creates competence, 2) HEI promotes impact and renewal, 3) HEI enhances quality and well-being, and 4) HEI as a learning organisation (FINEEC, 2019[76]).

Norway's most recent round of institutional audits in higher education, carried out between 2018 and 2024, used a similar concept of "audit heats". In a typical audit heat, institutions with similar contexts or circumstances are grouped together (for example, institutions offering education within the same disciplines, institutions that have recently merged, or institutions with regional campuses). Institutions involved in the same audit heat are encourages to share and discuss internal quality assurance practices before and after their audits take place. The intention is for the grouped institutions to be encouraged to develop more long-standing contacts and collaborative activities (ENQA, 2019[106]).

Embedding common global or sectoral challenges in evaluation frameworks

A third approach adopted by an increasing number of QA agencies to enhance the relevance of their external quality assessments is to embed global or sectoral challenges in their evaluation frameworks, expanding the scope of external QA beyond quality governance or teaching and learning. One of the most recent examples is the development of specific quality standards for online, blended and hybrid learning in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. A recent OECD study has found that, by mid-2022, twelve higher education QA agencies across OECD jurisdictions had developed such additional standards or guidance (Staring et al., 2022[107]). The international literature and experience from QA agencies reviewed in the study point to an "integrated approach" for the QA of digital provision. This consists of applying a common set of standards and procedures to all types of provision, and embedding specific indicators related to digital education in this overarching framework rather than creating new or additional procedures. The latter holds the risk of increasing the administrative burden for providers and regulators, and of creating walls between "traditional" in-person delivery and online/blended/hybrid forms of education.

The emergence of micro-credentials is another global trend that has led VET and higher education QA agencies to reconsider their QA frameworks. Recent experience suggests that programme-level evaluation for micro-credentials should not be encouraged, as it is too elaborate for such small volumes of learning (ENQA, 2023[108]; OECD, 2023[109]). The Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU Catalunya) in **Spain**, for instance, conducted a pilot evaluation of 33 short learning programmes offered by nine Catalonian universities in 2021, on the basis of which it concluded that given the expected growth of such credentials in the sector, it would be better to assure quality at the level of institution and their QA procedures for micro-credentials (Casadesus, Huertas and Edo, 2023[110]). In some countries, however, programme-level approaches to assuring the quality of micro-credentials are used, although this is reserved to specific types of providers such as private providers (e.g. in Ireland or New Zealand).

Another theme, which appears to be emerging more slowly in the work of QA agencies, is environmental sustainability. Except for the **Netherlands** (cf. "special feature" assessment on environmental sustainability discussed above), in none of the ten countries examined in this report evidence was found of QA agencies having developed specific guidelines or standards related to environmental sustainability. This confirms the findings of a recent OECD policy survey, which found that policy actions to elevate the importance of education towards greener and fairer societies in post-secondary non-tertiary and tertiary education levels remain slow to develop (OECD, 2023[111]). In some other countries, however, QA agencies have already started to embed environmental sustainability in their frameworks. In **Switzerland**, for example, the institutional evaluation framework includes one indicator that focuses specifically on how HEIs integrate the SDGs in their governance structure and quality assurance system (AAQ, 2023[112]). The National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation in **Spain** (ANECA) has also revised its evaluation frameworks to ensure that HEIs embrace sustainability in their education, research and engagement missions (ANECA, 2022[113]). There is an increasing recognition of environmental sustainability for HEIs, and incorporation of it in their broader institutional strategies (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024[114]). This places greater onus on QA agencies to understand its importance and how it interacts with delivery of education.

The main lesson is that QA agencies strive for integration instead of multiplication of evaluation frameworks and procedures as new topics emerge. Hcéres, for example, the QA agency for higher education in **France**, offers a good example of research and education integration. Since 2023, institutional evaluation covers strategic and operational quality management (domain 1), policy for research, innovation and engagement with society (domain 2) and education, student and campus life (domain 3). Previously, there were three separate procedures for institutional evaluation, programme evaluation and the external evaluation of research units (Hcéres, 2021[115]). **Ireland**'s QA framework for further and higher education caters for the integration of new themes through topic-specific guidelines, which maintain a clear link with core quality standards applicable to all types of providers (see Box 7).

Box 7. Ireland's external QA framework has a dedicated space for topic-specific guidelines

In Ireland, the same "core quality assurance standards" apply to all VET and higher education providers. These core QA standards are supplemented with sector-specific guidelines (for universities private/independent providers, institutes of technology and ETBs) and topic-specific guidelines for cross-sectoral themes identified as a priority by QQI, the government, or the sector. Each of these topic-specific guidelines is linked to a specific set of providers or programmes, with a clear indication of whether they are mandatory to obtain (re-)accreditation or if they serve to support sectoral enhancement only. As such, QQI has created a dedicated space for the development of thematic guidance in quite a lot of depth, whilst maintaining a clear link with the overall QA framework (see Figure 1).

For example, QQI's topic-specific guidelines for providers of apprenticeship programmes or providers of online and blended programmes are mandatory for all providers that offer such programmes. By contrast, the "Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes of English Language Education to International Learners" (ELE Code) is mandatory only for providers that wish to obtain QQI's new "TrustEd Ireland" quality label. TrustEd is a new and voluntary quality label which all providers offering English-language programmes to international students can apply for. The only exception are institutions that recruit non-EU/EEA learners to programmes that require immigration permissions/study visas, in an overall effort to improve the quality of transnational education. For these programmes, it is mandatory to obtain the TrustEd quality mark (QQI, 2024[116]).

Figure 1. Ireland's quality assurance framework for VET and higher education

Source: QQI (2024[117]), *Key Policies and Guidelines*, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Dublin, https://www.qqi.ie/QAguidelines.

Trend 3: Supporting enhancement through follow-up and implementation support

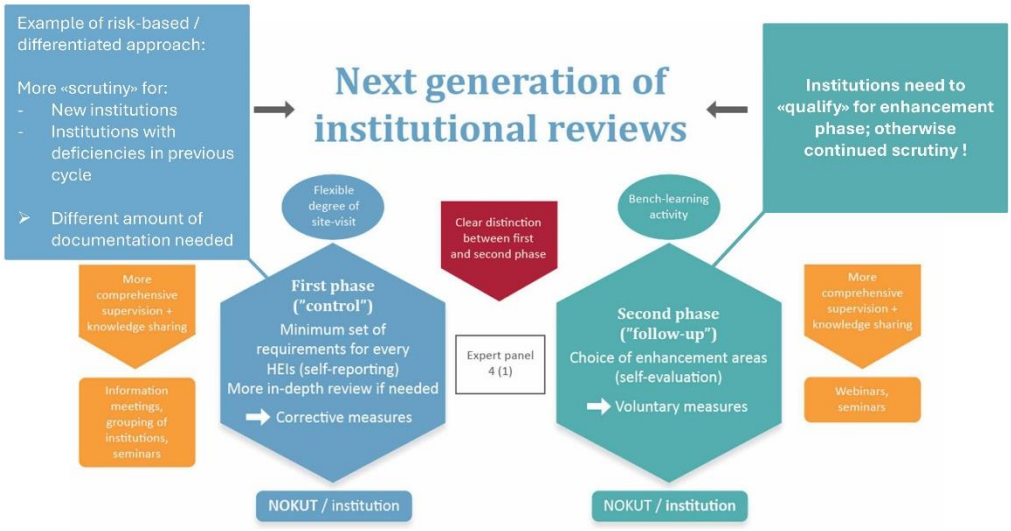
A third trend observed in the work of QA agencies is greater attention paid to follow-up and hands-on support for institutions to support the implementation of the advice and recommendations formulated by review panels. A common challenge for QA agencies is connecting external QA activity to improvements in teaching quality (Openo et al., 2017[118]). QA agencies tend to support institutions to implement teaching and learning enhancements in one of three ways: a) after external evaluation has been conducted; b) in parallel to external evaluation; or c) before the start of external evaluation. Each of these three approaches is discussed in the following sections.

Approach 1: Follow-up and implementation support after external evaluation

In almost all countries analysed for this paper, QA agencies have a system in place to support the implementation of recommendations *after* evaluations have been completed. In most cases, providers are required to develop an institutional action plan in response to the recommendations received from the external review panel, which is then monitored by the QA agency. In **Ireland**, for example, the ETBs, public HEIs and some private/independent higher education providers are required to engage in biennial quality dialogue meetings with QQI and submit an annual quality report, in which they provide updates and case studies on changes to their internal QA systems (QQI, 2024[119]). In **Finland**, FINEEC organises quality enhancement seminars for HEIs after institutional audits have been completed. During these seminars, HEIs that have received a "Quality Label for Excellence" are invited to share their practices with the sector. HEIs can be nominated to receive the FINEEC Quality Label for Excellence if they have been assessed as "excellent" in one of the three main evaluation areas by the FINEEC audit panel, and demonstrate evidence of an innovative and pioneering spirit, an approach that focuses on long-term quality enhancement, or a participatory operational culture (FINEEC, 2019[76]; FINEEC, 2024[120]).

In **Norway**, the third cycle of institutional reviews in higher education was completed in 2024. NOKUT is now developing the shape of its next cycle of institutional evaluation, which will start in 2025. A key focus of the new procedure will be to enhance follow-up work with institutions, making a distinction between two phases. In a first phase, all HEIs would be assessed against minimum requirements, supplemented by "corrective measures", in-depth reviews and information sharing meetings for those institutions that fail to meet minimum quality requirements. A second and voluntary phase would be open only to those institutions that have successfully passed the first phase and offer institutions the opportunity to engage in more in-depth enhancement activity with NOKUT on (a) themes(s) selected by the institution itself (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Norway's next generation of institutional reviews for higher education



Source: Friedrich, P. E. (2024[121]), "Designing a review methodology fit-for-purpose in Norwegian higher education", *Presentation at international peer learning event organised by the OECD for Lithuania on 20 June 2024 as part of the project "Strengthening the external evaluation and quality assurance systems for VET and higher education in Lithuania"*, unpublished.

Another innovative example coming from outside the country sample analysed for this paper can be found in **New Zealand**. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), which is responsible for assuring the quality of non-university tertiary organisations (TEOs), makes a similar distinction, as Norway does, between corrective measures (aimed to bringing institutions back to compliance with regulatory standards) and incentives (to reduce administrative burden). After each external evaluation and review, NZQA places each TEO into one of four provider categories, thereby creating a "risk profile" for each institution. Each provider category is associated with sanctions or incentives, giving trust to high performers, and restricting the activities of poor performers to protect learners. To bring poor performing institutions back to compliance, a peer-support model is used, with Category 1 and 2 providers mobilised to support Category 3 and 4 providers with the assessment and moderation of student work (see Table 2).

Table 2. Incentives and sanctions for provider categories of non-university tertiary education organisations (TEOs) in New Zealand

Provider category	Frequency of external evaluation and review (EER)	Frequency of submitting financial attestations	Making new applications	Turnaround time for applications	Assessment and moderation of student work	Student enrolment
Incentives for category 1 TEOs	4 years after publication of EER report	An Independent Assurance Practitioner's Review Report or Auditor's must be submitted every 2 years	No restrictions, including for special offshore programme approval	Applications of category 1 providers are prioritised; turnaround time of 30 working days guaranteed	Not applicable	Not applicable
Incentives for category 2 TEOs	4 years after publication of EER report	An Independent Assurance Practitioner's Review Report or Auditor's must be submitted every 2 years	No restrictions, including for special offshore programme approval	Applications of category 1 providers are prioritised; turnaround time of 30 working days guaranteed	Not applicable	Not applicable
Sanctions for category 3 TEOs	12-24 months after publication of the EER report	An an Independent Assurance Practitioner's Review Report or Auditor's must be submitted every year	Restrictions may be introduced for certain study/training areas and cannot apply for offshore delivery	Standard turnaround time of 45 working days for all new programme applications	Providers may need to have their material pre-assessed and assessments verified by a Category 1 or 2 provider	Providers can only enrol new domestic or international students if they are signatory to the Code of Practice for Pastoral Care for Students
Sanctions for category 4 TEOs	6-12 months after publication of the EER report	An an Independent Assurance Practitioner's Review Report or Auditor's must be submitted every year	Providers will normally not be granted any new approvals, and cannot apply for offshore delivery	Not applicable	6 weeks after EER publication, provider appoints a Category 1 or 2 provider to pre-assess, verify and/or carry out all student moderation and assessment work	Providers cannot enrol any new domestic or international students, even if they are signatories to the Code of Practice for Pastoral Care for Students

Source: Adapted from NZQA (2024[122]), *Provider categories after external evaluation and review*, New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), Wellington,https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/tertiary/quality-assurance/eer/provider-categories-after-external-evaluation-and-review/#e12116_heading1.

Approach 2: Follow-up and implementation support in parallel to external evaluation

In many other systems, an institutional support or enhancement programme exists in parallel or in addition to follow-up carried out after institutional reviews. These activities are not necessarily linked to the themes or recommendations emerging from external reviews. For example, in **Croatia** all HEIs are evaluated on five-yearly basis by AZVO and required to submit follow-up reports to show how they will implement the advice and recommendations that emerged from the review. To support peer learning among institutions in between evaluation cycles, the agency has established a national network of all higher education QA units in the country, CroQAnet. Through CroQAnet, AZVO supports the collection and dissemination of good practices and trends in the field of quality assurance and supports institutions to apply national and internationally accepted quality standards (AZVO, n.d.[123]).

In **Lithuania**, too, the KPMPC and SKVC play a major role in supporting inter-institutional peer learning in between evaluation cycles. SKVC regularly organises peer learning events for the sector, and KPMPC manages 15 methodological commissions, which comprises groups of teachers and external experts in

subject domains. In addition to being responsible for updating exam banks and pedagogical materials, the committees offer guidance and training on practical and theoretical assessment (KPMPC, 2021[124]; KPMPC, 2021[125]; KPMPC, 2021[126]). **Sweden's** parallel enhancement works with regional networks of education providers established to promote the development of higher vocational education in the region. Providers and social partners work together to share knowledge, establish local priorities and conduct skill analyses. Sweden's QA agency, the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (*Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolans*), collaborates closely with (but is independent from) these networks to align education planning and quality assurance with regional demands (MYH, n.d.[127]).

Some countries have systems where parallel quality enhancement activities are carried out by organisational peers, rather than by the QA agencies themselves. For example, Education and Training Boards **Ireland** (ETBI) supports its 16 regional Education and Training Boards (ETB) to deliver on their statutory responsibility for assuring the quality of VET provision in their region. ETBI has six strategic goals, which focus on promoting excellence in education and training, enhancing learner outcomes, investing in staff development, fostering partnerships with stakeholders, and advancing the strategic growth and visibility of the education and training sector in Ireland at local, national, and EU levels. This strategy comprises activities such as developing a Patrons' Framework for providers, implementing a Learner Support Framework across Further Education and Training (FET), and building professional capacity through tailored Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes for teachers. ETBI also invest in strategic partnerships at local, national, and EU levels to foster collaboration and advance shared initiatives and work on measures to enhance its brand visibility and influence by promoting education, training, and youth work services across the country (ETBI, 2021[128]).

Approach 3: Follow-up and implementation support prior to external evaluation

It is also possible for QA agencies to support the sector with teaching and learning enhancement *prior* to carrying out formal evaluation, although this appears to be a less common approach. In none of the ten countries analysed for this report, evidence was found of QA agencies engaging in enhancement work with institutions prior to carrying out an institutional or programme evaluation.

An example of this approach can be found in **New Zealand** and its academic quality audits of universities. Universities in New Zealand have been subject to audits of their institutional quality management practices by the Academic Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) since as early as 1998. Each academic audit is linked to a specific "Enhancement Theme", which is "a topic in which universities collectively address an issue which is important to individual universities and of national significance" (Te Pokai Tara, 2022[129]). Prior to undergoing academic audit by AQA, universities are supported by Universities New Zealand (*Te Pokai Tara*) to develop specific objectives and actions to address the chosen enhancement theme. This is then followed by AQA's academic audit. Universities are currently going through their sixth academic audit, which is focused on the enhancement theme of "Access, outcomes and opportunities for Māori students and for Pasifika students", which the sector has worked on collectively between 2017 and 2020 in close collaboration with *Te Pokai Tara* (AQA, 2020[130]).

4 How do countries align quality assurance across VET and higher education?

As demonstrated in the previous sections, there has been a multiplication of external evaluation and QA services across VET and higher education. In addition to establishing independent agencies with dedicated responsibility for assuring the quality of VET and higher education, some countries have established specialised bodies to assess the labour market relevance and student demand for new VET and higher education programmes (e.g. in Denmark and the Netherlands). In other countries, specialised agencies carry out accreditation of company-based training (e.g. in Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Scotland). In some systems, the national research council also plays a role in assuring the quality of doctoral education (e.g. in Lithuania, Norway and the Netherlands), especially as many European systems are developing more structured doctoral programmes and are "moving away from a highly individualised model of delivery based on the personal master-apprentice relation between supervisor and supervisee" (EUA, 2013, p. 14[131]).

The existence of multiple QA regimes across VET and higher education can create challenges for different actors in the system. For governments, it can be costly to maintain such a wide range of QA systems. While the exact financial cost of external QA activity is difficult to calculate, it includes a number of factors: the costs associated with setting up and running the day-to-day operations of the external QA agency; the type, scope and nature of external review activities (e.g. frequency of reviews, number of providers operating in the systems and subject to external review, the focus of reviews); or indirect costs associated with internal QA staff's time in collecting all the data and information needed for self-evaluation (Kis, 2005[132]). For providers, it can be challenging to navigate different regulatory and quality assurance requirements and align their curricula and teaching practices across VET and higher education, to create seamless learner pathways.

For these reasons, some countries have sought to create synergies or integrate (some of) the QA services spanning various levels of education and training, to make the system more streamlined and achieve efficiency in resource management. A 2013 study by KPMG, which examined government integration schemes in 22 jurisdictions in human and social services, has identified an "integration continuum" for the coordination of operations across government services (KPMG, 2013[133]). Applying this model to the external QA architectures for VET and higher education in the ten jurisdictions analysed for this paper shows that in half of the systems a highly fragmented system exists, with QA organisations working in isolation from each other. In the other half, there is evidence of limited, partial and full integration. In some cases, integration has involved the creation of a single QA agency (e.g. in Estonia, Finland, Ireland and Scotland). In others, it has involved co-ordination across different agencies responsible for VET and higher education (e.g. the Netherlands). The three approaches to integration are discussed in the following sections (see Table 3).

Table 3. Approaches to the integration of quality assurance services

Countries	No integration	Limited integration	Partial integration	Full integration
	A highly fragmented system with different QA organisations working in isolation from each other.	Different QA agencies collaborate to align procedures, share data and/or office locations, and do joint evaluation.	A single QA agency supports more formal collaboration, but there is no system-level integration and thus separate QA procedures apply.	A single QA agency and framework spanning VET and higher education exists, and wider system-level integration is sought.
OECD				
Austria	✓			
Denmark	✓			
Estonia			✓	
Finland			✓	
Ireland				✓
Lithuania	✓			
The Netherlands		✓		
Norway	✓			
Scotland (UK)[1]				✓
OECD accession				
Croatia	✓			

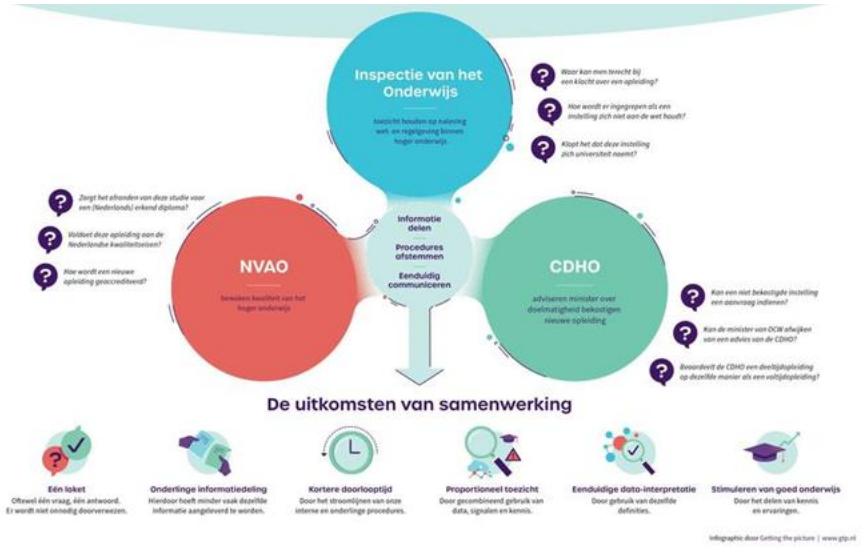
Source: OECD analysis, based on the "integration continuum" in KPMG (2013[133]), *The Integration Imperative: reshaping the delivery of human and social services*, KPMG International, pp. 3, https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/nz/pdf/October/integration-imperative-kpmg-nz.pdf.

4.1 Model 1: Limited integration of quality assurance for VET and higher education

In the limited integration model of quality assurance, different agencies are responsible for the quality assurance of VET and higher education, but there exists regular information sharing between the agencies and collaboration on the design of some evaluation procedures for some providers or programme types (e.g. providers offering both VET and higher education programmes; or programmes aimed at supporting transitions from VET to higher education). An example can be found in the **Netherlands**, where the external QA of VET is the responsibility of the Inspectorate of Education and the Commission Macro-Efficiency VET (CMMBO), and the external QA of higher education is assured by the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO) and the Commission Macro-Efficiency Higher Education (CDHO).

In 2018, the Inspectorate of Education, NVAO and CDHO signed a collaboration agreement (CDHO, NVAO and Dutch Education Inspectorate, 2018[134]). The collaboration focuses on higher education and consists of bi-monthly meetings between the three agencies to discuss responsibilities, align the timing of evaluation procedures, and to share data and information on key trends and the quality of different providers (see Figure 3). CDHO and NVAO also share the same office space. In doing so, the agencies want to function collectively as a "one-stop-shop" for anyone seeking information about the quality or quality assurance of education in the Netherlands, avoid duplication in the collection and processing of data (by providers and agencies), and signal quality risks to one another. This can then support proportionate QA measures by each respective agency and shorten the timelines of their external evaluation activities. Inter-sectoral collaboration is further facilitated through the use of common definitions, the prioritisation of key research topics and system-level thematic evaluations by the Inspectorate of Education covering all levels of education and training, from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to higher education (Dutch Inspectorate of Education, 2024[135]).

Figure 3. Collaboration protocol Inspectorate of Education-NVAO-CDHO in the Netherlands



Source: NVAO (2024[136]), *Samenwerking ICN [Collaboration ICN]*, Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO), https://www.nvao.net/nl/samenwerking-icn.

In 2016, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Tertiary Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) – the national regulator and QA agency for higher education – and the Australian Skills Quality Agency (AQSA) – the national regulator for VET providers in **Australia**. The purpose of the MoU is described as follows:

> *"to collaborate and co-operate to the extent possible in order to implement a co-ordinated regulatory approach for providers who are registered as (or who have applied to be registered as) both an `NVR registered training organisation' and a 'higher education provider' (hereinafter referred to as 'multi−sector providers'). It is intended to support Government's deregulation initiatives to reduce unnecessary or duplicative regulation"* (ASQA and TEQSA, 2016, p. 1[137]).

Like the Netherlands, ASQA and TEQSA collaboration focuses primarily on information sharing through the identification and use of common data, documentation and other evidence to reduce the administrative burden of compliance assessments being carried out by each respective agency. The agencies also co-regulate providers that deliver both VET and higher education courses (called "multi-sector providers") and that offer education to overseas students (i.e. providers registered in the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS)). Following the publication of the Australian Universities Accord earlier this year (see section 3.1), ASQA and TEQSA will intensify their collaboration in the coming years through the establishment of a Dual Sector Working Group. The Working Group will seek to support stronger alignment and use of each other's regulatory activities and improve the regulatory experience for dual-sector providers. TEQSA will also support a review of the ASQA standards for registered training organisations (RTOs) in order to better harmonise these standards with the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 (Australian Department of Education, 2024[59]).

4.2 Model 2: Partial integration of quality assurance for VET and higher education

In the partial integration model, a single agency or inspectorate co-ordinates the external QA of VET and higher education providers, based on a common set of quality standards or evaluation principles. However, to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, which may not address the specific needs and challenges of the VET and higher education sectors, the practical implementation of external QA in both sectors will be carried out by distinct governance units within the same agency. Each of these units will develop its own QA standards and procedures within this overarching framework, specific to the needs of each sector. For some sub-sectors, however, joint evaluation is carried out. Estonia and Finland offer examples of partially integrated quality assurance models for VET and higher education.

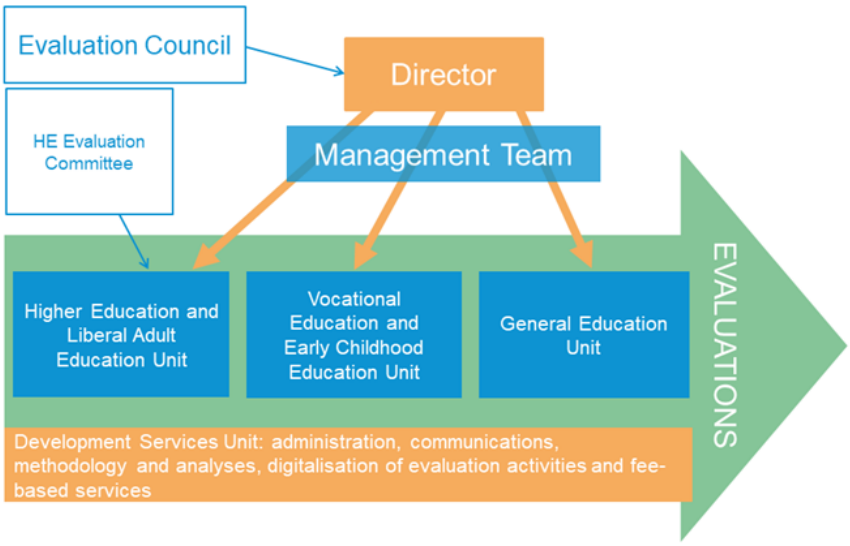
The **Finnish** Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) was established in 2014, merging the functions of the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, the Finnish Education Evaluation Council and the Finnish National Board of Education. In 2016, ECEC also became part of FINEEC's tasks to strengthen synergies across different education sectors and ensure a more holistic approach to education and quality assurance. The themes and schedules of FINEEC's evaluations across all these levels of education are informed by a National Education Evaluation Plan (FINEEC, 2024[43]). Each evaluation plan covers a four-year period and applies to all levels of education, from ECEC to higher education. The 2024-27 plan is structured around three strategic goals: 1) raising competence and education levels; 2) fostering social, ecological and economic sustainable development; and 3) continuous improvement of the quality of education.

While a common strategy guides FINEEC's evaluations across all education levels, distinct processes are maintained for each sector (see Figure 4). For example, while the VET and higher education sectors both undergo audits of their internal QA systems, VET evaluations tend to focus more on the attainment of objectives set in national curricula and qualification requirements, whereas higher education audits often involve comprehensive reviews of institutional quality systems.

Despite these separate approaches, FINEEC has been working to bridge the gaps between VET and higher education by conducting joint thematic evaluations. Examples are two studies that have focused on improving transitions from VET to higher education, and the alignment of competencies, which were carried out jointly by the VET and higher education units (Hintsanen et al., 2016[138]; Hakamäki-Stylman et al., 2024[139]). Engaging in cross-sectoral transversal thematic studies can be an important building block in the demonstration of this vision, and in overcoming challenges such as differing operational cultures and expertise requirements between the VET and higher education (quality assurance) sectors.

Like FINEEC, **Estonia**'s Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) is responsible for the quality assurance of VET and higher education, but it operates as an independent agency under the Youth and Education Board as a broader policy architecture governing education in Estonia. Within HAKA, core activities are split across four sectors (higher education, vocational education and training, continuing education, and adult education), and separate strategic priorities and tasks guide the work of separate units in each of these (HAKA, 2023[140]).

Figure 4. Organisational structure of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)



Source: Hiltunen, K. (2024[141]), "Strengthening synergies between VET and higher education – Case: The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)", *Presentation at an international peer learning event organised by the OECD on 20 June 2024 as part of the project "Strengthening the external evaluation and quality assurance systems for VET and higher education in Lithuania"*, unpublished.

4.3 Model 3: Full integration of quality assurance for VET and higher education

In fully integrated QA systems, a single agency is responsible for the QA of VET and higher education and, in addition to this, wider reflections and efforts are being made by the government to achieve greater system-level coherence and collaboration between VET and higher education providers. The objective is to create a more integrated tertiary education system, in which VET and higher education are increasingly seen as part of the same "skills delivery landscape" (Withers, 2023[142]), rather than two separate sectors. This should also be reflected in the application of a single quality assurance framework across both sectors to support greater transitions and parity of esteem between VET and higher education, to the benefit of learners. A more extensive discussion of the "tertiary turn" taking place across different OECD jurisdictions can be found in the second of this two-part paper series on quality assurance (OECD, 2025[31]).

Ireland's move towards an integrated QA system began in 2012 with the establishment of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as the agency with sole responsibility for the external QA of higher education and further education and training providers. QQI was established from the amalgamation of three former state agencies: the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. The Irish Universities Quality Board was also subsumed within QQI. QQI's common approach to QA contains three dimensions: 1) every VET and higher education provider must have an internal QA system in place, in line with "Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines" (QQI, 2021[143]) and relevant topic-specific guidelines (see **Error! Reference s ource not found.**); 2) providers are subject to external monitoring by and quality reporting to QQI; and 3) each provider must engage in periodic external review of their internal QA system. However, the practical implementation of external review in both sectors currently follows slightly different terms of reference and guidelines. While the cyclical review of HEIs has been in place for several years (QQI, 2016[144]), the external evaluation of the ETBs was only launched in 2021 (QQI, 2021[79]). QQI also has additional sector-specific standards for ETBs, institutes of technology, universities and private/independent providers as four separate sub-sectors within the overall tertiary system (QQI, 2024[117]).

The establishment of QQI was further enhanced with the creation in 2020 of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). DFHERIS applies a single strategic framework across VET, higher education, research and skills. One of the objectives of the strategy is to progress a Unified Tertiary System that "ensure[s] learners have the opportunity to follow the path that most closely meets their needs and allows them to transition seamlessly between and across different institutions in line with their particular requirements" (DFHERIS, 2023, p. 31[145]). To achieve this more practical collaboration across the two sectors, one key action has been to promote the creation of four-year "tertiary degrees", with support from a National Tertiary Office (NTO) (NTO, n.d.[146]). In a tertiary degree, students spend the first two years studying at a VET institution, after which they can receive an ISCED 5 Higher Certificate(at NFQ Level 6)). The next two years, students can automatically progress to a partner HEI (often a technological university) to obtain a bachelor's degree at ISCED level 6.

Similarly, in **Scotland (UK)** four system-level strategic objectives guide the VET, higher education and research sectors. These include several priorities to strengthen collaboration, transitions and inclusion: promoting fair access, clear pathways and transitions (Priority 1.1); supporting the development of targeted, purpose-driven collaborations across VET and higher education institutions (Priority 2.1); supporting coherent provision, skills and qualification planning and alignment, with institutions, employers and partners (Priority 3.2); and supporting the development of partnerships that secure better outcomes and public value, and enhance sustainability (Priority 3.4) (SFC, 2022[147]). Scotland also fosters the creation of more connected VET and higher education programmes through two Regional Delivery Boards (RDBs), set up in 2022 in the north and south-east of the country. RDBs seek to strengthen the alignment of post-16 education and training with local and regional skills needs. Several pilots seek to support joint programme design and delivery by colleges and HEIs, to create integrated pathways for learners from school through to degree-level provision (SFC, 2022[148]).

The creation of greater synergies between VET and higher education at system level is accompanied by the development of a single Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF). As noted in section 2.3, this work started in 2021 and was led by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). It involved a period of policy review, stakeholder consultation and co-creation workshops with QAA Scotland and Education Scotland as two of the main discussion partners. This led to the publication, in 2022, of a report that sought to answer the question: "Why a tertiary framework?" (SFC, 2022[149]). In this report, Scotland lists the main benefits it believes a single TQEF can bring: 1) the development of different types of provision and pathways, including shared provision; 2) a comparative understanding of the impact of investment in learning and teaching across different sectors; and 3) the sharing of innovation, excellence and good practice across sectors.

In May 2023, it was decided that QAA Scotland should lead on the design, planning and delivery of a multi-year external peer-review cycle for colleges and universities starting in the academic year 2024-25. In doing so, QAA Scotland effectively took over the QA function of colleges from Education Scotland (SFC, 2024[52]). Scotland's TQEF contains two main strands of activity (QAA, 2024[150]):

1. ***External enhancement-led peer review***: Building on its four cycles of enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) in higher education, QAA will conduct external reviews of all colleges and universities starting in 2025. Details on the exact methodology, as well as a handbook and guidance for providers, are expected to be published in the coming months.
2. ***Tertiary sector enhancement activity***: In collaboration with the College Development Network (CDN), which offers continuing professional learning (CPL) to Scotland's college sector, QAA's Tertiary Enhancement Activity Advisory Group (TEAAG) will identify and develop institutional guidance, CPL and development materials over the course of 2024-25.

5 Annexes

5.1 Annex 1: Comparison of standards and indicators in ESG and EQAVET frameworks

Table 4. The ESG and EQAVET frameworks cover similar standards and indicators

European standards for the internal quality assurance in VET and higher education *(label of standard)*

ESG Part 1: Internal quality assurance (2005, updated in 2015)	EQAVET indicative descriptors: provider level (2009)
Standard 1: The institution has a policy for quality assurance in place	
Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders (*ESG 1.1: Policy for quality assurance*)	VET providers have an explicit and transparent quality assurance system in place; European, national and regional VET policy goals/objectives are reflected in the local targets set by the VET providers; Explicit goals/objectives and targets are set and monitored; and Responsibilities in quality management and development have been explicitly allocated (*Cycle 1: Planning*)
Standard 2: The institution has clear processes in place for the design, approval and review of study programmes	
Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (*ESG 1.2: Design and approval of programmes*) Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned (*ESG 1.9: Ongoing monitoring and period review of programmes*)	Explicit goals/objectives and targets are set and monitored, and programmes are designed to meet them; The relevant stakeholders participate in the process of analysing local needs; and Providers plan co-operative initiatives with other VET providers (*Cycle 1: Planning*)
Standard 3: Student-centred teaching, learning and assessment practices are used	
Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach (*ESG 1.3: Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment*)	VET providers' programmes enable learners to meet the expected learning outcomes and become involved in the learning process; VET providers respond to the learning needs of individuals by using a learner-centred approach which enables learners to achieve the expected learning outcomes; and VET providers use valid, accurate and reliable methods to assess individuals' learning outcomes (*Cycle 2: Implementation*)
Standard 4: Process to support student admission, progression, recognition and certification are in place	
Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification (*ESG 1.4: Student admission, progression, recognition and certification*)	VET providers promote innovation in teaching and learning methods, in school and in the workplace, supported by the use of digital technologies and online-learning tools (*Cycle 1: Planning*) Early warning systems are implemented (*Cycle 3: Evaluation*)
Standard 5: The institution has high-quality teaching staff, which have opportunities for continuing professional learning	
Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the	There is an early involvement of staff in planning, including with regard to quality development (*Cycle 1: Planning*)

ESG Part 1: Internal quality assurance (2005, updated in 2015)	EQAVET indicative descriptors: provider level (2009)
recruitment and development of the staff (*ESG 1.5: Teaching staff*)	The strategic plan for staff competence development specifies the need for training for teachers and trainers; Staff undertake regular training and develop cooperation with relevant external stakeholders to support capacity building and quality improvement, and to enhance performance (*Cycle 2: Implementation*)
Standard 6: The institution has adapted learning resources and student support systems in place	
Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided (*ESG 1.6: Learning resources and student support*)	Resources are appropriately internally aligned/assigned with a view to achieving the targets set in the implementation plans; and Relevant and inclusive partnerships are explicitly supported to implement the actions planned (*Cycle 2: Implementation*)
Standard 7: Stakeholder feedback on the quality and relevance of study programmes is regularly collected, published and used	
Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities (*ESG 1.7: Information management*) Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible (*ESG 1.8: Student information*)	Ongoing consultation with relevant stakeholders takes place to identify specific local/individual needs (*Cycle 1: Planning*) Learners' feedback is gathered on their individual learning experience and on the learning and teaching environment. Together with teachers' feedback this is used to inform further actions; and Information on the outcomes of the review is publicly available (*Cycle 4: Review*)
Standard 8: The institution engages in regular external review at institution and/or programme level	
Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis (*ESG 1.10: Cyclical external quality assurance*)	Self-assessment/self-evaluation is periodically carried out under national and regional regulations/frameworks or at the initiative of VET providers; Evaluation and review covers processes and results/outcomes of education including the assessment of learner satisfaction as well as staff performance and satisfaction; and Evaluation and review includes adequate and effective mechanisms to involve internal and external stakeholders (*Cycle 3: Evaluation*) Procedures on feedback and review are part of a strategic learning process in the organisation; and Results/outcomes of the evaluation process are discussed with relevant stakeholders and appropriate action plans are put in place (*Cycle 4: Review*)

Source: OECD analysis, based on ENQA (2015[20]), *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher education (ENQA), Brussels, www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf and EC (2022[151]), *Indicators for each phase of the quality cycle: provider level*, last updated in March 2022, European Commission, Brussels, https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1570&langId=en.

5.2 Annex 2: System-design features of ten selected case study countries

Table 5. System-design features of ten selected case study countries

Countries	Population size (2022)	Institutional and programme differentiation			Formal responsibility for external evaluation and quality assurance		National or regional structure for teaching and learning enhancement	
		VET system	HE system	Private HE provision	One agency	Two or more agencies	VET	HE
OECD								
Austria	9.0m	Mix	Diversified	✓		✓		
Denmark	5.9m	Work-based	Diversified			✓		
Estonia	1.3m	School-based	Binary	✓	✓		✓	✓
Finland	5.5m	Mix	Binary		✓			
Ireland	5.1m	Mix	Diversified	✓	✓		✓	✓
Lithuania	2.8m	School-based	Binary	✓		✓		
Netherlands	17.7m	Mix	Binary	✓		✓	✓	✓
Norway	5.4m	Mix	Diversified	✓		✓	✓	✓
Scotland (UK)	5.5m	Mix	Unified	✓	✓		✓	✓
OECD accession								
Croatia	3.9m	School-based	Diversified	✓		✓		

Note: The selected sample of case study countries was informed by the project Advisory Group, which includes representatives from the European Commission's DG REFORM, the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (ŠMSM) and the OECD. The Lithuanian Qualifications and Vocational Training Development Centre (KPMPC) and Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) were also consulted by the project Advisory Group on countries to be included in the OECD's analysis.

Sources:

1) The population size for all countries (except Croatia) was calculated based on (2024[152]), *OECD population data 2022*, https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/population.html. The figure for Croatia is based on Eurostat (2024[153]), *Population on 1 January by age and sex*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjan/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.demo_pop.

2) Countries' institutional and programme differentiation is based on definitions in OECD (2024[154]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://10.1787/c00cad36-en and OECD (OECD, 2008[36]), *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264046535-en.

3) Countries' formal responsibility for the quality assurance of VET and higher education was identified based on desk research and expert interviews conducted by the OECD.

4) National or regional structures for teaching and learning enhancement were identified by the OECD based on desk research and expert interviews, building on Zhang (Zhang, 2022[155]), *National Developments in Learning and Teaching in Europe*, European University Association (EUA) asbl, Brussels, https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/lotus%20report_2022_fin2.pdf and EC (2019[156]), *Mapping of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs)*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/566920f4-ee2d-11e9-a32c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en.

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Higher Education Policy Team

The Higher Education Policy Team within the Policy Advice and Implementation Division of the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills carries out analysis on a wide range of higher education systems and policies. Its work is advised by the Group of National Experts on Higher Education, which assists the Education Policy Committee in guiding the OECD's programme of work on higher education policy.

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Recent work on quality assurance:

- OECD (2025), "Fostering Excellence in Higher Education and VET: Going Beyond Quality Assurance", *OECD Education Policy Perspectives* No. 116, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e6862056-en.
- OECD (2023), *Ensuring Quality Digital Higher Education in Hungary*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/5f44fd6f-en.
- Staring, F., M. Brown, P. Bacsich and D. Ifenthaler (2022), "Digital Higher Education: Emerging Quality Standards, Practices and Supports", *OECD Education Working Papers,* No. 281, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/f622f257-en.

VET Team

The VET Team within the OECD Centre for Skills carries out analysis on a wide range of VET systems and policies. Its work is advised by the Group of National Experts on VET, which assists the Education Policy Committee in guiding the OECD's programme of work on VET policy.

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