



Malta
Further & Higher
Education Authority

External Quality Assurance

Audit Report

EUROPEAN FORENSIC INSTITUTE - EFI

Audit visit carried out between

4th and 6th December 2023

mfhea.mt

Quality education for
confident futures .

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Abbreviations List

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| EACA | European Association for Crime Analysis |
| ECTS | European Credit Transfer System |
| EFI | European Forensic Institute |
| ENFSI | European Network of Forensic Science Institutes |
| EQA/QA audit | External Quality Assurance / Audit |
| ESG | European Standards and Guidelines (2015) |
| HEI | Higher Education Institution |
| IQA | Internal Quality Assurance |
| ISF | Istituto di Scienze Forensi (Milan, Italy) |
| ISO | International Organization for Standardization |
| MFHEA/the Authority | Malta Further and Higher Education Authority |
| MLSP | Malta Life Sciences Park |
| NCFHE | National Commission for Further and Higher Education |
| NQAF | National Quality Assurance Framework |
| QMS | Quality Management System |
| RPL | Recognition of Prior Learning |
| SAR | Self-Assessment Report |
| SUB | Student Union Board |

Executive Summary

Institutional Background

The European Forensic Institute (EFI) is a private institution that, since 2018, has held a licence (no. 2018-014) issued by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) to provide digital higher education programmes under the Maltese Education Act. The licence opened the possibility for EFI to offer accredited 3-year BSc (Hons) studies in the areas of Forensic Sciences and Criminology, as well as standalone modules of such studies. From 2023, EFI may also offer newly accredited, 90-ECTS Master's programmes (and modules thereof) in the areas of Business Management, Financial Crime and Digital Technologies; Cyber Security, Digital Forensic and Crime Analysis; and Forensic Biology; these programmes are expected to start gradually from the academic year 2024-2025.

A major feature of EFI is its close integration with the broad professional area of forensics/criminalistics. The programmes are clearly geared towards the education and training of qualified professionals. They feature a balance between theoretical learning and hands-on, practical application and they are being adjusted in accordance with changes in the profile required from such professionals (e.g., in order to reflect the growth of digital and financial crime). EFI's current students are predominantly young and full-time (continuing education and lifelong learning remain very marginal), female and Italian, which also means that its development possibilities into other target groups and new regions look quite promising. EFI's plans are to tap into these possibilities in a gradual, step-by-step, sustainable manner.

The first BSc cohort graduated in 2021 and EFI has currently some 70 alumni, who had no particular difficulty in getting their BSc credentials recognised academically (for those who undertook graduate studies at universities in Europe and the USA) or professionally.

Overview of the Audit Process

This report is a result of the External Quality Assurance process undertaken by an independent peer review panel. EFI's self-assessment report (SAR) is a document setting out the institution's policies aimed at guaranteeing the quality of the education and training of graduates on the basis of the ESG 2015.

The panel evaluated all the documentation submitted by the educational institution (i.e., the SAR and the additional information requested) and some publicly available data like EFI's website and some publications in media.

The audit visit took place between 4th and 6th December 2023 and consisted of a series of meetings hosted at EFI's premises at the Kappara Business Centre, followed by a short tour of its labs and its new space at the Malta Life Sciences Park (MLSP). The whole 3-day audit was accompanied by two staff members of the MFHEA. For an unexpected reason of *force majeure*, one of the panel members (Dr Olgun Çiçek) participated in a digital way. The interviewees participated mainly in person, although several meetings were conducted in a hybrid way or, in a few cases, fully online. In spite of some minor incidents, the technology functioned well and none of the sessions was disturbed by technical difficulties. Some interviewees participated in-person in more than one session, in agreement with the panel: given the small size of the institution, this actually led to more documented answers and was useful for the information of the panel.

The panel is responsible for reaching conclusions on all 11 Standards. Even though the panel investigated EFI's economic sustainability, the evaluation of its financial capacity needs to be formally confirmed by expert advice to be sought by the MFHEA, in accordance with the Authority's Manual of Procedures for Standard 2 (Institutional Probity). At the end of the visit the panel requested that EFI provide, within a week, some additional information about its marketing strategy and its outsourced marketing activities.

Timeline

The full timeline from the preliminary steps to the completion of the audit visit included the following steps:

- The panel's composition was communicated on 31 July 2023.
- The "induction meeting" was conducted on 23 August 2023.
- The first version of the SAR was discussed between the panel members on 6 September 2023; at this meeting, the panel agreed that it needed some additional information and some clarifications of the data provided in the SAR.
- The revised version of the SAR and the additional information was requested from EFI on that same day; it was duly received by the MFHEA and passed on to the panel on 4 October 2023.

- This allowed the panel to hold, on 20 October 2023, an internal discussion on the basis of all information provided by EFI (“desk-based analysis”).
- This was followed on 8 November 2023 by the (digital) “scoping visit” that was the first opportunity for the panel to meet virtually with EFI representatives, listen to two presentations by EFI and present its proposed programme of interviews for the audit visit.
- The audit visit took place between 4th and 6th December 2023 at EFI’s premises at the Kappara Business Centre and the Malta Life Sciences Park.

Summary of the Conclusions Reached by the Review Panel

Standards

On the basis of the findings documented in the present report, the panel has concluded that EFI:

- Meets nine MFHEA Standards, namely, Standards 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11;
- Requires improvements to meet two MFHEA Standards, namely, Standards 3 and 6.

Good Practice and Commendations

The panel found four occurrences of good practice or areas for commendation of EFI (in Standards 1, 3, 10 and 11).

Recommendations

The recommendations in the report are meant to improve the standards already in place and to enhance good practice. The panel made no mandatory recommendations, 11 key recommendations and 9 recommendations. Of the 11 key recommendations, one is to be implemented immediately following publication of this report and two before the start of the first new Master’s programme in the autumn of 2024. In addition, two are to be implemented within 6 months, four within 12 months, and two within 24 months from the date of publication of this report.

Overall Conclusions

Overall, the panel reaches the conclusion that EFI offers real academic quality and professional relevance in its higher education programmes. This could be checked in detail for the existing undergraduate programmes, but the panel is also confident that it will apply to the recently accredited Master’s programmes.

EFI's first five years have been quite successful, both for the institution and its students, mainly thanks to its uniqueness, its streamlined management and its outstanding connection with the forensic profession in a number of key countries.

The panel is confident that EFI has the potential to further develop as a sound higher education institution (HEI), making a real academic and social contribution in the years ahead. It has a broad opportunity to enter new geographical markets in Europe and to attract new profiles of students, in particular working students, mainly for its new graduate programmes and for the continuing education and upscaling of police officers and related forensic professions.

At the same time, the Institute will be faced with new competition and new challenges (e.g., in the areas of research, internationalisation and staff development). This will in all likelihood require a significant shift in management, from a small-scale operation, where much can be achieved informally through personal contact, to a more complex model, where formal structures and decision-making procedures will prevail and formalised strategic planning will become indispensable.

The panel trusts that EFI's leadership is aware of the challenges lying ahead and has the capacity to transform itself and the institution accordingly over years ahead.

About the External Quality Audit

Aims and Objectives of the EQA

Quality assurance in Malta is underpinned by six principles that determine the remit and function of the National Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education, and the relationship between internal and external quality assurance to enhance learning outcomes.

- i. The Framework is based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and enriched by the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) perspective.
- ii. The Framework contributes to a national culture of quality through:
 - increased agency satisfaction and numbers of service users,
 - an enhanced international profile and credibility of providers in Malta,
 - the promotion of Malta as a regional provider of excellence in further and higher education.
- iii. The Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) is fit for purpose.
- iv. The External Quality Assurance (QA audit) is a tool for both development and accountability. The QA audit shall ensure that the internal quality management system of the provider is:
 - fit for purpose according to the provider's courses and service users,
 - compliant with Standards and regulations, and contributing to the development of a national quality culture,
 - contributing to the fulfilment of the broad goals of Malta's Education Strategy 2014-24,
 - implemented with effectiveness, comprehensiveness, and sustainability.
- v. The Quality Improvement Cycle is at the heart of the Framework.
- vi. The integrity and independence of the QA audit process is guaranteed.

The QA audit provides public assurance about the standards of further and higher education programmes and the quality of the learning experience of students. It presents an opportunity for providers to demonstrate that they adhere to the expectations of stakeholders with regard to the programmes of study that they offer and the achievements and capabilities of their students. It also provides a focus for identifying good practices and for the implementation of institutional approaches to the continuous improvement in the quality of educational provision.

The MFHEA has a responsibility to ensure that a comprehensive assessment is conducted for all higher education providers in Malta. The QA audit provides an opportunity to assess the standards and quality of higher education in Malta against the expectations and practices of provision across the European Higher Education Area and internationally.

The QA audit examines how providers manage their own responsibilities for the quality and standards of the programmes they offer. In particular, the following issues are addressed:

- The fitness for purpose and effectiveness of internal quality assurance processes, including an examination of the systems and procedures that have been implemented and the documentation that supports them.
- The compliance with the obligations of licence holders with established regulations and any conditions or restrictions imposed by the MFHEA.
- The governance and financial sustainability of providers, including assurances about the legal status of the provider, the appropriateness of corporate structures, and the competence of staff with senior management responsibilities.

The QA audit benchmarks the QA system and procedures within an institution against 11 Standards:

1. Policy for quality assurance: entities shall have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management.
2. Institutional and financial probity: entities shall ensure that they have appropriate measures and procedures in place to ensure institutional and financial probity.
3. Design and approval of programmes: self-accrediting providers shall have appropriate processes for the design and approval of their programmes of study.
4. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment: entities shall ensure that programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in the learning process.
5. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification: entities shall consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student 'life-cycle'.
6. Teaching staff: entities shall assure the competence and effectiveness of their teaching staff.
7. Learning resources and student support: entities shall have appropriate funding for their learning and teaching activities and sufficient learning resources to fully support the students' learning experiences.
8. Information management: entities shall ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

9. Public information: entities shall publish information about their activities which is clear, accurate, objective, up to date and readily accessible.
10. Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes: entities shall implement the 'Quality Cycle' by monitoring and periodically reviewing their programmes to ensure their continuing fitness for purpose.
11. Cyclical external quality assurance: entities should undergo an external quality assurance audit by, or with the approval of, the MFHEA on a cyclical basis, according to the MFHEA guidelines, once every five years.

Peer review panels essentially ask providers the following question about their arrangements for quality management:

'What systems and procedures are in place and what evidence is there that they are working effectively?'

The approach to quality assurance can be encapsulated in a number of key questions which providers should ask themselves about their management of quality.

- What are we trying to do?
- Why are we trying to do it?
- How are we trying to do it?
- Why are we doing it that way?
- Is this the best way of doing it?
- How do we know it works?
- Could it be done better?

Answers to these questions should form the basis of the provider's critical assessment of and response to the self-evaluation questionnaire.

The approach of the QA audit is not simply about checking whether providers adhere to the regulations; it examines how providers are developing their own systems in addressing the expectations of sound management of educational standards and the quality of their learning and teaching provision. It does not involve the routine identification and confirmation of criteria – a 'tick-box' approach – but rather a mature and reflective dialogue with providers about the ways in which they discharge their obligations for quality and the identification of existing good practices.

Peer Review Panel

The peer review panel was composed of:

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| Chair of Review Panel: | Dr Guy HAUG |
| Peer Reviewer: | Prof Dr Olgun ÇIÇEK |
| Student Peer Reviewer: | Ms Elena ŠTEFANCOVÁ |
| QA Managers (MFHEA): | Ms Sibby XUEREB, Ms Aurora ATTARD COLEIRO |

Specific Terms of Reference

As defined in the MFHEA Quality Audit Manual of Procedures, the panel was responsible for examining how the institution manages its responsibilities to ensure the provision of the quality and standards of the education they offer. Therefore, the following issues were addressed:

The same as for all other audits procedure, the fitness for purpose and effectiveness of the Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) processes were core areas of inquiry, including the examination of the systems and procedures that are in place, together with the documentation that supports them.

In addition, in the case of EFI, three other dimensions have been identified as particularly important lines of inquiry:

- * As a licensed provider, its compliance with the established regulations and any conditions or restrictions issued by the MFHEA;
- * As a still young and small institution, its sustainability in terms of governance and finance, with regard to its legal status, the appropriateness of corporate structures and the competence of staff with senior management responsibilities;
- * As an institution focused mainly on the training of professionals, the ways, reality and effectiveness of its student-centredness.

The review team decided that, as part of an enhancement-led approach, it would issue recommendations linked to all parts of the operations of the institution. The report therefore distinguishes between:

- Mandatory recommendations (MR) which are crucial to meet a Standard and **shall** be implemented within the timeframes decided by the panel and indicated in this report.
- Key recommendations (KR) which are important to meet a Standard and **should** be implemented expediently by the institution, within the timeframes indicated, to address weaknesses.
- Recommendations (R) for improvement which are merely suggestions based on the panel's analyses and observations; these **could** be implemented by the institution.

Institutional Context

EFI is a private institution that was incorporated in 2017 as “ISF Limited” in accordance with Malta’s Companies Act 1995 under the registration number C82512. In 2018, its name was changed to “European Forensic Institute Limited” (EFI) for commercial reasons, and the institution was able to secure a five-year licence (no. 2018-014) issued by the MFHEA to provide higher education programmes under the Maltese Education Act. The licence opened the possibility for EFI to offer accredited 3-year BSc (Hons) studies in the areas of Forensic Sciences, and Criminology, as well as standalone modules of such studies. From 2023, EFI may also offer newly accredited, 90-ECTS Master’s programmes (and modules thereof) in the areas of Business Management, Financial Crime and Digital Technologies; Cyber Security, Digital Forensic and Crime Analysis; and Forensic Biology; these programmes are expected to start gradually from the academic year 2024-2025.

A major feature of EFI is its close integration with the multifaceted professional area of forensics/criminalistics in various world regions, including the US, the UK and the EU. The programmes are clearly geared towards the education and training of qualified professionals. They feature a balance between theoretical learning and hands-on, practical application and they are being adjusted in accordance with changes in the profile required from such professionals (e.g., in order to reflect the growth of digital and financial crime). EFI’s current students are predominantly young and full-time (working students are few, and continuing education and lifelong learning remain very marginal), female (male students make up a small minority) and Italian (still, for historic reasons, linked to the origin of the founding partners and for the geographical proximity of Malta with Italy, which makes blended education much easier).

The first BSc cohort graduated in 2021 and EFI has currently some 70 alumni, who had no particular difficulty in getting their credentials recognised academically (several of them have undertaken graduate studies at universities in Europe and the USA) or professionally.

EFI has been able to create and exploit a competitive advantage versus traditional European universities who do not offer really similar programmes (except in the UK). Hitherto, it has been quite successful in fulfilling its mission (the education and training of qualified professionals of forensics), while at the same time developing as a sound, viable institution of higher education. Its growth possibilities seem promising in the much larger European market, provided it is able to target new groups of potential students and a broader spectrum of countries.

While EFI’s declared intention is “to tap into these possibilities in a gradual, step-by-step, sustainable manner”, its strategic development plan for the years ahead remains to be firmed up. This is likely to be the European Forensic Institute’s major challenge in the next 3 to 5 years.

Analysis and Findings of the Panel

Standard 1: Policy for Internal Quality Assurance

Policy for quality assurance: entities shall have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management.

Main Findings

From the beginning of EFI's operations, certain features of its operations have contributed to making quality assurance a key aspect of the institution's strategy. This is the case in particular for its efficient blend of online courses (where students' participation is required and monitored) and onsite practical work and proctored examinations. In this way, EFI has found a way around one of the most problematic aspects of online higher education, i.e., the assessment of students' learning outcomes (knowledge, competencies and skills).

The panel has been impressed by EFI's efforts to guarantee academic integrity and its zero-tolerance policy towards fraud, cheating, plagiarism and absenteeism. A set of rules against misconduct (the "code of conduct") is set out in the Students Handbook and the Lecturer Handbook. Violations are subject to disciplinary action. The minimal attendance of 90% of class hours is strictly monitored. Plagiarism is deterred thanks to the preventive use of Turnitin®, a well-known software for plagiarism detection. According to the SAR, no case of fraud or plagiarism has been reported to date.

Overall, the panel agrees with EFI's view in its SAR that its current IQA is comprehensive (covering all 11 NQAF Standards, although to various extents), publicly accessible through its website, and integrated in the broader framework of the ISO 9001:2015 Quality Management System (QMS).

Yet, there are new challenges that will need to be addressed soon, when EFI enrolls more students from further away countries than Italy and offers fully online Master's programmes (without physical sessions for the learning of practical skills and the invigilation of examinations). The panel believes that EFI should start planning the changes required in its internal QA and regulations in order to safeguard a high level of control over examinations, attendance and the acquisition of transversal and practical skills. The spectrum of IQA aspects is likely to become much broader and to require even more attention than hitherto.

Another key aspect of internal quality assurance concerns the content and structure of programmes. One of EFI's major achievements is that its programmes are firmly geared towards the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills required in the various areas of forensics arts and sciences. The panel values EFI's direct connection with the forensic

profession in several countries (including in particular the USA, the UK and the European Union), but believes that in future a broader and more structured approach is likely to be required to keep abreast of developments, e.g., in the apparently fast-growing area of digital/technological crime.

While there is no doubt that EFI's current QA has benefitted both the institution and its students, this is mainly due to the orientation chosen by the leadership of the institution. The involvement of students and teachers in the design of QA procedures and their implementation has been limited. The panel believes that this should gradually be changed in the future, with a more structured and formalised involvement of teachers/trainers, students/alumni and a wider array of external advisors with strong experience in the forensic professions and in higher education governance.

Good Practice Identified

The panel commends EFI for its comprehensive system for internal quality assurance, which reaches beyond what is formally required, in particular thanks to its compliance with the broader framework of the ISO 9001:2015 Quality Management System (QMS).

Recommendations for Improvement

KR1: While acknowledging that the current QA tools have been sufficient to ensure a high level of quality and control hitherto, the panel recommends that as EFI is entering a new stage of growth and development it should further strengthen and formalise its internal structure and procedures; this means, in particular, involving more closely its teaching and administrative staff and its students in its decision-making processes.

This means, in particular, that EFI should formalise its internal quality assurance procedures in order to ensure that the same guarantees are maintained in the future. For this purpose, the panel recommends that EFI should create a formal QA Board or Committee as well as a broader, independent, more structured and more diverse advisory group. This would allow EFI to better meet the needs of its own internal management and to extend its IQA to new areas that will become crucial in shaping its institutional future, e.g., its research, overall programme development, marketing, recruitment and alumni strategies.

Timeline: Within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

Conclusion

EFI meets Standard 1.

Standard 2: Institutional Probity

Institutional and financial probity: entities shall ensure that they have appropriate measures and procedures in place to ensure institutional and financial probity.

Institutional probity encompasses the ownership, the financial viability and the organisation of the institution, ensuring that senior staff members are fit and proper to deliver quality higher education and work together in an organised way towards the institutional goals.

Main Findings

The panel has reviewed EFI's financial situation and capacity on the basis of the financial documentation provided in the SAR and during the meetings, in accordance with the Authority's Manual of Procedures for Standard 2. In line with the conclusions of the MFHEA's appointed independent accountant, the panel found that the Institute keeps comprehensive records of all its financial transactions and undergoes yearly auditing in line with the requirements of the Malta Business Registry; that the Institute maintains adequate annual budgeting and monitoring procedures; has been able to self-finance its development; has no debt (including none related to its real estate); and regularly prepares a 3-year financial forecast. This already includes more funds for internationalisation, research, Student Union Board (SUB) activities and possibly a student grant scheme. Unless the MFHEA comes to a different conclusion on the basis of additional information gathered by the Authority, the panel is basing its analysis of EFI's financial probity on these observations.

Concerning EFI's co-founders and institutional leaders (the Head of Institution and the General Manager), the panel appreciates that they have brought with them their experience previously gained at the Istituto di Scienze Forensi (ISF) in Milan and have been working together as an efficient team since the setting up of EFI – even through the difficult period of the COVID pandemic. They are not just using Malta as a place where they have a licence to operate, but are really anchored in the country and committed to further investing in it.

With regard to its internal organisation, the panel was satisfied that EFI's management is lean but efficient, deeply committed to its mission in forensics, and appropriate for a young, still small, but fast developing higher education institution. Even though most of the decision-making power is still concentrated mainly in the hands of the two-founders and leaders (unsurprisingly, in the case of a young and still small entity), the panel was satisfied that EFI's management staff is well qualified and able to support the development of the institution and the quality of its teaching, learning and (incipient) research activities. There is also no doubt that EFI has strictly aligned its investment priorities and its hiring procedures for teaching and administrative staff with the institutional strategy, while at the same time making certain that students and the forensic "industry" remain in the centre of their attention.

Good Practice Identified

None in particular.

Recommendations for Improvement

KR2: EFI should prepare, without delay, a comprehensive strategy for its planned growth and international expansion, in order to anticipate the quality challenges and managerial changes it will have to face in this new stage of its development – not least because it will be entering new territory with different types of competitors and new opportunities for cooperation.

Timeline: Immediately from the date of publication of this report.

R1: EFI could start formally allocating funds for research activities that are of interest to the Institute as such and/or to faculty members (individually or in teams).

Conclusion

EFI meets Standard 2.

Standard 3: Design and Approval of Programmes

Design and approval of programmes: self-accrediting providers shall have appropriate processes for the design and approval of their programmes of study.

Main Findings

EFI is not a “self-accrediting” provider at this time, which means that new programmes and significant changes to accredited programmes need to be submitted to the MFHEA for approval.

EFI’s Bachelor’s programmes have been designed with particular care put on the identification of the Learning Objectives that graduates should acquire. This has been a fundamental guiding principle at EFI and is based on its leadership’s experience with the changing forensics professions and professional organisations like the European Association for Crime Analysis (EACA). Another important aspect is the existence of the Academic Board, which includes two external advisors – and henceforward also a representative from the Student Union Board.

The audit visit confirmed that assessment procedures were geared not only towards new knowledge but also included the evaluation of key skills and competencies.

According to students and graduates, a good deal of EFI’s appeal to applicants and students is related to what they see as its “unique way of teaching and learning”. This is related to two main aspects: the balanced approach between theoretical learning (mainly through carefully monitored distance education) and onsite, practical application based on teamwork between students and a teacher/trainer; and the appreciation of teachers who “know what they teach from their own, personal experience”.

Most modules include theoretical and practical learning and a detailed description of each of them is available to applicants and students. Some modules are shared in common by the different programmes, and all of them may also be taken independently (as a self-standing “award” or as a “minor” within a degree programme). The panel sees this as a positive feature, since it allows students and teachers to broaden their vision and implies a more efficient use of human and financial resources. EFI also has a detailed regulation for the dissertation module that all students must complete before graduation; it is worth only 6 ECTS in BSc programmes, but will weigh 16 ECTS in the planned MSc programmes.

The audit visit has nonetheless also shown a few aspects that need more attention in the future. There should not be discrepancies between the Italian and English tracks of the same programme. Contrary to the Bachelor's programmes, the new Master's programmes are planned to be fully online, without the same practical, onsite components; will it still be possible to define the concrete Learning Outcomes for each module and programme without a more formal consultation structure with external stakeholders (both academic partners and professional circles). How can the acquisition of these planned Learning Outcomes (encompassing knowledge, skills and competencies) be assessed and certified henceforward? Can the security of examination be guaranteed to the same extent as for undergraduate programmes? These questions may of course be addressed in a variety of modes, including possibly the opening of a few additional hubs where applied skills may be fostered and examinations may be proctored.

The panel was also interested to hear that EFI has already arranged study-abroad periods in Breda (The Netherlands) for a few of its own students and was considering joining the Erasmus programme. EFI plans to apply for an Erasmus Charter in February 2024 and expects it to be approved in 2025, which means that the first cohort of incoming and outgoing students would travel in 2026.

Finally, the panel wondered why EFI was hardly involved in continuing education and the professional upgrading of forensic practitioners and police officials – a possibility formally opened to EFI in its licence. While appreciating that as a small and young institution EFI cannot do everything from the beginning, the panel was nonetheless interested to hear from its meeting with professionals that they shared this expectation – not necessarily regarding full programmes, but rather specific modules leading to an award or a certificate.

Good Practice Identified

The panel sees the development of new modules and programmes in fast growing areas like biology, and financial and digital crime as a very good practice and a means for EFI to guarantee its sustainability and its competitiveness in these areas.

Recommendations for Improvement

KR3: EFI should close any existing gap between the different linguistic versions of its programmes and make certain that no such gap appears in the future.

Timeline: Within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR4: EFI should make certain that its new online graduate programmes will offer the same level of guarantee for the acquisition of skills/competences (in addition to knowledge) and for the protection of academic integrity.

Timeline: Before the actual start of the first new Master's programme in the autumn of 2024.

- R2: The panel recommends that EFI could make its programmes more truly European and international, in particular through the provision of more opportunities for study periods or internships abroad – preferably, as expected, via EFI’s formal participation in the Erasmus programme.
- R3: The panel encourages EFI to start defining its role in continuing education for practitioners (including in the future for its own graduates) in its medium-term strategic planning. This would imply developing a formal procedure for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in line with local regulations in Malta.
- R4: Further to its Key Recommendation 1 (under Standard 1), the panel advises EFI to set up an independent, international Advisory Board comprising high level experts from both the academic and professional world.

Conclusion

EFI requires improvements to meet Standard 3.

Standard 4: Student-centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment: entities shall ensure that programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in the learning process.

Main Findings

The panel appreciates EFI's firm commitment to student-centred learning as one of its strongest distinctive features. Evidence of this can be found in:

- the identification of up-to-date learning objectives with regular updates in view of changing professional needs and technologies;
- the adoption of blended learning modes and different pedagogical tools/methods;
- the systematic evaluation of courses and teachers/trainers by students;
- the student assessment methods geared towards the acquisition of not only knowledge but also skills and competencies;
- the rigorous organisation and supervision of examinations during onsite sessions in Malta (instead of online assessment); yet, the panel is concerned that this may no longer be the case for the new, fully online Master's degrees and urges EFI to pay utmost attention to the need to guarantee the quality and security of examinations of these programmes.

The panel sees in the various aspects of its student-centred learning process the main reason of EFI's low drop-out and failure rate.

Next to these aspects, EFI also emphasises the continuous progress made in the involvement of students in decision making and institutional life. In EFI's second year of operation, the election of student representatives was introduced for each cohort of each programme; from the third year, these student representatives have attended regular meetings of the Academic Team with a view to ensuring that the students' voice is being heard by management and teachers; 2023 has been marked by the creation of the Student Union Board (SUB) – a new body whose five enthusiastic members demonstrated to the panel their determination to engage students and develop a sense of community among them, and to contribute to EFI's future QA, growth and acceptance.

The panel has seen evidence that EFI has established an ongoing, fluid and mainly informal dialogue between teachers, administration and students. Formal procedures exist, e.g., for student complaints, guidance throughout the study cycle, and the provision of career services, but hitherto informality has been an easy and effective way to seek and get answers. However, as EFI grows in numbers and complexity, this is in all likelihood no longer going to be the case.

The panel also learnt that EFI is hiring students as administrative support staff during their studies, thus providing direct exposure to professional life to some of them.

Good Practice Identified

None in particular.

Recommendations for Improvement

KR5: EFI should ensure that the quality and security of examinations is also fully guaranteed for its new, fully online Master's degrees.

Timeline: Within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.

KR6: EFI should design and implement more formal procedures and platforms, e.g., student complaints, student guidance, student mobility, career information, Personal Learning Plans, etc.

Timeline: Within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

Conclusion

EFI meets Standard 4.

Standard 5: Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification

Student admission, progression, recognition and certification: entities shall consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student 'life-cycle'.

Main Findings

EFI's main tool for the management of the whole student cycle is Classter, which produces the main documents and statistics at the various stages of the cycle. Admission requirements and procedures are published on EFI's website and managed online through Classter – even though the panel has not seen data about the actual selection rate. Students' progression recognition and certification, together with all internal rules and policies governing attendance and assessment, are set out in the Student Handbook and are made available to students online, from the time of induction throughout the duration of studies. EFI's degrees are formally aligned with the MFHEA regulations and are accompanied by a detailed Diploma Supplement stating the modules studied and the Learning Outcomes achieved by graduates.

The panel found that students had no particular problems related to the understanding and application of these rules. In addition, the fluid communication between staff and students seems to add an informal way to prevent and resolve issues as they might occur; this is fully in line with the panel's findings under Standard 4 (Student-centredness). Students did not report difficulties related to assessing their own performance or choosing their learning itinerary.

Overall, students were positive about the quality and relevance of what they have learnt and about the teaching-learning process at EFI. The sequence of theoretical learning and practical training is widely seen as a major benefit of studying at EFI, and there were no complaints either about the technology for online courses or the organisation of laboratory or other practical workshops.

The first cohorts of graduates did not report difficulties with either finding a job or continuing their studies, but the panel is aware that the sample of students who were interviewed may not be fully representative of the whole picture (several of them took up a job at EFI and are looking forward to the start of a new Master's programme in the autumn of 2024). At this stage, EFI is still missing a formal tool to trace its alumni and there is no alumni association.

As was already mentioned, the panel was impressed by the strong feeling of belonging to a community expressed by students, student representatives and graduates during the interviews. At the same time, the panel was surprised that students seemed not particularly eager to expand the geographical diversity of intakes, improve the conspicuous imbalance of cohorts between men and women, or enhance the possibilities to spend a recognised period of study or an internship at another HEI in a third country.

Good Practice Identified

None in particular.

Recommendations for Improvement

KR7: EFI should continue its efforts to foster its declared European identity by gradually reducing its dependency on one main country, culture, gender and age group; this is of course a very significant challenge that may not be achieved in the short term, but is likely to become crucial in the medium term. The panel acknowledges that the leadership is aware of this necessity, but recommends that EFI reshape its strategy and clarify its future priorities in this regard; starting with a solid analysis of marketing data, markets and messages.

Timeline: Within 24 months from the date of publication of this report, ongoing.

KR8: In order to ascertain whether graduates are successfully entering the labour market in the forensics area or continuing their studies, EFI should henceforward conduct regular tracer studies regarding its alumni.

Timeline: Within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

R5: The panel encourages EFI to accelerate the creation of an alumni association, in order to keep track of all its graduates and to be able to involve them in its future development.

Conclusion

EFI meets Standard 5.

Standard 6: Teaching Staff

Teaching staff: entities shall assure the competence and effectiveness of their teaching staff.

Main Findings

The panel checked that the institution applies clear, fair and transparent processes for the recruitment of teachers and trainers. For each position, the qualification required and the recruitment process are clearly defined. Contrary to traditional universities, recruitment is driven mainly through LinkedIn, networking and referrals and is based not only on academic achievements but also on the applicants' professional experience. This is in line with EFI's identity and institution's profile. Teachers and trainers are recruited for a specific module on the basis of annual (renewable) contracts, and there is not formally any permanent faculty – even though the turnover seems to be low and is therefore not a problem.

All teachers and trainers go through an initial training process about EFI's policies (that are set out in the Lecturer Handbook) and its digital platform, in order to become familiar with its various functions for course delivery, student attendance, mutual digital interaction, e-library resources and all various types of support available for teachers. Staff development is also through the participation in a few professional seminars and conferences, some of them co-organised by EFI. The panel also became aware of EFI's incipient efforts to encourage academic cooperation and research with faculty members of traditional universities – even though research is still not a high priority at EFI, except for the preparation and defence of individual dissertations.

The teaching performance of individual lecturers/trainers is assessed mainly through casual class observation and through regular student surveys; the information gathered is shared with each teacher/trainer during an annual debriefing with the Head of Institution. In addition to their overall teaching performance, academic staff is also evaluated from an institutional perspective for their availability, punctuality and reliability.

As may be expected in the case of digital higher education, the community of teachers/trainers is mainly informal, but there is also an annual meeting involving all of them (at least virtually), together with EFI's management team.

Overall, the panel was satisfied that EFI has been able to recruit a qualified and motivated team of teachers/trainers and strong industry professionals who, as a team, enjoy the respect and appreciation of students. The panel was interested to hear that the gender balance and the diversity of origin were better achieved among staff than among students.

Good Practice Identified

None in particular.

Recommendations for Improvement

KR9: The panel encourages EFI that it should continue its effort for the recruitment, training and development of more permanent (and possibly full-time or nearly full-time) qualified teachers proceeding from various backgrounds. This should best be implemented as part of a broader human resources policy and a more formal faculty development plan offering a medium-term perspective to its most important and most promising teachers (as well as administrators and support staff).

Timeline: Within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.

R6: In addition to allocating more funding to research (Recommendation R1), the panel recommends EFI gradually pay more attention to fostering the development of the research capacity of its teaching/training staff. This may be achieved, in particular, in the form of more formal collaboration for the preparation of dissertations, more international cooperative research projects, and a more active/proactive participation in scientific meetings and conferences.

Conclusion

EFI requires improvements to meet Standard 6.

Standard 7: Learning Resources and Student Support

Learning resources and student support: entities shall have appropriate funding for their learning and teaching activities and sufficient learning resources to fully support the students' learning experiences.

Main Findings

The panel had an opportunity to meet at EFI's premises at the Kappara Business Centre. It was also able to visit EFI's space at the nearby Malta Life Science Park (MLSP), where it learnt more about EFI's digital platform and see the additional classroom space EFI has just acquired (on a rental basis) and will become fully operational for courses and laboratory work in the spring of 2024.

The panel could check that EFI has developed an efficient platform for digital learning together with various tools allowing student and teachers to make full use of it, such as the e-library (Proquest) and Journals (Science Direct), the monitoring of participation, interactive communication, the Student Handbook, and the Lecturer Handbook for the guidance for the preparation and supervision of the dissertation. EFI is also providing support for student activities, including for the recent creation of the Student Union Board and for some of the social activities driven by student initiatives.

The panel also received direct testimony from administrative staff about the invigilation of examinations held onsite in Malta and about the multifaceted support provided to students.

Overall, the current situation with respect to learning resources and student support is one of very good quality and is appreciated by staff and students. While in other environments digital classes tend to be seen as a source of additional student stress (to keep up with classes, technology, schedules, readings, etc.), it was hardly mentioned by students as a difficulty, or even a challenge, during the series of interviews held with them as part of the audit visit programme. On the contrary, students were very positive about their ability to independently find information on the Web and to maintain a very active dialogue with the institution, teachers and fellow students. However, EFI will need to make certain that students enrolled in the new, fully online Master's programmes requiring the preparation of a strong thesis will benefit from an equally good access to learning resources and student support.

The panel also noted with interest that EFI is hiring students as administrative support staff during their studies or after their graduation, thus adding to the human resources' ability to understand and support students' learning needs.

Good Practice Identified

None in particular.

Recommendations for Improvement

KR10: EFI should ensure that students enrolled in the new Master's programmes will have access from the beginning to all the necessary digital learning resources to engage with their fully online programme, including with respect to reference materials and contacts for the preparation of a strong Master's thesis.

Timeline: Before the beginning of the first new Master's programme in 2024.

R7: EFI could benefit from using its digital resources (courses, library, training) as a means for cooperation and exchanges with a select number of other HEIs, and for offering more module-based opportunities to practitioners in need of updating/upscaling of their level of qualification.

Conclusion

EFI meets Standard 7.

Standard 8: Information Management

Information management: entities shall ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

Main Findings

EFI maintains appropriate records for each student, thanks to its integrated student management system (Classter). It includes the systematic collection and analysis of key information about students' admission, enrolment, profile, academic calendar and attendance, progression, satisfaction, and grades per module, as well as success/failure rates and completion time per programme, financial data, etc.

The same system allows for the management of teachers, programmes and space, and potentially also graduates/alumni. The system includes automatic daily backups and thus provides a high level of security against the loss of data.

Moreover, the panel learnt that Classter is also used by other higher education institutions in Malta, which may be seen as an additional guarantee for conformity with local regulations and acceptance. It may also, at some stage in the future, ease the cooperation with Maltese higher education institutions, both for students interested in taking electives as part of an EFI degree and for EFI alumni potentially transferring to a Master's degree in Malta.

The panel was satisfied that EFI has taken appropriate measures to ensure the protection of its data. Classter and ISO 9001:2015 have built-in safety mechanisms. There is a daily back-up of emails and Microsoft Cloud files located (including for Teams/One Drive as the main tool for online teaching-learning and Sharepoint). Physical data such as transcripts are kept in locked storage space at EFI's main administrative office.

Therefore, the panel has no doubt about EFI's capacity to collect, analyse and use all core data necessary for the successful operation of its academic activities. This abundance of data may, however, not always be used to cast light on some key and somewhat concerning features, such as the huge gender imbalance, the early detection of students in difficulty, or the specific reasons why students choose to study forensics at EFI. The intimate knowledge of professional realities may, on occasion, not be sufficient to identify deeper-lying realities and trends, e.g., at the time of choosing between different options in areas such as strategic marketing, the optimisation of programme structure, or human resource allocation, or the analysis of future avenues for institutional development.

Good Practice Identified

None in particular.

Recommendations for Improvement

R8: The panel encourages EFI that it could make even more useful use of its comprehensive information system by relating and carefully analysing the data, in particular, for simulating future scenarios and programming its future strategy for institutional development.

Conclusion

EFI meets Standard 8.

Standard 9: Public Information

Public information: entities shall publish information about their activities which is clear, accurate, objective, up to date and readily accessible.

Main Findings

The panel is of the opinion that EFI's website (www.eufor.eu) offers to the public clear and complete information about the institution, its mission statement and its programmes and modules; the admission conditions for applicants and the regulation governing students' progression; the teaching modes, examinations and credentials (degree's name and level in the qualification framework); and the various aspects and documents for the internal management of quality. The website is rather easy to navigate and conveys a positive, attractive and credible message about studies at EFI.

The panel checked the accuracy of the information provided on the website and could not identify any misrepresentation or misleading information. Some aspects, such as the gender imbalance, uneven European dimension, limited internationalisation, and incipient research, are not emphasised, but not hidden either. The recognition of the degrees is correctly stated as resulting from their accreditation in Malta. However, there is evidence that this has not prevented HEIs from accepting EFI graduates for further studies, nor employers from hiring EFI graduates and thus acknowledging their professional qualification.

The panel noted that EFI's website highlights the announcement of "virtual open days" (on 20 December 2023 for undergraduate programmes) for potential applicants - a welcome initiative that is nonetheless unlikely to generate the repositioning of EFI as a truly European institution with a very diverse European student body and European-wide career perspectives. The experience of other HEIs seems to demonstrate that even for online or blended programmes, the student recruitment process tends to rely on more personal, personalised and lasting communication.

Good Practice Identified

None in particular.

Recommendations for Improvement

- R9: EFI could consider expanding and partially reconsidering its marketing and media communication work, with a view to attracting more numerous and more diverse applicants for its undergraduate and, above all, for its upcoming new Master's programmes. The panel believes that this should also allow EFI to achieve a better balance of gender and nationality among students.

Conclusion

EFI meets Standard 9.

Standard 10: Ongoing Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes

Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes: entities shall implement the 'Quality Cycle' by monitoring and periodically reviewing their programmes to ensure their continuing fitness for purpose.

Main Findings

The panel has seen evidence from the different actors involved that EFI carries out ongoing monitoring of its programmes and that this actually leads to improvements (some of which need approval from the MFHEA). Such reviews and forthcoming changes are all the more important in the case of a young institution operating in a fast-changing environment.

EFI's "quality cycle" is based on:

- direct feedback from academic staff (mainly about students and resources), in particular on the occasion of bi-annual meetings of the Academic Board;
- direct input from forensics professionals, with whom EFI's leadership maintains close, ongoing contact, both locally in Malta and through the European Network of Forensics Institutes (ENFSI); two professionals are also members of the Academic Board;
- input from students, e.g., monthly team discussions – now with the SUB – student surveys for each course and for each teacher/trainer;
- direct observation of teaching ("drop-ins");
- graduate surveys (one year after graduation). The panel understands that EFI provides feedback to all relevant parties, either via direct briefings or other communication channels (emails, announcements, the website).

The panel appreciates that the ongoing monitoring and review of programmes includes not only theoretical content delivered online but also the onsite practical work in laboratories. EFI pays considerable attention to the need to offer programmes abreast with the latest developments in the forensic profession. The panel was informed that changes to the first BSc programme (Forensic Science and Criminal Investigation, started in 2018) were under consideration at the time of the site visit.

It is also worth recording that in September 2022 EFI performed a Quality Management System (QMS) internal audit which produced recommendations for improvement that seem to be largely in line with those of the present report.

Good Practice Identified

The panel acknowledges EFI's efforts to implement its internal quality cycle in a comprehensive way with input from various categories of stakeholders. The ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes contributes not only to the academic quality of programmes but also to its continued relevance in the professional field.

Recommendations for Improvement

KR11: EFI should review its programmes from the viewpoint of its further Europeanisation/internationalisation, in particular, concerning student recruitment and academic exchanges for staff and students.

Timeline: Within 24 months from the date of publication of this report.

Conclusion

EFI meets Standard 10.

Standard 11: Cyclical External Quality Assurance

Cyclical external quality assurance: entities should undergo an external quality assurance audit by, or with the approval of, the MFHEA on a cyclical basis, according to the MFHEA guidelines, once every five years.

Main Findings

EFI has faithfully complied with this requirement and applied for the renewal of its licence before its expiration and forthcoming extension until the conclusion of the current external audit. The MFHEA's approval has been sought for any substantial change in existing programmes and for the new Master's programmes that are currently in the pipeline.

EFI's Bachelor's and Master's programmes are fully in line with the European Qualification Framework (and hence with the Maltese Qualification Framework).

EFI rightly pointed out that the evaluation of its Quality Management System (QMS) under ISO 9001:2015 through which it went in September 2022 should be seen as a step stone to its external audit by the MFHEA. The panel has no doubt that the QMS evaluation has contributed to the quality of the present cyclical external QA review. The two procedures are complementary to each other and the panel is confident that EFI will make the best possible use of them for its future development. The panel also learnt about EFI's intention to use ISO 17025 for the certification of its laboratories (probably as of 2027).

Good Practice Identified

The panel sees EFI's compliance with the internationally recognised ISO 9001:2015 as a good practice.

Recommendations for Improvement

None.

Conclusion

EFI meets Standard 11.

Response by the Provider

Preamble

The European Forensic Institute would like to extend our sincere appreciation to the audit team for their thorough and professional evaluation of our quality assurance processes as detailed in this audit report. This first external quality assurance audit process has provided us with valuable insights into our current practices compared to industry best practices, and we acknowledge the importance of continually improving our systems to maintain the highest standards of quality in our operations.

We have carefully reviewed the findings and recommendations outlined in the report and are committed to addressing the identified areas for improvement. Our response reflects our dedication to not only meeting but exceeding industry standards and regulatory requirements.

In this document, we provide a detailed response to key recommendations, including our action plan and timelines for implementation, ensuring that these improvements are successfully carried out. We believe that the measures we are taking will strengthen our quality assurance processes and enhance our overall performance.

We are confident that with these actions, we will continue to deliver educational programmes that meet the highest quality standards expected by our students and wider stakeholders. We value the collaborative approach taken by the audit team.

Thank you once again for your constructive feedback. We are committed to continuous improvement and to upholding the principles of quality and excellence in all aspects of our operations.

Response to Key Recommendations and Recommendations Made by the Peer Review Panel

| Action plan | | |
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| Recommendations | Actions to be taken to address the recommendations | Date for completion |
| Standard 1: | | |
| <p>KR1: While acknowledging that the current QA tools have been sufficient to ensure a high level of quality and control hitherto, the panel recommends that as EFI is entering a new stage of growth and development it should further strengthen and formalise its internal structure and procedures; this means, in particular, involving more closely its teaching and administrative staff and its students in its decision-making processes.</p> <p>This means, in particular, that EFI should formalise its internal quality assurance procedures in order to ensure that the same guarantees are maintained in the future. For this purpose, the panel recommends that EFI should create a formal QA Board or Committee as well as a broader, independent, more</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Revise organisation chart <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Go through current lecturers to determine potential candidates for Programme Leaders - Define and refine QA Board <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Update QA policies to new IQA standards - Revise existing Boards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Academic Board o Ethics Board o Student Union Board | August 2025 |

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| <p>structured and more diverse advisory group. This would allow EFI to better meet the needs of its own internal management and to extend its IQA to new areas that will become crucial in shaping its institutional future, e.g., its research, overall programme development, marketing, recruitment and alumni strategies. Timeline: Within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.</p> | | |
| <p>Standard 2:</p> | | |
| <p>KR2: EFI should prepare, without delay, a comprehensive strategy for its planned growth and international expansion, in order to anticipate the quality challenges and managerial changes it will have to face in this new stage of its development – not least because it will be entering new territory with different types of competitors and new opportunities for cooperation. Timeline: Immediately from the date of publication of this report.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Updated SWOT - A comprehensive strategy for growth (Strategy Document) - Meetings to schedule, in order in Sept 2024 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Academic Board Meeting o Core Staff (inc. Programme leaders) o Academic Staff Briefing o Student Briefings - Agenda in meetings to include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Audit findings o Strategy document | <p>December 2024</p> |

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| <p>R1: EFI could start formally allocating funds for research activities that are of interest to the Institute as such and/or to faculty members (individually or in teams).</p> | | |
| <p>Standard 3:</p> | | |
| <p>KR3: EFI should close any existing gap between the different linguistic versions of its programmes and make certain that no such gap appears in the future. Timeline: Within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.</p> | <p>Programme Leaders will be tasked with oversight of overall programme performance, including conformity with IQA and consistency across languages.</p> | <p>March 2025</p> |
| <p>KR4: EFI should make certain that its new online graduate programmes will offer the same level of guarantee for the acquisition of skills/competences (in addition to knowledge) and for the protection of academic integrity. Timeline: Before the actual start of the first new Master's programme in the autumn of 2024.</p> | <p>The Master of Sciences (MSc) in Forensic Biology is designed and accredited by MFHEA as a blended programme due to the nature of the subject. Where students are required to acquire physical skills and competences such as laboratory specific skillset, they will be required to attend laboratory sessions in person.</p> <p>For the other Master's programmes, digital laboratories are incorporated within the relevant course modules. The programmes were designed and accredited by the MFHEA as such to provide students with as much flexibility as possible within a strict academic framework to acquire the relevant skills and competences. Digital laboratories will include access to cloud-based tools such as virtual machines to simulate digital environments. In addition, academic versions of other relevant software and tools for investigations and crime analysis have been and are being procured to ensure students have access to the most relevant and up-to-date tools used by professionals in the field.</p> <p>Furthermore, our Professional Partnership Programme (PPP) is being developed to ensure students have access to professionals and their tools/experience in the respective subject areas.</p> | <p>October 2024</p> |

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| <p>R2: The panel recommends that EFI could make its programmes more truly European and international, in particular through the provision of more opportunities for study periods or internships abroad – preferably, as expected, via EFI’s formal participation in the Erasmus programme.</p> | | |
| <p>R3: The panel encourages EFI to start defining its role in continuing education for practitioners (including in the future for its own graduates) in its medium-term strategic planning. This would imply developing a formal procedure for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in line with local regulations in Malta.</p> | | |
| <p>R4: Further to its Key Recommendation 1 (under Standard 1), the panel advises EFI to set up an independent, international Advisory Board comprising high level experts from both the academic and professional world.</p> | | |
| <p>Standard 4:</p> | | |
| <p>KR5: EFI should ensure that the quality and security of examinations is also</p> | <p>EFI is in advanced stages of procuring an off-the-shelf online proctoring tool and expect to meet the security requirements of online proctored exams to ensure assessment integrity within the given timeline.</p> | <p>January 2025</p> |

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| <p>fully guaranteed for its new, fully online Master's degrees. Timeline: Within 6 months from the date of publication of this report.</p> | <p>Implementation of the tool, including testing, is also expected to be completed before any fully online assessment is run, with implementation assistance to be provided by the service provider.</p> | |
| <p>KR6: EFI should design and implement more formal procedures and platforms, e.g., student complaints, student guidance, student mobility, career information, Personal Learning Plans, etc. Timeline: Within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.</p> | <p>EFI embraces the spirit of independence within our student body to encourage our students to build crucial life skills including problem solving, networking and conversation. We aim to approach setting formal procedures and platforms in a balanced manner. Within this balanced scheme, we intend to approach the issues highlighted by the panel as follows:</p> <p>Student complaints - a form will be designed and provided for general complaints. This form will be managed by the QA team to ensure the student body feels adequately confident and unconstrained in expressing their thoughts through the segregation of duties. This form will be in place before the start of the next Academic Year in October 2024. Formal procedures are in place for academic complaints.</p> <p>Student guidance - as the SUB team continues to mature, student guidance will be handed over to the SUB team as more senior students assist their juniors in their academic career. This is expected to be a gradual process as the Academic Team begins to hand over certain aspects to the SUB Team.</p> <p>Student mobility - with the Erasmus Charter, EFI will be better positioned to support student mobility especially with other HEIs within the Erasmus programme. The formal procedures for student mobility will be embedded within our Erasmus guidelines.</p> <p>Career information - EFI has been running annual career orientation events for students since Academic Year 22/23, as such two such events have been held. In the first event in July 2023, a panel of experts was invited to discuss career opportunities and their experiences with our Student Network. The second edition in May 2024 saw the presentation of career statistics (eg: sectoral growth in demand for skilled workers) and pathways to such career. In addition, EFI hosts our "Meet the Experts" series of online talks which is open to the public. Our students are always invited to join the talks. (https://www.eufor.eu/events/category/meet-the-experts-en/). Finally, all students at EFI are registered as student members of the European Association of Crime Analysts, allowing them access to a network of professionals and annual conferences.</p> | <p>August 2025</p> |

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| | <p>Personal Learning Plans – EFI provides for students to select elective modules throughout the programme. This allows students to adapt their programme to their learning goals and career ambitions. Our student support team is on hand to guide students who require clarification or further guidance in terms of their personal learning plan.</p> | |
| <p>Standard 5:</p> | | |
| <p>KR7: EFI should continue its efforts to foster its declared European identity by gradually reducing its dependency on one main country, culture, gender and age group; this is of course a very significant challenge that may not be achieved in the short term, but is likely to become crucial in the medium term. The panel acknowledges that the leadership is aware of this necessity, but recommends that EFI reshape its strategy and clarify its future priorities in this regard; starting with a solid analysis of marketing data, markets and messages. Timeline: Within 24 months from the date of publication of this report, ongoing.</p> | <p>In line with our strategy and goals, our process for internationalisation began from AY 22/23 where we attended trade fairs beyond our main market. This has resulted in us organising open days and also online events in a third language (Spanish). Our website is also now available in this third language. An internal crucial resource gap was identified, and the recruitment process is on-going for a dedicated person to coordinate our marketing activities to ensure our broader strategy of expanding to other EU markets. Next Academic Year will also see our participation in trade fairs in at least 2 other new geographic areas.</p> <p>In addition, our application for the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) in February 2024 was successfully awarded the ECHE Charter on 26 June 2024, further supporting our internationalisation plans.</p> <p>Underpinning all of EFI’s strategy and goal is our adherence to the common European principles of inclusivity, gender equality and non-discrimination. EFI seeks to promote equal opportunities and access, inclusion, diversity and fairness across all its actions. This approach is embedded in our institutional culture, ensuring fair treatment for all in our community or those who want to join our community.</p> | <p>August 2026</p> |
| <p>KR8: In order to ascertain whether graduates are successfully entering the labour market in the forensics area or continuing their studies, EFI should henceforward conduct regular tracer studies regarding its alumni.</p> | <p>EFI performs regular one-year post graduation with our Alumni. At the date of the audit, there was only a small number of graduates and an even smaller. The next survey for the new cohort of graduates will be sent out by the end of 2024.</p> | <p>August 2025</p> |

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| Timeline: Within 12 months from the date of publication of this report. | | |
| R5: The panel encourages EFI to accelerate the creation of an alumni association, in order to keep track of all its graduates and to be able to involve them in its future development. | | |
| Standard 6: | | |
| <p>KR9: The panel encourages EFI that it should continue its effort for the recruitment, training and development of more permanent (and possibly full-time or nearly full-time) qualified teachers proceeding from various backgrounds. This should best be implemented as part of a broader human resources policy and a more formal faculty development plan offering a medium-term perspective to its most important and most promising teachers (as well as administrators and support staff). Timeline: Within 12 months from the date of publication of this report.</p> | <p>From the field audit to the date of this report, we have been working to expand our team. Given the limitations (size, geography) of the local labour market, our recruitment efforts depend heavily on national priorities and immigration policies which are out of our remit.</p> <p>On our broader human resource strategy, since January 2024, we have put out 5 job advertisements for 3 fixed roles within our core team. We have received 186 CVs and interviewed 37 applicants. So far, this has resulted in one successful hire who has met all our skill requirements and work permit. The process so far has highlighted the challenges faced to further develop our human resources which is immensely important to support the development of our institute as rightly noted by the panel.</p> <p>We have also identified a number of roles within our Academic programmes, including qualified full-time (or near full-time) teaching staff and subject matter experts which we would like to fulfil through both active recruitment and also through our participation in European wide projects such as Erasmus staff exchange and Horizon Europe R&I projects.</p> <p>To work around the issues of local skilled labour shortage, we will proceed with issuing medium-longer term teaching contracts with established Academic Staff within our institute, for example, 3-year instead of 1-year contracts.</p> | August 2025 |
| R6: In addition to allocating more funding to research (Recommendation R1), the panel recommends EFI gradually pay more | | |

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| <p>attention to fostering the development of the research capacity of its teaching/training staff. This may be achieved, in particular, in the form of more formal collaboration for the preparation of dissertations, more international cooperative research projects, and a more active/proactive participation in scientific meetings and conferences.</p> | | |
| <p>Standard 7:</p> | | |
| <p>KR10: EFI should ensure that students enrolled in the new Master's programmes will have access from the beginning to all the necessary digital learning resources to engage with their fully online programme, including with respect to reference materials and contacts for the preparation of a strong Master's thesis. Timeline: Before the beginning of the first new Master's programme in 2024.</p> | <p>Further to actions outlined for KR4, all postgraduate students will have access to our e-library (books and journals), professional association (EACA student member) and any other resources usually available for our undergraduate students.</p> | <p>October 2024</p> |
| <p>R7: EFI could benefit from using its digital resources (courses, library, training) as a means for cooperation and exchanges with a select number of other HEIs, and for offering more module-based opportunities to practitioners in need of</p> | | |

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| updating/upscaling of their level of qualification. | | |
| Standard 8: | | |
| R8: The panel encourages EFI that it could make even more useful use of its comprehensive information system by relating and carefully analysing the data, in particular, for simulating future scenarios and programming its future strategy for institutional development. | | |
| Standard 9: | | |
| R9: EFI could consider expanding and partially reconsidering its marketing and media communication work, with a view to attracting more numerous and more diverse applicants for its undergraduate and, above all, for its upcoming new Master's programmes. The panel believes that this should also allow EFI to achieve a better balance of gender and nationality among students. | | |
| Standard 10: | | |
| KR11: EFI should review its programmes from the viewpoint of its further Europeanisation/ internationalisation, in particular, concerning | We are currently in the process of reviewing our programmes and will take into account the consideration of the panel from the viewpoint of further Europeanisation/ internationalisation, in particular, concerning student recruitment and academic exchanges for staff and students. | August 2026 |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| <p>student recruitment and academic exchanges for staff and students. Timeline: Within 24 months from the date of publication of this report.</p> | | |
| | | |
| Standard 11: | | |
| N/A | | |
| | | |

Response to Mandatory Recommendations Made by the Peer Review Panel

| Action Plan | | |
|---------------------------|---|---------------------|
| Mandatory recommendations | Actions to be taken to address the recommendation | Date for completion |
| N/A | | |
| | | |

Annexes

Annex 1: Review Panel Bio Notes

In the setting up of the review panel for the European Forensic Institute, the MFHEA sought to maintain a high degree of diligence in the process of selection of the members of the peer review panel. The panel sought to be composed of specialists in quality assurance to act as external peers, professionals and practitioners of quality assurance frameworks, as well as students who, prior to the audits, attended professional training seminars organised by the MFHEA.

The following bio notes present the profiles of the members of the peer review panel. The bio notes are correct as at the time of carrying out the QA audit (between 4th and 6th December 2023).

Chair of Review Panel: Dr Guy HAUG

Dr Haug is an independent international expert in the evaluation, implementation and internationalisation of higher education policies, systems, institutions and programmes, mainly in Europe and the Americas. He has cooperated with leading international organisations (EU, World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank), many national and regional governments (mainly in Europe and North and Latin America), numerous university networks (EUA, EURASHE, EAIE, ACA, ENQA, SEFI) and individual higher education institutions. He is one of the founders of the Erasmus programme and the main designer of the Bologna process for the compatibility and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area. Dr Haug has extensive experience with internal and external quality assurance as a board member or advisor of many QA agencies and networks, and as a panel chair or member for the evaluation of numerous QA agencies, higher education institutions and programmes. He has a PhD in Political Science (Strasbourg/Tübingen), Master's degree in Law (Strasbourg), Master's in Management Science (Ottawa), and Doctorate *honoris causa* (HETAC, Ireland). Dr Haug lives and works mainly in Paris, Brussels and Valencia (Spain).

Peer Reviewer: Prof Dr Olgun ÇIÇEK

After completing his postgraduate education at the University of Surrey in the UK, Prof Dr Çiçek worked as an Instructor at Dokuz Eylül University, Faculty of Business Administration in 1992. He completed his PhD at the same university and received the title of Assistant Professorship in 1998. In 2001, Prof Dr Çiçek moved abroad and worked in different countries for 21 years (Northern Cyprus, Dubai, Singapore, Switzerland, Turkey, UK and USA) in public and private universities with various tasks and projects, assuming different roles ranging from Head of Department to Vice Rector. During this time abroad, he received the title of Associate Professor in Dubai in 2005 and Full Professor in the TRNC in 2013. He also served as a

Member of the Executive Board of the YODAK (Higher Education Planning, Evaluation, Accreditation and Coordination Council) in Northern Cyprus between 2014-2022.

Currently, Prof Dr Çiçek is an elected Board Member of INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education), Vice President of CEENQA (Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education), also Vice President of IQA (Association of Quality Assurance Agencies of the Islamic World). Additionally, he is an elected member of the CHEA-CIQG (Council for Higher Education Accreditation) International Advisory Council in the USA since 2022, and Accreditation Committee member of British Accreditation Council (BAC) in the UK since 2020. He is an affiliate of ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation in Germany). Prof Dr Çiçek also serves as an Honorary President of ECLBS (European Council of Leading Business Schools), reviewer/evaluator for many institutional and programme accreditation organisations in America, Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East (QAA, NVAO, AQAS, OCQAS etc.), and an external evaluator and advisor for TKTA and IAAR. As of 1st April 2022, after 21 years, he was reassigned to his previous position at Dokuz Eylül University, as the International Relations Coordinator under the Rectorate. Appointed in June 2022, he is currently an international advisor to THEQC.

Student Reviewer: Ms Elena ŠTEFANCOVÁ

Ms Štefanová is a PhD student of information technologies; she primarily focuses on the risks of recommender systems and the explainability of artificial intelligence. In addition, she has been dedicated to the quality of higher education, currently as a member of European Students' Union's Quality Assurance Students Experts Pool. Previously, Ms Štefanová also held several other positions, for example, a member of the national council of students or a trustee of the biggest technical university of Slovakia. She is a Fulbright alumna through a student research grant and also a laureate of a national award of The White Crow - a prestigious award given to people who perform courageous acts to defend truth, justice and the public interest.

Annex 2: Agenda of the Onsite Visit

Day 1 – 4th December 2023

Venue: 302 Kappara Business Centre, 113 Triq Bella Vista, San Gwann, SGN 4190, Malta

| | |
|---------------|---|
| 08.30 – 09.00 | Arrival of panel, settling in and preparation |
| 09.00 – 10.00 | Meeting with Leadership |
| 10.00 – 10.15 | Panel discussion |
| 10.15 – 11.15 | Meeting with Financial Officer |
| 11.15 – 12.15 | Panel discussion |
| 12.15 – 13.15 | Meeting with Academic team |
| 13.15 – 14.15 | Working lunch |
| 14.15 – 15.15 | Meeting with Quality Assurance team |
| 15.15 – 15.45 | Conclusion of day 1 |

Day 2 – 5th December 2023

Venue: 302 Kappara Business Centre, 113 Triq Bella Vista, San Gwann, SGN 4190, Malta

| | |
|---------------|---|
| 09.00 – 09.30 | Arrival of panel, settling in and preparation |
| 09.30 – 11.00 | Meeting with Teachers/Trainers (<i>online</i>) |
| 11.00 - 11.15 | Panel discussion |
| 11.15 – 12.15 | Forensic Professionals (external stakeholders) (<i>in-person</i>) |
| 12.15 – 13.15 | Working lunch |
| 13.15 – 14.45 | Meeting with Administrative Staff and tour of e-platform |
| 14.45 – 15.00 | Panel discussion |
| 15.00 – 15.30 | Meeting with Graduates (<i>online</i>) |
| 15.30 – 15.45 | Conclusion of day 2 |

Day 3 – 6th December 2023

Venue: 302 Kappara Business Centre, 113 Triq Bella Vista, San Gwann, SGN 4190, Malta

| | |
|---------------|---|
| 09.00 – 09.30 | Arrival of panel, settling in and preparation |
| 09.30 – 10.15 | Meeting with Graduates (working/studying with us) (<i>online</i>) |
| 10.15 – 11.00 | Meeting with Students (<i>online</i>) |
| 11.00 – 11.45 | Tour of premises and coffee break Venue: Malta Life Sciences Park, San Gwann SGN 3000 |
| 11.45 – 12.45 | Closed panel meeting |
| 12.45 – 13.30 | Final meeting with Leadership - Presentation of Initial Findings |



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