

# A3ES

Agência de Avaliação  
e Acreditação  
do Ensino Superior

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**ENQA COORDINATED EXTERNAL REVIEW OF A3ES**

**Follow-up Report**

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**June 2016**

## 1. Introduction

The ENQA Board, on its decision of 18 June 2014 to grant A3ES full membership of ENQA for five years, concluded that although A3ES is in substantial compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines it would like to receive a follow-up report on the recommendations in the panel report within two years of its decision, i.e. by June 2016.

The panel's conclusions and recommendations were as follows:

"The team commends the agency for its analytical and self-critical SER and endorses the presented SWOT analysis. The team encourages A3ES to progress the issues it has identified and in particular recommends it to:

- continue actively supporting higher education institutions to develop their internal quality assurance mechanisms in an effective but self-critical manner
- reconsider the structure and accessibility of its reports to ensure that a broader audience, in particular students and their parents, are informed and, indeed, sensitised to the significance of quality and its assurance
- continue developing the engagement of students in the external evaluation teams.

A3ES is well aware of the issues described and has already taken the initiative to ameliorate them. The review team's comments are intended to encourage the agency to do so in order to ensure that the progress the agency has undergone in its short existence is sustainable in the future."

This follow-up report aims, therefore, to answer the ENQA's request, explaining the measures taken to fulfil each of the panel's recommendations.

## 2. Follow-up on the external review of A3ES

The Management Board of A3ES has taken the panel's recommendations very seriously, namely by discussing them with the Advisory Council and with the international Scientific Council.

As mentioned in the review report the Agency was already working on the issues raised in the recommendations and continued to do so, as detailed in the following sections.

### 2.1. Developing internal quality assurance systems within higher education institutions

The legal framework for the assessment of higher education in Portugal requires that higher education institutions develop their own internal quality assurance systems, capable of being certified<sup>1</sup>.

In order to support the institutions in implementing their internal quality assurance systems and, thereby, contributing to the promotion and dissemination of a quality culture within institutions, the Agency developed a comparative study at European level, aiming to analyse the main trends in the specification and certification of internal systems, identifying and characterising cases of

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<sup>1</sup> Preamble of Decree-Law 369/2007, which created the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (*Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior*).

good practices, and to collect elements that could be used as orientations by the institutions (Santos, 2011).

Following an extensive public consultation process based on this study, and with the intention of providing a set of general guidelines that can assist institutions in designing and implementing their quality systems, the Agency adopted a set of reference points (open standards), formulated in terms of statements that characterise a well-established system of internal quality assurance and in line with the European standards and guidelines (ESG) and the legal requirements applicable. The reference points are based on Part 1 of the ESG, including also three additional points to incorporate the activities of research and development, interaction with society and internationalisation, thus covering the whole institutional mission.

The reference points were not designed with a prescriptive character. They were presented as factors for the development and encouragement of innovative approaches on quality assurance that may arise in the context of institutional autonomy, rather than merely seek to respond and adapt to external requirements and criteria.

Concomitantly, an audit model was developed leading to the possibility of certification of internal quality assurance systems in higher education institutions, as one of the essential tools of the national quality assurance system and as a precondition for further simplification of procedures for external assessment and accreditation of institutions and degree programmes. Within the overall objective of helping the development of quality assurance systems in institutions and to identify and develop best practices in quality assurance, the specific aims of the institutional audit are:

- Reviewing the institutional policy for quality and assess whether its implementation includes, in a clear and objective way, the definition and documentation of the objectives, functions and actors of the internal quality assurance system, as well as the establishment and organisation of the levels of responsibilities associated with it;
- Assessing the processes and procedures used by the institution to maintain and improve the quality of teaching and other activities;
- Assessing the extent to which the quality assurance system operates in accordance with the established procedures, produces useful and relevant information for the improvement of the institution, and uses this information to generate effective measures for continuous quality improvement of the activities and results.

The audit process was run on an experimental basis in the academic year 2011/2012 and is available since then, on a voluntary basis, for interested higher education institutions. So far, 16 institutions were audited and 14 had their internal quality assurance systems certified by A3ES, with a good mix of the higher education sectors (university and polytechnic, public and private). Each year a new call for candidate institutions is open.

A comprehensive Manual for the Audit Process (A3ES, 2013) is available on the Website. Combined to the audit model the Agency exercises a supportive role by running workshops with interested institutions and also local seminars on internal quality assurance whenever invited by an institution, providing fruitful opportunities for interaction and clarification with the academic communities. Tens of such seminars were already run as mentioned in the annual activity reports published in the Website.

On the other hand, the Guidelines for the Assessment and Accreditation of Study Programmes in Operation (A3ES, 2012) include the assessment of the following internal quality assurance elements (section numbers are indicated in brackets):

- Quality assurance mechanisms for the study programme (2.2.1; 2.2.2).
- Procedures for collecting information, monitoring and periodically assessing the study programme (2.2.3).
- Periodical evaluation procedures of the qualifications and competences of the academic staff (2.2.4).
- Discussion of results of the study programme evaluation and its use to define improvement actions (2.2.5).
- Procedures to evaluate the competences and performance of the academic staff (4.1.7) and the performance and training of the non-academic staff (4.2.3; 4.2.4).
- Adequacy of measures for pedagogic support and counselling of students and to promote students' integration in the academic community (5.2.1; 5.2.2).
- Use of the results of student satisfaction surveys to improve teaching/learning processes (5.2.4).
- Existence of a periodic system for reviewing the curricula in order to ensure its scientific and methodological updating (6.1.3).
- Adequacy of the methodologies for the evaluation of the students learning outcomes in light of the objectives of the curricular unit (6.3.3).
- Use of the results of the monitoring of academic achievement to define improvement actions (7.1.3).
- Use of the results of the monitoring of scientific, technological and artistic activities for their subsequent improvement (7.2.6).
- Availability of public information about the institution, the study programme and the education given to students (7.3.3).
- Mechanisms to ensure the quality of the students' in-service training, if applicable (A.12.3).

The A3ES, through its Office of Research and Analysis, has also carried out a research-based study on the importance and degree of implementation of the reference points proposed by A3ES for internal QA in Portuguese higher education institutions (A3ES, 2015), with the objective to realize their importance for institutions, both as a framework model for their internal quality assurance systems and to assess their degree of implementation within institutions. The results from the study show a reasonable knowledge of the ESG and of the reference points within the academic communities (median of 4 and 5, respectively, in a scale of 1-7), and a good perception of the importance of the reference points for QA in HEI (medians between 6 and 7 for the different points). As for the degree of implementation, the respondents' perceptions are very positive (medians around 6).

The study also discriminates results by HE sector, age, sex and scientific area of respondents, and their involvement in management positions or in quality management activities. It concludes that the differences found point to some work to be developed along different academic groups in order to involve them more actively in quality management activities, since

those who are involved have a better knowledge of the reference points, give more importance to them and have a better perception of their implementation.

In summary, the Agency is monitoring and assessing the development of internal quality assurance systems in higher education institutions under predefined standards and criteria, while exercising a supportive role in the design, implementation and improvement of those systems. The perceptions gained from the assessments, the follow-up of assessments and the contacts with institutions, as well as from the research study, are that there is a steady progress in the implementation and effectiveness of internal systems.

## **2.2. Structure and accessibility of reports**

A3ES publishes around one thousand assessment reports each year. The rules for the preparation of the preliminary version of the external evaluation report, its delivery to the higher education institution for appreciation and possible presentation of a response, the preparation of the final version and its publication on the Agency's, the Ministry's and the institution's Websites, along with the response from the institution, if any, are clearly established in the Assessment Handbook adopted by the Agency and published in its Website.

Reports are prepared online with the help of an appropriate password-protected electronic form, which ensures uniform formatting, encourages clear and concise answers and facilitates the comparability among reports. At the same time it facilitates ensuring compliance with standard 2.5 of the ESG. The rules for the drafting of the report are precise and sufficiently detailed on the elements to be covered. The themes of concision and clarity of the reports are specifically discussed in the preparation of team members, bearing in mind that one crucial objective is to provide the basis for the proposal from the assessment team regarding the decision on accreditation to be made by the Management Board. Another essential objective is to offer recommendations for improvement to the assessed institution.

The Agency is very much aware that the reports must also provide stakeholders and society with reliable and intelligible information on the quality of study programmes and that, although they are published, the previously mentioned objectives may sometimes make them a bit too technical. To help overcome this potential shortcoming, A3ES started last year to publish synthesis-reports by scientific areas as soon as the assessment of study programmes in each area is finished. These reports contain information on all accredited programmes, trends in the number of programmes, vacancies and candidates, results of student placements and the minimum required classification to access each programme, pedagogic efficiency and employment data.

So far, synthesis-reports have been prepared and published in the following areas:

- Accounting and Taxation;
- Architecture;
- Chemistry;
- Civil Engineering;
- Documentation Sciences;
- Economics;
- Electronics and Automation;
- Environment and Environmental Engineering;

- Finance, Banking and Insurance;
- History and Archaeology;
- Hospitality, Tourism and Recreation;
- Informatics Sciences;
- Journalism;
- Law;
- Marketing and Publicity;
- Political Science and Citizenship;
- Psychology;
- Sports.

A3ES is currently completing the first 5-year round on programme accreditation and, as of next year, will roundup the accreditation process with an exercise of institutional evaluation. The second round of programme accreditation will, therefore, start in 2017, with renewed electronic forms for the reports, building upon the experience collected in the first round and the advice of stakeholders, inter alia the contributions from the Scientific Council. In particular, the assessment reports will include a final section with a summary of the main findings, recommendations and proposal for decision, aiming at a broader audience.

### **2.3. Engagement of students in external evaluation teams**

Although it is not foreseen in the Portuguese legislation, the Agency decided in 2010 to undertake an experimental exercise to include students in External Assessment Teams (EAT) based on voluntary participation of institutions. The first initiative was to conduct a study on the participation of students in quality assurance at European and national level (Cardoso, 2010). Following consultation with students and higher education institution representatives, a guide was produced for the preparation of the experimental exercise of participation of students in the EAT for the assessment/accreditation of study programmes (Cardoso and Santos, 2011).

Consequently, the Agency started in 2011 a process to recruit students for the external assessment committees. Applicants who had tuition in the areas of the study programmes being assessed/accredited in 2011/2012 were invited to undergo a training programme and to present a short essay on a theme related to quality assurance in higher education. From the 58 candidates only 25 submitted the essay and 18 were accepted to integrate a pool of student-assessors. These students became part of the External Assessment Teams which began their work in May 2012. The results of this experimental exercise were very positive and it was decided to extend participation ensuring the presence of a student in each on-site visit.

Since then, every year a new call has been open for candidates who have tuition in the areas of the study programmes being assessed/accredited in the following year, under the same procedures. Indeed, it is necessary to renew the pool of students every year, in order to deal with the new areas to be accredited in the next year of the regular accreditation round. Since 2015 the presence of a student in the EATs was made compulsory in line with the new version of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG 2015).

The following table shows the evolution of the number of candidates, presences in the training sessions, essays submitted and students accepted to enter the pool. The last line shows the percentage of on-site visits that included a student in the visiting EAT. As emerges from the

table, the Agency is dealing with a very significant number of candidates each year, but the majority does not attend the training sessions or does not submit the essay. In practice, only around one third of the candidates enter the pool of assessors. A major difficulty is the need to rotate the pool every year, with a few exceptions of students with tuition on two or more different areas. Nevertheless, the vast majority of visits are already integrating a student.

	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/15	2015/16	Total
<b>Valid candidates</b>	58	148	409	292	350	1 257
<b>Presence in training sessions</b>	39	93	212	162	187	693
<b>Essays submitted</b>	25	60	200	127	127	539
<b>Accepted into the pool</b>	18	48	174	113	112	465
<b>% of visits with a student</b>	8%	12%	70%	68%	78%	-

As regards the auditing of internal quality assurance systems, the external audit teams have always integrated one student per team with large experience on the assessment of higher education at European level, in the scope of ESU.

In summary, having in mind that the number of study programmes to undergo programme accreditation in the next round is expected to be smaller in face of the simplification of procedures, the Agency is highly confident to be able to include a student in every EAT.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Agency has been steadily working on the issues raised by the panel, thus having reached a high level of fulfilment of all its recommendations.

It is the Board's intention, however, to continue to pay due attention to these matters aiming at the continuous improvement of processes and procedures carried out by the Agency.

### References

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### List of Abbreviations

A3ES	Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior ( <i>Agency for the Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education</i> )
EAT	External Assessment Team
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
ESU	European Students Union
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institutions
QA	Quality assurance