2026 European Quality Assurance Forum

Quality Assurance for Skills, Entrepreneurship and Innovation:
Partnering with the World of Work

Hosted by National Polytechnic University of Armenia, Yerevan
18-20 November 2026

ISSN: 1375-3797

Author(s)

Name: Maria Manatos

Position: Head of Studies and Analysis Office

Organisation: Agency for the Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES)

Country: Portugal

Short bio:

Maria Manatos works at the Portuguese Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education, A3ES, where she is involved in studies, thematic analysis, internationalisation and institutional communication. Her work focuses on quality assurance, higher education governance, institutional evaluation, doctoral education, sustainability and European cooperation in quality assurance. She holds a PhD in Management from the ISEG Lisbon School of Economics and Management, University of Lisbon, with research focused on quality management in higher education. She was a researcher at the Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies (CIPES), in Portugal. She has worked as an expert for international organisations in the higher education field. She has published her work in higher education and quality management journals.

Name: Marie Gould

Position: Head of Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review

Organisation: QQI – Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Country: Ireland

Short bio:

Marie Gould is Head of Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review at Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), with over twenty years' experience in tertiary education quality assurance. She oversees QQI's institutional reviews of higher education providers. She has overseen the development of a review model for institutions of different sizes and missions and now leads work on the methodology for the next review cycle. She is a member of ENQA's Agency Reviews Committee (ARC) and has served as an ENQA reviewer and panel chair. Her European work also includes oversight of QQI's procedures for joint programmes under the European Approach and pilots for the Joint European Degree Label.

Paper

From compliance to institutional capacity: rethinking institutional review for innovation and societal engagement

Abstract

Institutional assessment is increasingly expected to address complex and interconnected dimensions of higher education (HE) quality: strategic governance, AI for education, research-based innovation, stakeholder engagement, employability, lifelong learning, sustainability and institutional resilience. For quality assurance (QA) agencies, this raises a methodological challenge: how can review processes remain robust, transparent and evidence-based while also supporting institutional enhancement, diversity and responsiveness to changing societal, policy and technological contexts? This paper brings together the ongoing redesign of institutional assessment in Portugal, with a comparative QA perspective from QQI Ireland drawing on experience with differentiated and proportionate institutional review models, including approaches tailored to smaller and specialist higher education institutions (HEIs). The Portuguese case provides the starting point: an emerging institutional self-assessment framework that seeks to move beyond institutional description towards the evaluation of institutional capacity, including strategic coherence, internal quality assurance maturity, the real working of internal quality assurance / management system at all relevant levels of activity, effective use of evidence in decision-making and improvement. The comparative perspective with QQI Ireland is used to discuss transferability beyond the Portuguese context. Rather than comparing systems descriptively, the paper explores shared methodological questions for QA agencies: how to design review processes that are enhancement-oriented but credible, evidence-informed but proportionate, responsive to labour market and societal change but respectful of academic autonomy and institutional diversity and capable of producing transparent outcomes that sustain public trust. The paper identifies preliminary lessons for agencies seeking to redesign institutional assessment as a tool for institutional learning, innovation and public trust. It identifies key tensions for external QA: balancing accountability and enhancement, evidence and bureaucracy, common criteria and diversity, labour market responsiveness and the long-term public mission of HE, as well as the need to support system-level learning from review processes. The paper also considers how institutional assessment can generate system-level insights to inform policy development and sector-wide enhancement.

1. Introduction

Institutional review is being asked to serve a broader purpose. In addition to confirming compliance with legal and quality requirements, review processes are expected to examine how HEIs respond to technological change, evolving skills needs, environmental and demographic pressures, research and innovation, and increasingly diverse student populations. They must also consider engagement with employers, public authorities and society without losing sight of higher education's long-term public mission.

This broader scope raises questions about how reviews should be designed. Covering more areas can mean more documentation without improving understanding, judgement or quality. The same requirements may also be less useful for smaller, specialist or differently organised institutions. Reviews therefore need to maintain common expectations and credible outcomes while drawing on evidence suited to each institution's context, professional judgement and institutional learning.

The Portuguese case provides the starting point. Evidence from the 2022–2023 institutional assessment cycle is used selectively to support the principles informing the emerging design of the next cycle, not as the object of the paper. These principles remain under discussion and do not represent a formally approved future model. A comparative perspective from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) examines their wider relevance and transferability.

The main research question of the paper is: how can institutional review assess and support institutional capacity for research-based innovation and societal engagement and other pressing challenges for HEI, while remaining evidence-based, proportionate and respectful of institutional diversity?

2. From compliance to institutional capacity: principles for institutional review

Institutional review combines accountability, compliance and enhancement. Compliance remains essential to academic standards, transparency and public trust, but the existence of policies, governance structures and internal quality assurance procedures does not demonstrate that an institution can use them effectively. The ESG place primary responsibility for quality with HEIs and require external quality assurance to consider the effectiveness of internal quality assurance (ESG, 2015). Recent European developments reinforce this institutional orientation. QA-FIT emphasises diverse contexts, broader institutional settings and flexibility in responding to change (Cirlan & Gover, 2024). The 2025 Council Recommendation calls for quality assurance that is agile and fit for purpose while supporting institutional transformation (Council of the European Union, 2025). The ESG 2027 final draft similarly highlights resilient institutions, diverse missions, governance and organisation, and links between learning and teaching, research, innovation and societal engagement (ESG Drafting Group, 2026).

An institutional capacity perspective therefore examines whether institutions can connect mission and strategy with evidence, decisions, implementation, results and organisational learning. Capacity concerns not only what an institution has established, but how coherently its components operate and how effectively evidence is used to understand performance and improve its capacity for driving its strategy now and capacity for doing so tomorrow, and in a context of great change. Four interconnected principles express this perspective.

2.1 Evidence over narrative

Institutional self-assessment requires narrative to explain mission, context and strategic choices. However, narrative should support analysis rather than substitute for it. Extensive documentation may generate administrative burden without producing institutional understanding or improvement (Newton, 2000). An evidence-informed approach does not require more information; it requires relevant and reliable evidence whose use can be demonstrated. Review should establish a traceable relationship between an issue or priority, the evidence used to understand it, the resulting decision, implementation and observed results. Evidence from the previous Portuguese cycle supports this emphasis, having

revealed recurring difficulties in connecting strategies and quality mechanisms with indicators, decisions and demonstrable results.

2.2 Results and learning over intentions

Strategies and formal mechanisms are necessary evidence of commitment, but they are the starting point rather than the endpoint of review. Institutional capacity is demonstrated through a progression from intention and planning to implementation, results and learning. A strategy for innovation, for example, does not establish whether the priority influences resources, teaching, research or partnerships, or whether results inform later decisions. Review should therefore examine whether commitments are implemented, results are assessed and learning is incorporated. Results need not always be quantitative or immediately attributable to institutional action – they can go from increasing of research competitive money or international students (both very quantitative) to 'success stories' engaging students as drivers of social innovation (mostly qualitative). The requirement is a credible relationship between intention, action, outcome, evidence and learning. Internal quality assurance is central because its maturity depends on integration with governance and demonstrable contribution to improvement, not simply on the existence of procedures (EUA, 2011; QAA, 2023).

2.3 Integration over fragmentation

Institutional frameworks use separate dimensions for analytical clarity, but capacity emerges from relationships between governance, strategy, teaching, research, innovation, people, resources, information, quality assurance and external engagement. Research outputs, patents, partnerships or community initiatives may be relevant, but their significance depends on their relationship with institutional mission, organisational capacity, learning and stakeholder involvement. Innovation should therefore be assessed as the capacity to mobilise knowledge, people, resources and partnerships to create academic, educational, scientific, economic, social, cultural or environmental value. The question is not whether all institutions produce the same outcomes, but whether choices and results are coherent with distinctive missions, strategies and contexts.

2.4 Proportionality without reduced credibility

Institutional diversity creates a tension between common expectations and context-sensitive review. Uniform requirements may be disproportionate or analytically weak for some institutional profiles; excessive differentiation may undermine consistency and confidence. Proportionality should affect how capacity is evidenced and examined, not whether it must be demonstrated. All institutions should show strategic coherence, reliable evidence use, effective internal quality assurance and the capacity to learn, while ambition showed the volume and granularity of evidence may reflect mission, scale, disciplinary profile and organisational complexity. Proportionality is not a lower threshold. It focuses review where evidence and professional judgement add most value, while retaining safeguards and transparent outcomes (INQAAHE, 2025).

3. Translating the principles into the emerging Portuguese approach

Draft documents for the next Portuguese institutional assessment cycle seek to translate these principles into a review architecture. As they remain under discussion, the elements below are emerging design options rather than definitive features of the future model (A3ES, 2026a, 2026b).

3.1 A common analytical framework

The emerging approach retains common dimensions addressing identity and governance; strategy and context; teaching and students; research and its relationship with teaching; innovation, transfer and impact; human resources; infrastructure; financial sustainability and information management; and internal quality management. A common framework supports consistency and public confidence, but the dimensions should not become isolated reporting compartments. The assessment should examine relationships across them. Internal quality assurance functions as infrastructure connecting evidence, governance and learning throughout the institution.

3.2 Evidence use and focused audit trails

An audit trail is a focused and traceable reconstruction of how an institution has addressed a strategically relevant issue or priority. It links the evidence available to the institution with the decisions taken, their implementation, the results achieved and the learning that followed. Its purpose is not to provide an exhaustive description of institutional activity, but to enable reviewers to examine whether the institution can demonstrate a coherent and complete cycle of evidence-informed action.

The approach distinguishes information that is available from evidence that is used. Institutions may be asked to identify critical indicators, explain their relevance and demonstrate how they inform decisions and improvement. This prevents data availability from being treated as equivalent to evidence-informed governance.

Focused audit trails provide selective, traceable examples of institutional action. For retrospective cases, the sequence is: Indicator → Evidence → Decision → Implementation → Result → Learning. Prospective cases may connect contextual analysis with a development plan, responsibilities, success indicators and monitoring. The aim is not to document every activity, but to test complete improvement cycles in strategically relevant areas. An innovation audit trail could begin with a regional or societal need and show how the institution interpreted it, mobilised research and partnerships, implemented a response, evaluated results and used the learning.

3.3 A common evidence core and proportionate requirements

The emerging design distinguishes a common evidence core from complementary evidence that may vary with institutional profile. Differences may concern data disaggregation, reporting periods, the number of audit trails or the extent of narrative. The common core preserves credible and consistent review; differentiation concerns the form and granularity of evidence, not institutional responsibility for

quality. The underlying principle is that proportionality changes how institutional capacity is evidenced, not the level of confidence expected from review outcomes.

3.4 Transparency and professional judgement

The model also seeks a clearer relationship between evidence, evaluative descriptors and outcomes. Explicit criteria can make expectations and decisions more understandable. Yet institutional review cannot be reduced to calculation: rigid indicators may create artificial precision and encourage threshold-driven reporting, while an entirely holistic approach may produce inconsistency. The challenge is to combine explicit expectations, traceable evidence and contextual professional judgement. Peer review is not replaced by a formula; judgement becomes more reasoned, transparent and reviewable.

3.5 Applying the approach to innovation and societal engagement

Research-based innovation and societal engagement demonstrate the value of an institutional capacity approach because isolated indicators cannot capture their coherence or sustainability. Through the institutional review process, agencies can examine whether innovation and engagement are aligned with institutional mission and strategy; whether governance, resources and research environments support those ambitions; whether external stakeholders help identify needs and develop responses; and whether the institution can demonstrate results and learning. . These questions can be explored through a small number of significant examples, following each from the identification of a need or opportunity through decision-making and implementation to results and learning.

Relevant contributions may be academic, educational, scientific, economic, social, cultural, environmental or regional. Not every effect is immediately measurable, but institutions should use credible methods to interpret results and engage stakeholders.

Portuguese HEIs have identified diverse development priorities, including specific scientific and formation areas (several interdisciplinary), sustainability, pedagogical innovation, internationalisation, regional development, societal impact and digital capacity, while varying in how explicitly these priorities are connected to institutional strategy. This supports assessment of strategic coherence and capacity rather than inventories of activity.

4. The Irish perspective: differentiated and proportionate review

The Portuguese approach shows how institutional capacity can be assessed through review. The Irish experience complements this by showing how a common quality framework can be applied proportionately across different types of institutions.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is responsible for quality assurance and review of a diverse range of higher education providers, including universities, technological universities, independent and

private institutions, including smaller specialist providers. These institutions differ considerably in their size, mission, types of provision, awarding authority and organisational structures.

QQI operates within a common national quality assurance framework, aligned to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015). Its Policy for Cyclical Review of Higher Education Institutions establishes a single flexible review model across this diverse system. The policy provides a common basis for review while allowing its focus and implementation to reflect differences in institutional mission, size and capacity (QQI, 2016b).

QQI's current institutional review process, CINNTE, is situated within a wider framework that includes statutory quality assurance guidelines, approved institutional quality assurance procedures, annual quality reporting, ongoing dialogue, systematic thematic analysis and structured follow-up. Institutional review is therefore part of a continuing relationship with the provider rather than an isolated periodic event.

QQI's Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (QQI, 2016a) apply to all providers and establish that primary responsibility for quality rests with each provider. These are supplemented by sector - specific guidelines. For example, the Sector Quality Assurance Guidelines for Independent & Private Providers recognise that the scope and complexity of a provider's quality assurance arrangements will be influenced by its context, goals, scope of provision, the field or professional area and modes of teaching and learning (QQI, 2016c).

The form of these arrangements may therefore vary, but the essential safeguards remain the same. Providers must have effective governance and decision-making, protect academic decisions from undue commercial influence, manage risk, maintain sufficient resources and protect learners. Proportionality allows different structures, but it does not reduce the confidence required in their effectiveness (QQI, 2016a, 2016c).

In 2023, QQI commissioned Professor Paul Giller to prepare the independent report, Quality Assurance in Higher Education - Where do we go from here?. The report supported discussion about how external review could remain useful, proportionate and forward-looking as institutions and their internal quality assurance systems mature. It also highlighted the need to avoid unnecessary administrative burden and an overly uniform approach to institutional review (Giller, 2023).

This flexible approach has informed QQI's review process for independent and private higher education providers. In 2024, QQI completed institutional reviews of four of the largest providers in this sector. The next phase covers 24 independent and private providers, including smaller and specialist institutions.

The revised Handbook and Terms of Reference for the external quality assurance review of independent and private providers were published in 2026, with the first review visits scheduled for November 2026. They retain common objectives and criteria but recognise that providers differ in size,

context and provision. The evidence considered and questions asked by review panels can therefore reflect how each provider organises and carries out quality assurance (QQI, 2026a, 2026b).

For example, a smaller specialist provider may demonstrate effective governance through clear responsibilities and appropriate external oversight rather than through complex committee structures. It may also use focused evidence from its programme portfolio to show how learner outcomes, assessment and quality improvements are monitored. Areas such as work-integrated learning or collaborative provision are considered where applicable, while provider-specific matters can be identified for special consideration at the start of the review.

For a smaller specialist provider, the relevant evidence may therefore be more focused than that expected from a large multidisciplinary university. A smaller provider may have fewer management layers, a narrower range of programmes and more direct communication between senior management, staff and learners, and local employers. The review evaluates whether these arrangements are appropriate, implemented and effective, rather than whether the provider has reproduced structures designed for a larger institution.

The Irish experience suggests that a common framework and a proportionate approach are compatible. Policy establishes common expectations and the level of confidence required, while sector-specific guidelines, terms of reference and review methods allow the evidence to reflect institutional mission, scale, provision and context. Institutional quality is therefore demonstrated not by the size of the institution or the amount of documentation it produces, but by whether its quality system supports effective decisions, implementation, evaluation and learning.

This is particularly relevant to engagement with employers and the world of work. The review considers how these relationships influence programmes, learner opportunities and provider decisions, alongside input from students, staff and other stakeholders. A proportionate review focuses on the evidence that matters in the institution's particular context.

The benefit is a more focused and impactful review process that supports accountability, quality enhancement and trust. Common requirements for effective quality assurance are maintained, but providers are not expected to have the same structures or produce the same volume of documentation. The methodology has also been adapted to use a cluster model, reflecting the size and scope of providers. This enables reviews to be organised more efficiently and creates opportunities to identify shared learning across similar providers.

5. Comparative discussion: implications for quality assurance agencies

The Portuguese design and the QQI experience can be compared through four propositions. First, a common core is necessary for public trust, but common expectations do not require identical evidence or processes. Second, proportionality must shape review design without weakening the credibility of outcomes. Third, evidence should support dialogue and judgement rather than administrative

accumulation; a limited number of strategically selected examples may reveal more than extensive inventories. Fourth, innovation and societal engagement should be assessed as institutional capacity, because outputs acquire meaning through their links with mission, resources, stakeholders, results and learning.

For quality assurance agencies, the practical challenge is to combine common requirements with context-sensitive evidence, proportionate review methods, informed professional judgement, transparent findings and meaningful follow-up. This requires clarity about what remains common and what can be flexible. The purpose, criteria and level of confidence required should be consistent, while the evidence and questions explored by panels can reflect institutional mission, size, provision and context.

This balance needs to be managed carefully. Prescriptive indicators may encourage compliance and place too much emphasis on activities that are easy to measure. Excessive flexibility, however, may reduce consistency and make review findings more difficult to explain. Agencies therefore need clear terms of reference, relevant reviewer expertise and reports that show how institutional context and evidence informed the findings.

Some principles can be shared across quality assurance systems: a common review framework, proportionate evidence, independent professional judgement, transparent reporting and effective follow-up. Their practical application will depend on national legislation, system structure, institutional autonomy and the responsibilities of the quality assurance agency. The Portuguese and Irish approaches apply these principles differently, but both seek a review process that is consistent enough to produce credible findings and flexible enough to recognise different institutional missions and contributions to learners, employers and wider society.

6. Conclusion

Moving from compliance to institutional capacity does not mean abandoning standards, regulation or accountability. It means extending review beyond formal arrangements to examine whether institutions translate their mission and commitments into coherent decisions, effective implementation, results and learning. The emerging Portuguese approach seeks to to put this into practice through focused evidence, traceable examples, integration, proportionality and the demonstrable use of internal quality assurance. The QQI comparison tests how these principles can operate in another regulatory context and across institutions that vary in mission, size, provision and organizational capacity.

The challenge is not to choose between accountability and enhancement, or between common requirement and institutional diversity, but to make accountability more meaningful by examining how institutions understand their contexts, use evidence well, respond to change, and improve their provision. For quality assurance agencies, this requires a clear common framework combined with proportionate evidence requirements, informed professional judgement, transparent findings and meaningful follow-up. It also requires agencies to review their own methods, learn from evidence across

review cycles and adapt their approaches where they create unnecessary burden or no longer provide useful assurance.

A capacity-based approach should therefore strengthen, rather than reduce, confidence in external quality assurance. Its purpose is not to ask less of institutions, but to focus institutional review more clearly on whether their quality assurance arrangements are effective, can be trusted and support continuing improvement.

References

A3ES. (2026a). Draft manual for the next institutional assessment cycle. Unpublished internal working document.

A3ES. (2026b). Draft institutional self-assessment guide. Unpublished internal working document.

Cirlan, E., & Gover, A. (2024). Quality assurance fit for the future: Key considerations for the revision of the ESG. QA-FIT Project.

Council of the European Union. (2025). Council Recommendation of 12 May 2025 on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education. Official Journal of the European Union, C/2025/3006.

ESG. (2015). Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Brussels, Belgium.

ESG Drafting Group. (2026). Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2027): Final Draft for BFUG Approval, 5–6 November 2026. EHEA.

European University Association. (2011). Examining quality culture: Part III. From self-reflection to enhancement. EUA.

Giller, P. (2023). *Quality assurance in higher education – Where do we go from here?* Quality and Qualifications Ireland. Report (accessed 6 November 2026).

INQAAHE. (2025). International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. INQAAHE.

Newton, J. (2000). Feeding the beast or improving quality? Academics' perceptions of quality assurance and quality monitoring. Quality in Higher Education, 6(2), 153–163. https://doi.org/10.1080/713692740

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. (2023). Quality Enhancement Review Handbook. QAA.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland. (2016). *Core statutory quality assurance guidelines developed by QQI for use by all providers*. Guidelines (accessed 6 November 2026).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland. (2016). *Policy for cyclical review of higher education institutions* (QP.16, Version 1). Policy (accessed 6 November 2026).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland. (2016). *Sector specific statutory quality assurance guidelines developed by QQI for independent/private providers coming to QQI on a voluntary basis*. Guidelines (accessed 6 November 2026).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland. (2026). *External quality assurance review of independent and private providers: Handbook*. Handbook (accessed 6 November 2026).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland. (2026). *External quality assurance review of independent and private providers: Terms of reference*. Terms of reference (accessed 6 November 2026).

Declaration of AI use: Microsoft Copilot was used for language and editorial support. The authors verified final text and retain full responsibility for its content.