

Presentation at the ENQA training of agency reviewers
Helsinki, February 2011

The independence of the QA agencies

Josep Grifoll

Overview:

- a) The standard of independence
 - b) Why your expertise is important?
 - c) Independence: is the right term?
 - d) The standard and its guidelines
 - e) Elements to be assessed
 - f) Your role as reviewers
 - g) Final conclusion
-

The concept of independence in the ESG

Agencies should be independent to the extent both that:
they have **autonomous** responsibility for their operations
&

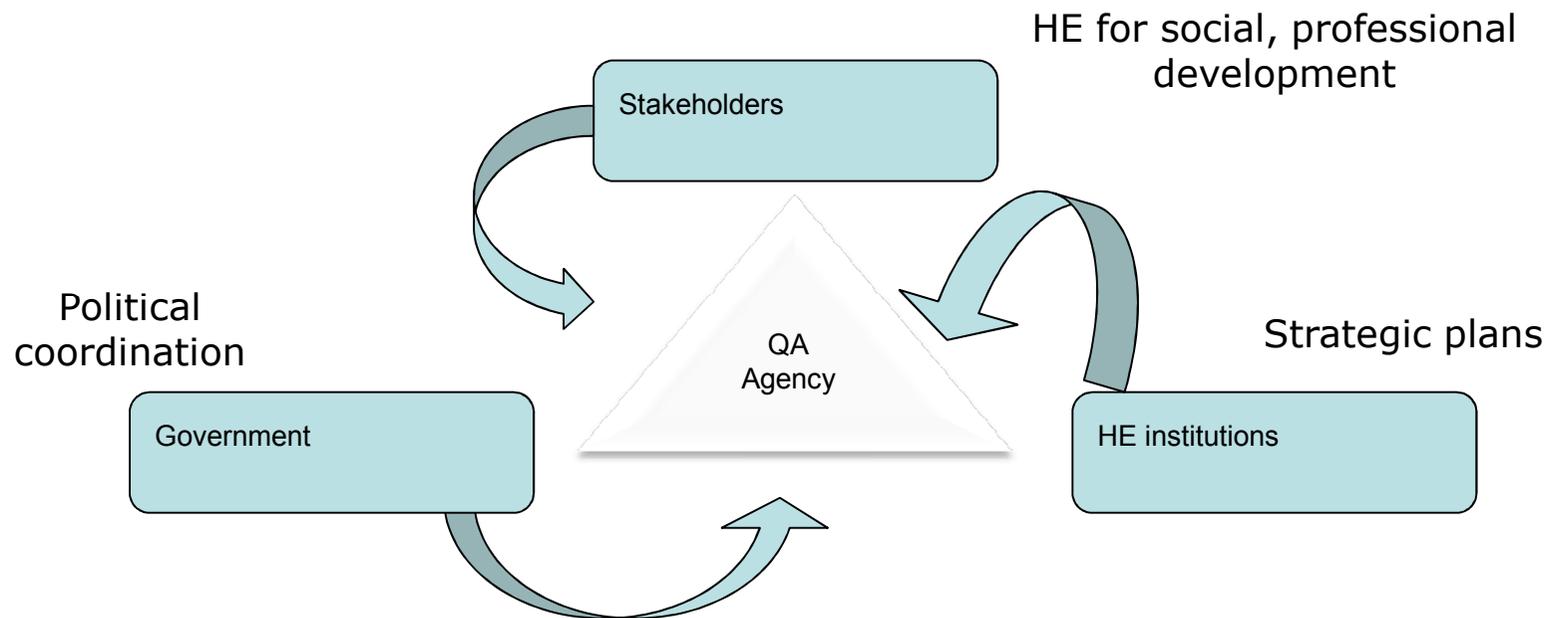
that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports **cannot be influenced** by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders

Why ENQA needs your expertise?

- 1) **No single scheme** addressed to fulfil the standard of independence.
e.g. Boards, Councils, members, decision making processes...are diverse.
 - 2) A scheme could formally fulfil the standard but it is important to see **how procedures work** under a particular scheme.
 - 3) It is important to combine the **national and international approach** when reviewing the QA agency.
 - 4) The standard **doesn't work "independently"** it has to be connected with the situation of other standards (official status, mission statement, resources...)
 - 5) The concept of Independence **needs to be interpreted** wisely...
-

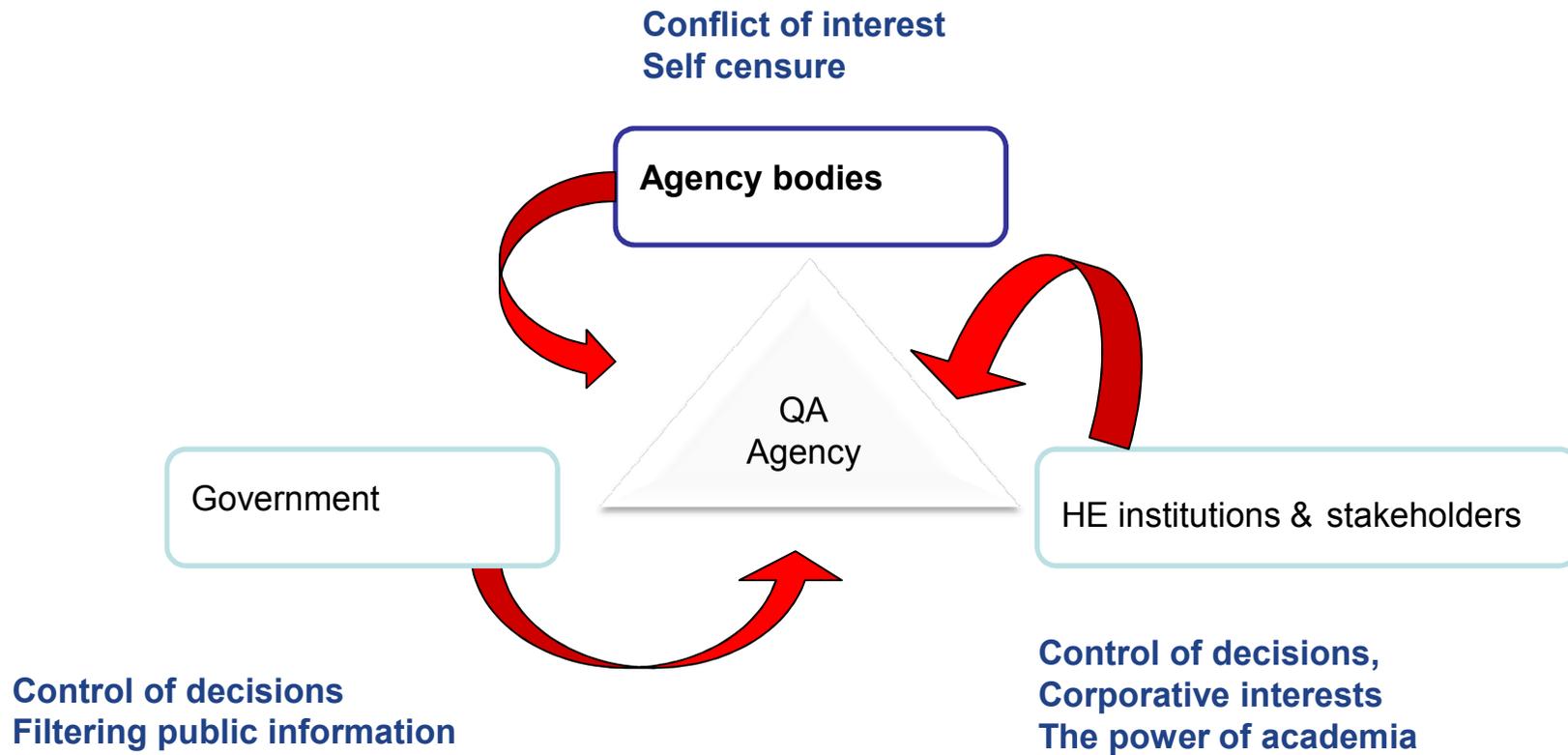
QA Agencies cannot be isolated: there are positive interactions.

Democracy and social needs should be considered; national and international stakeholders contributions...



Important: The standard helps to strengthen the credibility and the strategic position of the agency, promoting and preserving independence in some critical points...

independence is threatened when...



3.6 Standard guidelines:

its **operational independence** from HEI's & governments is guaranteed in official documentation (e.g. instruments of governance or legislative acts);

- Definition & operation of its procedures & methods,
- Nomination & appointment of external experts,
- Determination of the outcomes of its QA processes

They are undertaken **autonomously & independently** from governments, HEI's, & organs of political influence;

while relevant stakeholders in HE, particularly students/learners, **are consulted** in the course of QA processes, the final outcomes of the QA processes remain the responsibility of the agency

Autonomous responsibility of their operations and the governance in the agency decision-making bodies:

Independence is granted in official documents (yes) but....more precisely it's interesting to observe:

- The **balance** in the composition of the decision making bodies: Society representatives, students, international members, representatives from HEIs, representatives from the Ministry... **The representative roles**
 - The **expertise role** in the decision making bodies
 - The **selection** and **appointment** processes of the members for those decision-making bodies. Who selects and appoints? And how is it done for representative and expertise roles?
 - Mechanisms to **avoid the conflict of interest** at different levels of the organisation.
-

Autonomous responsibility of their operations... other aspects:

- 1) How QA agency makes requests for adequate resources to undertake its work?
Is the funding system a potential source for the conflict of interests or a limitation for the QA functions development?
- 2) the process for appointing external experts?
- 3) Definition of QA procedures (methodology, criteria...) how is it done? In principle it should be made to positively contribute to the alignment of the agency QA methods and the enhancement opportunities of the national HE system.
- 4) External QA methods should be able to demonstrate: a) positive impacts on HE and b) reliable information about the quality of HE to national and international stakeholders. (Std. 3.3 activities)
- 5) Finally we could ask if the agency is reporting directly for the outcomes of their tasks?

Final outcomes of the QA processes remain the responsibility of the agency. How to see that?

Is the QA agency collecting (formally) relevant stakeholders opinions and views concerning its outcomes and procedures? (linked to the Std. 3.8)

What is the level of transparency of these positive interactions?

How those opinions and views are (formally) integrated by the QA agency decision-making bodies?

Does the QA agency collect appeals, complaints? (if yes, see how QA agency deals with those issues)

Important:

a) panel members are not asked to reach an assessment whether a QA agency is in itself independent, but whether the agency has independent control over its operations and whether “outsiders” can or not **influence (unfairly!)** its conclusions.

b) Levels of independence should be assessed against all possible influences:

from the government

from HEIs

from stakeholders

and from national conflict of interest

c) Take into consideration how big / small is the HE system in which the agency works. (everybody knows everybody?)

But at the end of the day...

independence is a **question of ethics**.

Ethics for the organisation (Board, panels, staff...)

and **commitment** of the agency and its decision-making bodies and staff (experts and officers) to enhance the quality of HE, and to facilitate the accountability of HE.

Thank you!