



AEQES Progress report, February 2019

In this progress report, AEQES presents to the Board of ENQA the current state of affairs concerning the recommendations made by the panel of the 2016 external review and highlighted in the letter from the President of ENQA to AEQES dated March 3, 2017. Furthermore, AEQES expresses its interest in benefiting from the new ENQA procedure, the progress visit, in order to discuss further its development in a context where the Agency is introducing significant changes to its methodological approach.

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

Introduction: Key changes since the ENQA Review

The 2016 ENQA review was welcomed by AEQES as an opportunity for both taking stock of the progress made since the first review and benefiting from an external view on its future developments. Indeed, at the time of the panel visit (September 2016), AEQES was preparing a comprehensive report¹ to introduce institutional reviews that would complement the programmatic approach of its EQA procedures².

This AEQES methodological report as well as the ENQA Review report led the Government to adopt the following legal changes to the 20 December 2017 Decree governing the agency's operation:

- 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

¹ <http://www.aeqes.be/documents/20171031%20Rapport%20de%20l'AEQES%20-%20version%20finale%20avec%20annexes.pdf>

² This process resulted in an EQAF paper in Riga (EQAF2017 that described why and how a QA agency decided to trigger a process of in-depth reflection and consultation on its external quality assurance (EQA) practices in order to develop a better fit between its quality assurance approach and the HE system. Convinced that some evolution was needed, AEQES set up a working group that first benchmarked some European systems and produced a preliminary report. It then surveyed the HE sector (online questionnaires). With the survey results in mind, it developed further possible methodological changes and asked key stakeholders (advisory and decision-making instances) and international experts to write down a feedback on five principles. Then AEQES elaborated a comprehensive report to inform the Belgian lawmakers on the desirable changes of the legislation that defines the QA mechanisms.

https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/p1_aubert_duykaerts%20%20full%20paper.pdf

Article 22 – and providing the Government with an assessment report of the pilot within six months after its completion”.

- 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).

Subsequent to the reconfirmation of membership of AEQES in ENQA, the 2017 Review report was examined by EQAR. Its Register Committee found that the report provided sufficient evidence and analysis on AEQES’ level of compliance with the ESG and therefore approved the application for inclusion on the Register. AEQES’ inclusion shall be valid until 28/02/2022.

Areas for development³: progress report

This section presents how AEQES has addressed so far the recommendations listed in the Review report and in the President’s letter.

ESG 3.1 [Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance]

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 negotiations with the government to shorten the 10-year interval between external evaluations. AEQES is recommended to continue supporting students and promoting quality assurance among students, in cooperation with the relevant student organisations.

AEQES has taken steps to shorten the 10-year external evaluation cycle and, as mentioned in the introduction, convinced the Government to integrate this change in the 20 December 2017 Decree. The lawmakers endorsed, on the one hand, the obligation for HEIs to submit to an EQA procedure half-way through the 10-year cycle, which in practice implies a periodicity of five years between two EQA procedures and, on the other hand, to implement from 2022 on, new cycles of six years for both institutional and programmatic EQA procedures (including a monitoring process half-way), if the pilot phase assessment brings positive outcomes and leads to the new legal framework as expected.

As to the support to students’ engagement in quality assurance, it is worth noting that student representatives (3 full members, each with a substitute member) sit on the Steering committee of AEQES; they are nominated for a period of one year (renewable once). This legal obligation creates a high turn-over among representatives (by comparison to the other members who are nominated for four years, renewable once). To support their integration in the Steering Committee, the Executive Unit⁴ organizes meetings targeted to students to facilitate their understanding of quality issues discussed in the regular meetings of the Steering committee and to encourage them to join the AEQES working groups. This practice has been particularly successful in 2018 as several WG benefit now from the participation of students. In addition, to emphasise students’ engagement, AEQES gives them speakers’ tasks in its annual [seminars](#).

³ The ENQA President letter of March 3, 2017 is quoted in italics in this section

⁴ Staff members of the Agency

Furthermore, AEQES will discuss with the student organisations (FEF and UNECOF) the opportunity of organising annual meetings with them in order to maintain and strengthen students' awareness of and engagement in quality assurance.

ESG 3.3 [Independence]

It is recommended 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 place emphasis on the approval process (without any interference by the SC) of the external evaluation reports.

There is a need to distinguish the individual external evaluation reports (one per HEI) and the system-wide analyses (one report analysing a cluster of study programmes across the HE sector). The Steering Committee has had no role in the former. With respect to the latter, the cluster analyses, up to recently, included a section⁵ called “analytical note” in which the Steering Committee could give conclusive comments. In April 2018, The Steering Committee decided to suppress this section from the system-wide analyses in response to the ENQA report recommendation.

As a further response, the Agency has developed the following two flow-process charts to clarify and emphasise how, since the beginning of its activities, AEQES has designed the process of issuing evaluation reports and setting respective roles and responsibilities as follows:

Chart 1: the evaluation report per HEI, from draft to publication

Chair of the panel	Panel members	Executive unit	HEI	Steering committee
writes a draft report				
	comment and improve the draft			
		ensures that the criteria and dimensions of the reference framework are duly taken into consideration, as well as publication requirements		
validate the final preliminary report				
		sends the preliminary report to the HEI for right of reply		
			right of reply (form + content)	
The report is amended according to the elements of response that are accepted by the experts.		The comments that did not lead to an amendment of the report are included in a document signed by the institution, and inserted in the evaluation report.		
		Publishes the final report on the website of AEQES		

As for the system-wide analyses, the process, since April 2018, is as follows:

⁵ “After the experts had finished writing their part of the system-wide analysis, the Agency attaches to it an analytical note, i.e. conclusive comments drafted by the AEQES Steering Committee, which highlights some aspects and gives the Agency’s opinion on the evaluation conclusions. This part of the document expressly enables the Steering Committee to draw the attention of policy makers on the salient elements of the analysis, and on the changes that have to be made to the education programmes”. From AEQES 2016 SER, p.48

Chart 2: the system-wide analysis evaluation, from draft to publication

Chair(s) of the panel	Panel members	Executive unit	HEIs	Steering committee
The Executive unit organizes a meeting (one day to one day and a half) of the whole panel to prepare the WFB cluster-scale report with reference points stemming from the panel's international expertise (education and/or quality assurance practices from elsewhere, inputs from the professional world, reflections on pedagogy, etc.)				
write(s) a draft analysis				
	comment and improve the draft			
		ensures that the criteria and instructions are duly taken into consideration		
after two rounds of improvement, validate the last version of the system-wide analysis				
		sends the system-wide analysis to the HEIs, the SC, other potential readers (ARES, Parliament, professional associations) and invite them to its oral presentation		
Oral presentation of the system-wide analysis			may point out factual errors	
The analysis may be amended according to the factual elements raised during the oral presentation				
		Publishes the final system-wide analysis on the website of AEQES and disseminates it		

Both charts show that there is no interference by the Steering Committee on the approval of any type of evaluation reports. This needs to be stressed especially in the view of the fact that for ESG 3.3 the Panel commends *the Agency for the large number of experts included in evaluation panels who do not reside in the WBF (62% of the total number of experts employed). This ensures the results of the evaluation processes are more transparent and more reliable and consistent*⁶. To communicate upon that important feature of independence, the flow-process charts will be included in AEQES' various documents.

ESG 3.4 [Thematic analysis]

It is recommended 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, it might be useful for AEQES to further develop its communication strategy and its management data system.

⁶ See 2017 REVIEW REPORT, page 38

AEQES is satisfied that the Panel commended *AEQES for its transversal analyses which are very complex, analysing in depth the situation of HE in WBF*⁷ and agrees with the need to further enhance their dissemination.

In order to do so, the agency has widened the access to the oral presentation by the chairs of the panels of these analyses. In addition to their first targeted audience – that is to say the HEIs concerned by the study programmes evaluated and the members of the Steering Committee – the Executive Unit systematically invites other categories of potential audience, namely the ARES (Académie de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur, including the members of its Advisory Board), the members of the Higher Education Commission of the Parliament, professional associations when appropriate, HE-specialized journalists, etc.).

As a result, several newspapers articles⁸ were written and contribute to help disseminating the results of the EQA procedures among Belgian readers.

In addition, AEQES produces meta-analyses, building on the cluster reports. The next meta-analysis that is presently being elaborated will clearly identify who are the targeted addressees of the various recommendations issued by several panels throughout different clusters evaluations, which should also help facilitate dissemination of the EQA outcomes.

In the last few months, the AEQES communication strategy has focused on the launch of the pilot phase: several events and documents were prepared and delivered for that purpose. A new website provides the HEIs and the general public with the timeline of the pilot phase, and various information and documents about the activities and events dedicated to the success of the pilot phase.

In 2019 the project of conceiving and designing a renewed AEQES website to replace the present one will start. Managing more information, diverse reports (institutional level + programmatic level) and analyses will require a new website architecture that would be user-friendly and efficient to retrieve information rapidly for appropriate usage.

ESG 3.5 [Resources]

It is recommended that the Agency continues its discussions with policy-makers on its financial situation, in order to ensure the continuation of its activities while maintaining the same level of responsibility and quality standards.

The judgement of the 2016 Panel on this ESG (partial compliance) emphasised by both ENQA and EQAR has probably helped AEQES to obtain an increase of its annual allocation from the Government. From 788.000 euros in 2017, this annual allocation was raised to 1.000.000 euros for 2018 and the subsequent years (Article 22, Decree 20 December 2017). This financial support is also linked to the task entrusted to AEQES of implementing the pilot phase while pursuing the core programmatic EQA procedures in a context where more “authorizations” (rights to provide new study programmes) are granted to HEIs, which *de facto* increases the number of EQA procedures needed, and thus the expenses of the agency. AEQES is of course grateful to the Minister of HE for this immediate supportive answer to the resource issues. However, AEQES believes that a structural solution must be found to secure the continuation of its activities while maintaining the same level of responsibility and quality standards. The staff workload is still too heavy⁹ at present and hiring new staff is a long and difficult process that takes several months and various steps of formal approval. As of January 2019, an

⁷ idem

⁸ http://www.aeqes.be/agence_pr.cfm

⁹ As a matter of illustration, 148 days of site visits for 6.8 FTE in 2018/2019

estimated 44% of the annual funding allocation is necessary to cover salaries. If the staff paid by the Ministry were to leave, it would be replaced by new staff paid by the Agency which would increase that percentage. Finally, while the new EQA methodology provides more flexibility to HEIs to manage their own EQA procedures¹⁰, there is little budgeting flexibility given the requirement of setting the yearly expenses at the start of the year. While this methodological flexibility is desirable because it translates into increased ownership of QA by the HEIs (one of the finalities of the methodological changes), it leads to a more complex planning process for the agency, which requires more budgeting flexibility and autonomy of its human and financial resources in the medium and long-terms.

ESG 2.2 [Designing methodologies fit for purpose]

It is recommended for the Agency continue the process of involving students in its activities, and in cooperation with the relevant student organisations, to support the capacity building of student experts in quality assurance.

AEQES has taken some actions to invite students to engage in the quality assurance issues. Concerning the capacity building of student experts in the various EQA procedures, AEQES organizes on a yearly basis a three-day seminar for all its experts. Student experts are treated on an equal footing as the other experts and benefit from the same training. These seminars present contextual data on the Belgian French-speaking HE system and address methodological dimensions (e.g. What is quality in HE? How does it fit into the AEQES set of standards? How to assess the internal coherence of a study programme? How to get ready for a site visit? How to develop an appropriate evaluator attitude (as critical friend), e.g. by developing information collection and evidence-based strategies? How to ask questions in the interviews? How to find the necessary information in the SER and other documents provided by the HEI? How to write reports: observation / analysis / recommendations? How to use the AEQES tools? Etc.).

ESG 2.4 [Peer-review experts]

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.

[In its letter to AEQES the President of ENQA added that] AEQES should make sure that students are involved in all quality assurance processes.

When adopting its provisional budget for 2019, AEQES made the decision of including students in all its panels from 2019/2020 on (they were part of all the initial programmatic evaluation panels since 2014/2015). Adding an expert in the follow-up evaluation process represents an increase of 30% of its costs as students are treated equally to other expert profiles and receive the same fees.

Furthermore, the follow-up evaluation while aiming at the same objectives as the initial evaluation (support to the institutions to take stock of progress made, to analyse its capacity for change and to continue to develop a quality culture) has evolved into a format called

¹⁰ They have a choice of the period of institutional review in the future 6-year plan, the possibility of having other EQAR-registered agencies perform EQA procedures, the possibility for an HEI to obtain through a successful institutional review the authorisation to manage their own programmatic evaluations.

“continuous enhancement evaluation” strengthened by an explicit reference framework that was adopted in October 2018.

ESG 2.5 [Criteria for outcomes]

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

AEQES takes good note of this recommendation and will implement it in order to provide experts with a better adjusted training (legal context of the German-speaking HE system as well as checking minimum linguistic competences in German) in the case the German-speaking community would require AEQES again for evaluating its programmes. As a matter of fact, for the time being, the partnership is not operating as the German-speaking community decided to have its study programmes accredited instead of evaluated.

ESG 2.6 [Reporting]

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.

[In its letter to AEQES the President of ENQA added that] AEQES should put more focus on issuing of summary reports of its evaluations

In 2017 AEQES revised the format of its reports in order to show visually – with a coloured background – the summary written by the experts. The latter receive writing instructions to do so (no jargon words, a limited number of recommendations, etc.)

This applies to the system-analyses as well.

For examples, see:

<http://www.aeqes.be/documents/20180627REDroitHEPL.pdf>

<http://www.aeqes.be/documents/20181106%20-%20AT%20TechMed.pdf>

ESG 2.7 [Complaints and appeals]

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 web-site so that they are correct and align with the documents published in French.

The information on the complaints (and appeals) procedure is now part of guidelines on the EQA procedures to the HEIs.

See pages 38 and 53, section “introduction éventuelle une plainte”

<http://www.aeqes.be/documents/20181022Guide20192022adestinationdesetablissementsV1.pdf>

For the time being, this procedure concerns the possibility to place a complaint, not an appeal as AEQES is not strictly making formal decisions. However, the pilot phase will introduce the option of making decision at the request of an HEI that would wish to have the authorisation to externally quality assure its study programmes. For this, AEQES needs to examine further the procedure and then communicate about it.

The very last recommendation consisting of updating the English version of documents on the website of the agency has not been tackled yet due to a lack of resources and the need to cope with priority tasks for the pilot phase. It is nevertheless considered as an important work to help maintain the international dimension of AEQES and will be dealt with as soon as possible.

This Progress report was adopted by the AEQES Steering Committee on January 15, 2019

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https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/p1_aubert_duykaerts%20%20full%20paper.pdf

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