Self-evaluation report
Spring 2011

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Foreword

In November 2002, the Government of Belgium's French Community established an agency for assessing the quality of its higher education. It was named the "Agence pour l'Évaluation de la Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur", or AEQES for short. The agency has been restructured by law in 2008 and consequently this report applies solely to the period 2008-2011. In its new form, AEQES has been able to complete a first cycle of assessment activities under the new provisions. After taking stock of them internally, the external assessment under the coordination of ENQA gives the agency the opportunity of sharing its thoughts with an international committee and thus benefiting from its expertise.

In anticipation of the site visit by ENQA experts in the context of the five-year evaluation cycle, AEQES opted for the following steps:
- The establishment, on 1 September 2009, of the "self-evaluation" working group (WG).
- Brief presentation of ENQA's methodology guide to the Steering Committee and the "self-evaluation" WG.
- Invitation of a member of the Quality Assurance Department of the *Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad* (VLIR) to benefit from the feedback.
- Preparation of a comprehensive SWOT analysis and an action plan for dealing with any identified weaknesses.
- Organisation of a special meeting of the Steering Committee to examine the documents produced by the self-evaluation WG and to check their contents.
- Approval of the self-evaluation report by the Steering Committee at its 14 February 2011 meeting.

This self-evaluation followed by the ENQA visit are part of a much wider, continuous and critical process of examining the schemes introduced, as illustrated by the following practical examples:
- The Steering Committee has set up a number of working groups for the purpose of discussing current practices (or ones to be introduced) and to make any necessary improvements.
- At the end of each evaluation period, AEQES conducts a survey of the experts and institutions involved.
- Where an assessment involves several institutions being revieuwed and necessitates a co-chairmanship of the expert panel, the Executive Unit organises a mid-term review with the co-chairmen. This review meeting enables an initial overall discussion on the methodology, possibly leading to immediate or future adjustments, but also anticipating the main paths of the system-wide analysis.

The first chapter of this report will allow the expert panel to acquaint themselves with the system of higher education in Belgium's French Community; the second chapter provides a description of the Agency and the way it operates; while the third chapter examines AEQES practice, in comparison with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The last chapter, the fourth, goes back to the main strengths and weaknesses presented throughout the report and ends with an action plan until 2014.*

Chapter I   Background information
Presentation of the system of higher education in Belgium's French Community

1. The political context of Higher Education in the French Community

Figure 1: Higher education within Belgium's political structure.
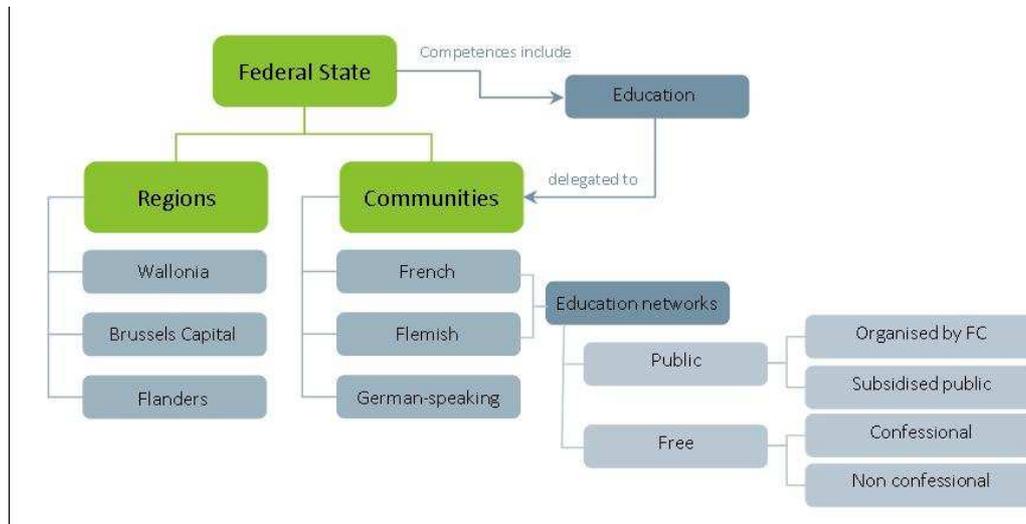
The kingdom of Belgium is a federal state. It has three Communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking) and three Regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital). Each of the 3 Communities has its own parliament and government, as does the Federal State itself. Each has its specific legislative and executive competences, established in the Belgian Constitution.

On the establishment of the Communities in 1988, the Federal State delegated the competence for education to each of three Communities, meaning that now each Community government is responsible for all educational affairs. This is the reason why the legal and regulatory provisions governing higher education and research are basically within the competence of the Communities. These include:
- The organisation of higher education study programmes
- The funding of teaching activities and of a major part of basic research
- The underlying priorities of study programmes

In its 2009-2014 Community Policy Declaration[1], the Government of the French Community of Belgium defined the following priorities for higher education:
- High-quality higher education available to all
  - o democratising access to education and promoting success
  - o increasing consistency in higher education offerings
  - o ensuring high-quality higher education
  - o providing career and training support for higher education staff
  - o ensuring the specificities of higher arts education
  - o refurbishing and adapting buildings used for higher education
  - o pursuing the refinancing of higher education
- Adult education at the centre of a life-long learning approach
- State-of-the-art and innovative scientific research

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[1] Déclaration de politique communautaire 2009-2014 "Une énergie partagée pour une société durable" (literally "shared energy for a sustainable society") http://www.cfwb.be/index.php?id=1774

The regional governments and the federal government also have competences in a number of areas related to scientific research. On a regional level: research focused on the economy, technological developments and the promotion of innovation. On a federal level: research conducted in the context of international and supranational agreements (in particular the European Framework Programme and space research) and research into topics of national interest.

As in the other levels of education, responsibility for higher education is in the hands of:
- The French Community itself
- Cities and municipalities
- The provinces
- Private individuals

These bodies are known as the "managing authorities" (*pouvoirs organisateurs* or *PO*).

Our higher education is divided into networks, with each network containing institutions under the same managing authority. In the French Community there are three education networks:
- The network organised by the French Community consisting of all institutions managed by the Government of the French Community who delegates its competences to the ministry/ministries with higher education in its/their portfolio(s).
- Subsidised public schools consisting of institutions managed by other public authorities, i.e. cities and municipalities, the provinces and the French Community Commission (COCOF) for the Brussels-Capital Region. Each municipality and province has its own managing authority. There are however two coordination bodies: CPEONS (*Conseil des Pouvoirs organisateurs de l'Enseignement Officiel Subventionné*/The Board of Managing Authorities in Subsidised Public Education) and CECP (the Education Board of Communes and Provinces).
- Subsidised free schools consisting of institutions managed by private managing authorities (either confessional or non-confessional) subsidised by the French Community. French- and German-speaking Catholic educational institutions have their own coordinating body, the SEGEC (*Secrétariat Général de l'Enseignement Catholique*). Non-confessional subsidised free schools belong to the FELSI (*Fédération des Établissements Libres Subventionnés indépendants*).

In the French Community, only educational institutions belonging to one of three networks may issue recognised qualifications, attesting that the studies undertaken comply with the specific recommendations decreed by the Government and guaranteeing quality education[2].

Higher education is mainly funded by the French Community of Belgium and covers all networks. The operational budgets granted to higher education institutions are calculated on the basis of a set budget, which varies with the cost of living index. The share each institution has of this budget is dependent on the number of its students, as compared with the other institutions.[3]

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[2] This section is based on BECKERS J., *Enseignants en Communauté française de Belgique : mieux comprendre le système, ses institutions et ses politiques éducatives pour mieux situer son action*, Brussels: De Boeck, 2010, pp. 26-42.
[3] Inspired by *Bologna 1999-2009 Higher Education in the Flemish Community of Belgium, the French Community of Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands*, Brussels: Expertisecentrum O&O Monitoring van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 2009.
On line: http://www.aeqes.be/agence_references_biblio_detail.cfm?references_id=35, viewed on 3 February 2011.

Figure 2: The French Community's educational networks

Networks	Public education		Free education		
	French Community	Subsidised public	Subsidised free		Free, non subsidised "private schools"
			Confessional	Non confessional	
Managing authorities	French Community	Provinces Communes COCOF	Dioceses Religious Congregations Non-profit organisations …	Non-profit organisations	
Federations		CPEONS / CECP	SEGEC	FELSI	
Role(s) of the French Community	Manages Funds Recognises qualifications issued	Subsidises and Recognises qualifications issued			Recognises other qualifications via an equivalence procedure

2. The implementation of the Bologna reform

By adopting the declaration of Bologna in 1999, Belgian higher education committed itself, alongside 45 States, to a process of profound reform in higher education, aimed at establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. It adopted a series of measures to modernise and integrate its higher education into the EHEA.

The main action lines of the Bologna Process implemented by the French Community are as follows:

- A system of easily understandable and comparable qualifications:
  In the 2004-2005 academic year, the French Community started introducing the Bologna process[4] leading to the award of bachelor, master and PhD degrees.
- Three-cycle system: bachelor, master and PhD:
  The higher education architecture consists of three cycles, each of which has a defined number of credits (ECTS: *European Credits Transfer and Accumulation System*), and at the end of which a degree is awarded.
- Overview of ECTS credits:
  In the French Community, one credit corresponds roughly to 30 hours of learning activities (lectures, practical work, individual work, group work, projects, etc.).
- Issuance of the diploma supplement:

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[4] 31 March 2004 - Decree on higher education, facilitating its integration into the European Higher Education Area and refinancing the universities.

Each higher education institution issues diploma supplements. These provide a standardised description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies completed by its holder.

- Mobility of students and academic staff:
  Mobility in higher education is one of the priorities. Various measures promoting mobility are available, including joint degrees (between two universities), inter-university agreements, research grants, and a special student mobility fund.
- Quality assurance in higher education:
  The "Agence pour l'Évaluation de la Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur" (AEQES) is responsible for regularly assessing bachelor and master programmes (via peer reviews).

3. Higher education: institutional structure

Figure 3: Structure of higher education in the French Community of Belgium[5]
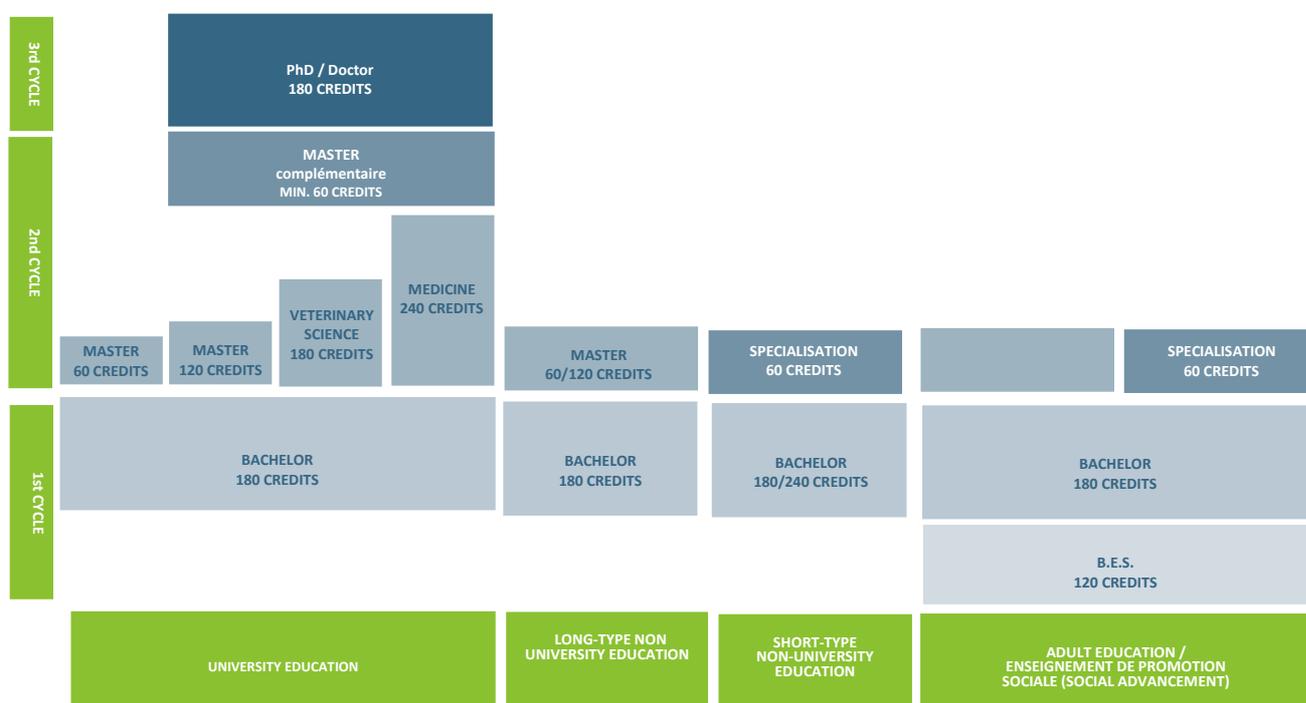
The French Community offers a wide range of study programmes. These are provided by various institutions, classed according to the type of education they offer (university education or non-university higher education).

University education combines study and research, whereas non-university higher education has a more vocational dimension.

University studies are organised in three cycles:

- 1st cycle studies last three years (180 ECTS) and lead to a bachelor degree, known as "transition".

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[5] Illustration inspired by *Bologna 1999-2009 Higher Education in the Flemish Community of Belgium, the French Community of Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands*, Brussels: Expertisecentrum O&O Monitoring van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 2009.
On line: http://www.aeqes.be/agence_references_biblio_detail.cfm?references_id=35, viewed on 3 February 2011.

- 2nd cycle studies lead to a:
  - o master degree after 2 years (120 ECTS) or 1 year (60 ECTS)
  - o 3 years (180 ECTS) for a veterinarian doctor, or
  - o 4 years (240 ECTS) for a medical doctor.
- Students can complement their master degree by a so-called *master complémentaire* giving them a specialised occupational qualification. This additional training, worth at least 60 ECTS, must be preceded by initial studies with a value of at least 300 ECTS.
- 3rd cycle studies include doctoral training (60 ECTS) leading to the award of a certificate of training in research, and the work relative to the preparation of a doctoral thesis, leading to the academic degree of doctor after defending the thesis. This work corresponds to at least 180 ECTS, 60 of which can be obtained during the doctoral training. In the French Community of Belgium, the *Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique* (Scientific Research Fund or F.R.S.-FNRS) manages the twenty doctoral schools covering a range of subjects; generally speaking, these schools are inter-university, interdisciplinary and international.

The *hautes écoles* and higher art colleges (non-university tertiary education institutes) provide either "long-type" higher education ("transition" bachelor and master degrees) or "short-type" higher education ("professionalising" bachelor degrees).
"Short-type" studies consist of a single cycle ending with the award of a bachelor's degree (180 - 240 ECTS). Training here is both practical and theoretical. Certain *hautes écoles* also offer a specialisation year after completion of the 1st cycle.

Last but not least, the so-called "*enseignement de promotion sociale*" (EPS or Social Adult Education) is a special form of higher education specifically targeting adults. This adult education is modularised, offering short- and long-type study programmes leading to qualifications equivalent to university degrees:[6] professional bachelor degrees or master degrees. The *enseignement de promotion sociale* also offers higher education certificates (*brevets de l'enseignement supérieur* or BES) worth 120 ECTS, with specific qualifications or occupational titles.

In summary, each of these different types of higher education has its own objectives. These in turn determine the different structures and teaching methods. They are managed according to specific regulations (decrees, fundamental laws).

There are also "bridges" allowing students holding a qualification obtained in one type of higher education institution to switch to another type of institution, taking with them the credits previously gained.[7].

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[6] In accordance with the Decree of 16 April 1991, the equivalent qualifications refer to the sections of higher adult education and lead to degrees on a level equivalent to those issued after full-time higher education.

[7] Use of such "bridges" is governed by a number of statutory provisions, including the Decree of the Council of the French Community of 5 September 1994 on university studies and academic qualifications, the Decree of the Government of the French Community of 30 June 2006 setting university access requirements for students with non-university academic qualifications, and the Decree of the Government of the French Community of 30 June 2006 setting the "bridges" giving access to study offered by the *hautes écoles*.

4. Higher education totals: institutions and students

Figure 4: Total number of higher education institutions[8] *in the French Community, and their development in the period 2004 - 2010*

	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
Universities	9	9	9	9	9	7
Hautes Écoles	30	29	29	26	25	21
Institutes of architecture	4	4	4	4	4	4
Higher arts colleges	17	17	17	17	17	17
Adult education institutions	123	124	119	117	120	116

* calculated on the basis of the information provided, in November 2010, by the *Direction de l'Enseignement de promotion sociale*

Figure 5: Number of students enrolled in higher education in 2009-2010, by type of higher education institution:

	Men	Women	Total
Universities	35.226	41.747	76.973
Hautes Écoles	32.181	45.240	77.421
Institutes of architecture	1.808	1.515	3.323
Higher arts colleges	2.901	4.057	6.958
Adult education institutions	no information for the corresponding degrees*		

*31,423 people are in higher education at adult education institutions, whether taking corresponding degrees or not.

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[8] Solely institutions recognised by the French Community of Belgium.
Sources: Conseil des Recteurs francophones pour les universités : cf. www.cref.be
SATURN for the *hautes écoles*, institutes of architecture and higher art colleges
ETNIC for adult education http://www.statistiques.cfwb.be/

Chapter II   The Agency
Description and analysis: AEQES and the system used for assessing higher education in Belgium's French Community

1.   The development of the quality assessment system in the French Community

1998	The Board of University Rectors, CReF (*Conseil des Recteurs des universités de la Communauté française de Belgique*), sets up a quality assessment programme for education. The objective of the programme is to prepare universities for the harmonisation of higher education in Europe, as proposed by France, Germany, Italy and Great Britain in the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration and advocated by the Bologna Declaration in 1999.
14 November 2002	Announcement of the Government of the French Community's Decree establishing AEQES.
December 2003	End of the CReF programme
23 January 2004	Inauguration of AEQES
March 2004	Start of AEQES external assessments.
22 February 2008	Announcement of the decree containing various measures related to the organisation and functioning of AEQES and annulment of the Decree of 14 November 2002.

The main amendments contained in the decree, aimed at incorporating ESG, are as follows:

- Election of a chairman and vice-chairman from among Steering Committee representatives, with a 2-year term of office renewable once
- Increased involvement of the Higher Education Councils (HECs). This sees them acting as interfaces between the Agency and the institutions, and gives them the opportunity of modifying the programme-related lists of indicators, of making proposals for drawing up and updating the 10-year plan, and of participating in the initial selection phase of potential experts
- The design and the annual update of a 10-year assessment plan
- Increases in resources (funds and staff)
- Publication, for a given programme, of the review reports of the institutions evaluated, their related follow-up action plans, and a system-wide analysis
- Follow-up procedure (publication of a follow-up action plan and its agenda)
- The obligation for an external evaluation of the Agency itself once every 5 years.

October 2008	Establishment of the Executive Unit of the "new" Agency and commencement of the evaluation process now in use.
June 2010	Publication of the first review reports on the Agency's website.

October 2010   Publication of the first system-wide analyses on the Agency's website.

January 2011   Publication of the first follow-up action plans on the Agency's website.

2. How the Agency functions

a. Missions

The Decree of 22 February 2008 defines the Agency's missions as follows:
1 To ensure that the study programmes organised by the institutions are subject to regular evaluation, highlighting best practice and any inadequacies or problems needing to be resolved.
2 To ensure the implementation of evaluation procedures.
3 To promote, in collaboration with all higher education institutions (HEIs), the introduction of best practice, allowing for enhancement in the quality of teaching in each institution.
4 To provide information to the Government, stakeholders and beneficiaries of higher education on the quality of higher education available in the French Community.
5 To formulate for policymakers suggestions for improving the overall quality of higher education.
6 To make any proposal deemed to be of use for the accomplishment of its missions, at its own initiative or on request.
7 To represent the French Community in national and international bodies in matters concerning quality assurance in higher education.

b. The evaluation process and scope

AEQES uses a formative quality evaluation process, working in a context where an authorisation ("*habilitation*"[9]) is granted *ex ante* by Government decree. The results of evaluations conducted by AEQES therefore have no formal effects in terms of an institution's funding or authorisation. AEQES does not carry out any scoring or ranking of institutions. The fact that an evaluation has no formal effect explains that the legislator has not provided for any appeal procedure within the Agency.
Such a "non-sanctioning" approach encourages the emergence of a quality culture among stakeholders involved in higher education, promoting its appropriateness and fostering creativity.

The Agency develops autonomously the procedures used for assessing the quality of teaching in bachelor and master programmes in the institutions authorised by the French Community.
It establishes an evaluation timetable on a 10-year basis (referred to as the "*plan décennal*" or 10-year Plan), taking care that the right programmes are clustered. Clusters are done across institutions and can take several forms: evaluation of a study programme delivered by several types of teaching institutions[10] ; the evaluation of several study programmes related to a single field or a single subject

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[9] "Habilitation: the authorisation, accorded by decree to a higher education institution, to organise all or part of a study programme, to confer academic degrees, and to issue the associated certificates and diplomas."
Definition taken from the Decree of 31 March 2004 defining higher education, promoting its integration into the European Higher Education Area and refinancing the universities (Article 6, §1).
[10] Example: In 2008-2009, the Agency conducted an evaluation of "Physiotherapy" study (bachelor and master) delivered both by universities and *Hautes Écoles*.

and delivered by a certain type of institution[11] ; the evaluation of several study programmes delivered by several types of institutions[12].

In addition, for institutions looking for an evaluation or accreditation carried out by an external evaluation or accreditation body, the Agency has developed a collaborative procedure making joint evaluation possible. For instance, the AEQES will soon be working together with the CTI (*Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur*) in the context of the joint evaluation of civil engineering and bio-engineering programmes in Belgium's French Community.

The 10-Year Plan is adapted once a year by the Agency's Steering Committee on the basis of proposals put forward by the higher education councils. The Plan is published on the Agency's website.

Discussions

Reflecting on the Agency's missions

Bearing in mind the present situation of its staff (see p.38), the Agency focuses on its evaluation programmes and cannot wholly comply with its third mission *To promote, in collaboration with all higher education institutions (HEIs), the introduction of best practice, allowing for enhancement in the quality of teaching in each institution*. For example, AEQES would like to hold workshops, seminars and training related to quality assurance, set up a thematic resource centre, etc.

Reflecting on the length of the cycle and the methodological scope

In April 2010, the Agency has set up a "10-Year Plan" working group, consisting of one Agency representative for each type of education, with the task of regularly updating the Plan and assessing the feasibility of possible new clusters of programme and other changes.

Via the new clusters it proposes, the Agency would like to promote the clarification of programme profiles and objectives in connection with HEI missions, spread best practice, and promote synergies.

This study-programme approach does however involve a multiplicity of assessments, to be implemented with the limited human and material resources available to the Agency's Executive Unit. In addition, the HEIs themselves have difficulties managing such multiple evaluations, sometimes being subject to several within the same academic year. The Agency supports such institutions by encouraging the dissemination of information and the sharing of experience between departments already assessed and those still to be assessed.

The Agency is convinced of the necessity to eventually change the length of this 10-year cycle. Although current provisions (the follow-up procedure and its optional updating possibility (see Chapter II, 3.4 – p. 26) can offset the length of the cycle, other alternatives could be looked into (the adaptation of the methodology according to requirements, the adoption of mixed models - institutional evaluation/programme evaluation, etc.).

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[11] Example: In 2009-2010, the Agency conducted an evaluation of programmes under the "Sociology" cluster. These included: 2 bachelor ("Sociology-Anthropology" and "Human and Social Sciences"; 5 120-ECTS master ("Sociology", "Anthropology", "Human Resource Management", "Occupational Science" and "Population and Development Science"); and 2 60-ECTS master (Sociology-Sociology" and "Occupational Science").

[12] Example: In 2010-2011 the Agency is conducting an evaluation of the "Marketing" programme (a bachelor programme delivered by *Hautes Écoles* and adult education (EPS) institutions and "International Trade" (a bachelor programme given by *Hautes Écoles*) within the same *cluster*.

In addition, the Agency keeps abreast of new developments via its working groups. The Agency could consider spreading its scope and include other fields: institutional assessment, research and the third cycle, vocational training and qualifications, cross-border higher education, and MC (*masters complémentaires*) programmes. No decision has been made so far and these changes would entail modifying the Agency legal framework.

c. The Agency's structure

The bodies of the Agency are the Steering Committee, the Secretariat, and the Executive Unit. Agency decision-making is in the hands of the Steering Committee.
The Steering Committee is made up of 24 full members with voting rights and a secretary. Each full member has a deputy. Full members:
- 4 representatives from University academic and research staff, put forward by the university rectors
- 4 representatives from the teaching staff of the *Hautes Écoles*, put forward by their coordination body, the *Conseil inter réseaux de concertation*
- 2 representatives from the teaching staff of the higher arts colleges, put forward by their coordination body, the *Conseil supérieur de l'enseignement supérieur artistique*
- 2 representatives from the teaching staff of the adult education (EPS) institutions, put forward by their coordination body, the *Conseil supérieur de l'enseignement de promotion sociale*
- 1 representative of university administrative staff, put forward by their coordination body, the *Conseil interuniversitaire de la Communauté française*
- 1 representative of *Hautes Écoles* administrative staff, put forward by their coordination body, the *Conseil général des Hautes Écoles*
- 3 student representatives, put forward by student organisations
- 3 trade union representatives, put forward by the trade unions
- 3 representatives from business, civic society and the arts, appointed by the Government of the French Community
- The Directorate-General of non-compulsory education

In addition, a representative of the ministry/ministries with higher education in its/their portfolio(s) is present in an advisory capacity. The Steering Committee meets once a month.

As a way of looking at topics discussed in greater detail and to provide the necessary background for the decisions it takes, the Steering Committee makes use of various working groups. These research relevant literature, analyse the information gathered, formulate proposals and produce documents.

The Secretariat consists of the chairman, the vice-chairman and the director of the Agency's Executive Unit. The director-general of non-compulsory education is present in an advisory capacity. The Secretariat is responsible for preparing the work of the plenary sessions, carrying out all tasks delegated by the latter in its internal rules, and making decisions on current issues.

The Executive Unit is responsible for implementing the decisions taken by the Steering Committee and the Secretariat. The head of the Executive Unit takes part in an advisory role in the Steering Committee, acting as its secretary.
The main task of Executive Unit staff is to make sure that all evaluation work planned by the Agency is carried out smoothly. There is an administrative officer responsible for handling the Agency's internal organisational and administrative affairs.

Figure 6. Agency diagram

Steering Committee

24 members representing academic and administrative staff and students in higher education, trade unions, public authorities, business, culture and society

Sets strategies, draws up the 10-year plan , selects the experts, delegates tasks to working groups, compiles the conclusions of the system-wide analyses, issues opinions, etc.

Secretariat

Chairman and vice-chairrman of the Steering Committee, Director general of non-compulsory education, head of the Executive Unit
Prepares the decisions and work of the Steering Committee

Communication WG

Ethics and Strategy WG

Reports WG

Self-evaluation WG

Standards and indicators WG

10-year plan WG

Experts WG

Executive Unit

Head of unit
Four staff officers
One assistant

Implements the decisions of the Steering Committee and the Secretariat

Discussion

Within the French Community, the Agency plays a federative role. In a constantly changing and competitive environment, the Steering Committee is one of those rare places where representatives from the different types of higher education can get together and exchange their views. The members of the Steering Committee discuss together the major issues and set the Agency's strategic direction.

3. Assessment methodology

Figure 7. Programme assessment and chronogram
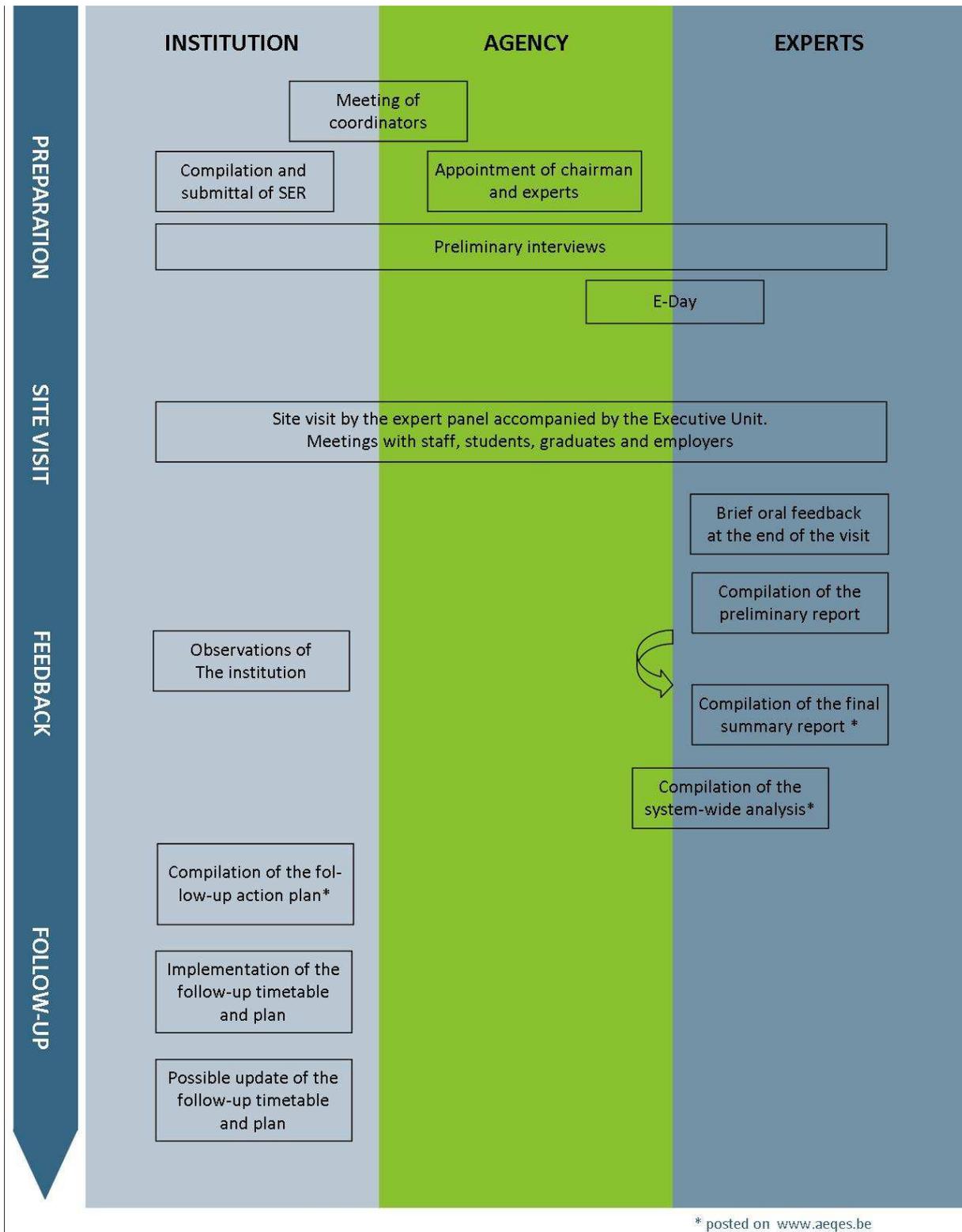
Assessment takes place in three phases: the internal evaluation (included in the preparation), the external evaluation (including the site visit and a presentation of findings) and the follow-up. Each phase involves all stakeholders of the institutions concerned.

3.1. The preparatory phase

a) The internal evaluation

The goal of the internal evaluation (or self-evaluation) phase is:
- To present the institution and, within it, the specific department to be assessed.
- To present the quality assurance process used within the department to be assessed and the institution concerned.
- To provide basic information and a full critical self-evaluation (in terms of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats) as well as an action plan for improving teaching with the participation of all stakeholders concerned.

This initial phase culminates in the writing of a self-evaluation report. The framework of this report is fixed by government decree, defining a *reference list of indicators* (listed in full in Annex 2). In accordance with the Decree of 22 February 2008, the *conseils de l'enseignement supérieur*/higher education councils (HECs) involved in the evaluation are given the opportunity of proposing to the Agency's Steering Committee modifications to this list of indicators on a programme-by-programme basis.

In sum, the following categories of questions (see table below) are involved:

Figure 8 - Overview of the self-evaluation report

chapter 1	The institution's structure and governance, student participation, quality assurance	*who are we?*
chapter 2	Study programmes: goals, design, consistency, implementation, student assessment, internships and end-of-programme dissertations, quality assurance measures, etc.	*what do we want?*
chapter 3	Students: numbers, profiles, job placement, etc.	*for whom?*
chapter 4	Staff (HRM) and facilities (equipment, infrastructure, etc.)	*with which means?*
chapter 5	Research, community service, national and international relations, mobility, partnerships	*related activities and their impact on teaching*
chapter 6	SWOT analysis, results, and strategic action plan	*are we achieving our goals? what next?*

Evaluation is centred on the published missions and goals of the programmes, their relevance to societal issues, and how effectively this is all being accomplished. But it also looks at other aspects influencing the quality of the programme under scrutiny: the HEI's governance, quality assurance, community service, how well the institution's administration functions, the working environment, communications, research, etc.

The first evaluation phase begins about 2 academic years before the actual site visit by the expert panel. The process is triggered by the Agency sending a letter to the academic authorities of the institutions concerned, advising them of the commencement of the assessment. Upon receipt of this letter, the latter sets up the internal self-evaluation commission, appointing a coordinator. The composition of the commission is fixed by decree: the coordinator, representatives of the academic, research, administrative and technical staff, and students (at least 20%). The commission is also open

to other members of the institution, its management bodies, and to graduates who have received their degrees within the last three years.

This commission, under the leadership of the coordinator, is responsible for compiling data and writing the self-evaluation report.

The letter sent by the Agency also notifies the institution of the date of the first "meeting of coordinators". This generally takes place in spring n-2. In the programme of this self-evaluation phase, two or three joint information meetings may be held, at which the Agency makes available to coordinators various tools:
- The slide presentation containing the goals, steps, and exact evaluation timetable
- Methodology guidelines for the coordinator
- Tthe reference list of indicators, adapted to the programme(s) in question
- The "statistics toolbox": an *Excel* file sent by the Agency to the coordinator. Specifically adapted to the type of HEI and for a given year, this file contains standard tables for collecting the data relating to the indicators specified in Chapter 3
- An online forum set up by the Agency's Executive Unit after the first meeting. This is available on the Agency's website www.aeqes.be. The forum enables coordinators to exchange information deemed useful for fulfilling their mission. The minutes and the documentation of the "meetings of coordinators" held by the Agency are also stored here.

On completion, the self-evaluation report is subjected to validation by commission members and the department's managing body. Ten copies are sent to the Agency's Executive Unit, which in turn forwards them to the experts appointed for conducting the external assessment. The Executive Unit guarantees the report's confidentiality, with the experts being the only external recipients.

Discussion

Reflecting on the methodology's participative character

In this first phase, the Agency elicits, via its methodology, a participative approach: establishment of the self-evaluation commission, the holding of joint meetings for coordinators, validation of the self-evaluation report by colleagues, encouragement to share and disseminate the self-evaluation report, etc.
Moreover, beyond this initial phase, the Agency seeks to enhance the dialogue with the various stakeholders, in an attempt to gain their support for the approach. This involves a preparatory meeting for the actual site visit, confidential discussions with teaching staff during site visits, group presentations of the status of the site visit, invitations to collective debriefings, etc.

Reflecting on the reference list of indicators set by decree.

Apart from *ad hoc* adaptations, the reference list can be seen as a basis for comparing all evaluations.

The figure below lists Part I of the ESG (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area), comparing them with the indicators contained in the AEQES reference list.

Figure 9: Table ESG/ AEQES Indicators

ESG - Part 1	AEQES reference list of indicators
1.1. Policy and procedures for quality assurance	1.4. Terms and conditions for student participation in decision-making and advisory bodies 1.6. Organisation of quality assurance in the institution and department: bodies and their responsibilities 1.7. Support from the institution's administrative department for the quality assurance process 2.2.9. Quality measurement: evaluation of study programmes and teaching by students; evaluation of study programmes by graduates and employers
1.2. Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards	2.2.1 Procedure for designing a study programme according to the objectives listed under 2.1.1. 2.2.9. Quality measurement: evaluation of study programmes and teaching by students; evaluation of study programmes by graduates and employers 2.2.10. Effects of quality measurement on the compilation and adaptation of course programmes
1.3. Assessment of students	2.2.5. Attitude of the department in respect of student assessment: methods and frequency of assessments (oral or written exams, MCQ, continuous assessment, etc), relevance of the assessment system to programme objectives 2.2.6. Educational objectives and how they are taken into account in projects, reports, end-of-course dissertations; organisation, monitoring and evaluation 2.2.7. In the departments concerned: educational objectives and how they are taken into account in work placement(s) (compulsory or recommended) or study periods abroad; organisation, monitoring and evaluation 2.2.8. For universities: PhDs and PhD training organisation, monitoring and evaluation 2.3.5. Information on the assessment of students' knowledge and competences 2.3.6. Promoting success: coaching, individual monitoring, remedial help, switching programmes, and participation rates Annex b. Analysis of teaching content, covering all course components. For each one, the number of hours per year or credits (including lectures, practical work, tutorials, personal work), the educational objective, the content, the manner of assessing and the teaching aids used Annex e. Departmental rules of procedure (including examination regulations)
1.4. Quality assurance of teaching staff	2.2.9. Quality measurement: evaluation of study programmes and teaching by students; evaluation of study programmes by graduates and employers 4.1.4. Staff management (in the department, within the institution): teacher training, further training, assessment and promotion policy, workload assessment, etc. 4.1.5. Effects of teaching quality assessments on staff policy 5.1.1. Department's research policy, main research topics, benefits for teaching 5.3.2 Mobility of academic and research staff: exchange agreements for teachers and researchers, invitations from abroad, participation in conferences and symposiums Annex c. List of members of staff, with their functions, their teaching tasks and other internal work
1.5. Learning resources and student support	2.3. Teacher information and monitoring 2.3.6 Promoting success: coaching, individual monitoring, remedial help, switching programmes, and participation rates 3.5. Exam success rate per academic year or department and per subject, option or specialisation 3.7. Graduation rate 4.2. Resources and facilities (especially 4.2.4 for appropriateness)
1.6. Information systems	2.2.9. Quality measurement: evaluation of study programmes and teaching by

	students; evaluation of study programmes by graduates and employers 2.2.10 Effects of quality assessments on the compilation and adaptation of programme programmes 3.1. Overall context: student population of the French Community of Belgium, in the institution and in the programme 3.2. Qualitative and quantitative information on the recruitment, eligibility conditions, socio-demographic characteristics of student intake 3.3. Students numbers (overall, first-time students, repeating students) per academic year or study unit, and per subject, option or specialisation 3.4. Quantitative analysis of study careers: "bridges" between different types of institution, switching programmes, etc. 3.5. Exam success rate per academic year or department and per subject, option or specialisation 3.6. Average study duration 3.7. Graduation rate 3.8. Career opportunities for graduates, by type of training (sectors, job quality, career paths, etc.) 3.9. Information on unemployment or under-employment
1.7. Public information	2.1.2. Verification of the procedures for disseminating information to interested parties (staff and students) 2.3.1. Information for students on eligibility and enrolment criteria 2.3.3. Information for students, at the different stages of their courses, on available choices, options and specialisation, optional courses, their dissertation, exams, etc. 3.8. Career opportunities for graduates, by type of training (sectors, job quality, career paths, etc.) 3.9. Information on unemployment or under-employment

In the programme of the evaluations and via the *feedback* loops used, the Agency has been able to determine that the reference list presents certain difficulties in its use, both for institutions and experts. In its current form, this standard is indeed little suited for practical use and needs an "interpretation tool".

It would seem that its non-normative character is the cause of part of the uncertainty. The search for the right balance is at the core of current discussions in the Standards & Indicators (*Référentiel et Indicateurs*) Working Group, set up in February 2010. In the context of a possible revision of the decree, the Agency will be asking the legislator to introduce a greater degree of flexibility and autonomy in the development of the standard selected.

b) Composition of the expert panel

During each n-2 academic year, each HEC involved in the evaluation submits a list of at least 12 experts for each programme to be reviewed (peers, professionals, educationalists (optional), possibly nominating one of them for the chairmanship of the panel).
For each nominated expert, the Council compiles an ID file. After having checked the nominee's eligibility, with a particular focus on his or her independence, it sends the file with CV to the Agency's Executive Unit. The Council is also responsible for ensuring that the nominee agrees in principle to participate.

On the basis of this initial selection, the Executive Unit draws up a list of potential experts, taking minimum requirements regarding the composition into account (at least three peers representing different subjects, one of which must work outside Belgium, one representative of a profession connected with the programme to be assessed, and optionally one educationalist). This list may contain more candidates than necessary. It is then submitted to the Agency's Steering Committee, which, if necessary, makes changes, possibly adds to it, and validates its contents.

Once the list has been validated, the Steering Committee chooses the chairman for the expert panel. The chairman and the Executive Unit compose the panel. Their choice must take into account the range of specific profiles and skills (in Annex 8), the document guiding the HECs in their selection of nominees). One priority when selecting experts is that they should have assessment experience and a quality assurance background.

In consultation with the chairman of the expert panel, the Agency's Executive Unit contacts the selected experts and offers them a work contract (*contrat d'expertise*) covering the duration of the assessment procedure. The amount of the expert's remuneration and the description of reimbursement of expenses are attached thereto.

Once the panel has been constituted and each member has formally given his or her acceptance, a summary of the expert's CV - approved by him or her - is posted on the Agency's website.

Discussion

Reflecting on the composition of the expert panel

The HECs play an important role in the selection of potential experts. However, the Agency also feels a need to diversify recruitment in order to extend its pool of experts even further. Through its participation in various symposiums and forums in Belgium and abroad, it is slowly building up a large network (consisting of quality assurance agencies and other bodies), of contacts which often lead to solid collaboration projects. This way, the Agency is permanently adding to its expert database. To date and taking into account all assessments conducted so far, the Agency has worked with 85 experts.

The composition of an expert panel is one of the main points determining the success of an external assessment. When building its panels, AEQES focuses on the independence criterion. This is checked twice, once by the HECs and then again by the Agency's Steering Committee. Furthermore, great importance is attached to the nominee having a quality assurance background. The independence criterion is underpinned by the international dimension of an expert panel. Depending on the programme to be assessed, the percentage of international experts has been so far between 50 and 87.5%. Over the last three academic years, the percentage has averaged 70%.

The inclusion of students in the expert panels is not currently foreseen by the law. A first experience will be gained in the context of the AEQES-CTI collaboration. The Agency will assess that practice.

c) Preparation and organisation of the site visits

The timetable for the site visits is as follows: the Executive Unit draws up a provisional timetable, adapting it to the schedules of the experts, before sending it simultaneously to all institutions to be assessed. The institutions then give their feedback, reporting their availability for each of the dates proposed. The Executive Unit then schedules the site visit dates for the institutions, informing the coordinators, academic authorities and the experts.

Once the self-evaluation reports are delivered, the Executive Unit forwards them to the experts, giving them the opportunity to become acquainted with their contents before the panel's preparatory meeting (*E-Day* - see below). The examination of these documents allows them to undertake an initial analysis.

First talks between the chairman of the expert panel and each institution are held at the Agency. These talks, lasting approximately one hour per institution, have the following objectives:
- To establish an initial contact between the chairman of the experts and the head(s) of the institutions.

- To set down the broad outlines of the external assessment.
- To finalise a timetable of a site visit.

At the end of these talks, a working day is planned at the Agency for the full expert panel - the so-called "E-Day". This preparatory meeting serves several purposes:
- To get the experts working together as a team.
- To present the French Community higher education landscape, along with any specific features of the programme to be evaluated (in this case with an external speaker from the HEC).
- To allow the chairman of the experts to report on the prior talks with the institutions.
- To restate the overall context of the evaluation, the legal framework, the objectives and expected results, as well as the timetable.
- To go through the ethical principles and define the methodology to be used by the committee, detailing the roles and responsibilities of each expert.
- To conduct an initial analysis among colleagues of the self-evaluation reports.

Methodology guidelines[13] helping to make sure that the mission goes smoothly are also made available.

3.2. The site visit phase

The objective of the external evaluation phase is:
- To subject the analysis and conclusions contained in the self-evaluation report to an external review.
- To confirm the correspondence between the description contained in the report and the findings.
- To examine how the resources described in the report match the needs.
- To assess to what extent the objectives described in the report are met.
- To give an opinion on the relevance and feasibility of the proposed action plan.
- To make any recommendations deemed useful for improving the quality of teaching.

During the site visit, which lasts 2-5 days depending on the how much there is to be assessed, a series of interviews and meetings are held, in which the expert panel meets all stakeholders associated with the programme (management, staff representatives, employers. students and graduates, etc.). The first meeting is devoted to a presentation of the quality assurance process currently in place within the department and the institution. This is given by the academic authorities and the institution's quality coordinator.

At the end of this series of interviews and meetings, the panel starts its SWOT analysis of the programme, drafting recommendations tailored to the institution. This analysis is the basis for a presentation of findings at the end of the site visit, carried out by chairman. The number and roles of the people invited to this presentation are left to the discretion of the institution, though the Agency would like to see as many people as possible being informed of the findings. The contents of this presentation of findings prefigure the draft report to be sent to the institution.

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[13] Available on http://www.aeqes.be/infos_documents_details.cfm?documents_id=11

Discussion

Reflecting on the interview methodology

The Agency has a clear objective in its use of interviews: to enable the expert panel to establish a climate of trust, to cross-check perceived realities, to encourage discussions, thus, ultimately to get more input for their analysis and to make more pertinent recommendations.

The accent put on the quality assurance process - underlined by its being the subject of the first meeting - indicates the importance attached to it by the Agency, and the Agency's concern to examine the process together with officials from the department concerned and the institution (in accordance with a combined *bottom-up* / *top-down* approach).

The meetings held with business representatives and graduates help to widen the debate, encompassing stakeholders from outside the institution.

3.3. The reporting phase: draft reports, the right of reply, review reports, and the system-wide analysis

On the basis of the text of the presentation of findings and according to the Decree of 19 December 2008, the expert panel draws up, for each institution reviewed, a confidential draft report containing an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis), along with recommendations.
This work is done by the chairman of the panel, together with his team, and with the help of the Agency's Executive Unit.
After all the site visits have been completed, these reports are then sent exclusively to the academic authorities and coordinator(s) involved. On receipt, an institution is given 15 working days to exercise its right of reply. This can involve the correction of any factual errors and/or content observations. Corrections are communicated via the standard template provided by the Agency. The Executive Unit then requests the expert panel to review the various observations and corrections sent in by the institutions involved. The panel decides on the inclusion of corrections to their text. The content observations compiled by the institution are annexed without change to the panel's report. In this way the draft report becomes the review report, and is ready for publishing on the Agency's website. In their observations, academic authorities can explicitly refuse to have the report published, though any such refusal must be justified

The panel then compiles a status report (*Etat des lieux*) consisting of a contextualised presentation of the programmes and their prospects in the French Community, within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This status reports also contains a SWOT analysis of all reviewed programmes, along with a list of recommendations for improving overall quality. For the compilation of this status report, the Agency's Executive Unit organises a meeting with the expert panel.
Once finalised, the status report is presented by a member of the panel (generally its chairman) to representatives of the institutions reviewed, and to the members of the Agency's Steering Committee. After reading the status report, the Agency compiles a summary for inclusion in the experts' document. The status report including the Agency's summary then becomes the system-wide analysis report, which is published on the Agency's website. It is also sent to the minister(s) responsible for higher education, the HECs and the institutions involved.

Discussion

Reflecting on the evaluation mission and the collegial approach

The Agency uses different ways to weld its expert panels together and get them to adopt a collegial approach taking different viewpoints into account. The goal is to make the external evaluation as impartial and objective as possible.

The Executive Unit organises *E-Days*, numerous pre-evaluation meetings on the basis of the framework designed for this purpose and debriefings sessions - both before and during each site visit. It insists on this collegial structure for the SWOT analysis and for the joint writing of the recommendations. At the end of each visit, the panel receives from the Executive Unit the minutes of the interviews (as a record and guarantee of objectivity), along with the summary table used to support the chairman's presentation of findings. The reports compiled by the chairman are systematically reread and commented by each member of the panel. The panel meets to review the responses from the institutions and to build up the status report. Finally, the Executive Unit gets back to the experts with the results of the survey carried out at the institutions reviewed.

Reflecting on the complex readership: "which reports written for whom?"

The first review reports published in June 2010 were compiled using a predefined template (in accordance with the Government order of 19 December 2010) and written in a style primarily addressing current and future education stakeholders. The SWOT analysis contained in the report is always compiled on the basis of the findings approved by the whole panel. Moreover, both in the review reports and the system-wide analyses, readers can easily identify the best practice and recommendations.

The difficulty however lies in finding the right way of simultaneously addressing all stakeholders with their differing interests and expectations.

Reflecting on the objective and scope of the system-wide analysis

The primary objective of the system-wide analysis is to help improve the overall quality of the programme reviewed by making recommendations to the various stakeholders (teachers, students, academic authorities, administrations, the Government of the French Community, AEQES, etc.). The system-wide analysis contains a collection of best practice gathered during the site visits.

The guidelines fixed by the Government order of 19 December 2008 are seen as being restrictive (in particular the rules forbidding the inclusion of certain types of quantitative and qualitative data within the reports).

The Agency is currently discussing ways to make best use of the system-wide analysis and its content. For this purpose, the Steering Committee has asked the "Reports" WG to look into the objectives and scope of the system-wide analysis.

Overall Reflections

Besides producing a programme-related system-wide analysis, the Agency could also envisage producing an overall analysis based on the reports compiled to date by the various expert panels. The "Reports" WG has been given the task of identifying recurring themes and providing the Steering Committee with the result of its analysis. The Steering Committee could then, if seen to be relevant, draw up one or more position papers, sending them to the Government of the French Community for further discussions. These position papers would be published on the Agency's website.

3.4. The follow-up phase

Finally, the objective of the follow-up phase is to anchor the quality assurance process and make sure that it remains a top priority in the long term.

In the six months following the publication of the review reports on the Agency's website, each institution provides the Agency with a follow-up action plan according to a predefined template. These plans are published on the Agency's website, directly linked to the relevant review report. At the request of the institution involved, a progress report on the implementation of the follow-up action plan can be published every three years on the Agency's website.

Discussion

The Agency supports a broad and open approach to quality assurance, as described in the ESG. It stresses that the primary responsibility for quality lies with the institutions and their development of a quality culture and implementation of an internal quality assurance process. Follow-up procedures take place against this background.
The institutions reviewed in 2009-2010 have sent in their follow-up plans compiled according to the template set by the Agency. In accordance with the Decree, these were published on the Agency's website in January 2011. The whole set-up is still too new to measure the follow-up procedure's impact on enhancing quality.

4. The Agency and its own internal quality assurance system

4.1. Routine functions and dialogue within the Executive Unit.

For the purpose of ensuring a consistent approach in applying the methodology and in treating all institutions with equity, the Executive Unit operates according to the following rules:
- The routine handling of programme evaluations is put in the hands of a single person. This person assumes the role of contact person for both institutions and experts.
- During site visits, a member of the Executive Unit systematically accompanies the expert panel (preferably the contact person, but if necessary a different member of the Executive Unit). This increases versatility within the Executive Unit, making its members interchangeable. All relevant information is always shared between members. Moreover, each member of the Executive Unit has access to the minutes and findings of each visit.
- When the Executive Unit recruits a new employee, this person first has only observer status, accompanying a more experienced member.
- As a way of optimising internal communication, each member of the Executive Unit has access to a group IT server. This facilitates the archiving and updating of the documents involved.
- Following each evaluation cycle, the Executive Unit holds a debriefing workshop. As an example, at the end of the 2008-2009 campaign and as a result of such a workshop, practice-related improvements were made: introduction of the *E-Day*, a revision of site visit interview planning, etc.

To ensure the regular skill development of Executive Unit members, its director compiles a list of training requirements during appraisals or informal discussions. Each member has free access to further training provided by the Ministry of the French Community (with a focus on IT and language skills). In the area of quality assurance and higher education, members are given the opportunity of

taking part in a number of different workshops and in study days held on both a national and international level, as can be seen in the 2008-2010 activity report.

4.2.   Dialogue with stakeholders and feedback

The Agency attaches great importance to external feedback. This is why it conducts satisfaction surveys, asking the management and quality coordinators at the institutions reviewed and the expert panels for their feedback on the way the Agency operates. This is done by questionnaires sent out at the end of each evaluation process. The Executive Unit compiles the results, presenting them in an anonymous form to the institutions, experts and members of the Steering Committee. Moreover, it invites the institutions to a debriefing session at the end of each programme evaluation. This session is an opportunity to present the survey results, define the added value of the evaluation process and to pick up any suggestions for improving practice.
In addition, thanks to its good relations with the HEIs, the Executive Unit regularly gets informal feedback.

In the near future, the Agency intends to compile a questionnaire for students interviewed by the experts during the site visits. A further questionnaire would target HECs.

As a result of such feedback, adjustments are regularly made on two levels: either the Executive Unit takes the initiative in adapting specific procedures (e.g. the introduction of the presentation of the status report to assessed institutions by a member of the expert panel); or the suggestions gathered are subjected to in-depth examination by the appropriate working groups and followed up by a formal check by the Steering Committee (e.g. the procedure for updating official documents, such as an expert's work contract).

Dialogue and consultation take place both within the Secretariat at its monthly meetings and within the Steering Committee. Having members in common within different working groups also ensures consistency.
The Agency's intranet service, to which each member of the Steering Committee has access, is a further help in disseminating information among the Agency's various bodies. Information includes all minutes of Steering Committee and working group meetings; reports on surveys, seminars and symposia as well as the quality handbook.

4.3.   The use of the PDCA cycle at AEQES

The table below shows the main information relating to the four steps of any QA process done in accordance with the "*Plan – do – check – act*" (PDCA) principle. It is followed by a description of activities conducted in 2008-2010, illustrating the principles of transparency, confidentiality and reflection.

Figure 10: table of the 4 steps of AEQES Quality assurance

The four steps of the quality assurance process	- as conducted by AEQES
1. The planning reflects a strategic vision shared by the interested parties and consists of goals, measurements and detailed indicators.	The AEQES mission is to conduct quality evaluations of higher education programmes, highlighting best practice, weaknesses and problems needing to be solved. In the decree's annex, the fields to be examined are listed, together with certain indicators. The scheduling of assessments is done on the basis of a 10-year plan; The HECs (CIUF, CGHE, CSEPS and CSESA) are all involved in the annual review of the 10-year plan; within the Agency, members include representatives of HEIs and trade unions, students, and representatives from society and art. The representatives from the ministries with higher education and adult learning in their portfolios serve in an advisory capacity. All stakeholders are involved in the Agency's strategic choices.
2. Implementation plans are drawn up in consultation with the interested parties and include specific principles.	The external evaluation methodology is set up by the Agency in accordance with its code of ethics, the stipulations of the AEQES Decree and the ESG (European Standards and Guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions / Bergen 2005). The Executive Unit is responsible for the execution of the external reviews and supports on the one hand the HEIs in completing the self-evaluation phase, and on the other hand the expert panels in the fulfilment of their evaluation mission. The products of the external evaluation are as follows: Programme-related review reports for each HEI (compiled by the experts), the system-wide analysis of programme reviews (containing recommendations from the experts and remarks from the Agency); a collection of best practice, complementary analyses of structural problems, and position papers (own initiative or at the request of the government) compiled by the Agency. Publications are made available on the website www.aeqes.be and sent to the government (analyses and position papers).
3. An evaluation of outcomes and processes, supported by measurements, is conducted on a routine basis.	For each external evaluation cycle, the Executive Unit conducts a satisfaction survey targeting the experts, the HEIs (management and QA coordinators), but also other stakeholders (HECs). Debriefing sessions are systematically held with representatives of the institutions reviewed. Information gathered is reported to the Steering Committee, acting as input for the ongoing discussions on improving the external evaluation process, especially for the Agency's working groups (Ethics and Strategy, Standards and Indicators, Communication, and Self-evaluation). Every 5 years and in accordance with ENQA stipulations, the Agency is itself subjected to a review. The self-evaluation report along with the report of the experts are published on the Agency's website and sent to the Parliament and

	Government. The evaluation tests the compliance with the ESG and enables the Agency to obtain full ENQA membership. The Agency can then submit a request to be listed in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). ENQA (and EQAR) membership represent guarantees of quality.
4. Process are subject to permanent review	The permanent review conducted by the Agency leads to regular adjustments of processes with a view to improving the service provided to higher education stakeholders. The *supra* evaluation conducted by ENQA leads to a series of recommendations by independent experts. The Agency draws up an action plan for implementing the experts' recommendations, some of which can entail changes in legal texts (the 2008 decree governing AEQES and related operational decrees).

Chapter III   Analysis of ESG Parts 1, 2 and 3

3.1. Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education: The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of this report.

Before giving an opinion on this standard, we should consider whether AEQES complies with the standards listed in chapter 2 of the ESG.

2.1. Use of internal quality assurance procedures: External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

The verification of compliance with this standard implies that the indicators used by AEQES are suitable for verifying the effectiveness of the procedures described in the summary list with its 7 standards found in Part 1 of the ESG.
See Chapter II, table comparing the ESG with the AEQES list of standards, p. 20-21.

1.1. Policy and procedures for quality assurance: Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.

During the site-visits, the expert panel looks at various indicators, such as those defined below:
1.6. Organisation of quality assurance in the institution and department: bodies and their responsibilities
1.7. Support from the institution's administrative department for the quality assurance process
2.2.9. Quality measurement: evaluation of study programmes and teaching by students; evaluation of study programmes by graduates and employers
6. Analysis and strategic action plan
6.1. SWOT analysis (Analysis of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and theats)
6.2. Summary diagnosis based of the above
6.3. Solutions (planned or in the process of being drafted) for remedying identified weaknesses and threats.

In addition, the first meeting of any site-visit is devoted to programme management and the quality assurance process at both the department and institution level. The expert panel's mission is to express an opinion on the feasibility of an institution's action plan and to formulate recommendations in this sense (see Chapter II, 3.2. The site visit phase, p. 23).
By the introduction of a follow-up procedure, AEQES also provides for institutions publicising their action plans on the Agency's website (see Chapter II, 3.4. The follow-up phase, p. 26).

The Agency's methodology aims at strengthening the participative character of the quality assurance process, on the one hand in the self-evaluation phase[14] and on the other hand in the external evaluation phase, by requiring the expert panel to meet representative panels of all stakeholders of the institution (see Chapter II, 3.1 The preparatory phase, p. 18 and 3.2. The site visit phase, p. 23)

1.2. Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards: Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.

The expert panel seeks to examine this issue throughout the interviews. The education expert verifies in particular the presence of formal mechanisms within the institution.

During the site-visits, the expert panel looks at various indicators, such as those defined below:
2.2.1. Procedure for designing a study programme according to objectives listed under 2.1.1.
2.2.9. Quality measurement: evaluation of study programmes and teaching by students; evaluation of study programmes by graduates and employers
2.2.10. Effects of quality measurement on the compilation and adaptation of courses programmes

The follow-up procedure implemented by the Agency will definitely have effects on the periodic review of programmes.

1.3. Assessment of students: Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.

During the site-visits, the experts examine the documents made available to them by the institution (syllabi, ECTS factsheets, work placement reports, sample assessments, etc.). During interviews and meetings, the expert panel also examines the following indicators:

2.2.5. Attitude of the department in respect of student assessment: methods and frequency of assessments (oral or written exams, MCQ, continuous assessment, etc), relevance of the assessment system to programme objectives
2.2.6. Educational objectives and how they are taken into account in projects, reports, end-of-course dissertations; organisation, monitoring and evaluation
2.2.7. In the departments concerned: educational objectives and how they are taken into account in work placement(s) (compulsory or recommended) or study periods abroad; organisation, monitoring and evaluation
2.3.5. Information on the assessment of students' knowledge and competences
2.3.6. Promoting success: coaching, individual monitoring, remedial help, switching programmes, and participation rates
3.5. Exam success rate per academic year or department and per subject, option or specialisation
3.7. Graduation rate
Annex b. Analysis of teaching content, covering all course components. For each one, the number of hours per year or credits (including lectures, practical work, tutorials, personal

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[14] The Decree provides: "Apart from the coordinator, this commission consists of members coming from different parts of the entity assessed: academic, research, administrative and technical staff and students. The number of students must not be less than 20% of the total number of commission members. Students are nominated by the institution's students' council, insofar as it exists. The commission may also include other members of the institution or its management bodies and graduates from the last three years."

work), the educational objective, the content, the manner of assessing and the teaching aids used
Annex e. Departmental rules of procedure (including examination regulations)

The Agency notes, however, a drawback in the formulation of point *2.3.5.* where only the term "knowledge" is mentioned here. The reference list of indicators is in the process of being reworded (see Chapter II, 3.1. The preparatory phase p.18). In the meantime, the HECs have made use of their update right, and have added the term "competences" to the term "knowledge".

1.4. Quality assurance of teaching staff: Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved with the teaching of students are qualified and competent to do so. They should be available to those undertaking external reviews, and commented upon in reports.

During the site-visits, the expert panel looks at various indicators including:
2.2.9. Quality measurement: evaluation of study programmes and teaching by students; evaluation of study programmes by graduates and employers
4.1.3. Recruitment policy
4.1.4. Staff management (in the department, within the institution) teacher training, further training, assessment and promotion policy, workload assessment, etc.
4.1.5. Effects of teaching quality assessments on staff policy
5.1.1. Department's research policy, main research topics, benefits for teaching
5.3.2. Mobility of academic and research staff: exchange agreements for teachers and researchers, invitations from abroad, participation in conferences and symposiums
Annex c. List of members of staff, with their functions, their teaching tasks and other internal work

1.5. Learning resources and student support: Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.

During the interviews and meetings and through the study of the documents made available, the expert panel looks into various indicators including:
2.3. Teacher information and monitoring
2.3.6. Promoting success: coaching, individual monitoring, remedial help, switching programmes, and participation rates
4.2. Resources and facilities (see 4.2.4. for appropriateness)

The experts go through a sample range of syllabi and the institution's e-learning system (when available). They also inspect major facilities (library, laboratory, classrooms, IT rooms, etc.).

1.6. Information systems: Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.

During the interviews and meetings, the expert panel encourages the institutions to make use of the qualitative and quantitative data available to manage their programmes.

The expert panel looks at various indicators including:
2.2.9. Quality measurement: evaluation of study programmes and teaching by students; evaluation of study programmes by graduates and employers

2.2.10. Effects of quality measurement on the compilation and adaptation of course programmes

3.1. Overall context: student population of the French Community of Belgium, in the institution and in the programme

3.2. Qualitative and quantitative information on the recruitment, eligibility conditions, socio-demographic characteristics of student intake

3.3. Students numbers (overall, first-time students, repeating students) per academic year or study unit, and per subject, option or specialisation

3.4. Quantitative analysis of study careers: "bridges" between different types of institution, switching programmes, etc.

3.5. Exam success rate per academic year or department and per subject, option or specialisation

3.6. Average study duration

3.7. Graduation rate

3.8. Career opportunities for graduates, by type of training (sectors, job quality, career paths, etc.)

3.9. Information on unemployment or under-employment

To support quantitative analyses, AEQES, in collaboration with the Higher Education Observatory, provides institutions during the self-evaluation phase with a statistical tool related to the indicators listed in Chapter 3. (cf. Chapter II, 3.1. The preparatory phase, p. 18).

1.7. Public information: Institutions should regularly publish up-to-date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.

During the interviews and meetings and through the study of the documents made available, the expert panel looks into various indicators including:

2.1.2. Verification of the procedures for disseminating information to interested parties (staff and students)

2.3.1. Information for students on eligibility and enrolment criteria

2.3.3. Information for students, at the different stages of their courses, on available choices, options and specialisation, optional courses, their dissertation, exams, etc.

3.8. Career opportunities for graduates, by type of training (sectors, job quality, career paths, etc.)

3.9. Information on unemployment or under-employment

2.2. Development of external quality assurance processes: The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

The external quality assurance processes, together with the objectives and evaluation procedures, are defined in the following documents:
- The goals and objectives are to be found in the Decree of 22 February 2008 and its Annex
- *The coordinator guidelines* (published on the website and handed out in paper form at the first meeting of coordinators)
- *The expert guidelines* (on the website)
- An expert's work contract
- The memo detailing the follow-up action plan and its agenda

These documents (compiled by the Agency's working groups and approved by the Steering Committee) are not only available on the Agency's website, but are also handed out (with comments) to the experts and institutions at the various preparatory meetings (see Chapter II, 3.1, The preparatory phase p.18).

As a reminder, the objectives of the different evaluation phases are:

For the internal evaluation phase:
- To present the institution and, within it, the specific department to be assessed.
- To present the quality assurance approach used within the department to be assessed and the institution concerned.
- To provide basic information and a full critical self-evaluation (in terms of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats) as well as an action plan for quality enhancement. This is done with the participation of all actors concerned.

For the external evaluation phase:
- To subject the analysis and conclusions contained in the self-evaluation report to external review.
- To confirm that the description contained in the report matches the findings.
- To analyse if resources described in the report are fit for purpose.
- To assess the level the objectives described in the report have reached.
- To give an opinion on the pertinence and feasibility of the proposed action plan.
- To give any recommendation considered useful for quality enhancement.

Last but not least, the objective of the follow-up phase is to anchor the quality assurance process and make sure that it remains a top priority in the long term.

2.3. Criteria for decisions: Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

The policy of AEQES does not foresee evaluation resulting in a formal decision. That said, the evaluation process is based on explicit criteria (see the reference list of indicators in Annex 2) and are applied consistently through several mechanisms: all site visits related to the same programme or group of programmes are done by a single expert panel (or, when the number of site visits is high, an extended committee), supervised by a chairman or two co-chairmen and with the permanent support of the Executive Unit; the compilation of the reports is done according to a standard template.

2.4. Processes fit for purpose: All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

The two main objectives of AEQES are:
- Accountability for the quality of higher education
- Working towards quality enhancement in higher education

These objectives are to be found in the Agency's mission statement.

The fulfilment of the first objective involves the publication of various reports (review reports and system-wide analyses) and of institutions' follow-up plans (see Chapter II, 3.3 and 3.4 – p. 24 and p. 26). Other than these programme-related written publications, the Agency makes available to the public a number of more general analyses (opinions, system-wide reports, etc.).

The fulfilment of the second objective involves, apart from perfect collaboration with all stakeholders:
- The Executive Unit support for institutions during the self-evaluation and follow-up phases (see Chapter II, 3.1.a – p.18).
- Involving highly qualified experts in the external evaluation phase. To do this, during the selection procedure, the Agency has compiled a functional profile and an ethics code (see Annexes 5) setting forth its expectations. These documents are available on the Agency's website and have been sent to the HECs (see Chapter II, 3.1.b – p. 21). During the E-Day the mission and evaluation context are clearly restated to the experts (see Chapter II, 3.1.c – p...).
- During the whole period the experts are involved, the Agency's Executive Unit ensures process consistency and support for the experts in all steps.
- A commitment of institutions to maintain the drive towards quality enhancement beyond the one-off programme-evaluations. The methodology entails the publication and updating of follow-up action plans (see Chapter II, 3.4 - p. 26).

2.5. Reporting: Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to their intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

The Agency publishes on its website the reports compiled by the experts. As a way of standardising the quality of these reports, the Agency has produced a template for drafting the review report as well as guidelines for drafting the status report. These documents cover the Agency's minimum standards with respect to report compilation.

To make the reports published by the Agency easier to read, the Agency insists on the experts including in their review reports (at the end of the detailed analysis of the programme offered by an institution), a table summarising the main points of the SWOT analysis.

In the status reports, experts are requested:
- To point to best practice encountered in programme/cluster evaluated; these are highlighted in a coloured box in the final document or included in a summary table.
- To formulate recommendations and address them to specific stakeholders (generally speaking: teachers, management of institutions, the Agency, and the Government of the French Community); these recommendations are systematically listed at the end of the document in a summary table highlighting the addressees.
- To compile a system-wide SWOT analysis for the programme, also included as a summary table.

Since the Agency publishes reports for a variety of readers (current and future students, parents, teachers, managers, policy-makers, etc.), the question of their appropriateness for each bears consideration (see Chapter II, 3.3. - p. 24).

2.6. Follow-up procedures: Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

The follow-up procedure foreseen by the Agency is described in Chapter II, 3.4, (p. 26).

As a reminder, the first 33 follow-up action plans were published in January 2011. Before the first publications, the Agency asked the Ethics and Strategy working group to draw up guidelines for the recently introduced follow-up procedure. These discussions led to the production of an explanatory note for institutions, available on the Agency's website.

In the wake of the publication of the first 33 follow-up action plans, the Ethics and Strategy working group has now been asked to analyse the documents produced by the institutions and to "tune" the previous note for their production.

With external evaluation carried out just once every ten years, there is a risk of not sufficiently promoting the development of a quality assurance culture in the departments reviewed. The possibility of updating their follow-up action plans every three years can be seen as an "alternative", softening the impact of the 10-year evaluation cycle.

Moreover, this phase constitutes a tangible synthesis of an institution's self-evaluation, its strategy, and the external perspective of the experts.

2.7. Periodic reviews: External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

How often evaluations take place is laid down in the Decree of 22 February 2008. Article 10 stipulates that: "the programmes to be assessed and the institutions involved are determined by the Agency on the basis of a 10-year plan. This plan is established in such a way that each programme can be assessed at least once every ten years."

The Plan is published on the Agency's website. Each year the Higher Education Councils (HECs) have the opportunity of submitting requests for changes to the Agency. These are examined by the Agency's Steering Committee as part of its annual review of the 10-year Plan. Nevertheless, in order to enable institutions to know in advance which evaluations to expect, Agency jurisprudence foresees that the first three years following the revision of the 10-year plan cannot be changed.

This is explained in Chapter II 2.2. – p. 13).. The Agency is convinced of the necessity to eventually change the length of this cycle. Nevertheless the Agency needs time to discuss it, taking into account its current resources.

2.8. System-wide analyses: Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc.

The Agency is required to publish three types of "system-wide" reports:
- System-wide analyses of the programmes reviewed (see Chapter II, 3.3. – p. 24).
- The Steering Committee has requested that the Reports working group look into the issues the various expert panels have dealt with since the 2008 Decree. After analysis, the Steering Committee will decide the points to be the subject of a position paper on the quality of higher education in the French Community.
- Finally, the Agency has been requested to produce dossiers presenting the French Community's or Belgium's vision of higher education and the quality assurance process (as found for example in the ALFA project [15] developed in partnership with the VLIR and the VLHORA quality units).

Article 20 of the Decree of 22 February 2008 specifies that system-wide analyses of programmes must in no case result in any ranking of the institutions involved. The Agency itself considers that such a ranking would not be opportune in view of the formative approach it is trying to use.

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[15] A collaboration project with the University of Louvain (UCL). An EU-funded project analysing the development of quality assurance in Europe and Latin America.

When publishing the system-wide analyses referred to above, the Agency is confronted with two sometimes contradictory considerations: on the one hand, a number of experts and institutions have expressed the desire to be able to produce and exploit more explicit *benchmarking* elements through the reports; on the other hand, the guidelines set by the Government order of 19 December 2008 stipulate that review reports may not contain certain qualitative and quantitative data on socio-demographic student characteristics, or any information on average study duration, success rates or graduate careers.

3.2. Official status: Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

The role and responsibilities of the Agency in the field of external evaluation are defined by decrees and implementation regulations:

- The Decree of 14 November 2002, issued by the Government of the French Community, established AEQES, the Agency for the quality assurance of higher education organised or subsidised by the French Community (in its annex there is a list of indicators). The Decree of 22 February 2008 covers various measures related to the Agency's organisation and the way it functions in assessing the quality of higher education organised or subsidised by the French Community.
- In the Decree of 31 March 2004 defining higher education, promoting its integration into the European Higher Education Area and refinancing universities, Article 9 states that: "the higher education institutions are bound to have oversight and assure quality in all their missions. In particular, with regard to their education mission, the higher education institutions are to comply with the Decree of 14 November 2002 establishing AEQES and the related application provisions."
- The Decree of 14 November 2008, amending the Decree of 16 April 1991 on adult education to the effect of promoting the integration of its higher education into the European Higher Education Area, states in Article 73: "In accordance with the Decree of 14 November 2002 establishing AEQES and the Decree of 22 February 2008 covering various measures related to the Agency's organisation and the way it functions, adult education (higher EPS) is included in the quality assurance system. EPS institutions providing higher education shall have oversight and assure quality in all their missions."

3.3. Activities: Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

As already stated in Chapter II, evaluations are carried out once every ten years.
The Agency's activities are completely devoted to external evaluation. Between October 2008 and March 2011, AEQES will have assessed 9 programmes, involving a total of 90 site visits.
Site-visits run from the end of September till March. The external evaluation process involves the following work:
- Before site visits, provision should be made to examine the list of programmes, plan the work, look for relevant literature, contact the institutions, select and contact experts, process their contracts, send out the self-evaluation reports and organise meetings with the experts.
- The site visits require logistical support for the experts, the reading of all self-evaluation reports and related documentation, the organisation of preparatory meetings and participation in the interview, supporting the experts by taking notes.
- After the site visits, the follow-up needs to be planned, various reports need to be published on the website, the experts need support in compiling the review reports and the status reports. In addition the system-wide analysis needs to be compiled in conjunction with the

Steering Committee, and communications with the institutions need to be handled appropriately.

Other tasks of the Executive Unit also need to be considered. These involve such external quality assurance activities as acting as secretariat in the monthly meetings of the Steering Committee and the Secretariat, and of various working groups (communications, experts, ethics and strategy, agency reports, agency self-evaluation, standards and indicators), website maintenance, accounts, collecting information (drafting, sending out and processing satisfaction surveys targeting various stakeholders, preparing for the assessment of the Agency itself (once every 5 years), and representation duties (requests for presentations, participation in workshops, seminars, symposiums, etc.)

To get through its 10-year plan, the Agency needs to conduct on average 59 site visits a year. This evaluation focused on study programmes – in contrast to an assessment approach looking at individual institutions - is turning out to be quite energy-consuming, both for the Agency and the institutions concerned (often facing different programme-evaluations in one year). Nevertheless, this evaluation method appears to meet the information needs expressed by the various stakeholders: not just the students, but also the institutions themselves, who also benefit from support in managing their study programmes. In addition, this "learning approach" seems to correspond to the "early days" of the evaluation system in the French Community and is particularly suitable for the first steps in an overall quality assurance process.

The Agency also points out that its reference list of indicators contains a number of items relating to the institution as a whole (especially in the chapters dealing with such topics as governance, resources or international relations).

3.4. Resources: Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.

a) Financial resources

Since the 2008 financial year, the Agency receives an annual index-linked budget of at least 675 000 euros from the Government of the French Community (e.g. the 2010 and 2011 annual budgets were 691 000 euros and 727 000 euros respectively). This budget is intended for use in covering external evaluation costs and does not include the wages of the Executive Unit staff (as at time of writing). Article 2 of the Decree of 22 February 2008 states that the Agency is an independent body, financially separate from the French Community's general administration, pursuant to Article 140 of the State's accounting law.

On 1 August of each year, the Agency is required to present the annual budget project covering the expenses associated with the site visit programme of the experts for the following academic year. The accounts 2008, 2009 and 2010 can be found in Annex 11.

Taking into account financial resources carried over from the previous Agency, the financial resources currently available permit the Agency to meet the demands of its missions. Nevertheless, if AEQES's scope of activities is going to be extended (cf. discussion on the Agency's methodological scope p. 13), the AEQES budget would need to be increased.

b) Human resources

Article 7 § 1 of the Decree of 22 February 2008 states that the Agency shall have an Executive Unit headed by a Grade 12 (minimum) official and consisting of at least three Level 1 and two Level 2 employees.

Executive Unit staff figures:
- October 2008 - February 2009: One head of Unit and two Level 1 employees
- February 2009 - August 2009: One head of Unit, two Level 1 employees and two Level 2 employees
- August 2009 - October 2010: One head of Unit, two Level 1 employees and one Level 2 employee
- In April 2010, French Community undertook to provide the AEQES Executive Unit with two Level 1 employees
- October 2010 - January 2011: One head of Unit, three Level 1 employees and one Level 2 employee
- March 2011 : One head of Unit, four Level 1 employees and one Level 2 employee

The Agency considers that the Executive Unit is now understaffed. With the organisation of the external assessments in the hands of a mere handful of individuals, the Agency has now included in its budget a specific item enabling it to hire two Level 1 employees from 2011 onwards. The necessary procedures are currently underway.

In spite of these constraints, the Executive Unit staff regularly undertakes training activities and participates in national and international conferences. The involvement of the Executive Unit staff in international projects in the area of quality assurance in higher education is seen in its participation in a number of seminars and conferences organised by ENQA in November 2008 (Budapest), December 2008 (London), June 2009 (Brussels), June 2009 (the Hague), September 2009 (Barcelona), October 2009 (Sigtuna - Sweden), November 2009 (Copenhagen) and in May 2010 (London and Bologna) (see 2008-2010 Activity Report).

c) A learning organisation

As already mentioned in Chapter II, 2.3. – p.15, the Agency works as a learning organisation, jointly building procedures and tools which are constantly improving thanks to the experience gained. Steering Committee members actively take part in the various working groups. Those groups are formed, evolve according to need and provide the Steering Committee with the necessary intellectual stimulus. These are all volunteers who supporting the Agency in the values it upholds.

3.5. Mission statement: Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

AEQES mission statement:

"AEQES is an independent public sector agency, practising formative evaluation based on a dialogue between all stakeholders within the French Community. Fully embedded in the European context, the Agency is responsible for assessing the quality of higher education and working for its continuous improvement.

The Agency autonomously develops its procedures used for assessing the quality of teaching in bachelor and masters programmes in the institutions authorised by the French Community. It establishes an evaluation-plan on a 10-year basis, monitoring an appropriate group of programmes with the aim of fostering the alignment of programme profiles and objectives with the missions of the institutions involved, disseminating good practice and promoting synergies.

The Agency organises evaluation and follow-up procedures in line with its code of ethics. It selects its experts, informs them of their mission and its context and ensures that they can carry out their work in complete independence.

The Agency provides information on the quality of higher education by publishing on its website the review reports, the system-wide analyses and the follow-up action plans, and highlighting best practice. It provides the heads of the institutions reviewed and the Government with proposals on ways of enhancing quality.

The Agency, through its broad-based participative structure, remains in permanent dialogue with stakeholders. It takes any initiative deemed fit for accomplishing its duties, updating its procedures on the basis of experience gained.
Its participation in international bodies and events for quality assurance in higher education are also to be seen in the context of the Agency as a learning organisation.

By basing all its working procedures on the *European Standards and Guidelines* (ESG), by working together with other agencies or bodies in other countries, and by disseminating information on European developments in higher education, the Agency can be seen as being a part of an overall European process."

This report is available on the AEQES website under the heading "*Agence : présentation de l'Agence*"

3.6. Independence: Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

The Agency's independence is defined in the Decree of 22 February 2008. This states in its Article 2*:* An independent body is established, not as a separate legal entity, under the name of *Agence pour l'évaluation de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur organisé ou subventionné par la Communauté française* (AEQES)".

This independence manifests itself in the following way:
-   Independence insofar as the Agency performs its duties without outside interference: the Agency is free to develop the modalities involved in implementing its methodology and to adjust it according to the experience it gains. It develops and updates its 10-year plan in complete independence. It also has the freedom to formulate position papers addressed to the Government.
-   Independence insofar as the conclusions and recommendations contained in the reports may not be influenced by third parties: the AEQES Steering Committee has no right of inspection in respect of either the draft or the review reports posted on the Agency website.
-   With regard to the system-wide analysis, the responsibility for its compilation is divided up in the following manner: 1) The foreword is drafted by the Agency's Executive Unit; 2) the status report on the programme(s) assessed is compiled by the experts; 3) the analytic notes are compiled by the Agency's Steering Committee.
-   Independence from the institutions with regard to the composition of expert panels: the procedures for selecting experts foresee an initial filter, through the Higher Education Councils (HECs) and a subsequent one by the Agency's Steering Committee itself. There is a possibility (as yet unused) for institutions to voice an objection to the appointment of an expert to an evaluation panel (cf. Decree of 22/02/2008, Art. 16).

However, the Agency's official status gives certain disadvantages in terms of human resources (heavy staff recruiting procedures). Nevertheless, the Agency remains strongly attached to the public sector dimension of its status.

3.7. External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies: The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:
- a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process
- an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency
- publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes
- a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.

Procedures, methods and evaluation criteria are all defined in the Agency's presentation triptych: *the Guidelines for Coordinators*, *the Guidelines for Experts*, and in *the Quality Handbook* (all these documents are available on the Agency's website).
The information on the various steps involved in an evaluation are also explained to institutions in meetings with the coordinators (held 2 or 3 times during the preparatory phase) and to the experts as part of the *E-Day*.
The Agency's website clearly states the legal framework (the Decree and application regulations). These are also to be found in Belgium's official gazette (*Moniteur belge*).

3.8. Accountability procedures: Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

The Agency has implemented an internal quality assurance system, as shown below:

Figure 11: AEQES Quality Assurance System
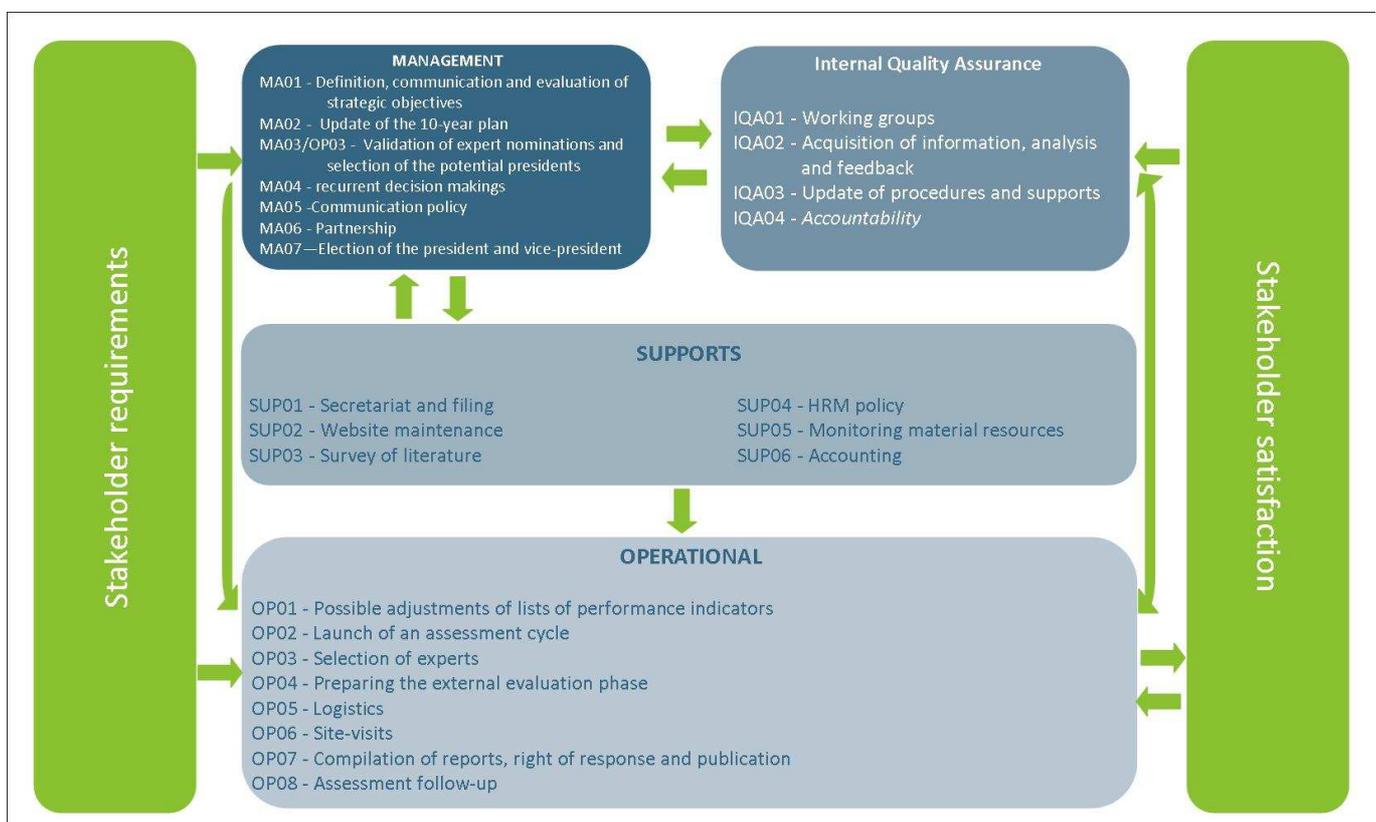
The Agency uses the following to examine and improve its procedures (cf. IQA process):
- Involvement of working groups to prepare, examine and improve procedures
- Gathering and analysing information from stakeholders
    o Questionnaires addressed to the institutions (management and quality coordinators compiled results available online *via* the forums and the intranet)
    o Questionnaires addressed to the experts (compiled results available on the intranet)
    o Debriefing sessions with coordinators at the end of an evaluation (minutes available in coordinator forums and on the intranet for the members)
    o Requests for the opinions of HECs on the system-wide reports
    o Upcoming: a questionnaire addressed to students interviewed
    o Upcoming: an HEC questionnaire
- Updating procedures and support measures on the basis of information gained
- Accountability (*vis-à-vis* stakeholders)
    o Every two years, the Agency compiles and publishes an activity report on its website.
    o Every five years (beginning in 2010-2011), the Agency produces a self-evaluation report

Chapter IV   Analysis and Action plan

1. Summary of the main strengths and weaknesses

After the analysis contained in Chapters II and III of this report, AEQES would like to stress its main strengths and weaknesses.

<u>The three main strengths of AEQES are:</u>

- Its values and vision translated into a methodology characterised by:
  o A formative and non-normative evaluation approach (absence of scoring, ranking and formal sanctions)
  o A widely participative and consensual approach
  o A follow-up procedure (publication of the follow-up action plan)

- Experts with a variety of backgrounds (profile, nationality, expertise) and the collective approach of the whole exercise. This favours a real admixture of points of view and exchange of best practice, the whole aiming at the best level of impartiality and objectivity of the evaluation.

- The federative role of the Agency, a place where the stakeholders of higher education can meet and express their opinions on the major quality-related issues, in particular on the crosswise aspects of the education offer in the French Community.

<u>The three main weaknesses of the AEQES are :</u>

- The fact that the Agency has at present no means to develop support actions such as the organisation of meetings, workshops and exchanges on best practice, the setting up of a real "Quality assurance resource centre", etc.

- The situation in terms of human resources makes the Executive Unit vulnerable: for the moment, the organisation of external evaluations rests on a huge commitment of the persons present and they show a dedication and a professionalism widely recognised by the experts and the institutions questioned during the surveys; the procedures of recruitment are long and complicated; *in fine*, how to guarantee the realisation of the ten-year plan?

- The evaluation standards, containing redundant items and considered too long according to many institutions, lead to difficulties in the writing of the reports; besides, the existence of a multiple and varied readership inevitably raises the question: "what and how to write for whom? »

2. AEQES Action plan 2011-2014

To pursue the various missions written in the decrees while correcting certain weaknesses described in this present report, the Agency has set up the following action plan:

Specific objectives	Description of the actions	Deadlines	Expected results
Methodology **To analyse regularly the evaluation procedures and adjust them when necessary**	1. To define the procedure for the updating of the follow-up plan 2. To keep an eye open for any new requirements (e.g.: developments on the Learning outcomes approach and joint degrees) *In charge : the Secretariat and the Steering Committee*	Autumn-winter 2011	Tuning the methodology to make it more appropriate to needs
	3. To give the Working Groups the task of discussing major adjustments 4. To analyse the issues in detail and submit proposals for adjustments to the Steering Committee *In charge: the Secretariat, the Steering Committee and the various Working Groups*	Major adjustments: allowing the necessary time for the consultation of the stakeholders and, if necessary, the parliamentary debates (if amendments of the decree)	Major adjustments : Improvement of the evaluation framework
	5. To take decisions on adjustments to the legal framework and/or propose legal amendments *In charge: the Secretariat and the Steering Committee* 6. To question the expert committees on the efficiency and the relevance of the practice 7. To question the institutions on the impact of the evaluation process *In charge : The Executive Unit*	Minor adjustments: according to analyses *Autumn, 2011: Nursing/ Mid-wifery and Marketing / International trade* *Autumn, 2012: computer science* *Autumn, 2013: graphic techniques, History and Art history, Construction, Ergotherapy, Dietetics, plastic, visual and spatial Arts, civil engineers and bio-engineers (special feature: joint evaluation AEQES-CTI)*	Minor adjustments (e.g.: methodological aspects, support and tools development,…)
Fostering a quality culture	1. A seminar or study days organised each year *In charge: the Secretariat*	Spring 2012 and subsequent years	Improving the quality culture of the various actors

Human resources	1. To measure HR requirements based on the ten-year plan 2. To recruit HR via appropriate paths *In charge: the Secretariat*	Every year Dependent on requirements derived from the ten-year plan	Matching requirements with human resources
Building a stable and competent team within the Executive Unit	1. To ensure the continuous upskilling of the members of the Executive Unit by enabling their participation in quality-related training and/or events *In charge : The Director of the Executive Unit*	Continuous approach	Increased skills in quality management and in communication (in particular foreign languages)
Developing the involvement of the Steering Committee members, in particular in the various working groups	1. To define the expectations attached to being a member of the member of the Steering Committee *In charge: the Secretariat and the Steering Committee*	From autumn 2011 onwards	Each Steering committee member becomes a member of a working group
Communication Increase targeted communication	1. To ensure the 2008-2010 AEQES Activity Report (and other reports published by AEQES such as the system-wide analyses) achieves a wide readership *In charge : the Executive Unit*	February 2011	Visibility of the AEQES and its missions
	2. To address a questionnaire to the HECs *In charge : the Secretariat*	March 2011	Definition of the roles the HEIs play as AEQES partners
	3. To address a questionnaire to students interviewed in the programme of the 2010-2011 site visits. *In charge : the Executive Unit*	March 2011	Measure the impact of the evaluation on the students
	4. Specific communication measures *In charge : The Steering Committee via the Communication working group*	End of 2011, then each year	Visibility of AEQES and its missions