



# A3ES

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Agência de Avaliação  
e Acreditação  
do Ensino Superior

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## FOLLOW-UP REPORT

A3ES/ENQA

June 2021

## FOLLOW-UP REPORT – A3ES/ENQA (June 2021)

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### 1. CONTEXT

The Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) was assessed by ENQA in 2017/18. The Self-Assessment Report<sup>1</sup> was submitted in 2018 and the External Assessment Report, of ENQA’s responsibility, was presented in 2019<sup>2</sup>. Following this Report, ENQA communicated to A3ES<sup>3</sup> its accreditation for a period of five years. In this document, ENQA indicated that a Follow-up Report was due two years after the accreditation, suggesting that it should be submitted in June 2021. The Follow-up Report, in accordance with ENQA’s criteria, should reflect the Agency’s commitment to an ongoing reflection on the activities carried out in the area of quality assurance<sup>4</sup>, highlighting the changes introduced (or foreseen) in the functioning of the Agency. This Report intends to meet this purpose.

<sup>1</sup> A3ES (2017) – *Self-Assessment Report*, Lisbon, Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior

<sup>2</sup> KOHLER, J. *et al* (2019) – *ENQA Agency Review; Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES)*, ENQA Agency Review.

<sup>3</sup> Letter 4 July 2019

<sup>4</sup> ENQA (2016) – *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews*, Brussels, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

In the same document, ENQA suggested that a voluntary progress visit to A3ES could be carried out, also two years after accreditation, to monitor the evolution of the Agency's activities. This visit is proposed to take place during the month of October 2021.

## 2. A3ES RECENT EVOLUTION

The activity of A3ES has recently undergone two adjustments that have had an impact on the development of its activities.

2.1. A first disturbance resulted from the COVID 19 pandemic that has affected the Agency's activity since March 2020. All sectors of the Agency organized their activities via a remote working system. This change in the operating model of A3ES required a period of adaptation and introduced a different work rhythm, reducing to a minimum the physical contacts between the Agency's employees, namely with the Project Coordinators, and temporarily limiting the effectiveness of the Agency's activities.

Assessment visits currently continue to take place via virtual platforms, a situation that, being more complex and laborious, has ensured the contact of the External Assessment Teams with the various members of higher education institutions.

2.2. A second change in the functioning of the Agency resulted from the replacement of the former Management Board by a new team with a completely different composition. This change took place on 18 December 2020 following the end of the former Management Board's mandate. The new Management Board, chosen by the Agency's Board of Trustees, took office on the same date. The new Management Board includes the following elements:

- João Guerreiro, Executive Member and President;
- João Queiroz, Executive Member;
- Helena Avelino, Executive Member;
- Anália Torres, Non-Executive Member;
- Miguel Faria, Non-Executive Member;
- Teresa Restivo, Non-Executive Member.

The new Management Board began its activity in an extreme pandemic situation, with all the Agency's staff in a remote working regime, and facing the difficulties inherent in streamlining activities in an institution that, for this reason, was completely fragmented. However, the quality of the staff was a

decisive element in recovering the Agency's working dynamics and in advancing assessment and accreditation activities.

### 3. HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN PORTUGAL: NEW INITIATIVES

3.1. Over the past years, after the accreditation of A3ES, the Portuguese higher education system has registered an evolution that is worth mentioning. A first change resulted from the increase in the flow of young people who intend to attend higher education. In 2020, compared to 2019, there was a 20% increase in the number of higher education applicants and enrolled, through the various access routes (next table).

ACCESS ROUTES	APPLICANTS		ENROLLED (1 <sup>st</sup> year 1 <sup>st</sup> time)	
	2019	2020	2019	2020
National Access Competition (public institutions)	51 046	62 567	45 789	52 655
Local competition	-	-	596	573
Institutional competition (private institutions)	-	-	10 263	11 954
Special competitions	-	-	15 447	14 779
International students	-	-	5 477	4 470
Competition for graduates from VET (secondary) - public		2 615		676
Competition for graduates from VET (secondary) - private		-		513
Sources: Relatório do Grupo de Trabalho sobre o acesso ao ensino superior, maio 2021 and Directorate-General for Higher Education, 2021				

3.2. Special mention should be made of the creation of a dedicated and special access route for VET (vocational education and training) candidates, a situation that traditional access mechanisms did not contemplate. This situation has been generating an unjustified inequality, given the fact that vocational secondary education graduates currently represent around 45% of secondary education graduates in Portugal.

3.3. Another significant change in the panorama of Portuguese higher education was the creation of a Legal Regime for Distance Learning Provision in Higher Education. The Agency developed the instruments to start the

evaluation of these study programmes in 2020, having created the Self-Assessment and External Assessment Guidelines. The first cycle of assessment of these programmes started in October 2020.

- 3.4. Still in 2018, another Decree-Law was published, already mentioned in the Assessment Report prepared by ENQA (2019), which altered some of the criteria used in the accreditation of degree-awarding study programmes. These new criteria introduce more demanding requirements regarding the qualification of teaching staff and began to apply to New Study Programmes (NCE) submitted for accreditation after 15 October 2020. In the future, they will affect all study programmes, including those that are in operation (ACEF), which will occur after 31 December 2022.
- 3.5. The Parliament approved a Law<sup>5</sup> that amends the previous Law that approved the Legal Regime for the Assessment of Higher Education. This amendment highlights some aspects of higher education assessment procedures. It gives higher education institutions primary responsibility for the quality of their functioning, as well as for their own quality assurance. It introduces in the quality assessment criteria indicators referring to social action, reduction of dropout, conditions of attendance of working students, academic freedom and measures against academic fraud. It reinforces the mechanisms for the participation of students in External Assessment Teams. Finally, it determines that the Agency should prepare an annual monitoring report on the assessment of higher education to be sent to the Parliament, to the National Education Council, in addition to its public dissemination. The first report prepared by A3ES, under this legal provision, was sent to the Portuguese Parliament in October 2020.
- 3.6. The last legal initiative with an impact on the higher education system was launched this year<sup>6</sup> and covers issues related to initiatives that result from collaboration between higher education institutions and other entities in the society (local authorities, companies, social, cultural and health organizations, as well as the various sectors of public administration). However, this legal initiative also addressed the criteria for the accreditation of joint study programmes (Portuguese institutions with foreign institutions), giving A3ES the competence to adopt criteria, in the assessment processes of these programmes, that are different from those used in the accreditation of study programmes organised exclusively by Portuguese institutions. This last change is fundamental for the accreditation of joint study programmes, a modality that currently registers a high growth rate in the requests for

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<sup>5</sup> Law nº 94/2019, of 4 September.

<sup>6</sup> Decree-Law nº 27/2021, of 16 of April.

assessment submitted to the Agency, namely the degrees created under the “European Universities” Programme.

3.7. Meanwhile, the Government launched a period of reflection on a proposal regarding the Statute of the Teaching Career in Private and Cooperative Higher Education. In the future, this instrument could be advantageous for improving the qualification of teaching staff of higher education institutions in the private and cooperative sector, particularly to make it more stable and compatible with the public sector.

#### 4. A3ES ACTIVITIES: 2020/2021

4.1. As mentioned, the current Management Board (MB) took office on 18 December 2020 and, overall, continued the Agency's previous work. Notwithstanding the widespread remote working situation in the country, the MB introduced some adjustments in the programme of activities, in the priorities of the Agency's work and in some of its programmatic documents. The Activity Plan (2021) was unanimously approved by the Board of Trustees and obtained a positive opinion unanimously approved by the Advisory Council.

4.2. The strands of assessment maintained their dynamics:

- New Study Programmes (NCE): the assessment of these study programmes was maintained based on document analysis only. All External Assessment Teams (EAT) now integrate an international element, a situation that was decided at the beginning of 2021.
- Study Programmes in Operation (ACEF): various assessments are in progress, many of them requiring visits (in this case, virtual visits) by EAT. A significant number of these ACEF study programmes have a simplified assessment (no visit), as they belong to institutions which have certified Internal Quality Assurance System (SIGQ), which have a high level of scientific research (R&D centres with classification of Very Good or Excellent) and, moreover, have registered a stable situation in the previous assessments of study programmes.
- Study Programmes in Special Accreditation Renewal Processes (PERA): in the last year the assessment of these study programmes reached an important number of processes. These are interim assessments, designed to align these study programmes to the normal periods of assessment of the respective scientific areas.

- **Distance Learning:** the evaluation of Distance Learning Study Programmes began in the current academic year (2020/2021). The Agency understands this first cycle of assessments as experimental, due to the novelty of this type of provision and the lack of previously consolidated criteria for such assessments. The External Assessment Teams have had a mixed composition, integrating evaluators from the respective scientific area and distance learning experts, in addition to the international evaluator who should be familiar with the object of the Study Programme. Distance learning has deserved several reflections organized by A3ES. Topics like Course Rubrics, Guidelines for Evaluation of Distance Education and Quality in Distance Education were discussed in a Seminar conducted by Susan M. Zvacek (College Teaching Coach, US). It is in this context that an International Conference on the subject (see at the end) is expected to be organized in September 2021, in which a reflection on the first year of accreditations of this typology of study programmes will be presented.
- **Internal Quality Assurance Systems (SIGQ):** the certification of these systems is based on a voluntary initiative by Higher Education Institutions. These submit the models and the experience with their operation and request the respective audit and certification. A positive certification signals the institution's commitment to quality assurance, a situation that is a public indication of the quality of its operations and, as mentioned above, allows the institution to benefit from simplified mechanisms for the assessment of its study programmes. SIGQ certification is granted for a maximum of six years.
- **Institutional Assessment:** at the end of the first cycle of programme assessments (2012-2016), the Agency organized a cycle of institutional assessments that lasted until 2017. At the end of the current assessment cycle (2018-2022), a new institutional assessment cycle is planned. The preparation of this cycle of institutional assessments will take place throughout 2022.
- **Scientific research:** in this domain, A3ES maintains its Office of Research and Analysis, although at this stage it is very focused on themes that directly contribute to improving the Agency's activity. The topics covered include doctoral degree models, distance learning or graduates' transition to the labour market. The Office is also engaged in the preparation of the next institutional assessment cycle, undertaking a detailed analysis of the reports produced in the last

institutional assessment (2017). The aim of this analysis is to clarify and, eventually, simplify the mechanisms that will be used in the next institutional assessment (2023).

## 5. CONVERGENCE WITH THE ESG

5.1. In the next chapters, this Report addresses the reflections and the achievements which converge with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). First, a reference is made to Part 3 of the ESG. Then Part 2 of the ESG is approached, making special reference to the standards in relation to which ENQA, in its previous assessment, made recommendations for the activity of A3ES.

5.2. Within the scope of Part 3 of the ESG (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance Agencies), the Agency's evolution, in the past three years, has been directed towards the reinforcement of its convergence with these standards:

5.2.1. Immediate objectives. A3ES once again clarified its immediate objectives through the preparation of the Activity Plan for 2021, which, as mentioned above and after approval by the Management Board, received unanimous favourable endorsements from the Board of Trustees and the Advisory Council. Simultaneously, the general lines of the Plan were presented to the representative entities of public universities (CRUP), public polytechnics (CCISP) and private and cooperative higher education institutions (APESP). By law, the Agency must submit an annual report of its activities to the Parliament and the National Education Council. The 2020 Report was submitted in November; the 2021 Report is being prepared, to be presented to these entities at the end of the year. These various initiatives allowed the discussion of the A3ES plan of activities not only with institutions representing higher education institutions, but also with professional bodies, which have a large representation on the Advisory Council, and with the entity that oversees the Agency: the Board of Trustees.

5.2.2. Agency staff. The Agency has been partially affected by the departure of some of its officers. At this stage, the recruitment of new Project Coordinators is underway to ensure the full functioning of the Agency.

The internal functioning of the Agency has benefited from monthly virtual meetings between the Management Board members and the

Project Coordinators. These are very productive moments, as they allow discussing all the issues that require clarification of the guidelines produced by the Management Board. The themes of these meetings focus on quality criteria, the training of EAT, the qualification of teaching staff, assessment reports (standard and follow-up), the relationship with professional bodies and with employers, etc. They generate coordination and homogeneity of action that cover all Project Coordinators and, through them, the various EAT. Thus, effective coherence is ensured in the different types of assessment.

- 5.2.3. Information system. The Agency is changing its information system, implementing a new application that will allow the integrated management of assessment mechanisms (all types of reports and other information associated with assessment operations), administrative and financial mechanisms, as well as the connections to the various institutions that interact with the A3ES (Foundation for Science and Technology, General Directorate of Higher Education and, in the future, with Higher Education Institutions themselves). This initiative will make it possible to completely dematerialize the Agency's daily work, overcome the shortcomings that still exist in some document flows and free up energy for work areas associated with the design and improvement of procedures.
- 5.2.4. Financial situation. Financially, the Agency has a very stable situation, with full autonomy, and no disturbances are expected in the coming years.
- 5.2.5. Scientific Council. The Scientific Council is a non-statutory structure created by the former Management Board to monitor the Agency's activities and advice on its directions. The current Management Board wants to keep the Scientific Council and is reconsidering its composition. Some contacts are currently being made, but the final composition will only be announced in the second half of 2021.
- 5.2.6. Strategic plan. The Agency is drafting its Strategic Plan for the period 2021-2024. The 2021 Activity Plan already advances with some issues that will be developed within the scope of the Strategic Plan. But the final version of this Plan, to be submitted to the Board of Trustees and the Advisory Council, will be completed by the beginning of the second half of 2021. This Plan will guide the Agency's activity in the coming years in line with the foreseeable evolution of the European

higher education area and the challenges that this area will be confronted with.

- 5.2.7. New reference documents. The Agency is reviewing some documents that constitute the main guiding body of its activity. The Quality Manual and the Regulation with the General Operating Standards applicable to the various lines of assessment will be revised in the coming months. The final documents are expected to be approved by the end of 2021. In order to get approval, once sanctioned by the Management Board, the changes will undergo an analysis by the Board of Trustees, the Advisory Council and also the Scientific Council. The general framework of these reference documents is consolidated. There are, however, some aspects that result from the new strategies for creating study programmes (in association with foreign institutions, of a multidisciplinary scope, in the distance learning modality or with a modular structure) or from new organizational models of institutions that require the revision of these documents and the introduction of changes.

So far, the Management Board has updated or drafted the following reference documents:

- Presentation of Assessment System (in Portuguese and in English);
- Thematic Assessment Committees;
- Rules for the constitution of EAT;
- Complementary guidelines for the preliminary appraisal and the assessment of distance NCE (new study programmes);
- Criteria for the qualification of teaching staff for the accreditation of study programmes.

- 5.2.8. Thematic Studies. The publication of the Thematic Studies, organized according to the different scientific areas, will be resumed and is scheduled for the end of this assessment cycle, in 2022. These are useful editions that outline the higher education panorama in the different scientific areas.

- 5.3. Within the scope of Part 2 of the ESG (Standards and Guidelines for External Quality Assurance), the Agency's evolution over the past three years has helped to clarify its convergence with this set of standards:

- 5.3.1. Guidelines for self-assessment. The Self-Assessment guidelines have to undergo some adjustments. The criteria used to analyse teaching staff qualifications, recently changed by law, will require adjustments

to be made to the various guidelines, although for the Study Programmes in operation (ACEF) these criteria will only come into force at the end of 2022. The procedure that the Agency is following is explained below:

- a) Guidelines for Self-assessment of Distance Learning Study Programmes: the experimental period (2020/21) has revealed numerous weaknesses in the guidelines, therefore they are currently being assessed and reviewed, to come into force at the beginning of the 2021/2022 academic year;
- b) Guidelines for Self-assessment of Study Programmes in Operation (ACEF). In this case, we are reaching the end of an assessment cycle (2018/2022) and, to maintain the stability of these procedures, the eventual revision of these Guidelines will take place in 2022, coinciding with the end of this five-year cycle. Changing a procedure in the middle of an assessment cycle is unjustified;
- c) Guidelines for the self-assessment of New Study Programmes (NCE). These guidelines, which are used every year for the submission of new study programme proposals, have gradually been improved over the years. Bearing in mind the principle of stability, adjustments have only contributed to the improvement and clarity of the issues on the basis of which the quality of Study Programmes is analysed. At this stage, the criteria for qualifying the teaching staff are one of the changes that will have to be introduced;
- d) Guidelines for the self-assessment of Internal Quality Assurance Systems (SIGQ). The guidelines used in the evaluation of SIGQs will, during the present year of 2021, be rethought and reoriented, valuing the convergence with the ESG and focusing their evaluation on the teaching-learning model and on student-centred initiatives.

#### 5.3.2. External Assessment Team.

Student evaluators. The procedure to select students to join the EAT has been complex, but effective. After the call for applications, a first documentary selection is made. Selected candidates attend a training course, followed by a written test that focuses on matters related to quality assurance in higher education institutions. The result of this process leads to a selection of about 10% of the initial candidates, who belong to different scientific areas and which guarantees the inclusion of students in all the EAT.

The current Management Board has established a new model for the composition of EAT. This includes the creation of Thematic Committees in the various scientific areas, composed of a small group of teachers/researchers with recognized high standard scientific curricula at national and international levels. These Thematic Committees are meant to collaborate with the Management Board and suggest additional guidelines for the various EAT, which are adjusted to the reality of the study programmes of each scientific area and which complement the quality criteria defined by A3ES. They also collaborate with the Management Board in forming the EAT, identifying the best peers to perform this role. Through this procedure, it is intended to prevent conflicts of interest and to apply consistent criteria for evaluating the quality of Study Programmes.

In recent months, the Management Board has created an instrument for presenting/explaining the different stages of assessment procedures. This instrument, mentioned above (5.2.7), was prepared in Portuguese and English and allows for the organisation of small training sessions to present the details of the assessment procedures to all members of the EAT to ensure homogeneity in the performance of all EAT.

To better guide the work of EAT, the Management Board has also reformulated the document which defines the framework of conditions that must be fulfilled in the composition of EAT (referred to in point 5.2.7). In addition to changes derived from recent legislation, other criteria were defined that guarantee the inclusion of better prepared peers in the EAT, limiting the exercise of each evaluator in an EAT to three consecutive years; therefore, these structures will be necessarily and regularly renewed. At the same time, greater visibility is guaranteed through public information on the EAT's composition.

The guidelines used by EAT to assess the composition of the teaching staff involved in each study programme were also updated due to recent changes in legislation. The new study programmes, submitted for accreditation after 15 October 2020, had to comply, by law, with the new, more demanding criteria aimed at mobilizing the best individuals to comply with the assessment mechanisms.

The Preliminary Assessment Reports, prepared by the EAT, the Final Reports (in case there is a formal response from the institution) and the Management Board's Decisions are published in the Agency's Information System. Self-Assessment Reports and Final Reports are also published on the respective institutions' website.

### 5.3.3. Conditions or Recommendations

One of the themes that has been a subject of reflection for the Management Board, in the interactions with the Project Coordinators and in bilateral relations with higher education institutions, focuses on the issue of accreditations with conditions or accreditations with recommendations. The Agency's strategy is to reduce, whenever possible, the incidence of accreditations with conditions, so as to turn clearer the pedagogical provision, limiting any doubts that may remain about some study programmes. This strategy depends, however, on two initiatives that will also be defined in the Agency's actions in the short term and that will be explored in the Strategic Plan:

- a) Greater clarity in the definition of the **quality requirements** which have to be fulfilled in the accreditation procedures and their explanation in the Self-Assessment Guidelines, reinforcing the explanatory indications and instructions of the contents of these requirements;
- b) Greater effort by institutions to organise their accreditation proposals more thoroughly, considering all the **quality requirements** defined for each of the submitted processes.

But at the same time, the Agency should stress its pedagogical component in order to advise and to suggest changes and adjustments in the organisation of study programmes or in the SIGQ, both in the meetings with institutions and in its own decisions.

### 5.3.4. Visits

The visits for the assessment and accreditation of Study Programmes in Operation (ACEF) were resumed in November 2020, but only in virtual format. The effect of virtual visits is not entirely negative, although some of the issues that contribute to the accreditation of study programmes, related to facilities, equipment and other infrastructures, cannot be assessed in loco. The ACEF are Study Programmes that are already in operation and therefore some of these issues may correspond to information already known by EAT members.

### 5.3.5. Reference documents

In addition to the review of the reference documents indicated earlier (5.2.7) and which will be (or are already) under review, the Agency will launch the elaboration of an Assessment Manual that, in addition to the Self-Assessment Guidelines, will turn clearer the quality requirements used in the various assessment operations under the responsibility of A3ES. National legislation imposes a wide range of criteria to which the ESG parameters must be added. This entire assessment framework requires the Agency to try to systematize the various criteria and parameters and, above all, to explain them clearly so that they can be internalized in the work of the EAT. Many of the doubts currently

raised during assessment procedures result precisely from the absence, in some chapters, of clear explanations and justifications of criteria. The FAQ will also be completed with better explanations and covering the whole range of issues addressed by the Agency.

#### 5.4. Issues identified by ENQA in the A3ES assessment carried out in 2018 and which obtained partial compliance (ESG 2.4 and ESG 2.5)

##### 5.4.1. ESG 2.4

Regarding the recommendations associated with ESG 2.4 (composition of EAT), the Agency has maintained the composition of its EAT almost exclusively with peers. In addition to the Project Coordinator, who is also part of the EAT, many of the recruited peers are academics, some are retired and others have professional activities in addition to their academic careers.

It is not easy to extend the composition of EAT to professionals and employers. The Agency intends to take up this alternative in the new **institutional assessment** cycle that is scheduled for 2022/23. At the same time, the EAT that will be created for the **cycle of Internal Quality Assurance Systems audits**, which will start in November/December 2021, should also integrate members from the professional and employer environment. This choice has to be a careful one, as it is important to emphasize that higher education institutions are structurally different from companies and other organizations. The Internal Quality Assurance Systems, beyond reflecting an effective functional structure, must guarantee a high level of participation and commitment from all sectors of the Academic Community, in addition to continuous improvement measures.

The EAT who **assess study programmes**, given the number of existing EAT, could hardly be extended to include other actors. There is a small number of EAT, oriented towards the assessment and accreditation of professional study programmes, which have had the collaboration of professionals who are not integrated within higher education institutions. The Agency will launch, on an experimental basis, the creation of EAT aimed at assessing Professional Master Degrees<sup>7</sup>, integrating experts from employers and business associations. The presence of foreign members, mentioned above, has proved to be essential for introducing a demanding and objective look

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<sup>7</sup> Master degrees with a strong professional orientation, involving employers and business and socio-professional bodies in the region, ensuring the involvement of employers, which are oriented towards the development of technical skills and recruit exclusively students with a minimum prior professional experience of five years.

which is not personally committed to the Portuguese reality. But their recruitment has not been an easy task. In parallel, the analysis of study programmes always includes a written, non-binding statement of opinion, issued by the respective professional body, which brings a contribution based on the representation of professional interests.

#### 5.4.2. ESG 2.5

Concerning the recommendations related with ESG 2.5 (better identification of quality criteria), the Agency will reformulate the Self-Assessment Guidelines and, in this process, will improve the instructions and explanations in order to clarify the content of the criteria defined in the article 25 of the Assessment Regulation. This Regulation is currently being reviewed, which is an opportunity to clarify the issue raised by ENQA.

Some of the reference documents that the current Management Board has drawn up are aimed at better clarifying the quality criteria. We refer to the aforementioned indication, which advocates the introduction of greater clarity and precision in the quality requirements, which will help to better identify what is intended in each of the chapters and points of the Self-Assessment Guidelines.

## 6. FINAL REMARKS

The tasks the Agency will face over the next three years are multiple and result from various constraints that require a deep reflection on the assessment mechanisms currently in operation. The end of the current cycle of assessment of study programmes in operation (scheduled for 2022) will allow to move forward in two directions: designing the Institutional Assessment (prepared in 2022 and launched in 2023) and preparing the new cycle of study programme assessments, starting at the end of 2023.

Institutional Assessment will close the cycle of assessment of different scientific areas carried out during the period between 2018 and 2022. The Institutional Assessment will cover the whole universe of Portuguese Higher Education Institutions, universities and polytechnics, public and private. It is estimated that in Portugal, the higher education system includes around 120 institutions. The parameters to be used in this operation will be reformulated in the first half of 2022, integrating new international practices, the national criteria established for the operation of Higher Education Institutions and the standards defined by the ESG. This operation will mandatorily integrate international experts in the various EAT, which must also include representatives of employers. The current expectation regarding this assessment procedure points to the reinforcement of the quality culture in the Institutions and to the definition of a set of incentives that will allow the adoption of progressive improvements in the respective performances.

The new cycle of assessments, from 2023 to 2028, will require specifying the criteria to be used in the procedures, expanding the respective instructions and justifications, adjusting the Self-Assessment Guidelines, formalising the new Thematic Committees in the various areas and scheduling the cycle through the distribution of the scientific areas over the six years.

The Internal Quality Assurance Systems (SIGQ) will also deserve the Agency's attention. The audit and subsequent certification of these Systems should focus on processes that have already been adopted, tried out during at least one full year and aimed at improving the various procedures that make up the System.

This set of initiatives will necessarily be intertwined with two strategies that are considered central for the consolidation of the higher education quality system in Portugal: improve knowledge and promote internationalisation.

The permanent incorporation of new knowledge requires continuous research into the development of these processes, the role that higher education institutions are playing in social evolution and the public reflections that the Agency will organise or participate in. The A3ES Research and Analysis Office will also contribute to this purpose.

Internationalisation is another strategy that should decisively influence the Agency's initiatives. An increasing number of proposals for joint study programmes are submitted to the Agency, and the “European Universities” Programme can increase this flow of applications. Concerning quality assurance in higher education, the Agency follows closely the reflections that are being developed within ENQA, EQAR and EUA on this topic, as well as the assessment of the importance of new methodologies, new learning models and new partnerships within the organisation of higher education.

Approved by the Management Board (A3ES) on June 16, 2021.

<b>ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS</b>	
A3ES	Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education
ACEF	Assessment of Study Programmes in Operation
APESP	Portuguese Association for private and cooperative higher education institutions
CCISP	Portuguese Public Polytechnics Coordinating Council
CRUP	Council of Rectors of Portuguese Public Universities
EAT	External Assessment Team
ENQA	European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance
EUA	European University Association
FAQ	Frequent Asked Questions
MB	Management Board
NCE	New Study Programme
PERA	Study Programmes in Special Accreditation Renewal Processes
SIGQ	Internal Quality Assurance Systems
VET	Vocational Education and Training

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

# The challenges of distance education in higher education

17<sup>th</sup> September 2021, Hybrid Conference

Organization: A3ES, CRUP, CCISP and APESP

Date	TOPICS	INVITED SPEAKERS
<b>17.09.2021</b>		
<b>9.30 am</b>	<b>Open Ceremony</b>	
<b>9.45 am</b>	<b>Pedagogical models: learning and teaching strategies and methods; academic development in distance education</b>	Carla Oliveira (Universidade Aberta, Portugal)
<b>10.30 am</b>	<b>Assessment and feedback in distance education</b>	David Boud (Deakin University, Australia)
<b>11.15 am</b>	<b>Coffee break</b>	
<b>11.30 am</b>	<b>E-moderation and mechanisms for monitoring students' learning</b>	Liz Marr (Open University, UK)
<b>0.15 pm</b>	<b>Curricular design and student diversity</b>	Ricardo Mairal (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities e UNED, Spain)
<b>1.00 pm</b>	<b>Lunch break</b>	
<b>2.30 pm</b>	<b>Criteria for Evaluating Distance Education Program Quality</b>	Susan Zvacek (Consultant, College Teaching Coach.com, USA)
<b>3.15 pm</b>	<b>The A3ES experience: First cycle of assessments of distance education programmes in Portugal</b>	Fernando Ramos (Distance Education Advisory Committee by A3ES and Universidade de Aveiro, Portugal)
<b>3.45 pm</b>	<b>Coffee break</b>	
<b>4.00 pm</b>	<b>Round table with representatives of CRUP, CCSIP and APESP</b>	
<b>5.00 pm</b>	<b>Closing session</b>	

*Lisbon Time (GMT)*



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