

AEQES PROGRESS REPORT, September 2013

In this progress report, AEQES presents to the Board of ENQA the current state of affairs concerning the recommendations made by the panel of the external review and highlighted in the letter from the President of ENQA to AEQES dated September 26, 2011.

Before examining how AEQES has addressed each area for development identified in the President's letter, a brief introduction sheds light on the changes that took place over the last two years.

The report includes the following annexes:

- the new AEQES reference framework and its compilation and assessment guide
- AEQES position paper of June 18, 2012

Introduction

First of all, AEQES was pleased to note that the results of the external evaluation had mostly confirmed, and had helped further clarify, the analyses presented in the self-evaluation report and that the several areas for development identified by both the review panel and the ENQA Board had already been topics of discussion within the Agency (for instance: the revision of the list of indicators and the reflexion about the length of the review cycle...).

On the base of this first ENQA review, AEQES applied for inclusion on EQAR in March 2012. The Register asked AEQES for additional information on how the agency would address the review panel's recommendations and on December 3rd 2012 AEQES was listed on EQAR.

It is important to stress that most of the areas identified for improvement by the panel are linked to the legal framework and demand therefore legal amendments. As a consequence, AEQES decided to work in two steps:

- to address the issues that could be improved within the present legal framework and give them an immediate answer;
- to reflect on the issues that require a new decree and develop proposals to be submitted to the lawmakers.

In the first category of actions, the following issues have been addressed: key documents in English, inclusion of students in the panels, development of the follow-up procedure, new reference framework (see Annex 1) and improved tools to clarify the task of the experts.

For the second category of actions requiring a legal modification, AEQES has issued a position paper on the legal changes needed to improve the Agency's functioning (see Annex 2). Adopted unanimously by the Steering Committee on June 18th 2012, this position paper was sent to the Ministers Mr Jean-Claude Marcourt and Mrs Marie-Dominique Simonet, to

the members of the higher education commission of the Parliament as well as to all the councils of higher education; it is also posted on the Agency website.

Two major issues need urgent consideration: the shortening of the 10-year review cycle and the Agency's resources. As explained below, the implementation of the follow-up procedure somehow compensates the length of the review cycle and, in terms of human resources, the Agency received temporary support from the ministers. However, a new decree should be written and voted, taking into account the suggestions developed by AEQES in its position paper. This takes place in a general context of economic crisis and important structural reforms of the higher education sector (a new decree is about to re-organize the general structure of the higher education provision and its functioning). In addition, elections will take place in Belgium next June and a new government will have to be formed. In that context, AEQES is presently writing a new position paper (*memorandum*) to be largely distributed to all political parties in order to inform them of the needs for quality assurance in higher education and gain support for AEQES.

Areas for development: progress report

1 Periodicity of the reviews (and... follow-up procedures)

The review panel recommended that AEQES started discussions with institutions and with the government about shortening the ten-year cycle of evaluations in order to ensure that quality assurance is on-going in the higher education system. The Board suggested that the cycle should be shortened to five or six years.¹

The Agency believes that the follow-up phase and the periodicity of the reviews cannot be disconnected. Concerning the follow-up phase (see item 3 below), new guidelines for the updating of the published follow-up action plan were developed; these guidelines provide for a follow-up site visit and discussions between the experts and each HEI about its action plan (thus ensuring that for each evaluated programme the weaknesses have been identified and acted upon and the relevance of the up-dated action plan has been assessed).

In the present context, shortening the evaluation cycle would put an untenable pressure on the budget needed to continue the current comprehensive evaluation process. In reducing the cycle, for instance from ten to five years, evaluating all the individual study programmes provided in the French-speaking Community would simply not be feasible.

A less costly solution would be to implement systematic follow-up site visits with a core review panel half-way through the evaluation cycle. Therefore, as an immediate solution, in its position paper, the Agency requests the lawmakers to make the follow-up procedures (that is to say the updating of the published action-plan) mandatory half-way through the evaluation cycle (which would result into a site-visit every five years) and this for all the programmes up to 2018. Beyond 2018, the cycle of evaluation could be reduced (to a periodicity of six years for instance) if AEQES adopts a different methodology such as the institutional-oriented approach.

¹ The ENQA Board letter of 26 September 2011 is quoted in italics in this report.

2 Resources

The financial resources are considered by the panel sufficient for AEQES to fulfil its core tasks with effectiveness. Nevertheless, the panel considers that the human resources are insufficient for the evaluations foreseen. The Board strongly recommends to improve the flexibility of staff enrolment in order to be able to accomplish collateral activities important for its mission such as developmental activities addressed to training activities or another quality analyses, as well as to face a more demanding situation in the future.

[In addition] AEQES should initiate discussions with the ministry on the possibilities of separating its staff recruitment and hiring procedures and full budgetary independence beyond the annual budget allocation and financial reporting to ensure accountability of public funds.

Both ministers in charge of higher education have reacted to the present situation of AEQES and have actively supported the Agency during the government's global budget discussions. As a result, a budget line for hiring two staff members was voted in July 2012. These were temporary, six-month appointments. As a sign of support, however, the ministry of the French-speaking community, responsible for issuing the work contracts changed them into permanent ones. These decisions have been made in order to give a rapid answer during the legal transition period. Currently, the Agency is not allowed to hire staff on its own resources (and with its own hiring procedures), which is one of the reasons for requesting a decree modification.

3 Follow-up process

AEQES should develop a more substantial follow-up process in coordination with stakeholders.

As referred to in item 1, the follow-up site visits are being implemented: from October 2013 to March 2014, some 22 sites-visits will take place for the programmes that were assessed in 2009/2010. It is worthy to note that almost 80% of the HEIs asked the Agency to implement this follow-up procedure that is, by law, optional. The Agency will pay close attention to this first cycle of follow-up visits in order to assess how much quality assurance – even better, quality culture – is being embedded in the HEIs...

4 A new reference framework

The Board recommended that Part one of the ESG could be more apparent if the agency was to set standards for quality, against which evaluations could take place.

Already aware of the fact that the 'list of indicators' needed revision, AEQES had decided to establish a working group especially devoted to developing a new set of standards. This new set of standards was approved by the Steering Committee on May 8 2012 and confirmed by government order on June 13th, 2013. For the future, AEQES strongly pleads to have its set of standards removed from any type of legal framework in order to ensure that it is a

continuously evolving tool, monitored and developed by the Agency itself, in consultation with the stakeholders.

AEQES considers its new reference framework as being much more explicit for both sets of users, i.e. to HEIs in preparing their SER – and establishing sustainable internal quality assurance – and to reviewers in assessing the quality of the provision of study programmes. Indeed, the full document makes clear reference to the ESG, includes a contextual and exhaustive introduction, the list of the five criteria with a detailed explanation of how each one should be addressed (including sets of questions to help describe, analyse, evaluate and improve) and a lexicon.

The Agency's main stakeholders were involved in the development of this new reference framework in the following way: representatives of the HEIs (all four sectors, namely universities, university colleges higher arts colleges and adult education institutions) first took part, among other members, in the working group that designed the new reference framework and further consultation was included in the process of its validation by the Steering committee in May 2012. The first informal feedback from the quality officers from different HEIs is generally positive.

5 Students as panellists; key documents in English

AEQES should include students in the evaluation committees; and translate the quality handbook and the instructions to experts into English.

The Steering committee of AEQES confirmed its decision to include students in all future review panels. As announced in the SER, the first review panels that included students are those involved in the joint mission (in collaboration with the CTI) of the evaluation and accreditation of the engineering programmes (October 2012 to February 2013). The practice of including students on panels has been extended to all review panels from 2013 on.

As to the key documents, they were rapidly translated into English and posted in November 2011 on the AEQES website in a specific section (http://www.aeges.be/english_about_us.cfm)

This Progress report was adopted by the Steering Committee on September 3rd 2013

Annex 1

<http://www.aeges.be/documents/20121004AEQESCompilationAssessmentGuide2012.pdf>

Annex 2

<http://www.aeges.be/documents/20121004%20AEQES%20position%20paper%20of%20June%202018.pdf>