AGENCY FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION (AEQES)

PADRAIG WALSH, OANA SÂRBU, CARMEN FENOLL, DAMIAN MICHALIK
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyses the extent to which the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (AEQES) fulfils the requirements of Parts 2 and 3 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The report is the result of a detailed procedure which consists of the following steps: A self-evaluation process by AEQES that includes the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report (submitted in June 2021), an online preparatory meeting between the panel and AEQES on 14 September 2021, and an online site visit made by the review panel to AEQES (29th September to 1st October 2021).

Established in 2008, AEQES is an independent public service agency that carries out formative evaluation of higher education programmes organized in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. Over the past few years, AEQES has developed a new evaluation methodology consisting of a mixed approach that combines both a revised programmatic component and is currently piloting an institutional evaluation process.

According to the legislation in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, AEQES pursues two main missions: to report on the quality of higher education and to ensure its constant improvement. This joint mission is to be carried out, on the one hand, through the development of specific methodologies and benchmarks for assessment, and, on the other hand, through the involvement of experienced national and international evaluators.

The following activities of AEQES were addressed during the external review:

- Programmatic evaluation (both initial and continuous);
- A pilot stage of institutional reviews[1].

AEQES produces and disseminates the results of the evaluations it carries out, in the form of reports, analysis and meta-analysis (diagnoses and recommendations).

The processes of programme evaluations are conducted in a supportive and enhancement-led manner without any summative judgement. At the time of the site visit, it was not yet clear whether the institutional evaluation processes would have the possibility of a summative judgement in relation to the internal quality assurance system of the institution.

During the online site visit, the panel had the opportunity to meet the staff of AEQES, the agency's Steering Committee, the Board members, members of the Methodology Working Group, the Methodological Support Council, , the Academy of Research and Higher Education (ARES), members of the evaluation panels for programmatic and institutional evaluation processes, leaders and quality officers from higher education institutions and student representatives, business stakeholders and social partners in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. The panel also had a particularly useful meeting with representatives of the Ministry who proved to be highly aware of, involved in and committed to the agency's activity.

As a result, the panel could see that the agency is respected and appreciated by the stakeholders in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. It is also obvious that its staff and leadership are viewed as valued professionals that contribute to the quality of higher education in the region.

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[1] The pilot institutional review process is addressed in this report to the extent possible at the time of the review. It should be noted that although 17 institutions had participated in the pilot phase, no reports had been published at the time of the site visit and the format of the summative judgements arising from the evaluations had not yet been agreed.

Following the previous review, it is gratifying to note that the agency had received an uplift in resources. AEQES acts in a professional manner in all its activities, but the team considers that an internal procedure for a regular evaluation of the effectiveness of its governance has not been implemented. In its discussions with Ministry officials, the panel understood that the Ministry would be supportive of such a review. Consequently, the panel recommends that AEQES conduct an evaluation process that addresses the effectiveness of its governance systems. External assistance may usefully be employed for this process.

In the light of all the information provided, the panel considers the agency to be fully compliant with the standards ESG 3.1, ESG 3.2, ESG 3.3, ESG 3.4, ESG 3.5, ESG 3.7, ESG 2.1, ESG 2.2, ESG 2.3, ESG 2.4, ESG 2.5, ESG 2.6, ESG 2.7 and substantially compliant with the standard ESG 3.6.

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (Agence pour l'Évaluation de la Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur) (AEQES) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted over the nine-month period from June 2021 to January 2022.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, to verify that they act in compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

The review addresses the following external quality assurance (EQA) activities of AEQES:

- two formats of programmatic evaluation (initial procedure and continuous procedure) of three types of higher education programmes (1st and 2nd cycles): higher education diplomas (120 credits), bachelor's degrees (180 and 240 credits) and master's degrees (120 credits) of institutions authorized by the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB).
- a pilot phase of institutional reviews (expected to end initially in June 2022, but extended to 2023)

AEQES's programme evaluations are conducted in clusters. The clusters take several forms:
- Evaluation of a programme organized by several types of higher education institutions;
- Evaluation of several programmes related to the same subject field, organized by one type of higher education institutions;
- Evaluation of several programmes organized by several types of higher education institutions.

As this is AEQES' third review, the panel is expected to provide clear evidence of results in all areas and to acknowledge progress from the previous review. The panel has adopted a developmental approach, as the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* aim at constant enhancement of member agencies.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2016 REVIEW

The 2016 review panel's report concluded that AEQES was in compliance with the ESG. It found the agency fully compliant with all standards, excepting ESG 3.5 Resources, considered partially compliant. The recommendations of the 2016 review panel are:

ESG 3.1 - The recommendation on the length of time between full programme evaluations made by the panel who conducted the ENQA review in 2011 remains valid and the Agency should continue the negotiations with the Government in shortening the 10-year time interval between two external evaluations.

- The Panel recommends to AEQES to continue supporting students and promoting quality assurance among students, in cooperation with the relevant student organizations.

ESG 3.3 - The Panel recommends that the Agency defines, in a clearer way than at present, the role of the Steering Committee in the description of the evaluation process, and in particular places emphasis on the approval process (without any interference by the SC) of the external evaluation reports.

ESG 3.4 - The Review Panel recommends that the Agency further enhances the dissemination process of its thematic analyses in such a manner that the analyses become a useful tool for all interested stakeholders. Furthermore, the Panel considers that it will be useful for AEQES to further develop its communication strategy and its management data system.

ESG 3.5 - The Panel recommends that the Agency continues its discussions with policymakers on its financial situation, to ensure the continuation of its activities while maintaining the same level of responsibility and quality standards.

ESG 2.2 - The Panel recommends that the Agency should continue the process of involving students in its activities, and in cooperation with the relevant student organizations, support the capacity building of student experts in quality assurance.

ESG 2.4 - The Review Panel recommends that AEQES would benefit from involving students in the follow-up evaluation process and panels. In this way, AEQES would further ensure the continuity of the evaluation process in a consistent manner.

ESG 2.5 – The Panel recommends that AEQES should pay more attention to the training of experts involved in the evaluation process in the German-speaking community.

ESG 2.6 – The Panel recommends that the Agency reconsiders the implementation of the proposal made by the ENQA Review Panel in 2011 concerning the issuing of summary reports on the evaluations that are easier to read and understood by non-professionals.

ESG 2.7 - The Panel recommends that AEQES considers the complaints and appeals procedures as part of the evaluation process. Furthermore, the Panel recommends that the Agency pays attention to updating the English versions of documents on the website so that they are correct and align with the documents published in French.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2021 external review of AEQES was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the external review of AEQES was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Padraig Walsh, Chief Executive, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Ireland - Chair, quality assurance professional (ENQA nominee)
- Oana Sârbu, Director of Quality Management Department, University of Bucharest, Romania - Secretary, quality assurance professional (ENQA nominee)
- Carmen Fenoll, Full Professor of Plant Physiology, Head of the Department of Environmental Sciences, University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain - Academic (EUA nominee)
- Damian Michalik, PhD student in Physics, University of Warsaw, Poland - Student (ESU nominee, member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool)

Milja Homan, project and reviews officer of ENQA, acted as review coordinator.

Self-assessment report

As part of the external evaluation process, the panel evaluated the documentation submitted by AEQES and conducted an on-line site visit.

The SAR was submitted in June 2021 and it provides clear and comprehensive information about the FWB HE and QA system; background description of the current situation of AEQES; an analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a SWOT analysis; each criterion (ESG part 2 and 3) addressed individually, and considerations of how the agency has addressed the recommendations as noted in the ENQA Board's membership decision letter and the partial compliance noted in the previous EQAR Register Committee's decision on renewal of registration. The information presented in the SAR is supported by 10 annexes and links to main documents cited in the report. The self-assessment process was coordinated by a *Self-assessment and Strategy Working Group,* also responsible for AEQES's new Strategic Plan, aiming to align the strategic vision with the agency's self-assessment activities.

After the SAR analysis, the panel considered that some clarifications were needed. Thus, AEQES sent the following additional documents:

- The process for handling conflicts of interest
- Online activities (including impact and feedback)
- Budget structure
- PDCA enacted
- Relationship between and roles of ARES and AEQES
- Organizational chart explained
- Updated information on the pilot phase of the Appeals Commission

Site visit

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the panel and AEQES agreed to conduct the site visit in an online format. It was organized in accordance with ENQA's Protocol for online site visits due to force majeure. The programme of the visit (Annex 1) was prepared jointly by the AEQES contact person and the panel. The online site visit took place between 29 September and 1 October 2021 and it was preceded by an online preparatory meeting between the panel and AEQES on 14 September 2021. During the online site visit, the panel met the different stakeholders linked to AEQES's activities:

- representatives from the Senior Management Team
- the team responsible for preparation of the self-assessment report
- staff of the agency
- ARES representatives
- Ministry representatives
- heads of some reviewed HEIs
- quality assurance officers of HEIs
- representatives from the reviewers' pool (including students)
- stakeholders, such as employers, students, local community

The panel appreciated the excellent organization of the virtual 'site visit'. The team felt that all their requests were accommodated and that the panel had an opportunity to meet with all the important stakeholders involved and that the size of teams that the panel met in each meeting was just about the right size to provide sufficient breadth of input while allowing all participants an opportunity to contribute.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Belgium is a federal state consisting of Communities (Flemish, French and German speaking) and Regions (Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels-Capital). The Federal State delegated the competences for education to each of the three Communities. As described in the SAR, the FWB offers higher education study programmes in four sectors (humanities and social sciences, health, science and technology, art) which are subdivided into 26 fields. The study programmes are delivered in different types of higher education institutions: 6 universities, 19 colleges, 16 higher schools of arts and 86 adult education institutions and are organized in three cycles:

- First cycle studies comprise between 120 and 240 ECTS and lead to an academic certificate or bachelor's degree. Bachelor's degrees may be referred to as *transitional* or *professionalizing*.
- Second cycle studies comprise between 60 and 180 ECTS (usually 120 ECTS) and lead to the master's degree.
- Third cycle studies comprise doctoral programmes and work relating to the preparation of a dissertation. In the FWB, the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique manages the 22 doctoral schools which group together the thematic doctoral schools (inter-university and interdisciplinary).

Higher education can also be provided by private institutions. These institutions, conferring degrees that are not recognized by the FWB, are not eligible for public funds and are not subject to AEQES's external evaluation.

All publicly funded higher education institutions are grouped within the Academy for Research and Higher Education (ARES) - a public interest body funded by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and created by the "Landscape" Decree of November 7, 2013.

ARES's mission consists of: guaranteeing the public service mission of general interest of higher education, supporting institutions and ensuring their overall coordination in their teaching, research and community service missions and encouraging collaboration between them, while respecting their autonomy.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality assurance in higher education was one of the main action lines assumed by FWB, following the adoption of the Bologna Declaration.

Considering internal quality assurance processes, the higher education institutions are required "to monitor and manage the quality of all their activities and to take all measures for effective internal self-evaluation and its follow-up."[2]

In accordance with the legislation in the French Community, the external quality assurance of all programmes leading to the awarding of academic degrees is carried out by the Agency for the Evaluation of the Quality of Higher Education (AEQES), created in 2002. AEQES carries out evaluations according to a specific methodology:

- a formative approach to evaluation;

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[2] Decree of 7 November 2013 « Landscape decree »

- a transversal approach which applies the same methodology to all types of higher education institutions;
- a programme approach as an external evaluation activity (more recently this is being supplemented by an institutional approach, with the pilot phase running from 2019 to 2022);
- the grouping of the programmes evaluated in the form of clusters.

The Academy of Research and Higher Education (ARES), founded in 2013, also has responsibilities in the QA area through the Commission for the Quality of Teaching and Research (CoQER), a platform for discussion and exchange between higher education institutions in the French Community on aspects relating to the quality of higher education and research, particularly in terms of support for strengthening the internal quality of institutions and the implementation of external evaluations carried out by AEQES, as well as contributing to quality developments.

AGENCY FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION (AEQES)

AEQES was established by the Decree of 14 November 2002 to implement the external quality assurance procedures and to support the development of internal quality assurance structures in HEIs. AEQES started the process of external evaluation in March 2004. The Decree of 22 February 2008 repeals the Decree of 2002 and establishes various measures relating to the organization and functioning of AEQES. AEQES is an independent public sector agency it is the only recognized external evaluation body by the FWB for the higher education 120 ECTS diplomas, bachelor's and master's degrees of the four types of HEIs (universities, university colleges, higher schools of arts and adult vocational education institutions).

In December 2017, the Government adopted the following legal changes:

- Article 3, 8° gives AEQES a further mission, that of "ensuring the development and implementation of methodological approaches adapted to the needs of the higher education sector and changing contexts".
- Article 9bis entrusts the agency with "the task of conceiving and implementing a pilot phase of institutional reviews (2019-2022) – within the limits of the budget assured by Article 22 – and providing the Government with an assessment report of the pilot, developed in the next six months.
- The same Article 9bis sets a new "periodicity of six years for the future evaluation cycles (institutional and programmatic)".
- Article 10 endorses follow-up evaluation procedures half-way through the present 10- year cycle of external evaluations.
- Article 22 sets the annual budget allocation to 1.000.000 euros from 2018 on (within the annual index adjustment).

AEQES has been a member of ENQA since 2011 and has been registered on EQAR since 2012.

AEQES'S ORGANIZATION/STRUCTURE

According to the 2008 Decree, the bodies of AEQES are: the Steering Committee (SC), the Board and the Executive Unit. Other bodies were progressively added by the agency to ensure its proper functioning. For instance, the SC mandates various Working Groups (WG) to conduct documentary research, to draw up suggestions and documents, to report regularly to the Steering Committee that makes decisions. Four WGs were active at the time of evaluation:

- the Self-assessment and Strategy WG

- the Methodological and Standards WG
- the Reports & Analyses WG
- the Planning WG

There are also bodies composed of members who are independent from AEQES and from the HEIs assessed by AEQES, such as the Complaints Commission, Recognition Commission, Appeals Commission or the Methodological Support Council. The Steering Committee has established them and defined their tasks and rules, respecting the independence in the activity.
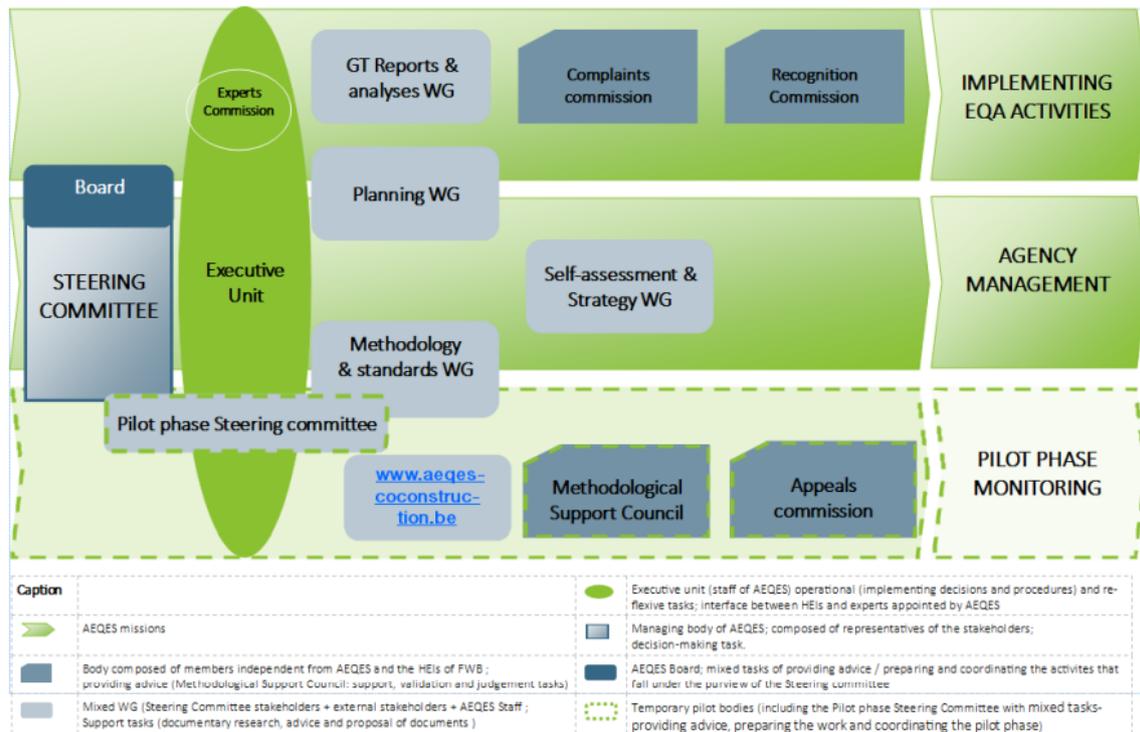
Fig. 1 AEQES organizational chart

The Steering Committee is the decision-making body, and it is composed of 24 full members with voting rights, and a secretary[3]. The Director of the Executive Unit participates in an advisory capacity in the Steering Committee and acts as its secretary. Each full member has an alternate who does not have the right to vote but can participate in all organized debates. The 24 members represent different categories of stakeholders: director of higher education, lifelong learning and scientific research, representatives of professional, social and cultural institutions, representatives of trade unions, representatives of students, administrative staff of different HEIs, and academics of different HEIs. The representative of the Minister responsible for higher education sits on the committee in an advisory capacity but does not have voting rights. Excepting students, who are nominated for a period of one year, the members of SC are nominated for *four years (appointment renewable once)*.

The Board assures the connection between the Steering Committee and Executive Unit, and it is composed of three members: the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the agency and the Director of the Executive Unit. The Director general for higher education, Lifelong Learning and Scientific Research sits in at Board meetings in an advisory capacity.

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[3] The process for populating the Steering Committee is described under ESG 3.3 below.

The Executive Unit implements the decisions of the Steering Committee and the Board. At the time of the evaluation visit in AEQES, 13 people were employed, under the coordination of the Director of the Executive Unit.

AEQES'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

According to the Decree of 2008, the main tasks of AEQES are:

1. To ensure that the study programmes organized by the institutions are subject to regular evaluation, highlighting best practices and any inadequacies or problems that need to be resolved;
2. To ensure the implementation of evaluation procedures;
3. To promote, through collaboration with all higher education stakeholders, the implementation of practices aiming to enhance the quality of education in all institutions;
4. To provide information to the Government, stakeholders and beneficiaries of higher education on the quality of higher education offered in the FWB;
5. To formulate suggestions to policymakers 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 at the Government's request;
7. To represent the FWB in national and international organizations in matters related to quality assurance in higher education.
8. Ensure in consultation with the stakeholders, the development and implementation of methodological approaches to quality assurance adapted to the needs of higher education and to changing contexts.

The external evaluations provided by AEQES are:
- two types of programmatic evaluation (initial procedure and continuous procedure)
- a pilot phase of institutional reviews (initially scheduled to end in June 2022, but since extended to 2023 due to the Covid-19 pandemic)

AEQES's programme evaluations are conducted in clusters. The clusters take several forms:
- Evaluation of a programme organized by several types of higher education institutions;
- Evaluation of several programmes related to the same subject field, organized by one type of higher education institution;
- Evaluation of several programmes organized by several types of higher education institutions.

The programmatic evaluations and the pilot institutional evaluations are composed of three phases:
- self-evaluation;
- the external evaluation carried out with the input of a committee of independent experts selected by the agency. This phase includes a site visit and the publication of the reports, drawn up by these experts, on the AEQES website;
- the publication of an action plan drawn up by the establishment and implementation of the action plan as well as a mid-term progress record (1st edition in 2023-2024).

Institutions are evaluated according to 6-year cycles. To support the institutions in their dynamic of continuous improvement, in the pursuit of the actions implemented and in the development of steering tools, AEQES also conducts mid-cycle follow-up evaluations, the three phases of which are:
- a progress report on continuous improvement actions;

- a follow-up visit by a committee of independent experts mandated by the agency, which shall draw up an evaluation report published on the AEQES website;
- the publication, by the evaluated institutions, of an action plan and its implementation.

The processes of programme evaluations are conducted in a supportive and enhancement-led manner and there is no summative judgment involved. For the pilot phase of institutional review, there is a proposal for a series of summative graded judgements in relation to the internal quality assurance system of the institution but at the time of the site visit, a final decision had not yet been taken on this outcome.

AEQES'S FUNDING

The financial resources available to AEQES are provided by the Government of the French-speaking Community. According to Article 22, Decree 20 December 2017, the annual allocation was raised to 1.000.000 euros for 2018 and the subsequent years. This financial support is also linked to the task entrusted to AEQES of implementing the pilot phase of institutional evaluation.

FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF AEQES WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG)

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

2016 review recommendation:

The recommendation on the length of time between full programme evaluations made by the panel who conducted the ENQA review in 2011 remains valid and the Agency should continue the negotiations with the Government in shortening the 10-year time interval between two external evaluations.

The Panel recommends to AEQES to continue supporting students and promoting quality assurance among students, in cooperation with the relevant student organizations.

Evidence

AEQES undertakes, on a regular basis, a series of external quality assurance procedures detailed in the section "AEQES's functions, activities, procedures" above which are:

- two types of programmatic evaluation (initial procedure and continuous procedure)
- a pilot phase of institutional reviews (initially scheduled to end in June 2022, but since extended to 2023 due to the Covid-19 pandemic)

Programmatic evaluation was conducted every 10 years with a mid-term follow-up evaluation, but from 2019 on, the decision of having new cycles of six years for both institutional and programmatic evaluations, was made. (20 December 2017 Decree).

AEQES has developed its 2021 – 2025 Strategic Plan, complemented by annual action plans, which defines the mission, principles and goals for the agency, in line with the new developments in the Higher Education Area. As stated in the 2021 – 2025 AEQES Strategic Plan, the agency "encourages the development of robust and sustainable management systems for the continuous improvement of the quality of higher education in FWB through the dissemination of its knowledge, the professionalism of its evaluations and its cooperation with stakeholders."

AEQES has issued a set of guidelines aimed at helping the implementation of its reference framework:
- AEQES reference framework for initial programmatic evaluation;
- AEQES reference framework for continuous programmatic evaluation;
- Detailed accompanying guide;
- Guidelines for HE institutions;

- Planning evaluations;
- Methodological guidelines for a pilot phase of institutional reviews.

All external programmatic evaluation reports are publicly available on the AEQES website. The programmatic evaluations conducted in clusters gives the agency the opportunity to collect and process information used in thematic analyses, which are also public documents.

The results of the programmatic evaluations conducted by AEQES have no formal effects as accreditation or impact on funding. Regarding the pilot phase of institutional evaluation, (an optional procedure which institutions could choose to undergo voluntarily) there is a proposal for several graded judgments:

- positive judgement - the planning of programmatic evaluations by AEQES will no longer be required for a period of six years
- conditional judgement - one or more conditions must be met by the HEI within a defined period
- negative judgement - the HEI is not authorized to gain such autonomy and its programmes will continue to be assessed by AEQES

The stakeholders are involved in the activity of the agency at different levels: governance, working groups or evaluation panels. The Steering Committee is composed of a large number of members, with diverse backgrounds: universities, university colleges, higher schools of arts, adult vocational education institutions, students, trade unions, the civil society, the professional world, and international experts. A representative of the Minister responsible for higher education also participates in SC meetings, without having the right to vote. Thus, the Minister can benefit from the relevant information concerning the strategic lines of the agency it finances as well as the level of achievement of the agency's objectives.

Analysis

The 2021 – 2025 AEQES Strategy, through the three main lines of development, reconfirms AEQES as one of the key actors in the implementation of quality assurance processes in FWB whereby it can:

- *"Improve its effectiveness by strengthening its organizational independence, its operational independence and the independence of evaluation results and by ensuring stakeholder involvement.*
- *Support institutions of higher education to develop an adequate and efficient quality system, embedded in a meaningful quality culture of their own.*
- *Participate, alongside the other quality actors in FWB, in the definition of a comprehensive and transparent quality policy, where the respective roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and synergies possible."*

Since its establishment, AEQES has demonstrated its support for higher education institutions in the development of their quality approach and has constantly sought to improve its evaluation practices for that purpose.

AEQES publishes clear, accurate, objective, relevant, accessible and detailed information regarding its external programmatic evaluation processes. The institutions' representatives that took part in the pilot phase of institutional evaluation have stressed that the procedures have not yet been fully defined; nevertheless, they are expecting the full guidance to be available once the pilot phase has been completed. The recommendation in the previous ENQA review to reduce the length of time between programme evaluations has largely been overtaken by the new Methodological proposal, adopted in 2017.

Upon the agency's establishment in 2002, the participation of the diverse set of higher education institutions from the Federation was important to ensure confidence in the agency's processes. Over

time, it is important that the voices of the different higher education sectors in the agency's governance do not detract from the important role that a governance body must play in strategic development. In its interviews with the members of the Steering Committee, the team heard diverse views on whether the current balance between institutional participation and strategy is optimal.

The interviews with stakeholders show that they are aware of the importance of their participation in the agency's activity, and they are satisfied and convinced with the level of professionalism of the agency and the usefulness of its external evaluation processes for improving internal quality assurance systems and, in a broad sense, the quality of the higher education system in the FWB.

It is clear to the team that the agency takes great care to involve stakeholders in its governance and its procedures. The agency is to be commended for the way in which actors from the world of work contribute to the evaluation procedures. In the panel's meeting with external stakeholders, the team were impressed with the strong commitment and interest from senior business leaders in the activities of the agency. As noted previously in the 2016 review, the team feels that it is important to ensure the involvement of students in all the activities of the agency beyond their presence in the Steering Committee and on evaluation panels. Student representatives can be an important conduit to the wider student body about the importance of student evaluation of the quality of their education and its assurance.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

Even if steps have been taken to involve students in AEQES's activities such as their presence in the Steering Committee and as panel members, there is still room for improvement in this direction and AEQES should continue to find solutions to attract students to QA.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS

Standard:

Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

Evidence

AEQES was established by the Decree of 14 November 2002 to implement the external quality assurance procedures and to support the development of internal quality assurance structures in HEIs. AEQES started the external evaluations in March 2004. The Decree of 22 February 2008 repeals the Decree of 2002 and establishes various measures relating to the organization and functioning of AEQES. AEQES is an independent public sector agency - the only external evaluation body recognized by the FWB for the higher education 120 ECTS diplomas, bachelor's and master's degrees of the four types of HEIs (universities, university colleges, higher schools of arts and adult vocational education institutions). Some other changes in the functioning of the agency were adopted by the Government in December 2017:

- AEQES has a further mission, that of "ensuring the development and implementation of methodological approaches adapted to the needs of the higher education sector and changing contexts".
- AEQES has "the task of conceiving and implementing a pilot phase of institutional reviews (2019-2022)".

- External evaluation processes will have a new "periodicity of six years for the future evaluation cycles (institutional and programmatic)".
- follow-up evaluation procedures half-way through the present 10- year cycle of external evaluations.
- the annual budget allocation will increase to 1.000.000 euros from 2018 on (within the annual index adjustment).

Analysis

AEQES is an autonomous public service agency which carries out independent evaluations of higher education programmes and institutions (in a pilot phase) organized in the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB). It is clear to the team that the agency has been established by legal decree and that the agency is recognized for its work by the government, institutions, and stakeholders. Although the agency has been established by decree, it does not have a separate legal basis. In its discussions with Ministry representatives, the team was informed that although some education agencies in FWB have an established legal basis, the legal basis of AEQES was not dissimilar to some other education agencies. he official status gives AEQES the necessary autonomy to make its own analyzes and find the best solutions in managing material and human resources. The first evaluation of AEQES in 2011 by ENQA (access to full membership status) and its inclusion on the EQAR register in 2012 reinforced this official recognition. Following the review by ENQA in 2016, the inclusion on the EQAR register was reconfirmed in 2018.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

Standard:

Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

2016 review recommendation:

The Panel recommends that the Agency defines, in a clearer way than at present, the role of the Steering Committee in the description of the evaluation process, and in particular places emphasis on the approval process (without any interference by the SC) of the external evaluation reports.

Evidence

According to Article 2 of the 2008 Decree, AEQES is an "autonomous service without legal personality whose accounting and budgetary management is separate from that of the administration's departments." The Steering Committee, the Board and the Executive Unit are set by the same law and some other different structures were added to ensure the agency's proper functioning. AEQES's structure is designed to separate responsibilities and decision-making powers in governance and executive processes.

The decision-making body of AEQES is the Steering Committee composed of 24 full members with voting rights, and a secretary:
- One general director of non-compulsory education and scientific research;
- Four representatives of the academic and scientific bodies of the universities proposed collegially by the Rectors;

- Four representatives of the teaching staff of the university colleges, on the proposal of the Directors-Presidents;
- Two representatives of the teaching staff of the higher schools of arts, on the proposal of the Directors of the higher schools of arts;
- Two representatives of the teaching staff of educational institutions for social advancement organizing higher education, proposed by the General Council for Social Advancement Education;
- One representative of the administrative staff of the universities, proposed by the Interuniversity Council of the French Community;
- One representative of the administrative staff of the university colleges proposed by the General Council of the university colleges;
- Three student representatives, proposed by the student representative organizations;
- Three representatives of the trade unions represented on the National Labor Council and which affiliate in the sector, proposed by them;
- Three personalities from professional, social, and cultural circles.[4]

Each full member has an alternate who does not have the right to vote but can participate in all organized debates. The mandate of the SC members is four years, renewable once except for the mandate of the student representatives which corresponds to one academic year and is renewable. In the event of the death or resignation of a full member, they will be replaced by the alternate one. The Executive Director of AEQES attends the SC's meetings, acting as a secretary and sitting in an advisory capacity. The representative of the Minister responsible for higher education sits on the committee in an advisory capacity without the right to vote, and is there purely to benefit from the relevant information. The Board assures the connection between the Steering Committee and the Executive Unit, and it is composed of three members: the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the agency and the Director of the Executive Unit.

The Executive Unit is the permanent staff of the agency. Under its founding decree being without legal personality, AEQES was unable to legally hire staff itself, the staff being technically employed by the Ministry. Once the approval to hire staff was received, however, the selection procedures are completely under the responsibility of AEQES. The number of hired personnel is defined by AEQES's Executive Director and since 2014 AEQES has been able to recruit staff with its own funds and not only with civil service funds.

AEQES recruits experts following the launch of a public call for applications, and all applications received are examined by the Executive Unit, which also identifies potential conflicts of interest. The list of all AEQES experts can be found on the agency's website, accompanied by the CV of each expert.

The financial resources of AEQES are fixed by law and the expenditures of AEQES are basically split into two budget lines: the functioning of the agency and the EQA activities. The largest line of expenditures is allocated to implement EQA activities, including all the expenses related to the experts and the salaries of the staff.

A large part of the methodology implemented by the agency is based on legal requirements, but AEQES has developed independently its procedures, strategies or reference frameworks used for its external evaluation processes. The Decree of 22 February 2008 from the Government of the French speaking Community (with subsequent changes), Art 11 states that "*[.....] the evaluation standards, drawn up by*

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[4] Article 5 of the 2008 Decree [modified by D. 30-04-2009; D. 25-06-2015; D. 09-02-2017]

the SC in consultation with ARES, are approved by the Government.". As part of the pilot project, the evaluations are based on standards adopted by the Government on the agency's proposal.

Considering AEQES's strategic development, every five years, a WG established by the SC elaborates a new strategic plan that is adopted by the Steering Committee. Once validated, the strategic plan is translated by the Board into annual action plans.

Considering the programmatic evaluations, the final external evaluation reports are the responsibility of the evaluation panel without any external influence. Neither the AEQES Steering Committee nor another body has the right to amend the work produced by the experts. In the case of the pilot phase for the institutional evaluation process, the draft reports were subject to scrutiny and moderation by the Methodological Council, but the experts expressed their satisfaction to the panel that their reports were unchanged in terms of the substance of their proposed judgements and recommendations.

Analysis

Organizational independence

The team recognizes that the higher education system in the Federation is diverse and complex with a mixture of long-established comprehensive universities, university colleges, higher schools of arts and adult higher education colleges. This has been the basis of having a governance system with a large (24 member) Steering Committee that has a significant representation of members nominated by the institutions from the different sectors of higher education. Each of these representatives also has an alternate member. The team were surprised to hear that it has been the practice that such alternate members attend and speak at meetings concurrently with the official representative, although without voting rights. While it was understandable in the initial stages of the agency's development to ensure a wide understanding of the development of external quality assurance, it is debatable whether such a large parliamentary style governance system represents current good practice. The team heard diverse views from different stakeholders of the benefits and disbenefits of such a system. At the same time, the SC members must always act first in the interests of the agency, not of the stakeholders represented.

While the hiring of staff must be approved by the Ministry, it was clear that the agency has full autonomy in how it selects its staff.

Operational independence

Although the agency is reliant on public funding for its operation, and its premises and ICT resources are provided by the Ministry, the team was convinced that there is no sense in which government influences the agency's procedures. The definition and operation of its procedures and methods, strategies, the nomination and appointment of external experts and the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance procedures are undertaken autonomously and independently from government or higher education institutions.

The agency is clearly free to select and train its experts. The members of the expert panels are selected following a public call and screening and nomination by the Executive Unit thanks to a defined system, guaranteeing the non-influence of HEIs and ensuring experts have no conflict of interest. The panel considers that an important aspect of AEQES's activity is the presence of many international evaluators, an important way to guarantee the processes fairness.

Independence of official results

The external evaluation reports produced by evaluation panels are not subject to external moderation in terms of the substance of their judgements and recommendations. The Executive Unit, in the case of programmatic evaluations and the Methodological Council for the pilot phase of the institutional

evaluation procedure is responsible for checking the draft external evaluation report, but only to ensure that the evaluation guidelines are considered, the analysis and recommendations are respected and that the guidelines for publication are followed.

The team noted that one strategic goal of the AEQES is to "develop a structural solution to strengthen the independence and efficiency of the Agency". The discussions with various stakeholders during the interviews pointed out that this *independence* can be strengthened by improving the efficiency of the decision-making mechanisms, which may require smaller groups. This aspect has been analysed by the Steering Committee, but no final decision has been made so far, due to the difficulty of finding a good balance between the representation of all stakeholders and improved efficiency of decision-making.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel believe that for more efficient decision-making a smaller, competence-based, Steering Committee might be considered. Alternatively, a smaller Standing sub-committee could be delegated some of the more routine functions of the Steering Committee without losing the important parliamentary and representative nature of the existing system.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

2016 review recommendation:

The Review Panel recommends that the Agency further enhances the dissemination process of its thematic analyses in such a manner that the analyses become a useful tool for all interested stakeholders. Furthermore, the Panel considers that it will be useful for AEQES to further develop its communication strategy and its data management system.

Evidence

The programmatic evaluation carried out in clusters permits AEQES to conduct system-wide analyses on a regular basis. As much as possible, the same team of experts performs the programmatic evaluation for each programme in the cluster and, at the end of the evaluations, the experts write a report that captures the perspective of the programmes evaluated at the level of the higher education system in the FWB. The system-wide analyses are published and presented to higher education institutions, the Steering Committee and other stakeholders. Some of the stakeholders interviewed (mainly students and business representatives) did not seem to know about these analyses. AEQES's website contains 44 such system-wide analyses.

The Reports WG is responsible for writing meta-analyses based on the regular evaluation processes and the system-wide analyses. The WG has produced the following analyses:

- TRENDS - an analysis on seven recurrent themes in the evaluations provided by AEQES during 2009-2010: visibility and opportunities, the trend for professionalization in education, the design and the control of programmes, the development of competency frameworks, the place of research in HEIs, the place of foreign languages in the educational processes, and resources.

- FOCUS – an analysis on six themes in the evaluations provided by AEQES during 2010-2012: the evolution of societal needs and the programmes updating, the flexibility of students' routes, teacher training, research, autonomy versus regulations, quality assurance – methods and cultures.
- PATHWAYS - revisited the results of thirteen evaluations conducted in 2013-2014 in the light of part I of ESG (version 2015).
- FROM PROGRAMMES TO GOVERNANCE focuses on the main fields of action identified by the evaluation panels (from 8 evaluations conducted in 2014-2016) and on the management processes of the activities to which they belong (core, support and steering processes).

The outcomes of some other thematic analyses conducted by AEQES over previous years can also be found on the AEQES website:

- the review of the follow-up evaluations conducted in 2015-2016;
- the summary of the results of stakeholder surveys (institutions, students, experts) on the AEQES's performance.

The Executive Unit systematically invites other categories of potential audience "to quality events for stakeholders"[5] and several newspapers articles have been written. Recently, a staff member with responsibility for communication has been recruited. Some stakeholders confessed to being unaware of the existence of the agency until they were asked to participate in some of its processes.

Considering the data management system, under the DEQAR project, ARES and AEQES worked together to optimize a database that cross-references HE provision and the external evaluations. "The toolboxes currently fall under the purview of ARES."[6]

Analysis

The team complements the agency for the significant work it has put into the development of 'cluster' reports for selected academic disciplines that are produced following a round of programmatic evaluations at individual institutions. PATHWAYS and "From Programmes to Governance" are the only meta-analysis that was finalized since the evaluation back in 2016. During the last few years, the agency's activity has focused on implementing the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation procedure. As a result, a system level analysis on the impact of the processes of institutional evaluation is currently in the closing phase but was not completed at the time of the site visit.

The agency uses common pools for evaluations of disciplines where only a small number of programmes are offered regionally. Stakeholders commented on the usefulness of such synoptic reports.

With the welcome recent arrival of a staff member specifically dedicated to communications, there will be an opportunity to showcase the work of the agency to a wider audience. The agency has to ensure that the outputs of its work are made more visible and in a manner that is easily communicated to a wider audience, including the opportunity to use electronic resources such as social media to make its outputs more accessible to a general audience. The agency could also introduce some strategic planning for thematic analysis and consider how to make use of it in the future beyond its dissemination.

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[5] p 57, *AEQES Self-Assessment Report* - on http://www.aeqes.be/calendrier_events_details.cfm?news_id=185; http://www.aeqes.be/calendrier_events_details.cfm?news_id=186
[6] *p 47, AEQES Self-Assessment Report*

AEQES has made progress in enhancing the dissemination process of its activities, but the panel considers there is still room for improvement in this aspect.

The panel found that AEQES is aware that the dissemination of the results is a very important dimension of the quality assurance process and, consequently, the development of the communication strategy is one of the main actions in the 2021 – 2025 AEQES Strategic Plan: "*AEQES develops its targeted communication strategy. It designs and implements an appropriate and relevant communication plan.*" Additionally, during the interviews, the agency representatives have mentioned that a new website is on the 'drawing board', designed to be both more user-friendly and efficient in finding information rapidly.

Panel commendations

The agency is to be commended for the use of common pools for evaluations of disciplines where only a small number of programmes are offered regionally. Stakeholders commented on the usefulness of such synoptic reports.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The agency is encouraged to find ways to ensure that the outputs of its work are made more visible and in a manner that is easily communicated to a wider audience, including the opportunity to use electronic resources such as social media to make its outputs more accessible to a general audience.

The agency could also introduce some strategic planning for thematic analysis and consider how to make use of it in the future beyond its dissemination.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

Standard:

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

2016 review recommendation:

The Panel recommends that the Agency continues its discussions with policymakers on its financial situation, to ensure the continuation of its activities while maintaining the same level of responsibility and quality standards.

Evidence

The financial resources of AEQES are fixed by law and the expenditures of AEQES are basically split into two budget lines: the functioning of the agency and the external quality assurance activities. The largest line of expenditures is allocated to implement external quality assurance activities, including all the expenses related to the experts and the salaries of the staff. Since 2014, AEQES is authorized to recruit staff within the agency's allocation. According to Article 22, Decree 20 December 2017, the annual allocation was raised to 1.000.000 euros for 2018 and the subsequent years. In 2021, the foreseen amounts are 1.055.489€ of which 550.489€ for the EQA activities and 505.000€ for the staff.

At the time of the evaluation visit in AEQES, 13 people were employed. The Executive Unit consists of the Director, nine people who are exclusively assigned to external quality assurance tasks, an

accountant, an administrative assistant and a communications officer. An important aspect in the staff structure is represented by the rehiring of an experienced former staff member who will now devote her time to human resource development.

The agency reported on frequent staff turnover due to the nature of the employment contract, a so-called employment contract for 'specific tasks' which does not allow for statutory recruitment. This aspect is not controlled by AEQES and remains the responsibility of the Ministry. It was pointed out during the interviews that the hiring of new staff is a long and difficult process that takes several months and various steps of formal approval.

Staff are regularly trained thanks to a staff development plan. Some examples of the various types of training the members of the Executive Unit could attend in the period from 2016 to the present time are presented as an annex in the SAR, and include project management, GDPR, Excel, PowerPoint, conflict management, process management, foreign languages, communication, etc. At the same time, staff members participated in several international events in QA, organized by EUA, ENQA, INQAAHE or other agencies for quality assurance in higher education.

Analysis

Following the previous review, it is gratifying to note that the agency received an uplift in resources. From the team's discussions with the Ministry, the panel observed that the agency is well regarded at governmental level. At the same time, the panel noted that while the new external institutional evaluation gives more flexibility to HEIs to manage their programmatic evaluations, it is not the same for the agency which would need more budgeting flexibility and autonomy in its human and financial resources.

The non-established status of AEQES employees has probably contributed to the high level of turnover of agency staff, although it is probable that staff turnover is a multi-faceted process. The team heard from the Ministry representatives that the problem of the non-established nature of the agency is well-known to them and is shared by some other education agencies funded by central government.

The flat structure of the agency whereby all other members of staff report to the Director is probably a contributing factor here also. The structure is a consequence of the small size of the agency. Nevertheless, the team feels it is important to point out the inherent risk in having a structure that is so reliant on one senior member of staff.

The panel had the opportunity to meet a large number of staff members. They are well qualified in terms of professionalism and are highly committed to their work. Based on the discussions taking place during the online site visit, staff are encouraged to participate in forums/conferences/workshops in which significant QA issues are discussed and plans for development are considered.

The whole agency activity is also backed by a representative number of experienced QA external evaluation experts, whose implication was outstanding during the online site visit.

Panel commendations

The team commends the recent appointment of a staff member dedicated to communications and to the recent rehiring of a former staff member who will now devote her time to human resource development.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

With the support of the Ministry, AEQES should strive to find a solution to consolidate the staff structure in the long-term.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

> Standard:
>
> Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

Evidence

AEQES has a formal published Quality Handbook which sets out its policy and processes for internal quality assurance. The Quality Handbook describes the four key processes which are split into a series of procedures: the Management process, the Quality Management process, the Support process and the Operational process.

AEQES has various mechanisms in place (surveys, meetings) for collecting relevant information from stakeholders (teachers, students, professionals, staff members of higher education institutions, expert members of evaluation committees) and processing it to provide feedback and to update procedures and materials where necessary.

Every two years, the Executive Unit draws up an Agency's Activity Report which is approved by the Steering Committee and disseminated to the agency's partners. The Activity Reports are also published on the AEQES's website. This periodical evaluation report covers almost exclusively the processes carried out and not the effectiveness of its governance. Testimonies during the interviews showed that the large number of SC members, including alternate members, can sometimes delay the decision-making process.

Using the information collected from different stakeholders or its own staff, AEQES has been constantly engaged in activities aimed at improving the knowledge of its technical staff or external evaluators. One of the experienced staff members, has returned to the agency after three years, and is now in charge of staff development activities.

Integrity is assured through the integration of a Code of Ethics that includes a non-conflict of interest statement. The Code sets out a clear standard for the ways in which all people involved in AEQES's activities (Steering Committee, Executive Unit, experts) carry out their work under the headings of independence, fairness, transparency, confidentiality, involvement.

Analysis

From the interviews, the team concluded that the agency acts in a professional manner in all its activities. The panel found evidence confirming that all procedures are being followed and all stakeholders are convinced by AEQES's professional work.

Internal quality assurance functions throughout the agency are integrated in a defined cycle of planning, implementation, assessment and review. The Executive Unit or the Methodological Council (in the case of the pilot phase of institutional evaluations) is responsible for checking the draft external evaluation report, to ensure that the evaluation guidelines have been considered, the analysis and recommendations are respected and that the guidelines for publication are followed. The recent hiring of a staff member who is going to work on staff development should assist in developing the internal quality assurance processes within the agency to ensure that staff are as cross-functionally skilled as possible.

The Code of Ethics was adopted by the Steering Committee in 2010 and the agency considered that the content of the code was still relevant and did not amend it, but its provisions have been adapted through procedures to meet current needs. For example, switching from a face-to-face site visit to an

online site visit changed the confidentiality conditions. AEQES assured that meeting rooms were always secured, and access to the online meetings was provided personally by a member of the Executive Unit. The absence of complaints indicates that preventive action was efficient in the field of conflict of interests.

The standard requires that an agency has in place internal quality assurance processes for assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of its activities. Such activities include not only its procedures but its internal governance. As an agency that has been established for almost two decades at this stage, a good internal quality assurance system should include regular evaluation of the effectiveness of its governance - of its board, committees and working groups. From its discussions with the members involved in the agency's governance system, the panel observes that there are strong and diverse views on the effectiveness of the current system of governance. Good governance practice suggest that these exercises should be conducted on a periodic basis. In its discussion with Ministry representatives, the Panel believes that such a review would be supported.

Panel recommendations

The team strongly recommends to AEQES to conduct an evaluation process that addresses the effectiveness of its governance systems. External assistance may usefully be employed for this process.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

Further work could be done to improve the feedback mechanisms on the outcomes of AEQES's evaluations, particularly to student participants who have a more ephemeral relationship with the evaluated institutions than staff members.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES

Standard:

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

Evidence

This is the third external review of AEQES undertaken by ENQA. The previous review was undertaken in 2016, and AEQES has been working to address all the recommendations arising from that review since. The SAR provided to the panel included a section dedicated to the progress, current situation and supporting evidence for each recommendation. After the reconfirmation of membership of AEQES in ENQA, the review report was examined by EQAR which found that the report provided sufficient evidence and analysis on AEQES's level of compliance with the ESG and therefore approved the application for inclusion on the Register. AEQES's inclusion is valid until 28/02/2022. The AEQES's 2019 follow-up report was appreciated by the ENQA Board for its analytical approach.

Analysis

The review panel found that AEQES fulfills its formal obligations towards continued membership in ENQA. The previous ENQA review provided an opportunity for AEQES to reflect on its policies and activities and the evidence available demonstrates an active and comprehensive response varied by recommendation.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG Part 2: External quality assurance

ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

> Standard:
>
> External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

Evidence

The AEQES's external evaluation procedures clearly state that external quality assurance should assess the effectiveness of internal quality assurance processes and the reference framework specifies in detail the areas to be covered.

The Reference framework for programmatic initial evaluation is as follows:

Criterion 1: The institution/the entity has defined, implements and keeps up-to-date a policy for supporting the quality of its study programmes.

- Dimension 1.1: The HEI's governance policy
- Dimension 1.2: Quality assurance at HEI, entity and programme levels
- Dimension 1.3: Programme design, strategic planning and periodical review
- Dimension 1.4: Internal information and communication

Criterion 2: The HEI/entity has developed and implements a policy for ensuring the relevance of its study programmes.

- Dimension 2.1: Assessment of the study programme's relevance
- Dimension 2.2: External information and communication

Criterion 3: The HEI/entity has developed and implements a policy for ensuring the internal coherence of its study programme.

- Dimension 3.1: Learning outcomes of the study programme
- Dimension 3.2: Study programme content, teaching and learning activities (including internships, projects, and final dissertations)
- Dimension 3.3: Study programme's overall implementation and time foreseen for achieving the intended learning outcomes
- Dimension 3.4: Assessment of the achievement level for the intended learning outcomes

Criterion 4: The HEI/entity has developed and implements a policy for ensuring the efficiency and equity of its study programme.

- Dimension 4.1: Human resources
- Dimension 4.2: Material resources
- Dimension 4.3: Equity in terms of student welcome, progress monitoring and support
- Dimension 4.4: Analysis of data required for the programme's monitoring

Criterion 5: The HEI/entity has completed the analysis of its study programme and has developed an action plan for continuous improvement.

- Dimension 5.1: Self-assessment methodology
- Dimension 5.2: SWOT analysis
- Dimension 5.3: Action plan and follow-up

Since 2018, the AEQES has developed a new, specific reference framework for continuous evaluations:

- "Criterion A: The institution/entity is committed to a process of continuous enhancement adapted to its objectives and based on reasoned choices, in particular as regards the recommendations of the previous external evaluation. This approach is explicit and is carried out with the participation of the internal and external stakeholders of the institution/entity.
- Criterion B: The changes made by the institution/entity contribute to the dynamics for improving the programme/cluster, in particular as its relevance, internal coherence, efficiency and equity. The communication of the institution/entity is updated accordingly.
- Criterion C: In the service of the continuous enhancement of the entity's programmes, its quality culture is based as much on the individual and collective commitment of all stakeholders as on identified procedures and tools".[7]

Compliance of programmatic evaluation with Part 1 of the ESG:

Part 1 - ESG	Initial evaluation	Continuous evaluation
ESG 1.1	Dimension 1.1; Dimension 1.2; Dimension 5.1	Criterion A Criterion C
ESG 1.2	Dimension 1.3; Dimension 2.1; Dimension 2.2; Dimension 3.1; Dimension 3.2; Dimension 3.3; Dimension 4.3	Criterion B
ESG 1.3	Dimension 3.1; Dimension 3.2; Dimension 3.3; Dimension 3.4; Dimension 4.1; Dimension 4.2; Dimension 4.3	Criterion A Criterion B Criterion C
ESG 1.4	Dimension 2.2; Dimension 3.1; Dimension 4.3; Dimension 4.4	Criterion B
ESG 1.5	Dimension 4.1	Criterion A Criterion B Criterion C
ESG 1.6	Dimension 4.1; Dimension 4.2; Dimension 4.3	Criterion A Criterion B Criterion C
ESG 1.7	Dimension 4.4	Criterion A Criterion B Criterion C
ESG 1.8	Dimension 2.2; Dimension 3.1	Criterion A Criterion B Criterion C
ESG 1.9	Dimension 1.2; Dimension 1.3; Dimension 2.1; Dimension 2.2; Dimension 4.4; Dimension 5.3	Criterion A Criterion B Criterion C
ESG 1.10	Dimension 1.3;	Criterion A Criterion C

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[7] p. 43 – AEQES Self-Assessment Report

The reference framework is accompanied by guidelines (a Guide for HEIs and a Guide for experts), which are useful for self-evaluation reports and for the external evaluation process.

The reference framework used for the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation process is precisely Part 1 of the ESG, AEQES giving to HEIs a degree of freedom to demonstrate compliance with standards, depending on their mission, dimension, or resources. Interviews with HEI representatives showed that while this approach was appreciated by some institutions, for others, it created difficulties in the self-assessment process. Another aspect highlighted during the discussions was the challenge of applying the same reference framework for all types of institutions: large comprehensive universities, university colleges, and smaller higher schools of arts and adult higher education colleges. Stakeholders mentioned that the consideration of diversity could mean innovation and flexibility for the quality assurance in the FWB higher education system, but, at the same time, without final information on a decision on the proposed use of graded judgments, some of the smaller institutions were concerned that could also increase the impact of their resource differentials.

Analysis

It was clear from the self-assessment report and from the discussions with the institutions that the European Standards and Guidelines are well known and that the long-standing programmatic evaluations use ESG part 1 as a basis for the evaluation. The panel has also read several external evaluation reports. These reports fully cover the reference framework, indicating compliance with internal quality assurance standards.

It was also clear that the template for the self-assessment report offered by the agency for the pilot phase of the institutional evaluations uses the ESG Part 1 standards as their foundation.

The panel heard the efforts of the agency to develop, monitor and promote the internal quality assurance systems of the higher education institutions. The reference frameworks act as a key guidance document and the panel noted evidence of the additional efforts taken by the agency to meet with institutional representatives, formally and informally, to explain and clarify criteria based on ESG.

The panel heard some interesting inputs from stakeholders from the business world. While there was a diversity of views expressed on the preparedness of graduates for the world of work, several stakeholders expressed their satisfaction at the growing transversal skills being acquired by students as part of their study programmes, indicating that the student-centred learning approach advocated by the 2015 ESG Part 1 may be working its way into pedagogical practices in the institutions.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel considers it essential that at the end of the pilot phase of institutional evaluation, AEQES should make an in-depth analysis of the results, taking into account the various expectations of all actors involved and thus make the best decision on the final form of the process, including one or several reference frameworks according to the different types of HEIs.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

Standard:

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

2016 review recommendation:

The Panel recommends that the Agency should continue the process of involving students in its activities, and in cooperation with the relevant student organizations, support the capacity building of student experts in quality assurance.

Evidence

According to the law in FWB, the main mission of AEQES is to "promote the strengthening of continuous quality improvement processes in higher education in the FWB in cooperation with higher education institutions and stakeholders".

To fulfill its mission, as already mentioned in this report, AEQES undertakes a series of external quality assurance procedures on a regular basis:

- two types of programmatic evaluation (initial procedure and continuous procedure)
- a pilot phase of institutional reviews (initially scheduled to be completed in June 2022, but since extended until 2023 due to the Covid-19 pandemic)

The results of the programmatic evaluations conducted by AEQES have no formal effects on accreditation or impact in funding. Regarding the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation process, there is currently a proposal for different graded judgements:

- positive judgement - the planning of programmatic evaluations by AEQES will no longer be required for a period of six years
- conditional judgement - one or more conditions must be met by the HEI within a defined period
- negative judgement - the HEI is not authorized to gain such autonomy and its programmes continue to be assessed by AEQES

AEQES's formative external programmatic evaluations are intended to support the institutions in developing their missions. To achieve this objective, AEQES developed additional tools and procedures to further support the development of internal quality assurance processes:

- introduction of a follow-up external evaluation as of 2013-2014 to allow for taking stock of improvements made by institutions to their study programmes;
- transformation of this evaluation to develop the current methodology of 'continuous programmatic evaluation': assessment of the first edition, introduction of a specific reference framework, inclusion of a student expert in the panel, concept of the portfolio to be developed by the institutions to document the improvements made to their programmes, production of a system-wide analysis if relevant, etc.;
- addition - in the three external quality assurance activities - of the 'mid-term progress record', a follow-up mechanism (midway between two evaluations) that consists of sending to AEQES a brief report to inform the actions already implemented for improvement."[8]

For the pilot phase of the institutional review procedure, even if the processes seem to be clear enough, there were some different opinions expressed on the proposed graded final judgments and their legal consequences.

The stakeholders (HEIs representatives, students, ARES's representatives, policy makers, labour market representatives) are involved in AEQES's activities at different levels: Steering Committee,

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[8] P. 45 – *AEQES Self-Assessment Report*

Working Groups or evaluation panels. Thus, they permanently contribute to procedures design and continuous improvement of the agency.

Analysis

The agency's programmatic evaluations are well established and fit for purpose. It will be important that, following the completion of the pilot phase, when the final framework for the institutional evaluations is eventually agreed, the purpose of the evaluations is clear to all participants. It is clear that stakeholders, particularly those from the institutions, are heavily involved and committed to the evolution of an institutional development process but the panel believes it will be challenging to find a process that satisfies such a diverse range of institutions from large, comprehensive universities to university colleges, higher schools of arts and adult higher education colleges.

In terms of the trajectory from a programmatic evaluation approach to an institutional approach for quality assurance, a diversity of views was presented to the panel on the desire for greater autonomy by some larger institutions whereas some smaller institutions saw the possibility of an increased burden if they are expected to take greater responsibility for quality assurance processes. All institutions were adamant that it would only be possible to take on increased responsibility for evaluation if additional resources were provided.

AEQES has established clear tools for permanent monitoring of the way the procedures are applied, and how the expected results are obtained. All information collected is analysed and, if necessary, corrective actions are performed.

It is clear to the panel that the agency makes good use of involving professionals and students in the governance of the agency and in the evaluation processes that it undertakes. There is still some way to go in involving students in all aspects of the agency's work and the panel encourages the agency to work with the national students' union and student representatives in the higher education institutions to ensure wider student involvement in and awareness of the dissemination activities of the agency's outputs.

Considering the programmatic evaluation procedures, all processes are well defined and communicated to the HEIs and expert panels. Even if regular surveys of institutions and experts indicate overall positive satisfaction rates, AEQES permanently responded to improve its activities. Thus, if the analyses of the questionnaires applied in 2017-2018 showed that for continuous evaluations the HEIs found less information available, during the interviews, the higher education institution representatives confirmed that the situation has changed, and exhaustive information is now published on the AEQES's website. The interviews confirmed the fact that the processes run by AEQES have induced major improvements within the institutions and increased the awareness regarding the importance of internal quality assurance for the higher education institutions in FWB.

As the panel has already mentioned in this report, considering the new institutional evaluation process, the application (during the pilot phase) of the same reference framework for all types of institutions: comprehensive universities, university colleges, higher schools of arts and adult higher education colleges was appreciated by some institutions, but for others, it created difficulties in the self-assessment process.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel strongly encourages all stakeholders involved in AEQES's work, following the completion of the pilot phase of the process, to move towards agreeing an institutional evaluation process and provide clarity on the consequences of the graded summative judgements arising from the application of this process, as quickly as possible.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

> Standard:
>
> External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:
>
> - a self-assessment or equivalent
> - an external assessment normally including a site visit
> - a report resulting from the external assessment
> - a consistent follow-up

Evidence

The external evaluations processes provided by AEQES are pre-defined and published:

- two types of programmatic evaluation (initial procedure and continuous procedure) - conducted in clusters
- a pilot phase of institutional reviews (initially scheduled to be completed in June 2022, but extended to 2023 due to the Covid-19 pandemic)

The long-established programmatic evaluations and the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation process are composed of three phases:

- a self-assessment process completed through a self-assessment report / self-assessment progress report, for continuous programme evaluation;
- the external evaluation carried out with the input of a committee of independent experts selected by the agency;
- the follow-up process: the publication of an action plan drawn up by the evaluated institution and implementation of the action plan, a mid-term progress record (1st edition in 2023-2024).

To support the HEIs in achieving self-assessment, AEQES has published on their website the Guidelines for programmatic evaluation and the Methodological guidelines for the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation. The HEI representatives that took part in the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation have stressed that the final form of the Methodological guidelines will need improvement., possibly through not applying the same framework for all types of higher education institutions.

The agency's external evaluation procedures include the nomination of the panel members, the analysis of the self-evaluation report in relation to the criteria of the evaluation framework, a site visit and the publication of the reports drawn up by these experts on the AEQES website. The composition of the expert panels should be balanced with an international perspective, professional experience (academics, students, representatives of the labour market, QA experience, education expertise), as well as considering gender and age.

The site visit proposes meetings with different stakeholders and the panel assessing the correspondence between the data, information and conclusions of the self-assessment and the real situation in the institution. Due to legal restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, the most recent site visits were organized online. Schedules for online visits have been reconceptualised to accommodate the characteristics of an online environment (time and data management, preparation and debriefing of panel discussions, etc.). The findings are concretized in an external evaluation report

with conclusions and recommendations. While the processes for programmatic evaluation and the conclusions of the external reports are well known and acknowledged, interviews with HEI representatives showed that while they appreciated the move to an institutional evaluation process and the templates for the draft structure of the self-assessment report, the final format for the use of graded judgements and expectations are still not sufficiently clear.

In terms of follow-up, the continuous programmatic evaluation focuses on the processes outlined by the HEI in the action plan published at the end of the initial programmatic evaluation. Also, in all three external quality assurance activities a follow-up mechanism is implemented (midway between two evaluations) that consists of sending to AEQES a brief report to inform the actions already implemented for improvement.

During the interviews, the panel found that not all the participants in the evaluation processes felt informed about the purpose of the reviews and, consequently, they didn't know about the existence of a final report and a follow-up process. Moreover, the students of the evaluated institutions did not seem to be familiar with the process of external quality evaluation.

Analysis

The team recognizes that the programmatic evaluation process is well established and follows the above-mentioned 4-stage model. However, the institutional review process is still in the development phase. The pilot evaluations have been conducted using self-assessment and a site visit and the reports will also be forthcoming (although they were not yet available at the time of the site visit). The panel heard a diversity of views on the process that has been adopted for the self-evaluation structure, with some institutions using the ESG Part 1 as the basic template and other choosing a different mechanism that incorporates the standards. It will be important to formally evaluate the satisfaction with the process once the pilot phase has been completed. The legal restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, changed the way of organizing site visits from face to face to on-line. Regarding the confidentiality of the process, the meeting platforms are hosted and managed by AEQES and online visits are not recorded.

The procedures for selecting experts and for the composition of expert panels are clearly mentioned on the agency's website and are structured as follows:

Procedures	Responsible			
	Executive Unit	Experts Commission	Chair of the panel	Methodological Support Council
Experts' recruitment				
Validation of the experts and Selection of the experts eligible for the chair position (programmes evaluation)				
Composition of the panel – initial evaluation	Proposal		Validation	
Composition of the panel – continuous evaluation				
Validation of the experts and Selection of the experts eligible for the chair position (institutional evaluation)				
Composition of the panel – institutional evaluation	Proposal			Validation

It is important that those participating in evaluation processes in the higher education institutions are informed about the purpose of the reviews and how the outcomes will be reported on and followed-up. During the meetings with students who had participated in such processes, the panel has found out that they were unaware about how the views they had expressed would find their way into eventual institutional change. An important role could be played by elected student representatives who could find innovative ways to disseminate the results of AEQES activities. The Agency's student representatives could help to keep students' unions up to date on QA matters and articulate common students' needs as equal stakeholders in the agency. The long timeline for the governance of evaluation outputs does not lend itself to speedy change but it is important to stress to the students who participate in such events that their views are important and will be considered by the higher education institutions when following up on report's recommendations.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

Greater use of elected student representatives in the dissemination activities of the agency may assist in widening their impact.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

> Standard:
>
> External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

2016 review recommendation:

The Review Panel recommends that AEQES would benefit from involving students in the follow-up evaluation process and panels. In this way, AEQES would further ensure the continuity of the evaluation process in a consistent manner.

Evidence

AEQES recruits experts following the launch of a public call for applications, and all applications received are examined by the Executive Unit, which also identifies potential conflicts of interest. The list of all AEQES experts can be found on the agency's website, accompanied by the CV of each of the experts.

For the programmatic evaluation, the experts' profiles are:

- peer expert: person with teaching experience in the evaluated field;
- professional expert: person with professional experience in the evaluated field;
- education expert: person with experience in higher education, didactics and pedagogy;
- expert in quality assurance;
- student expert;
- chair of the panel: a person who is proficient in one of the above-mentioned areas of expertise (except a student expert) and who has experience in quality assurance – only for initial evaluation.

While the panel is coordinated by the Chair during the initial programmatic evaluation, a similar position doesn't exist for the continuous programmatic evaluation. Consequently, the team members all have equal responsibilities and need to organize its coordination themselves.

For the pilot phase of institutional evaluation, the experts' profiles are:

- expert in governance and strategic leadership of a higher education institution or organization;
- expert in quality assurance in higher education;
- expert in pedagogical practice in higher education;
- student expert;
- professional expert;
- chair of the panel.

The composition of the expert panel should be balanced with an international perspective as well as considering gender and age. For the pilot phase, the experts were recruited from outside FWB as much as possible (ensuring that at least one member of the panel had a good knowledge of the HE context in the FWB).

All experts who participate in AEQES's external evaluations sign a contract that includes a no Conflict-of-Interest statement.

Before an evaluation, the Executive Unit provides training to review panels which covers AEQES's activities, processes and values, and the methodology for a given process and report writing. Also, some training events are organized every year in September/October for all experts commissioned for the academic year. Because of the pandemic, the most recent training events were organized online and digital materials were produced and made available to the experts. The reviewers the team met expressed satisfaction with the training provided by the agency and the helpfulness of the agency staff anytime clarification was required. Should panel members be unable to assist physically at the visit due to legal restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Executive Unit provides to each panel member specific instructions designed to ensure efficient and effective management during online visits. The instructions provide technical guidance to the panel in advance of connecting to meetings as well as user guidelines for the online platform itself.

The performance of reviewers is assessed upon completion of each evaluation by the evaluated institution but also by the Executive Unit.

Analysis

The team found that the agency has in place mechanisms to ensure that competent and suitable reviewers are selected from their pool of reviewers and that students are incorporated in all relevant processes. The selection of experts and the composition of the panels according to the requested profiles of experts are clear, transparent and appropriate. Discussions held by the panel with AEQES evaluation experts have identified the need for having a pre-designated chair in all evaluation teams.

All the processes in which the experts are involved are carried out in compliance with the values assumed by AEQES: dialogue and construction, independence, fairness, transparency, respect for diversity, continuous improvement.

As the ENQA panel learned from its discussions with experts, each panel works as a team where all members, including students and professional experts, have the same level of responsibility in terms of judgements and contribute according to their specific expertise. The chair of a panel carries out specific tasks which include oral feedback on the panel's first conclusions following the external evaluation visit, draft reports to the panel, continuous support for the panel's work dynamic, and submitting to the institutions and the Agency's Steering Committee the evaluation report drawn up

by the panel. Regarding the training of experts, it is evident to the panel that experts are trained appropriately through the different tools the agency has put in place: trainings, guides or presentation clips. The tools provided ensure an appropriate level of knowledge and a common understanding of the reference framework for a consistent interpretation and application.

The panel considers that an important aspect in the AEQES activity is the presence of many international evaluators, well acknowledged for their competence in the QA domain. This stands not only for the fairness of the process but also adds the perspective of an international approach.

Panel commendations

The agency's use of international reviewers is to be complemented and the team were impressed by the commitment of such reviewers in the meeting the team had with them.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

For a better organization of external evaluation processes, AEQES should consider having the position of a designated chair for each type of evaluation.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Standard:

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

2016 review recommendation:

The Panel recommends that AEQES should pay more attention to the training of experts involved in the evaluation process in the German-speaking community.

Evidence

AEQES has put in place several instruments to guarantee the consistency of its procedures:

- the procedures and criteria are publicly available on the agency's website;
- the experts are trained appropriately, to ensure consistent treatment across all evaluated programmes and institutions;
- permanent support of the Executive Unit during the evaluation processes, including a verification of the draft external evaluation report, to ensure that the evaluation guidelines are considered, the analysis and recommendations are respected and the guidelines for publication are followed.

The AEQES's programmatic evaluations do not lead to any formal decision.

Regarding the institutional evaluation, the current pilot phase proposes different judgements:

- positive judgement - the planning of programmatic evaluations by AEQES is no longer required for a period of six years
- conditional judgement - one or more conditions must be met by the HEI within a defined period
- negative judgement - the HEI is not authorized to gain such autonomy and its programmes continue to be assessed by AEQES

The legal restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic brought new challenges for the agency in ensuring the consistency of the evaluation processes. Consequently, a protocol for online visits was set up in September 2020. The protocol is based on two major principles: HEIs and experts involved in the evaluation process adhere to the principles and requirements of the online review and they also accept the methodological rigour regardless of organizational modalities of the visit.

Since the 2016 evaluation, the German-speaking Community has no longer asked AEQES to evaluate its study programmes.

Analysis

Programmatic evaluation

The team found that the agency has put in place systems designed to ensure that the final reports from programmatic evaluation procedures are as consistent as possible. The procedures and criteria used by AEQES for programmatic evaluations are clearly defined and publicly available on the agency's website.

Experts are well prepared before each evaluation process, and they are comfortable with the criteria used by AEQES. At the same time, the agency's methodology for programmatic external evaluations, including standards and criteria, are accessible to all stakeholders and particularly well known by the HEI representatives.

Institutional evaluation (pilot phase)

The institutional review procedure will be a change for institutions in that it will be possible to have a judgement as to the institution's ability to take on greater autonomy and responsibility for its own study programmes.

During the panel visit, interviews with HEI representatives showed that they appreciated the move towards an institutional evaluation process, drafting structure of the report, but the future consequences of the proposed graded judgements and expectations are still not sufficiently clear. Following the completion of the pilot phase, AEQES should carefully analyse and consider the results derived from the process in order to establish and publish clear explicit procedures and criteria for the final agreed form of an institutional evaluation process.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

Following the completion of the pilot phase and its analysis, it will be essential that the framework and guidance for the agreed final form of the institutional review process contain criteria that are explicit and public.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Standard:

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

2016 review recommendation:

The Panel recommends that the Agency reconsiders the implementation of the proposal made by the ENQA Review Panel in 2011 concerning the issuing of summary reports on the evaluations that are easier to read and understood by non-professionals.

Evidence

All programmatic initial evaluation reports are elaborated based on the template provided by the agency to the experts' panels, respecting the five-criteria structure of the AEQES reference framework, on which the HEI relied to conduct the self-assessment. The system-wide analysis report has three main chapters: Foreword (written by Executive Unit), State of the art (written by the expert panel) and the Summary (written by the expert panel). The objective of the evaluation report is to establish an inventory of the strengths and areas for improvement of the programmes evaluated, and to offer recommendations to help the HEI build its own improvement plan, translated into an action plan.

As already mentioned in this report, AEQES's panels for initial programmatic evaluation and for the pilot phase of institutional evaluation have an assigned chair. For these types of external evaluations, after SAR analyses and site visit, the chair proposes a draft evaluation report to the panel. The draft is commented upon and enriched by all experts of the panel and a new draft unanimously accepted by the panel members is sent to AEQES. Given the absence of a designated panel chair for the continuous programmatic evaluation, the reports are elaborated by all members of the panel according to a methodology which ensures the overall consistency and balanced distribution of the workload. The Executive Unit in the case of the programmatic evaluations or the Methodological Council (for the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation procedure) is responsible to check the draft external evaluation report, only to ensure that the evaluation guidelines have been considered, the analysis and recommendations are respected and that the guidelines for publication are followed.

Before being published, the report is sent to the evaluated HEI, so that it can submit in writing any comments and suggestions to correct data that the institution believes were either misunderstood or inadequately considered. The report is adapted according to the elements accepted by the experts. Comments that do not lead to an adaptation of the experts' report are recorded in a document, signed by the HEI and included in the evaluation report.

Reports produced by the expert panels involved in AEQES's external programmatic evaluation processes are all published on the website in full. The evaluation reports are also published in the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR – managed by EQAR). Following the recommendations made during the ENQA 2016 evaluation, AEQES revised the format of its reports to show visually – with a coloured background – the summary written by the experts. The reports continue to be published exclusively in French. To try and improve the dissemination process of the results of the external evaluations performed by AEQES, the Executive Unit sends an e-mail to all relevant stakeholders to inform them of the reports' publication.

At the time of the site visit, none of the reports arising from the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation process had been completed but the panel understands that the process for their publication, once completed, will mirror that for the programmatic evaluations

Analysis

The team understands that the expert panels are primarily responsible for the report contents for the programmatic evaluations and that the role of agency staff is to ensure that the language is clear and consistent. The draft reports for the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation process were subject to scrutiny and moderation by the Methodological Council, but the experts expressed their satisfaction

that their reports were unchanged in terms of the substance of their judgements and recommendations.

Even if AEQES has a methodology for elaborating the reports resulting from a continuous programmatic evaluation, the experts would appreciate the prior designation of a panel member as chair who can steer the report.

The representatives of the HEIs confirmed that reports are well structured and contain all the necessary elements to provide HEIs with useful recommendations to improve their internal quality assurance system, but stakeholders, such as students or representatives of the labour market, consider that a summary report would be useful and might improve the interest of all stakeholders in AEQES's activities. Also, the production of a summary report would make it easier to disseminate the evaluation results to non-specialized QA personnel in HE.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel suggests that AEQES should consider the prior designation of a chair for any evaluation process; additionally, it should continue the process of issuing summary reports on the evaluations that are easier to read and be understood by non-professionals.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Standard:

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

2016 review recommendation:

The Panel recommends that AEQES considers the complaints and appeals procedures as part of the evaluation process. Furthermore, the Panel recommends that the Agency pays attention to updating the English versions of documents on the website so that they are correct and align with the documents published in French.

Evidence

Until 2016, following an external evaluation process conducted by AEQES, existing complaints were solved by mediation.

In 2016, AEQES adopted a Procedure to set up a Complaints Commission which deals independently with complaints from higher education institutions. The Complaints Commission is composed of three members on an ad hoc basis: one appointed by the complainant institution, one appointed by the Steering Committee, and one appointed jointly by these two persons. A member of the Executive Unit acts as the secretary of the Complaints Commission. In the last five years there have been no complaints following the programmatic evaluation processes.

A complaint is considered admissible when it:
- pertains to non-compliance with the code of ethics, an evaluation procedure and/or the expert contract;
- is submitted, in writing, within 30 calendar days of the alleged offence;
- is based on facts and is documented;

- is signed by the highest authority of the HEI;
- pertains to an identified element of the evaluation procedure.

Linked to the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation process, AEQES appointed an Appeal Commission with 9 members who are independent from AEQES and from the HEIs assessed by AEQES. An appeal may be submitted against that final decision, but a clear procedure has not yet been established. An assessment of the summative judgement procedure and the appeal procedure is to be made at the end of the pilot phase to learn the lessons from it and improve the processes.

Analysis

The long-standing system of programmatic evaluations are conducted in a supportive and enhancement-led manner and there is no summative judgment involved. Therefore, without a formal stake, HEIs are not encouraged to contest the evaluation processes' results, leading to no complaints being filed for the past number of years. In response to the recommendation addressed in 2016, AEQES introduced the complaints procedure as part of the external evaluation process.

For the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation process, an Appeals Commission has been established, but it has not yet had to deal with any referrals to date. As the pilot institutional evaluation processes will have the possibility of a series of graded summative judgement in relation to the internal quality assurance system of the institution, it will be important to ensure that an appropriate appeals procedure is in place and is clearly flagged to the institutions and other external stakeholders. The panel encourages the agency to nominate a student as a member of the Appeals Commission.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS (optional section)

EVALUATION OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS

While a growing number of higher education institutions, including those involved in the Erasmus+ European Universities initiative, are already working on the development of micro-credentials, AEQES, backed by Government support, should consider the possibility of evaluating these qualifications. The same quality assurance principles should be applied to micro-credentials and AEQES could take initiatives in this direction.

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

ESG 3.4 The agency is to be commended for the use of common pools for evaluations of disciplines where only a small number of programmes are offered regionally. Stakeholders commented on the usefulness of such synoptic reports.

ESG 3.5 The team commends the recent appointment of a staff member dedicated to communications and to the recent rehiring of a former staff member who will now devote her time to human resource development.

ESG 2.4 The agency's use of international reviewers is to be complemented and the team were impressed by the commitment of such reviewers in the meeting the team had with them.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ESG 3.1, ESG 3.2, ESG 3.3, ESG 3.4, ESG 3.5, ESG 3.7, ESG 2.1, ESG 2.2, ESG 2.3, ESG 2.4, ESG 2.5, ESG 2.6, ESG 2.7 – fully compliant

ESG 3.6 – substantially compliant

ESG 3.6 The team recommends to AEQES to conduct an evaluation process that addresses the effectiveness of its governance systems. External assistance may usefully be employed for this process.

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (AEQES) is in compliance with the ESG.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

ESG 3.1 Even if steps have been taken to involve students in AEQES's activities such as their presence in the Steering Committee and as panel members, there is still room for improvement in this direction and AEQES should continue to find solutions to attract students to QA.

ESG 3.3 The panel believe that for more efficient decision-making, a smaller, competence-based, Steering Committee might be considered. Alternatively, a smaller Standing sub-committee could be delegated some of the more routine functions of the Steering Committee without losing the important parliamentary and representative nature of the existing system.

ESG 3.4 The agency is encouraged to find ways to ensure that the outputs of its work are made more visible and in a manner that is easily communicated to a wider audience, including the opportunity to use electronic resources such as social media to make its outputs more accessible to a general audience.

The agency could also introduce some strategic planning for thematic analysis and consider how to make use of it in the future beyond its dissemination.

ESG 3.5 With the support of the Ministry, AEQES should strive to find a solution to consolidate the staff structure in the long-term.

ESG 3.6 Further work could be done to improve the feedback mechanisms on the outcomes of AEQES's evaluations, particularly to student participants who have a more ephemeral relationship with the evaluated institutions than staff members.

ESG 2.1 The panel considers it essential that at the end of the pilot phase of institutional evaluation, AEQES should make an in-depth analysis of the results, taking into account the various expectations of all actors involved and thus make the best decision on the final form of the process, including one or several reference frameworks according to the different types of HEIs.

ESG 2.2 The panel strongly encourages all stakeholders involved in AEQES's work, following the completion of the pilot phase of the process, to move towards agreeing an institutional evaluation process and provide clarity on the consequences of the judgements arising from the application of this process, as quickly as possible.

ESG 2.3 Greater use of elected student representatives in the dissemination activities of the agency may assist in widening their impact.

ESG 2.4 For a better organization of external evaluation processes, AEQES should consider having the position of a designated chair for each type of evaluation.

ESG 2.5 Following the completion of the pilot phase and its analysis, it will be essential that the framework and guidance for the agreed final form of the institutional review process contain are criteria are explicit and public.

ESG 2.6 The panel suggests that AEQES should consider the prior designation of a chair for any evaluation process; additionally, it should continue the process of issuing summary reports on the evaluations that are easier to read and be understood by non-professionals.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Programme of the site visit

29 September			
Session No.	**Timing**	**topic**	**persons for interview**
3	09:00 – 09:30 30 min	Review panel's private meeting	
	09:30 – 09:35 *5 min*	*Connection set-up*	
4	09:35 – 10:20 45 min	Meeting with the CEO and the chair of the Board (or equivalent)	The Chairman of the Steering Committee Anne-Joëlle PHILIPPART The Vice-chair of the Steering Committee Karin VAN LOON The Director of the Executive Unit Caty DUYKAERTS
	10:20 – 10:35 15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
	10:35 – 10:40 *5 min*	*Connection set-up*	
5	10:40 – 11:25 45 min	Meeting with the team responsible for preparation of the self-assessment report	Members of the team responsible for the SAR, with different backgrounds: Angeline AUBERT (member of the Steering Committee) Lucien BOLLAERT (member of the Steering Committee) Dominique THEWISSEN (member of the Steering Committee) David URBAN (member of the Executive unit, since Oct. 2019)
	11:25 – 11:40 15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
	11:40 – 11:45 *5 min*	*Connection set-up*	
6	11:45 – 12:30 45 min	Meeting with representatives from the Senior Management Team	Members of the Steering Committee Lucien BOLLAERT (international expert) Sandrine CANTER (Universities representative)

			Dimitri DEFLANDRE (adult higher education colleges representative)
			Jennifer GEERTS (Universities representative / administrative staff)
			Caroline HOLLELA (Directorate General for Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Scientific Research representative)
	12:30 – 13:30 60 min	*Lunch break*	
	13:30 – 14:30 60 min	*Review panel's private discussion*	
	14:30 – 14:35 5 min	*Connection set-up*	
7	14:35 – 15:20 45 min	Meeting with key staff of the Agency/staff in charge of external QA activities	Claire LEFEVRE (quality officer, since January 2019)
			Marie-Line SERET (quality officer, since November 2020)
			Dounia TALEB (quality officer, since March 2021)
			Alexis VERMOTE (quality officer, since March 2011)
	15:20 – 15:35 15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
	15:35 – 15:40 5 min	*Connection set-up*	
8	15:40 – 16:00 20 min	Meeting 1 with department/key body of the Agency	Pascale DISKEUVE (accountant, since September 2016)
			Caty DUYKAERTS (director, since October 2008)
	16:00 – 16:25 25 min		Eva JAROSZEWSKI (responsible for coordination support and staff development, since October 2008)
			Hélène LEBAILLY (communications officer, since March 2021)
			Romain PARMENTIER (quality officer, responsible for the Experts Commission and the Executive unit coordination, since January 2019)
	16:25 – 16:40 15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
	16:40 – 16:45 5 min	*Connection set-up*	
9	16:45 – 17:10 25 min	Meeting 2 with department/key body of the Agency	Members of Methodology and standards WG:
			Angeline AUBERT (member of the Steering committee, chair of the working group)
			Sandrine CANTER (member of the Steering committee)
			Dimitri DEFLANDRE (member of the Steering committee)

			Caroline HOLLELA (member of the Steering committee)
			Clarence PITZ (member of the Steering committee)
	17:10 – 17:35 25 min		4 Members of the Methodological Support Council: Guy AELTERMAN (independent expert, Flanders) Bernadette CHARLIER (independent expert, Switzerland) Jacques MOREAU (independent expert, France) 1 Member of the Appeals Commission Elfriede HEINEN
	17:35 – 17:45	Break	
	17:45 – 18:45 60 min	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day II	

30 September			
SESSION No.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
10	09:00 – 9:15 15 min	Review panel's private meeting	
	9:15 – 9:20 5 min	Connection set-up	
11a	09:20 – 9:45 25 min	Meeting with ARES	Bénédicte CHAMPAGNE (project manager at the Studies and statistics department, ARES) Philippe HUBERT (chair of CoQER, the quality commission of ARES) Nathalie JAUNIAUX (Head of Studies and statistics department at ARES) Jacques NEIRYNCK (Head of Academic affairs at ARES)
	9:45 – 10:00 20 min	Review panel's private discussion	
	10:00 – 10:05 5 min	Connection set-up	
11b	10:05 – 10:30 25 min	Meeting with ministry representatives	Florence MAERTENS (representative of the Minister of HE sitting in the Steering Committee) Arnaud VANHONACKER (jurist at the Ministry Cabinet)

	10:30 – 11:05 35 minutes	Review panel's private discussion	
	11:05 – 11:10 5 min	*Connection set-up*	
12	11:10 – 11:55 45 min	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs/HEI representatives	Different types of institutions: universities, colleges, colleges of art, adult education institutions *In italics: HEIs participating in the pilot phase* *Annick CASTIAUX (Rector of University of Namur)* Carine DECHAMPS (Director of the École supérieure des Affaires - adult higher education college, Namur) Laurence DENIS (Director-President of Robert Schuman University College) Pascale HOGNE (Director of Peruwelz adult higher education college) *Marc STREKER (Director ESA St. Luc)*
	11:55 – 12:10 15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
	12:10 – 12:15 5 min	*Connection set-up*	
13	12:15 – 13:00 45 min	Meeting with quality assurance officers of HEIs	*In italics: HEIs participating in the pilot phase* Loredana ASTORINO (quality officer, Morlanwelz adult higher education college) *Bertrand BIELANDE (quality officer, Haute Ecole Libre en Hainaut HELHa – university college)* Florence KHONEN (quality officer at Royal Conservatoire Brussels) *Isabelle LECROART (quality officer, UCLouvain)* Catherine MEYFROID (quality officer Haute Ecole Lucia de Brouckère – university college) *Nathalie VANASSCHE (quality officer, IFOSUP Wavre, adult higher education college)* *Catherine VANDELEENE (quality officer at Liege University)*
	13:00 – 14:00 60 min	*Lunch break*	
	14:00 – 15:00 60 min	*Review panel's private discussion*	
	15:00 – 15:05 5 min	*Connection set-up*	
14	15:05 – 15:50 45 min	Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool	*In italics: experts participating in the pilot phase* *Dylan COUCK, student expert*

			Antoine GEKIERE, student expert Sophie GRÜNFLEDER, profession, education and QA expert *Jacques LANARES, education and QA expert, chair of panel* *Claude MAILHOT, peer and QA expert* Laurent MAVEYRAUD, peer expert and chair of panel Charlotte POURCELOT, education expert
	15:50 – 16:05 *15 min*	Review panel's private discussion	
	16:05 – 16:10 *5 min*	*Connection set-up*	
15	16:10 – 16:55 *45 min*	Meeting with stakeholders, such as employers, students, local community	*In italics: studying at a HEI participating in the pilot phase* Laura DEFÈCHE (student at Liège University) Eléni DIAMANTIS (student at IPFC Nivelles adult higher education college) Loïc FERNEZ (student at HELHa university college) Asmaa IDGUAGUA (student at HEPN – university college) Steeven JACQUEMIN (member of the Steering Committee, representative of the students' union FEF) *Lauriane KAHN (student at HE Léonard de Vinci – university college)* *Hugo LACROIX (student at HE EPHEC – university college)* Hélène MORCIAUX (student at UCLouvain)
	16:55 – 17:10 *15 min*	Review panel's private discussion	
	17:10 – 17:15 *5 min*	*Connection set-up*	
16	17:15 – 18:00 *45 min*	Meeting with stakeholders, such as employers, students, local community	DACY Bruno (Account manager Giacomini) DEFRAIGNE Philippe (Director Cullen International) DI BARTOLOMEO Jean-Pierre (President directory board Sowalfin) GAUTHIER Daniel (Private investor) PIROTTE Béatrice (Director, public financial service) VEITHEN Alex (Project leader Chemcom)
	18:00 – 18:10	*Break*	

17	18:10 – 19:10 60 min.	Wrap-up meeting among panel members: preparation for day III and provisional conclusions	
		1 October	
SESSION No.	**TIMING**	**TOPIC**	**PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW**
18	09:00 – 10:00 *60 min*	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify	
	10:00 – 10:05 *5 min*	*Connection set-up*	
19	10:05 – 11:05 *60 min*	Meeting with CEO to clarify any pending issues	Members of AEQES Board: The Chairman of the Steering Committee Anne-Joëlle PHILIPPART The Vice-chair of the Steering Committee Karin VAN LOON The Director of Higher education, LLL and scientific research Etienne GILLIARD The Director of the Executive Unit Caty DUYKAERTS
20	11:05 – 12:35 *90 min*	Private meeting among panel members to agree on the main findings	
	12:35 – 13:35 *60 min*	*Lunch break*	
	13:35 – 13:40 *5 minutes*	*Connection set-up*	
21	13:40 – 14:10 *30 min*	Final de-briefing meeting with staff and Council/Board members of the Agency to inform about preliminary findings	Members of the Board and the Steering Committee + Agency's staff

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

1. Background and context

AEQES is an independent public sector Agency, practising formative/enhancement-led evaluation in French-speaking Belgium. 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 the associate degrees (120 ECTS), bachelor and masters programmes provided by the HEIs of Wallonia-Brussels Federation. The Agency selects its experts, trains them for their mission 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 review reports, system-wide analyses or other studies, and highlighting best practice. It provides the reviewed HEIs and the Government with proposals on ways of enhancing quality.

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.

Two formats of cyclical programmatic evaluation procedures are in place, and more recently a pilot phase of institutional reviews was launched. This pilot phase was extended to 2023 because of the Covid crisis that impacted the usual implementation of EQA procedures.

AEQES has been a member of ENQA since 2011 and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership.

AEQES has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 2012 and is applying for renewal of EQAR registration.

2. Purpose and scope of the evaluation

This review will evaluate the extent to which AEQES fulfils the requirements of Parts 2 and 3 of *the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. Consequently, the review will provide information to the ENQA Board to aid its consideration of whether membership of AEQES should be reconfirmed and to EQAR to support AEQES application to the register.

2.1 Activities of AEQES within the scope of the ESG

In order for AEQES to apply for ENQA membership and for registration in EQAR, this review will analyse all activities of AEQES that are within the scope of the ESG, i.e. reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditation of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). This is independent of whether the activities are carried out within or outside the EHEA and whether they are obligatory or voluntary in nature.

The following activities of AEQES have to be addressed in the external review:

Programmatic evaluation procedures with two formats implemented

- the so-called 'initial evaluation procedure' when a study programme is assessed for the first time
- the so-called 'continuous evaluation procedure' when the study programme has already been assessed

Each format has its own set of standards and protocol.

Note: the pilot phase of institutional reviews in presently in progress (only half of the 17 pilot HEIs have had their visits and no reports have been published yet). Therefore, this new procedure will be addressed against the ESG based on the pilots and to the extent possible at the time of the review.

Considering the renewal of AEQES' application to EQAR, the self-evaluation report and the external review report is expected to also cover issues where the Register Committee concluded in its last decision that the Agency complied only partially with the ESG, namely ESG 3.5. AEQES review should further address any substantive changes in the Agency's governance and/or activities carried out before the Agency's external review.

3. The review process

The review will be conducted following the methodology of ENQA Agency Reviews. The process is designed in line with *the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and the requirements of *the EQAR Procedures for Applications*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Formulation and agreement on the Terms of Reference for the review between AEQES, ENQA and EQAR;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by ENQA;
- Notification of EQAR about the appointed panel;
- Self-assessment by AEQES including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to AEQES;
- Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final evaluation report by the ENQA Review Committee;
- Analysis of the scrutiny by the ENQA Board and their decision regarding ENQA membership;
- Decision making by the EQAR Register Committee on the Agency's registration on EQAR;
- Follow-up of the panel's and/or the ENQA Board's recommendations by the Agency, including a voluntary progress visit.

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of four members: one or two quality assurance experts (at least one of which is currently employed by an ENQA member Agency), an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member, and eventually a labour market representative (if requested). One of the members will serve as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. For ENQA Agency Reviews at least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. An additional panel member may be included in the panel at the request of the Agency under review. In this case, an additional fee to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses is applied.

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The ENQA staff member will not be the secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide AEQES with the list of suggested experts and their respective curricula vitarum to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The experts will have to sign a non-conflict of interest statement as regards the AEQES review.

3.2 Self-assessment by AEQES, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

AEQES is responsible for the execution and organization of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-assessment is organized as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-assessment report is broken down by the topics of the evaluation and is expected to contain, among others: a brief description of the national HE and QA system; background description of the current situation of the Agency; an analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a SWOT analysis; each criterion (ESG part 2 and 3) addressed individually, and considerations of how the Agency has addressed the recommendations as noted in the ENQA Board's membership decision letter and the instances of partial compliance noted in the previous EQAR Register Committee decision of inclusion/renewal. All Agency's QA activities (whether within their national jurisdiction or outside of it, and whether obligatory or voluntary) will be described and their compliance with the ESG analysed.
- The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which AEQES fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ESG.
- The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat which has four weeks to pre-scrutinise it before forwarding the report to the panel of experts. The purpose of the pre-scrutiny is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but whether the necessary information, as stated in the guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews, is present. For the second and subsequent reviews, the Agency is expected to enlist the recommendations provided in the previous review and to outline actions taken to meet these recommendations. In case the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to reject the report and ask for a revised version within two weeks. In such cases, an additional fee of 1000 EUR will be charged to the Agency.
- The report is submitted to the review panel a minimum of six weeks prior to the site visit.

3.3 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule which shall be submitted to the Agency at least two months before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule is to include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is usually 2,5 days. The approved schedule shall be given to AEQES at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The review panel will be assisted in a site visit by the ENQA Review Coordinator.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the panel's overall impressions but not its judgement on the ESG compliance of the Agency or the granting or reconfirmation of ENQA membership.

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings concerning each standard of part 2 and 3 of the ESG. A draft will be first submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity and language, and it will be then submitted to AEQES usually within 10 weeks of the site visit for comment on factual accuracy. If AEQES chooses to provide a position statement in reference to the draft report, it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report. Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the statement by AEQES and finalise and submit the document to ENQA.

The report is to be finalised within three months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 40 pages in length.

When preparing the report, the review panel should also bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG* to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the consideration of the Register Committee of the Agency's application to EQAR[9].

For the purpose of applying for ENQA membership, AEQES is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which AEQES expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be taken into consideration by the Board together with the final evaluation report when deciding on the Agency's membership.

4. Follow-up process and publication of the report

AEQES will receive the expert panel's report and publish it on its website once the ENQA Board has approved the report. The report will also be published on the ENQA website, regardless of the review outcome and decision by the ENQA Board. As part of ENQA Agency Review follow-up activities, AEQES commits to react on the review recommendations and submit a follow-up report to the ENQA Board within the timeframe indicated in the Board's decision on membership. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website, in addition to the full review report and the Board's decision.

The follow-up report could be complemented by a small-scale progress visit to the Agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). This visit will be used to discuss issues, based on the ESG, considered to be of particular importance or a challenge to AEQES. Its purpose is entirely developmental and has no impact on the judgement of membership and/or judgment of compliance of the Agency with the ESG. Should the Agency not wish to take advantage of this opportunity, it may opt out by informing the ENQA Review Coordinator about this.

5. Use of the report

ENQA shall retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the expert panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, shall be vested in ENQA.

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[9] See here: https://www.eqar.eu/kb/official-documents/#use-and-interpretation-of-the-esg

The review report is used by the ENQA Board for the purpose of reaching a conclusion on whether AEQES can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA. The report is also used as a basis for the Register Committee's decision on the Agency's registration on EQAR. The review process is thus designed to serve these two purposes. However, the review report is to be considered final only after being approved by ENQA. Once submitted to ENQA and until it is approved by its Board, the report may not be used or relied upon by AEQES, the panel, or any third party and may not be disclosed without the prior written consent of ENQA. The approval of the report is independent of the decision of the ENQA Board on membership.

For the purposes of EQAR registration, the Agency will submit the review report (once approved by the ENQA Board) via email to EQAR before expiry of the Agency's registration on EQAR. The Agency should also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), a Declaration of Honour, full curriculum vitae (CVs) of all review panel members and any other relevant documents to the application (i.e. annexes, statement to the review report, updates). EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the Agency's application at its Register Committee meeting in May/June 2022.

6. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	September 2020
Appointment of review panel members	March 2021
Self-assessment completed	31 May 2021
Pre-screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	June 2021
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	July 2021
Briefing of review panel members	September 2021
Review panel site visit	Late September / Early October 2021
Draft of evaluation report and submitting it to ENQA Review Coordinator for pre-screening	Mid-November 2021
Draft of evaluation report to AEQES	Early December 2021
Statement of AEQES to review panel if necessary	December 2021
Submission of final report to ENQA	January 2022
Consideration of the report by ENQA Board	February 2022
Publication of report	February/March 2022
EQAR Register Committee meeting	May/June 2022

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

AEQES	Agence pour l'évaluation de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur [Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education]
ARES	Académie de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur [Academy for Research and Higher Education]
CoPIL	Comité de pilotage de la phase pilote [Steering Committee for the Pilot Phase] AEQES body set-up for the pilot phase
CoQER	Commission pour la qualité de l'enseignement et de la recherche (ARES) [Commission for Quality in Education and Research]
CTI	Commission des titres d'ingénieur (France) [Engineering Degree Commission]
DEQAR	Database of External Quality Assurance Results (managed by EQAR)
ECTS	European Credits Transfer and Accumulation System
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ESG	*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, 2015
FrAQ-Sup	Réseau francophone des agences qualité pour l'enseignement supérieur [French-speaking Network of Quality Agencies for Higher Education]
FWB	Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles [Wallonia-Brussels Federation]
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
QA	Quality Assurance
SAR	Self-assessment Report
WG	Working Group

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY AEQES

AEQES's Self-Assessment Report and its annexes, including:

- Recommendations and main findings from the 2016 ENQA review and AEQES' resulting follow-up;
- 2021-2025 AEQES Strategic Plan;
- AEQES Action Plan 2021;
- Joint note ARES-AEQES: roles, missions and actions;
- AEQES 2008 Decree – some articles;
- Roadmap of the pilot phase;
- Composition of various working groups and bodies set up for the pilot phase;
- AEQES - Reference frameworks for programmatic evaluations;
- Professional training of the Executive Unit
- Links to main documents cited in the report

Additional documents:

- Handling conflicts of interest
- Online activities (including impact and feedback)
- Budget structure
- PDCA enacted
- ARES-AEQES
- Organizational chart explained
- Updated info on the pilot phase Appeals Commission

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL:

- AEQES website: http://www.aeqes.be/
- ARES website: https://www.ares-ac.be/fr/

enqa.

European Association for
Quality Assurance in Higher Education

ENQA AGENCY
REVIEW 2022

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Agency Review
of the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
(AEQES), undertaken in 2021.

enqa.

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Quality Assurance in Higher Education