



Self-Assessment Report June 2021

Agence pour l'Évaluation de la Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur (AEQES)
[Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education]
www.aeqes.be

TABLE OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAQ	Agence suisse d'accréditation et d'assurance qualité [Swiss Agency for Accreditation and Quality Assurance]
ADMEE	Association pour le développement des méthodologies d'évaluation en éducation [Association for the Development of Evaluation Methodologies in Education]
AEEEEV	Association européenne des établissements d'enseignement vétérinaire [European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education]
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]
BES	Brevet d'enseignement supérieur [Diploma of Higher Education] (120 ects = level 5 of the FWB Qualifications Framework)
CAM	Conseil d'Appui Méthodologique [Methodological Support Council] AEQES body set-up for the pilot phase
CE	Cellule exécutive [Executive Unit] of AEQES
CG	Comité de gestion [Steering Committee] of AEQES
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]
CReF	Conseil des Recteurs des universités francophones de Belgique [Council of University Rectors of the French Community of Belgium]
CTI	Commission des titres d'ingénieur (France) [Engineering Degree Commission]
DGESVR	Direction générale de l'Enseignement supérieur, de l'Enseignement tout au long de la vie et de la Recherche scientifique [Directorate General for Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Scientific Research]
ECTS	<i>European Credits Transfer and Accumulation System</i>
EEES	Espace européen de l'enseignement supérieur [European Higher Education Area (EHEA)]
ENQA	<i>European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education</i>
EPS	Enseignement de promotion sociale [Adult Education]
EQA	External quality assurance
EQAR	<i>European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education</i>
ES	Enseignement supérieur [Higher Education]
ESA	Écoles supérieures des arts [Schools of Arts]
ESG	<i>European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area</i>
EUA	<i>European University Association</i>
EUA-IEP	<i>European University Association – Institutional Evaluation Programme</i>
EURASHE	<i>European Association of Institutions in Higher Education</i>
FEF	Fédération des étudiants francophones [Federation of French-speaking Students]
F.R.S.-FNRS	Fonds de la recherche scientifique [Scientific Research Fund]
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]
GT	Groupe(s) de travail [Working group(s)]
HCERES	Haut conseil de l'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur (France) [High Council for the evaluation of Research and Higher Education]

HE	Hautes Écoles [University Colleges]
MusiQuE	<i>Music Quality Enhancement</i>
MQ	Manuel qualité [Quality Handbook]
PAE	Programme annuel de l'étudiant [Annual Student Programme]
PO	Pouvoir(s) organisateur(s) [Controlling Authority]
PS	Plan stratégique [Strategic Plan]
SACA	Service administratif à comptabilité autonome [Administrative Service with Independent Accounting]
SWOT	<i>Strengths – Weaknesses – Opportunities – Threats</i>
UE	Unité d'enseignement [unit of study]
VLHUR-AQ	Agence qualité pour l'enseignement supérieur flamand [Flemish Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education]
WBE	Wallonie-Bruxelles Enseignement [Wallonia-Brussels Education]

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1. INTRODUCTION

A self-assessment report is a privileged moment of reflection when an organization can take stock of its activities between two reviews and plan the future. This third review of the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (AEQES) by ENQA comes at a particular time, as the Agency is engaged in a phase of methodological experimentation that happens to take place during the COVID-19 crisis.

This review constitutes a timely opportunity to take advantage of an external viewpoint on the essential projects it has identified, namely the

- continued reflection on the governance of the Agency as regards its effectiveness and the representativeness of its bodies;
- stabilization of the Executive Unit and the Agency's resources;
- AEQES communication strategy;
- finalization of the pilot phase and management of the transition to a sustainable methodology of institutional review;
- clarification of the framework governing the quality of higher education in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, in particular through the enactment of a new decree.

AEQES concentrated on its mission of implementing external programmatic evaluations in its first years, and then developed a longer-term strategic reflection, which led to a first Strategic Plan for 2016-2020, the preparation of a cooperation agreement with ARES (Academy for Research and Higher Education) signed in 2017, and more recently, the adoption of the Strategic Plan for 2021-2025. All of the aforementioned projects (the context of which is detailed in this report) are part of this new strategic plan.

Furthermore, it has organized annual meetings with its stakeholders since 2015 through the "AEQES Study Days" and has pursued its reflexive approach through publications such as "*Des Programmes à la Gouvernance – Regard transversal sur les Recommandations issues des Évaluations 2014-2016*" [From Programmes to Governance - A Cross-Cutting Look at the Recommendations from the Evaluations of 2014-2016]. Upcoming reflexive analyses such as the report on the pilot phase of institutional reviews by the experts involved and the assessment of the pilot phase by AEQES will be communicated in 2021-2022.

To support the development of quality assurance and culture in the HEIs, important methodological steps have been reflected upon from 2016 to date: the notion of cycles, the emphasis on enhancement and the use of portfolios, the procedure for recognizing evaluation/accreditation processes carried out by other bodies, etc. It is with the same aim of supporting HEIs in mind that the Agency has designed and implemented a pilot phase of institutional reviews (focus: learning & teaching) after broad consultation with the stakeholders. Initially planned to run from 2019 to 2022, it was extended to 2023 as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. It involves 17 HEIs from the four types of higher education providers operating in FWB (Wallonia-Brussels Federation). This pilot phase is characterized also by the introduction of a new methodology for the continuous evaluation of programmes, for which the Agency has developed a specific reference framework which has been in use since 2019-2020.

For all these reasons, the ESG compliance analysis is focused on three EQA activities (the 2 formats of programmatic evaluations, namely initial and continuous, and the pilot institutional review).

The Agency is looking forward to welcoming the experts and their reflections on all these important issues. It will certainly capitalize on the conclusions of this evaluation to improve the way it operates and to engage in constructive discussions with the supervisory authorities with a view to drafting a new decree.

2. DEVELOPMENT of the SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

This self-assessment report has been prepared for the third review of the Agency by the ENQA. It relies on the experience¹ of the first (2010-2011) and second (2015-2016) reviews and on the progress visit of September 2019. It is part of a more global context of reflection by the Agency on its current positioning and future development.

The AEQES opted to entrust the 'Self-assessment and Strategy' working group² with the task of preparing the Agency's new strategic plan (approved by the Steering Committee in November 2020) and the self-assessment. This choice aimed at aligning the strategic vision with the Agency's self-assessment work.

In performing its task to draft the self-assessment report, this WG met seven times between November 2020 and May 2021 and proceeded in four stages:

- definition of the method and in-depth analysis of the 2015 ESG, the 2016 self-assessment report and the 2019 progress visit;
- compilation of the relevant evidence and documents, including the work of the other working groups, and drafting the various sections of the report;
- organization of a specific session with representatives of the student union (FEF);
- presentation of the report in two extraordinary sessions to the Steering Committee members to approve it. In addition, this WG was also entrusted with the task of contributing to the smooth organization of the visit of the panel mandated by the ENQA.

Several actions have been undertaken to ensure a good circulation of information within the AEQES:

- interim report of the WG at the regular plenary sessions of the Steering Committee;
- posting the minutes of the WG's meetings on the Agency's intranet;
- regular reporting to the Executive Unit's service meetings;
- attendance of two members of the Executive Unit and its Director³ in the Self-assessment and Strategy WG.

The approved self-assessment report was then put on the Agency's website and disseminated to the participants (invited stakeholders) of the review meetings.

¹ See the recommendations made by the ENQA panel and the ENQA Board and the follow-up thereto in Annex 1.

² See composition in Annex 7.

³ Id.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION and QUALITY ASSURANCE in WALLONIA-BRUSSELS FEDERATION

3.1. Political context of higher education in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation⁴

The Kingdom of Belgium is a federal state consisting of Communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking) and Regions (Flemish, Walloon and Brussels-Capital). Each federated entity, as well as the federal authority, is in charge of a series of specific powers in areas reserved for them by the Constitution.

The French-speaking Community, called the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles⁵ (FWB) [Wallonia-Brussels Federation] in its communications, is in charge of French-speaking education⁶ and in particular the:

- organization of the programme of studies in higher education ;
- financing of teaching activities and a significant part of basic research;
- priorities underlying the organization of studies.

Furthermore, the regional and federal authorities also have powers in a number of areas relating to scientific research activities.

Higher education, subsidized by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (FWB), is organized by various Organizing Authorities:

- the FWB itself (Wallonie-Bruxelles Enseignement, WBE) [Wallonia-Brussels Education]; or
- the towns, municipalities and provinces (officially subsidized), or
- private individuals grouped in associations (denominational and non-denominational).

The FWB distinguishes four types of higher education institutions: universities, university colleges (HE), adult higher education colleges (EPS) and higher schools of arts (ESA).

HE institutions	higher education AEQES reviewed provision (BES, BA, MA)			Number of students 2018/2019	Number of students 2017/2018	% of women (in 2017/2018)
6 universities		173	294	101.844	99,203	55.7%
19 university colleges		369	80	91,354	91,219	57.6%
16 schools of arts		82	157	7,743	7,666	58 %
86 adult HE colleges	70	215	9	31,498	31,701	48.8%
Total 127	70	839	540	232.439	229,789	55.6%

FIGURE 1: HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, GLOBAL OFFER AND STUDENT POPULATION IN THE FWB
(SOURCE [HTTPS://WWW.ARES-AC.BE/FR/STATISTICS](https://www.ares-ac.be/fr/statistics) AND AEQES REGISTER)

There is also higher education organized by private institutions. These institutions confer degrees that are

⁴ For a more detailed presentation of higher education in the FWB, AEQES posts a syllabus [\[available in French\]](#).

⁵ On 25 May 2011, the Parliament of the French-speaking Community adopted a resolution to replace the name French-speaking Community of Belgium by the name Wallonia-Brussels Federation. As the Belgian Constitution has not been amended in this respect, texts with a legal scope always include the name French-speaking Community, while the name Wallonia-Brussels Federation is used in cases of normal communication.

⁶ The federal state remains responsible for determining the minimum requirements for the conferral of diplomas, the beginning and end of compulsory education and the pension scheme for educational staff.

not recognized by the FWB⁷, are not eligible for public subsidies and are not subject to external evaluation by the AEQES.

The political context in which AEQES operates is that of a 5-year term (2019-2024) for the FWB Government. This latter has defined various priorities for its higher education in its 'Community Policy Statement'⁸. The most important elements include the refinancing of higher education (strengthening the administrative services of the institutions, improving their infrastructure and digital development) and making higher education more accessible (improving the geographical distribution of the range of courses on offer, facilitating flexible paths among the various HE providers as well as the recognition of prior experience and learning).

3.2. General organization of studies and reform of the higher education landscape

Implementation of the Bologna reform: Bologna decree (2004) and Landscape decree (2013)

The adoption of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 led to far-reaching reforms of higher education in FWB to modernize and integrate it into the EHEA. A first decree ('Bologna decree', March 2004) provided the basis: adoption of a three-cycle structure (bachelor's degree – master's degree – doctorate), generalization of ECTS credits, issuing the Diploma Supplement, support for the mobility of students and academic staff, quality assurance in higher education, including the activities carried out by the AEQES.

In 2008 was introduced a Higher Education Qualifications Framework (levels 5⁹ to 8)

Stemming from a long consultation process, a reform of the structure and landscape of higher education was implemented in 2013 through what is known as the 'Landscape decree'.¹⁰ This reform had two main objectives: to restructure the higher education landscape in FWB by creating the ARES, the academic clusters and the inter-clusters zones in 2014 for one; and to harmonize the organization of studies by placing students at the centre of the reflection, by providing them with a personalized pathway during their initial studies and throughout their lives, and by creating a single student status in all institutions.¹¹

The Landscape decree introduced the systematization of an approach by learning outcomes for each learning activity or set of learning activities. It also led to the disappearance of the notion of a study year in favour of that of the 'annual student programme.' Similarly, the notion of 'course' is replaced by 'unit of study'.

Higher education coordination bodies

The Academy for Research and Higher Education (ARES in its French acronym) is a public interest organisation which brings together institutes of higher education in the FWB (universities, colleges, schools of the arts and adult education institutions). It is responsible for guaranteeing the exercise of the various missions of higher education, research and service to the community, and for encouraging cooperation by and between the institutions. The ARES carries out its various missions without prejudice to the autonomy of higher education institutions.

⁷ Decree of 28 June 2018 modifying the decree of 7 November 2013 (« Landscape decree ») and aiming at transparency of non-recognized institutions. This decree requires in particular private HEIs to mention on all formats (website, flyers, any medium) in bold and framed the following sentence « institution and diplomas not recognized by the French-speaking community of Belgium ».

⁸ [\[Available in French\]](#)

⁹ Level 5 refers to a 120-ECTS first cycle programme. It was introduced in 2013.

¹⁰ Decree of 7 November 2013 defining the landscape of higher education and the academic organization of studies (hereinafter referred to as the "Landscape decree")

¹¹ Cf. [\[Explanatory memorandum available in French\]](#).

An academic hub¹² is first and foremost a place for consultation and dialogue by and between higher education institutions in the same geographical area. Its main task is to promote and support all forms of cooperation by and between its members and to encourage them to work together so as to offer quality services to students.

General organization and structure of studies

The FWB offers higher education in four sectors: the social and human sciences; health; science and technology; and the arts. These sectors of studies are subdivided into 26 fields. The study programmes are offered in different institutions and 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' (i.e. with the main purpose of preparing for the Master's degree cycle) or 'professionalizing'.
- Second cycle studies comprise between 60 and 180 ECTS (but 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 (F.R.S.-FNRS) [Scientific Research Fund] manages the 22 doctoral schools which group together the thematic doctoral schools; these are inter-university and interdisciplinary.

3.3. Quality assurance in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation

Continuing from the Bologna decree requirements¹³, the Landscape decree specifies in its Article 9 that *'institutions are required to ensure quality management and assurance of all their activities and to take all measures for effective internal self-evaluation and its follow-up.'*

Institutions of higher education must comply with the requirement to have their programmes evaluated by AEQES on a regular basis, in particular for their first and second cycles.

In addition, through the Commission for Quality in Education and Research (CoQER), ARES plays a role on the quality front also. Although the provisions of the decree do not strictly define the scope of ARES action in this field in the strict sense, CoQER encourages and enhances dialogue between institutions and supports the strengthening of their capacity to develop their internal quality management system and their quality culture.

A [cooperation agreement](#) by and between AEQES and ARES was signed in March 2017 at the initiative of AEQES. This official note specifies the roles and tasks of both bodies and defines the operating procedures to be deployed so as to meet their joint objectives for quality of higher education.

During the September 2019 progress visit, the two experts commissioned by the ENQA, Fiona Crozier and Brian Maguire, had the opportunity to talk to various higher education stakeholders including representatives of ARES. Here is their analysis:

Although ARES was created by decree in 2013, it appears that the relationship between the two organisations is still developing (and that this will continue as both organisations move into the next stages of strategic planning). The follow-up visit seemed to demonstrate that both organisations were valued, especially by the universities and other higher education institutions. It seemed to us that both had specific expertise and experience and that AEQES could add value to

¹² The five academic clusters are: Brussels, Hainaut, Louvain, Namur, Liège and Luxembourg

¹³ Bologna decree, Article 9. – Higher education institutions are required to ensure quality management and assurance for all the missions they perform.

joint projects that might run between the two. We feel, therefore, that it would be useful for the current agreement that exists between AEQES and ARES to be revisited and updated, in particular to include an activity plan that could be updated each year with concrete deliverables. In this way, the value of both organisations and of their partnership working will be transparent to external stakeholders, in particular to the HE sector.

AEQES has continued its cooperative actions with ARES.

An action plan based on 6 jointly defined objectives¹⁴ is reviewed regularly and adjusted if necessary. Specific actions are added to this plan.

By way of example:

- at the start of the pilot phase (2019), a representative of ARES was included in the Pilot phase Steering Committee to ensure a regular flow of information between the two bodies;
- under the DEQAR project, ARES and AEQES pooled (human and financial) resources to optimize a database that cross-references HE provision and the external evaluation of curricula;
- an *ad hoc* cooperation arrangement by and between the VLHUR ([Vlaamse Universiteiten en Hogescholen Raad](#)), AEQES and ARES led to a [publication on quality assurance and joint degrees in Belgium](#) (February 2021).

¹⁴ On the basis of their respective missions and in order to ensure that internal and external quality assurance (which are inseparable) are implemented in a coherent manner on the FWB scale, the two organisations share the following objectives, namely to:

- 1 make publicly available up-to-date information on the range, coherence and quality of the education on offer and the quality systems developed in higher education in the FWB;
- 2 support institutions to develop a sustainable quality culture for their missions;
- 3 define, maintain and improve the articulation between internal and external quality assurance;
- 4 define and implement operational procedures for the conduct of external evaluations;
- 5 inform, document and prepare files on all matters relating to the quality of higher education for decision-makers and stakeholders;
- 6 ensure that no conflict of interest arises.

4. AEQES: HISTORY, PROFILE and ACTIVITIES

4.1. Role and characteristics of AEQES

AEQES is the public service agency which conducts an independent evaluation of higher education programmes in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. Created in its current form by the decree of 22 February 2008, it carried out its first programme evaluations in 2009-2010. It has been a member of the ENQA since 2011 and has been registered on EQAR since 2012.

A particular feature of AEQES is the development of a **formative approach** to the evaluation of programme quality (with a strong focus on enhancement). This is due to the fact that the authorizations¹⁵ are granted *ex-ante* by the Government following proposals from ARES on the basis of strict predefined rules and criteria and that supervisory procedures exist for each form of higher education. External evaluations are compulsory and are financed from the Agency's budget. The results of these evaluations have no formal impact on the HEIs in terms of funding or authorizations. AEQES is therefore not an accreditation agency: it neither rate or rank institutions, nor receive any financial contribution for evaluations from HEIs.

The Agency carries out **two formats of programmatic evaluation (so-called initial procedure and continuous procedure)** of three types of higher education programmes (1st and 2nd cycles): higher education diplomas (mainly 120 credits but also of 60 and 180 credits), bachelor's degrees (180 and 240 credits) and master's degrees (120 credits) of institutions authorized by the FWB. The entire range of programmes subject to evaluation is listed in a plan which the Agency regularly adjusts and makes public.

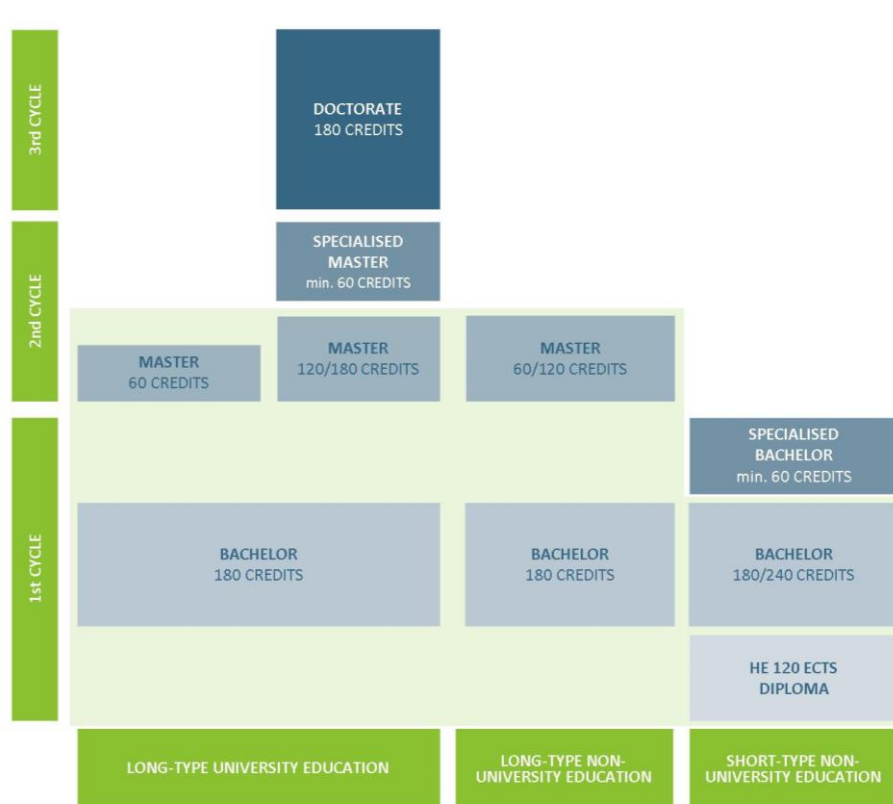


FIGURE 2: SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION CARRIED OUT BY AEQES (GREEN BACKGROUND)

¹⁵ 'Authorization: the capacity, granted by decree to a higher education institution, to organize a programme of study in a specific geographical area, to confer an academic degree and to award the related certificates and decrees' (definition taken from the decree of 7 November 2013)

Another particular feature of AEQES’s programmatic approach is the **grouping of different programmes into clusters**. All programmatic evaluations are cluster-based. This cluster approach leads to the production of system-wide analyses (see ESG 3.4) and to the organizational (and financial) optimization of the programmatic EQA activities on the scale of a small territory like the FWB. However, the definition of the scope of the clusters is still subject to debate¹⁶.

Higher education programmes that fall within the scope of the Agency's evaluation are required to be evaluated by law. However AEQES allows institutions that wish to do so to use other evaluation or accreditation bodies, under certain conditions, without having to duplicate the process with the formative evaluation of AEQES.

With this in mind, and for the purpose of [cross-border quality assurance](#), AEQES initially authorized joint evaluations in cooperation with QAAs specializing in a particular subject area. This option led to experiences of joint evaluation with the [Commission des Titres d’Ingénieur](#) (CTI) [Engineering Degree Commission] or with [Music Quality Enhancement](#) (MusiQuE).

In September 2017, AEQES took a further step by adopting a **procedure for recognizing an evaluation or accreditation process conducted by another body**¹⁷. This was, for example, requested by the universities for the Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree in Veterinary Medicine as part of their accreditation process with the [European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education \(EAEVE\)](#) in 2019. This AEQES policy enables institutions to meet the legal requirement of evaluation and to benefit from the viewpoint of another evaluation and/or accreditation body in one single procedure.

In addition, in 2017, AEQES was tasked to design and implement a **pilot phase of institutional reviews**. Currently in the experimental phase, this type of evaluation examines the quality systems developed by higher education institutions for their entire HE provision (including programmes currently not covered by the external quality assurance system, i.e. doctoral programmes, [FIGURE 2: SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION CARRIED OUT BY AEQES \(GREEN BACKGROUND\)](#), certificates and continuing education, educational qualifications, etc.). This pilot institutional review is being carried out on a voluntary basis at 17 higher education institutions ([see list of institutions, page 4](#)).

4.2. Milestones since the 2016 ENQA review

September 2016	Second ENQA review, visit of the panel
February 2017	AEQES membership is renewed
March 2017	AEQES-ARES agreement (roles, missions, actions)
June 2017	AEQES registration on EQAR is renewed (until 28/02/2022)
2015-2017	Work of the ‘Perspectives’ WG, extensive consultation of stakeholders and production of the ‘Methodological proposal’ October 2017
September 2017	Approval of the procedure for recognizing an evaluation/accreditation process carried out by another body
December 2017	Amendments to the AEQES decree: mission to design and carry out a pilot phase (2019-2022) and to take stock thereof; increase of the endowment (to €1 million)
October 2018	Approval of the programmatic continuous evaluation framework
January 2019	Progress report submitted to ENQA
September 2019	Launch of the institutional review pilot phase (17 volunteered higher education institutions; visits from November 2019 to April 2021)

¹⁶ E.g. how to define the scope of a cluster? Following the strict legal classification (degrees pertaining to such or such field of studies)? Following a coherent grouping of professions that the study programmes can lead to? In other words, a more academic perspective or a more employability perspective? Some interdisciplinary programmes are difficult to relate to clusters. Clusters vary in sizes and scopes and the content and scope of their system-wide analysis is consequently impacted.

¹⁷ [The procedure is described in detail in the AEQES Quality Handbook \(pages 44 – 48\)](#).

	ENQA progress visit
March 2020	COVID-19 crisis – rescheduling of visits and extension of the pilot phase 2019-2023
October 2020	Switch to remote mode (evaluation site visits, meetings of the Steering committee and the WG, staff meetings, teleworking for all, etc.).
Autumn 2020	Adoption of the Strategic Plan 2021-2025
2021	Finalization of pilot visits – report by the experts on the pilot institutional reviews and AEQES’s assessment of the pilot phase Third ENQA review

FIGURE 3: SOME MILESTONES BETWEEN 2016 AND 2021

4.3. Missions, values, composition and functioning of the AEQES

Missions (decree of 22 February 2008)

- 1 ensure that the curricula organised by the institutions are regularly evaluated, highlighting good practices, shortcomings and problems to be solved;
- 2 ensure the implementation of the evaluation procedures [...];
- 3 promote, through cooperation by and between all components of higher education, the implementation of practices that improve the quality of education provided in each institution. For adult education, this cooperation shall also be carried out with the relevant inspectorate;
- 4 inform the Government, the actors and beneficiaries of higher education about the quality of higher education provided in the French-speaking Community;
- 5 make suggestions to policy makers in order to improve the overall quality of higher education;
- 6 make any proposal that it considers useful for the accomplishment of its missions, on its own initiative or at the request of the Government;
- 7 represent the French-speaking Community before national and international bodies in matters concerning the evaluation of the quality of 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 [completed by D. 20-12-2017].

The 8th mission added in December 2017 confirms the Agency's proactive approach to methodological developments and, together with other parts of the articles supplementing the 2008 decree, provides a legal basis to the pilot phase of institutional reviews¹⁸.

Values

In revising its Strategic Plan (2021-2025), the Agency has retained the values set out in the first Strategic Plan 2016-2020.

DIALOGUE AND CO-CONSTRUCTION	The Agency operates on the basis of dialogue and co-construction practices with/among all stakeholders.
INDEPENDENCE	AEQES is an autonomous public service agency that carries out independently formative evaluation of higher education programmes in the FWB. It is

¹⁸ Inserted by decree of 20-12-2017

'Article 9a - As a complement to the programmatic component of the evaluation described in this chapter IV and with the aim of supporting higher education institutions in the development of their quality systems, the Government entrusts the Agency, within the limits of the budgetary resources allocated pursuant to Article 22 of this decree, with the design and implementation of a pilot project for the external evaluation of the institutional component, as well as with the transmission to the Government of an evaluation report on this pilot project no later than six months after its completion. This pilot project will take place during the academic years 2019-20 to 2021-22. Its purpose is to define the programming of (the programmatic and institutional component) of the evaluations, both for the programmatic and institutional component, according to a new 6-year interval.'

FAIRNESS	responsible for the way it operates. It guarantees the impartiality of the evaluation results, without external influence.
	The Agency treats all institutions with consistency, professionalism, objectivity and integrity, while respecting the diversity of the many components of higher education.
TRANSPARENCY	The Agency's operating rules, evaluation procedures and the results thereof are public.
RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY	The Agency respects the diversity of the higher education institutions' projects and curricular objectives, within the overall aims of higher education and quality.
REFLEXIVITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT	The Agency is in a posture to question the needs of higher education; it monitors international practices, is open to continuous improvement and is a source of proposals to that end.

FIGURE 4: VALUES OF AEQES

Status, composition and functioning

By virtue of its official status [cf. ESG 3.2], the Agency is the external evaluation body, recognized by the FWB, in the service of the four forms of higher education.

Pursuant to the 2008 decree, the bodies of the Agency are: the Steering Committee, the Board and the Executive Unit. To ensure its proper functioning, the Agency has added working groups (as needed), a Complaints Commission (2016), and, for the pilot phase, an Appeals Commission (2021), a pilot phase Steering Committee and a Methodological Support Council.

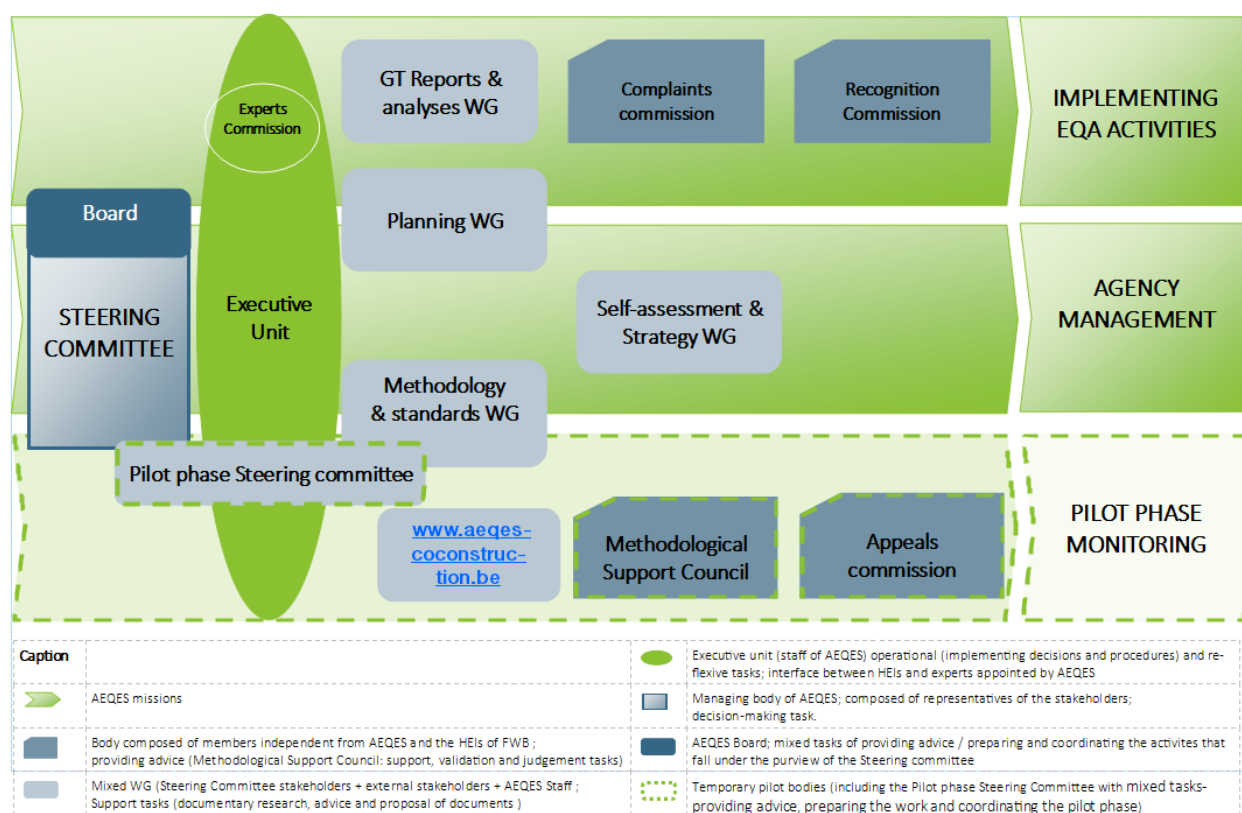


FIGURE 5: AGENCY ORGANIZATIONAL CHART (INCLUDING THE PILOT PHASE)

Composition of the Steering Committee

The Steering Committee is composed of 24 full members with voting rights, and a secretary. Each full member has an alternate. Its composition reflects the structure of higher education in FWB by including representatives of the different forms of education as well as different categories of staff of these institutions (71% of the members in all). The remaining third is composed of representatives of students, socio-economic and cultural circles and the DGESVR.¹⁹

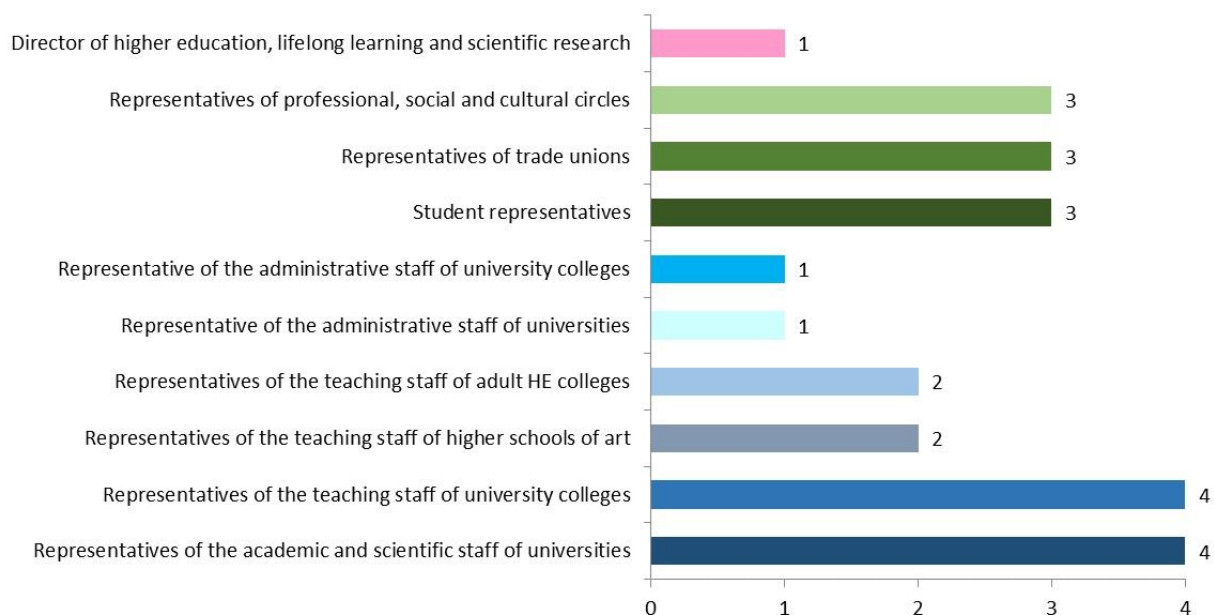


FIGURE 6: COMPOSITION OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE, PER (FULL) MEMBER CATEGORY

In addition, a representative of the Minister responsible for higher education sits on the committee in an advisory capacity.

Missions of the Steering Committee

The Steering Committee elects a Chairman and Vice-Chairman from among its ranks. It meets regularly and discusses strategic issues such as methodological changes, the approval of budgets, the strategic plan, the six-year evaluation plan, etc. and takes decisions on these matters. The Director of the Executive Unit participates in an advisory capacity in the Steering Committee and acts as its secretary. In order to delve deeper into the topics of its debates and to inform its decision-making, the Steering Committee mandates various working groups²⁰ to carry out documentary research, analyse the elements gathered, draw up proposals and produce documents.

Board

The Board consist of 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 an advisory capacity. Its main tasks are to prepare the work of the Steering Committee plenary sessions, to carry out all the missions that the latter delegates to it in its rules of procedure, and to take decisions on day-to-day business.

Executive Unit

The Executive Unit implements the decisions of the Steering Committee and the Board. The staff of the Executive Unit ensure that the evaluations planned by the Agency are organized properly, but also contribute to the reflection on the continuous improvement of practices and to the representation of the

¹⁹ Directorate General for Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Scientific Research

²⁰ See the list of the workgroups and the tasks entrusted to them in Annex 7.

Agency at national and international levels. The administrative staff (assistant, accountant) see to the organizational and administrative follow-up of the Agency. The Communication Officer is responsible for the implementation of the Agency's communication plan.

Pilot phase Steering Committee

The pilot phase Committee²¹ carries out a mixed task providing advice, preparing the work and coordinating the pilot phase. It ensures that the pilot project runs smoothly, reports regularly to the Steering Committee, which commissions the various WG, defines the pilot project evaluation system (assessment) and ensures good communication with the stakeholders throughout the pilot phase.

Methodological Support Council

The Methodological Support Council, set up for the pilot phase, is composed of members who are independent from AEQES and the higher education institutions of the FWB.²² It has an advisory and endorsement function and reports to the Steering Committee: selection of pilot higher education institutions, approval of experts, advice on the [methodological guidelines \(available in French\)](#), advice on the assessment criteria, definition of the arrangements for the implementation of the summative judgement procedure, decision making for the summative judgement procedure, etc.

Complaints Commission

Since January 2016, the Agency has had a Complaints Commission, which acts independently [see ESG 2.7.] It has never had to be activated to date.

Appeals Commission

The Agency has had an Appeals Commission since February 2021 as part of the pilot phase. The Appeals Commission can be called upon to deal independently and impartially with any appeals lodged by the pilot institutions that have requested the summative judgement procedure ²³ [see ESG 2.7].

[See also ESG 3.3. and 3.6]

²¹ See Annex 7 for the composition of the Pilot phase Committee.

²² See Annex 7 for the composition of the Methodological Support Council.

²³ **The (optional) summative judgement procedure dispenses a higher education institution that obtains a positive judgement following its institutional review from an external evaluation of its programmes by AEQES for a period of six years.**

5. AEQES and HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE

5.1. Activities of AEQES

Three external quality assurance activities carried out by AEQES are to be considered for this ENQA review, namely the:

- Initial programmatic evaluation (mandatory)
- Continuous programmatic evaluation (mandatory)
- Pilot institutional review (on a voluntary basis - 17 higher education institutions)

Activity	Object	Scope	Reference framework
INITIAL PROGRAMMATIC EVALUATION	Quality of the study programme	Relevance, coherence, equity and efficacy of the programme + Quality system for improving the programme	5 criteria²⁴
CONTINUOUS PROGRAMMATIC EVALUATION	Continuous improvement of the quality of the study programme	Assessment of and action plan for the programme Quality system and quality culture for improving the higher education institution's programme	3 criteria²⁵
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW (PILOT PHASE)	How a higher education institution's policies and approaches enable it to attain its strategic objectives for learning and teaching.	Quality assurance relating to learning and teaching (for all programmes organized by the higher education institution, including continuing education and third cycle.	ESG, part 1

FIGURE 7: THREE EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE ACTIVITIES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

5.2. Planning and the concept of cycle

From 2008 to 2018, the AEQES planned²⁶ the evaluations of study programmes on a ten-year basis (with an annual adjustment of the planning to integrate new programmes or to move clusters on the basis of arguments discussed and approved by the Steering Committee).

As of 2015 and the introduction of 'follow-up evaluations' at the mid-point of the 10-year cycle, the duration of the cycle was *de facto* extended to 5 years. This was a follow-up evaluation, however, implemented between two comprehensive evaluations and it did not have a specific reference framework and the evaluation panel did not include a student expert.

[Cf. ESG 2.4. for the composition of the committees].

²⁴ For the ESG, part 1-coverage of this reference framework, see Figure 21, page 40

²⁵ For the ESG, part 1-coverage of this reference framework, see Figure 23, page 41-42

²⁶ As prescribed in its decree

Academic years	Mechanisms	Planning documents	cycle
2008 to 2013	First evaluations of study programmes (launch)	Ten-year plan 2008-2018, then 2009-2019, ... until 2018-2028	10 years
2013-2014 and 2014-2015	First follow-up evaluation (optional) + methodological revision of this first edition		
2015-2016	Mid-term evaluation made systematic		10/5 years
2016-2019	Continuation of the ten-year plan with mid-term follow up evaluation		10/5 years
2019-2023	Pilot institutional review of 17 pilot HEIs + evaluation of study programmes (initial + continuous) planned in this transitional period (continuous evaluations waived for the pilot HEIs)	Transitional plan ²⁷ for the pilot phase (2019-2023)	
2023-2029	Institutional reviews (mandatory for all HEIs minus the 17 pilot such institutions, exempted due to their involvement in the pilot phase) + Programme evaluations (continuous format for more than 80% of the programmes)	Six-year plan (2023-2029)	6 years

FIGURE 8: DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF THE CYCLE IN AEQES PRACTICES

5.3. Methodological initiatives

At the Agency's initiative and with the support of a broad consultation among stakeholders, a [methodological proposal](#) (October 2017), led to:

- the design a **pilot phase** from 2019 to 2022, extended to 2023 due to the health crisis, which corresponds to a transitional period with its [specific planning](#);
- considering future **six-year cycles**, both programmatically and institutionally (the [next planning will be on a six-year basis from 2023 to 2029](#));
- turning the first experiences of follow-up evaluation into a mechanism that is now called '**continuous evaluation**' (specific reference framework, addition of a student to the panel, system-wide analysis when deemed relevant);
- considering, at the programmatic level, that each programme should be evaluated by AEQES once under the 'initial evaluation' format and then continue the evaluation cycle under the 'continuous evaluation' format. All programmes are thus placed in an evaluation system every 6 years ;
- using the '**recognition procedure**' and '**summative judgement procedure**' to consider how to integrate programmatic and institutional approaches optimally and avoid bureaucratic burden [see also FIGURE 9: LINKAGE BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT COMPONENTS OF EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE and ESG 2.5. page 53];
- designing and putting online a **website dedicated to the pilot phase** so as to inform all stakeholders of the objectives and stages of the pilot phase, supporting higher education institutions (comprehensive documentation and tools) and inviting them to share resources in a spirit of co-construction;
- planning an **assessment of the pilot phase** to learn its lessons and fine-tune the future methodology.

²⁷ Extended by one year due to the pandemic.

The next figure shows, within the scope of 'Learning & Teaching' of the pilot phase, the four options available for EQA of programmes.

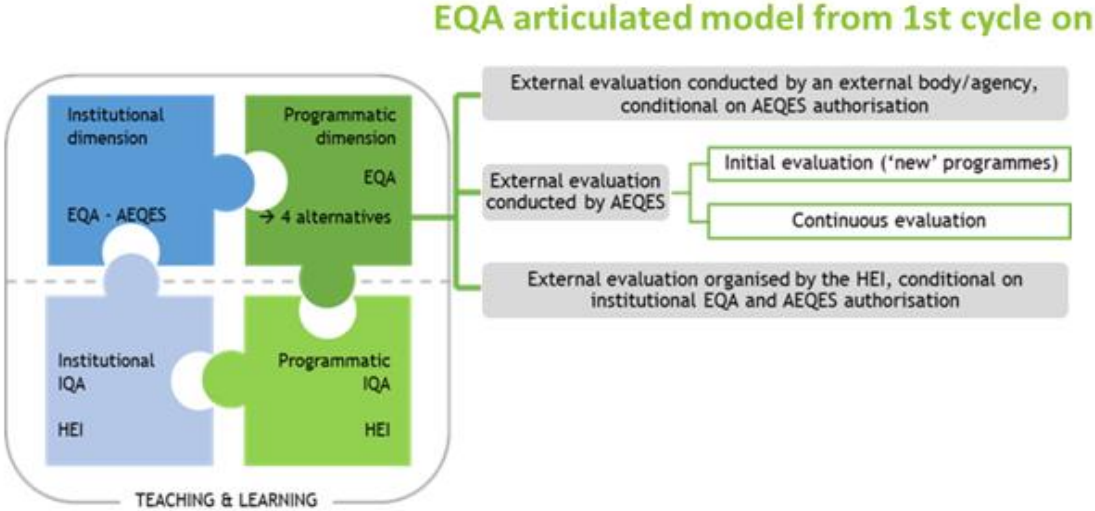


FIGURE 9: LINKAGE BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT COMPONENTS OF EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

5.4. Provisional volume of activities

Programmatic evaluations

The graph below shows, provisionally and by way of information, the HE provision (number of programmes) per study cycle and type of providers which will be evaluated by one or other method over the period between 2023 and 2029. Advanced bachelor and master programmes are *not* included (outside the scope of AEQES).

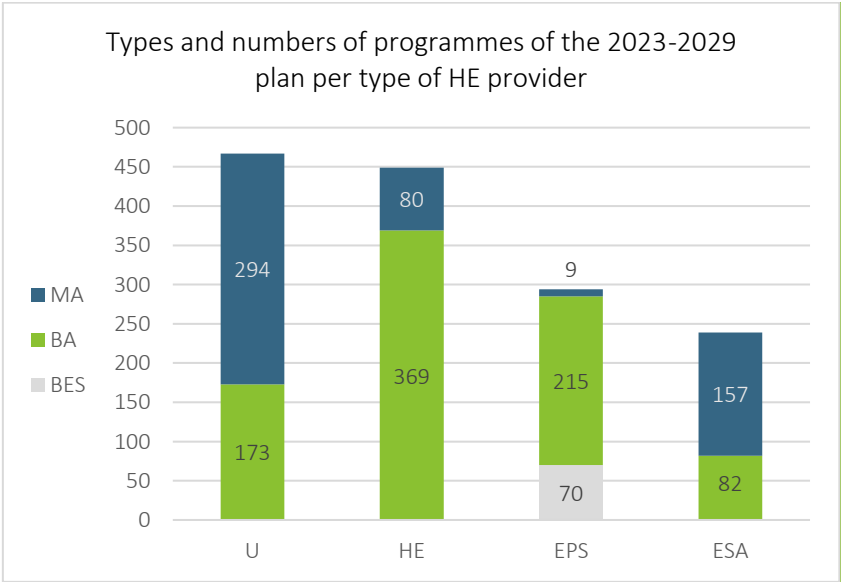


FIGURE 10: TYPE AND NUMBER OF STUDY PROGRAMMES TO BE EVALUATED BETWEEN 2023 AND 2029

Institutional reviews

For the institutional reviews, the higher education institutions were consulted for the planning of 2023-2029. The 17 pilot institutions (among which all universities) are exempted from a new institutional

review in the first cycle, but they can reintroduce the cycle, upon request, in particular if they wish to activate the summative judgement procedure so as to gain autonomy in quality assurance practices (which they did not request in the pilot phase) or reintroduce this procedure if they did not obtain a positive judgement in the pilot phase. Eight pilot institutions requested the summative judgement procedure.

This summative judgement procedure - the fourth option shown on figure 9 - dispenses a HEI that obtains a positive judgement following its institutional review from an external evaluation of its programmes by AEQES for a period of six years [see also ESG 2.5 page 53].

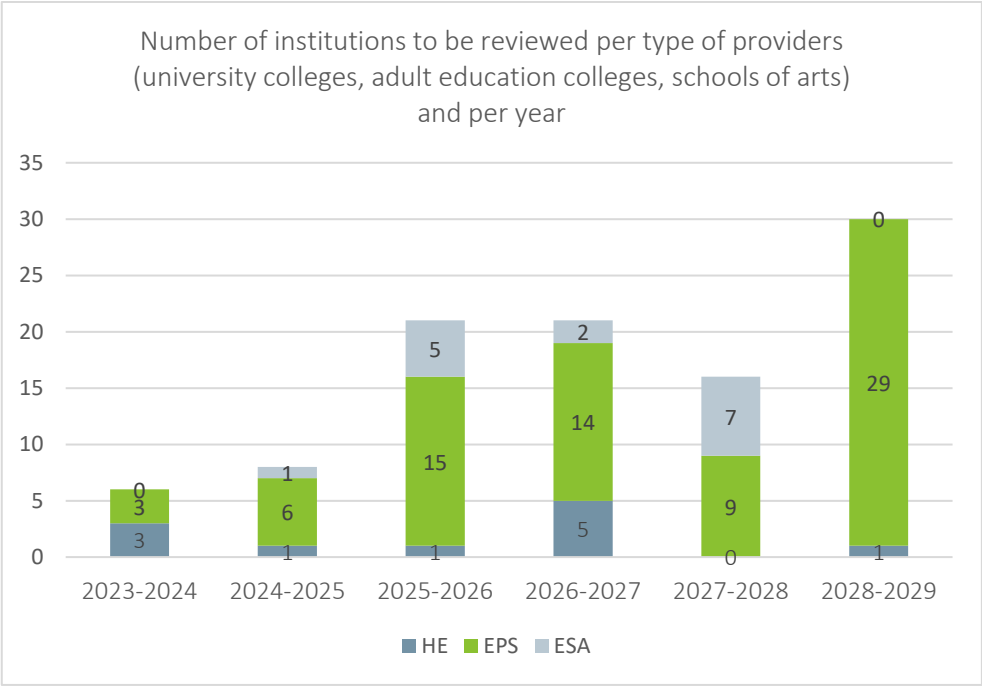


FIGURE 11: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW PLANNING BETWEEN 2023 AND 2029

6. PROCESSES and their METHODOLOGIES

The share of EQA activities of the AEQES devoted to initial programmatic evaluations has been decreasing sharply since 2018 and at the end of the ten-year plan. With the exception of a few programmes whose evaluation has been postponed beyond the initial ten-year plan, only newly created programmes will still be subject to an initial programme evaluation in the future.

All evaluations - both programmatic and institutional - are complemented by a mid-term update, used to document the progress made by the institutions evaluated. It is a follow-up mechanism, in the same way as the requirement for the institution to publish its action plan a few months after the Agency has published the external evaluation report.

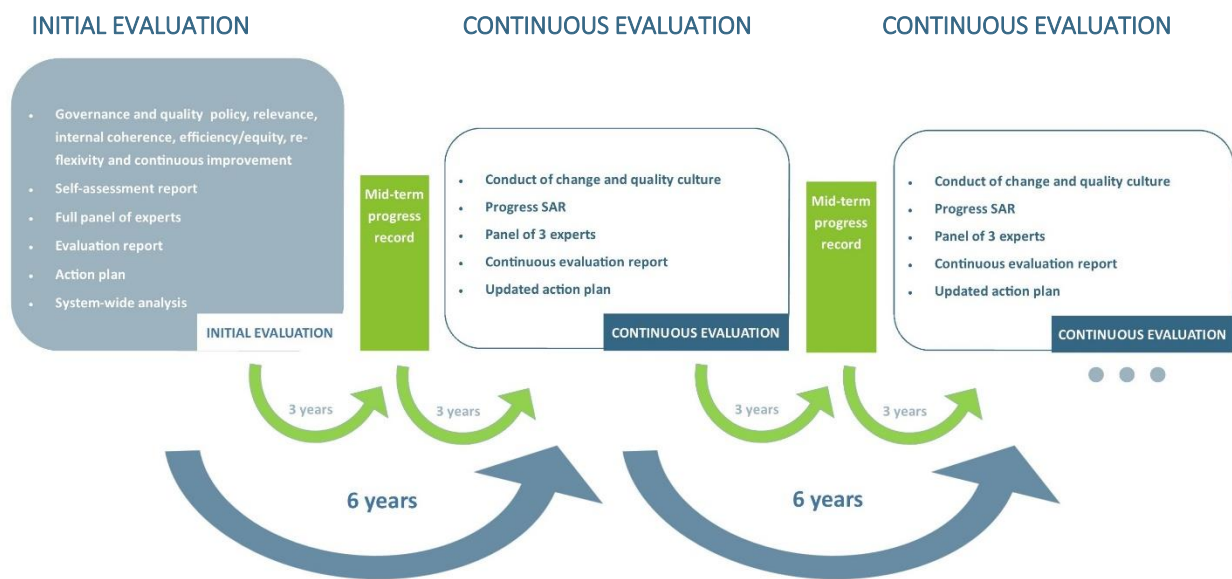


FIGURE 12: SEQUENCE OF PROGRAMME EVALUATIONS CONDUCTED BY AEQES

6.1. Initial programme evaluation

The initial programmatic evaluation concerns the study programmes of the first and second cycles²⁸ (diplomas, bachelor's and master's degrees) organized by universities, university colleges, higher schools of arts, and adult education institutions in the FWB which have never been evaluated by the Agency. The aim of the external evaluation is to assess the quality of the programmes and of their quality assurance systems. To this end, the Agency invites the institution to carry out a thorough self-assessment of the programme under evaluation and asks a group of experts to make any useful recommendations for improving its quality.

An initial evaluation is based on the use of the 5-criteria AEQES framework by both the institutions concerned and the panel mandated by the Agency. This constitutes the basis for the self-assessment of the programme by the institutions and forms the framework of the external evaluation report drawn up by the evaluation panel.

The initial programmatic evaluation comprises three phases:

²⁸ See also FIGURE 2, page 10

- the self-assessment by the institution whose programme is being evaluated;
- the external evaluation by a panel of independent experts selected by the Agency. This phase includes in particular an on-site visit (or online visit) and the publication of the experts' report;
- the publication of an action plan drawn up by the institution and its implementation; the mid-term update record.

The initial evaluation of a cluster is the subject of a system-wide analysis geared to contributing to the reflection on quality assurance policies and practices while aiming to improve the quality of the programme. It serves to summarize the issues, strengths and weaknesses of a cluster and to make recommendations to the various stakeholders: institutions, controlling authorities, policy-makers. These analyses are aimed at a wide audience, including the political authorities as well as would-be students seeking information on their future studies. In addition to publication in print and on the AEQES website, system-wide analyses are presented orally (now online) and disseminated to stakeholders.

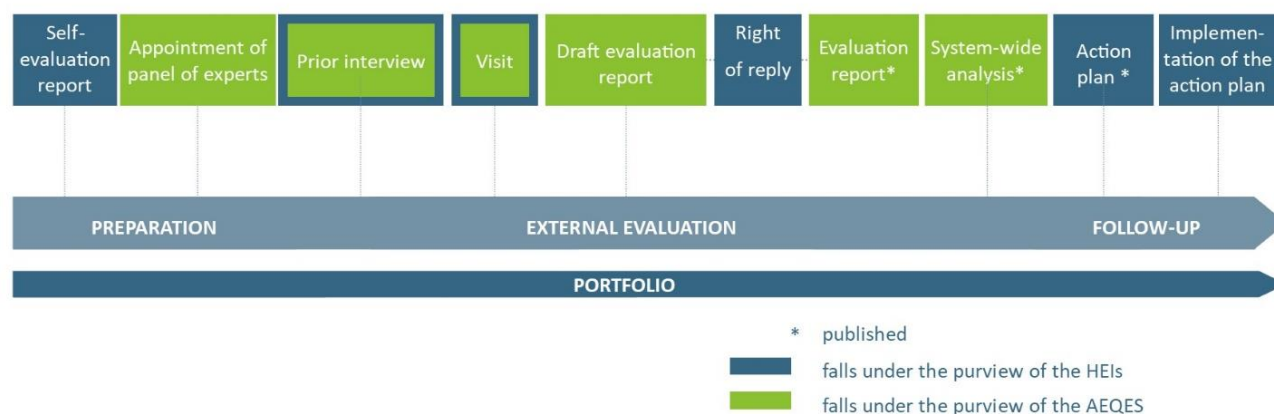


FIGURE 13: PHASES OF AN INITIAL PROGRAMMATIC EVALUATION

6.2. Continuous programmatic evaluation

Continuous programmatic evaluations concern the study programmes of the first and second cycles (diplomas, bachelor's and master's degrees) organized by universities, university colleges, higher schools of arts, and adult education institutions in the FWB which have already been evaluated by the Agency. They aim to support higher education institutions in their dynamic of continuous improvement, in the continuation of actions put in place and in the development of steering tools. In doing so, the procedure ensures that an active commitment to an integrated quality culture is maintained together with a balance between internal and external quality assurance mechanisms.

Since 2018, the AEQES has developed a new, specific reference framework for continuous evaluations. Composed of three criteria, it is used to enhance the reflexive aspect of self-assessed progress reports. It devotes more attention to measuring the quality culture within the higher education institutions evaluated.

The continuous programmatic evaluation also comprises three phases intended to be less burdensome for the institution:

- the production of a self-assessed progress report by the evaluated institution;

- the external evaluation carried out by a panel of independent experts selected by the Executive Unit. This stage includes a short on-site visit (or online visit) and the publication of the report drawn up by the panel;
- the publication of an action plan drawn up by the institution on its website and its implementation as well as a mid-term update record.

The continuous programmatic evaluation is also intended to maintain and strengthen an active quality dynamic in institutions and to ensure the traceability and documentation of internal quality assurance systems.

The methodology of the continuous programmatic evaluation focuses on the degree of achievement of the actions foreseen in the action plan published by the institution at the end of the initial programmatic evaluation and the draft action plan for the coming years.



FIGURE 14: PHASES OF A CONTINUOUS PROGRAMMATIC EVALUATION

The continuous evaluation of a cluster can also be the subject of a system-wide analysis. It is considered relevant only if the number of evaluated programmes is sufficient. This wasn't always the case during the pilot phase because the pilot HEIs could be dispensed from AEQES evaluations. However, some clusters lead to this new type of system-wide analyses [see ESG 3.4. page 36].

6.3. Pilot phase of institutional reviews

Between 2019 and 2023, the AEQES is implementing a pilot phase of institutional reviews in 17 volunteer institutions: the 6 universities of the FWB, 8 university colleges, 2 adult education college and a school of arts.

The methodological framework of the pilot phase was approved by the Steering Committee, while leaving open the possibility of transforming this framework on the basis of the pilot experience.

The [methodological guidelines \(available in French\)](#) set out the:

- object and modalities (How a higher education institution's policies and approaches enable it to attain its strategic objectives for learning and teaching); optionally, the summative judgement procedure;
- reference frameworks (ESG, part 1; optionally, the 4 criteria of the summative judgement procedure);
- the phases of the pilot institutional review, namely:
 - the production of an institutional self-evaluation report by the lead institution;

- the external evaluation carried out by a panel of independent experts, selected by the Methodological Support Council. This phase includes in particular an on-site or online visit and the publication of the report drawn up by the panel, and, where applicable, the decision concerning the summative judgement procedure;
- the completion by the panel of a system-wide analysis of the 17 pilot HEIs institutional reviews;
- the publication of an action plan drawn up by the institution (published on its website) and its implementation;
- a mid-term update record.

	Institutional review visit	Institutional review visit + Summative judgement
November 2019		university
February 2020		university university college
March 2020	university college	
Suspension of visits / COVID crisis		
October 2020	adult education institution	
November 2020		university university college
December 2020		university
February 2021	adult education institution	university college university
March 2021	university college university university college university college	
Avril 2021	school of Arts university college	
September 2021	Publication of 17 reports + 8 judgements	
November/Dec. 2021	Publication of the system-wide analysis	

FIGURE 15: TIMETABLE FOR THE PILOT PHASE (ADAPTED FOLLOWING THE POSTPONEMENT OF VISITS DUE TO THE COVID CRISIS)

This table illustrates the impact of the pandemic crisis on the progress of the pilot phase. The HEIs site-visits were initially planned for the academic years 2019-2020 (8 higher education institutions) and 2020-2021 (9 higher education institutions).

In fact, only the first 4 visits took place *in situ*, then the October 2020 visit took place in a hybrid manner (two experts present on site and two remotely) and the following 12 were carried out exclusively remotely. On the other hand, several institutions requested a postponement of the visit (and of the submission of the self-evaluation report), which explains the intensive planning during the academic year 2020-2021.

7. AEQES INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

7.1. Description of the AEQES quality system

The quality system developed by the agency

- **geared to** the continuous improvement of all its activities and the fair treatment of all higher education institutions
- based on **the values** of dialogue and co-construction, independence, equity, transparency, respect for diversity, reflexivity and continuous improvement
- in line with **the ESG**

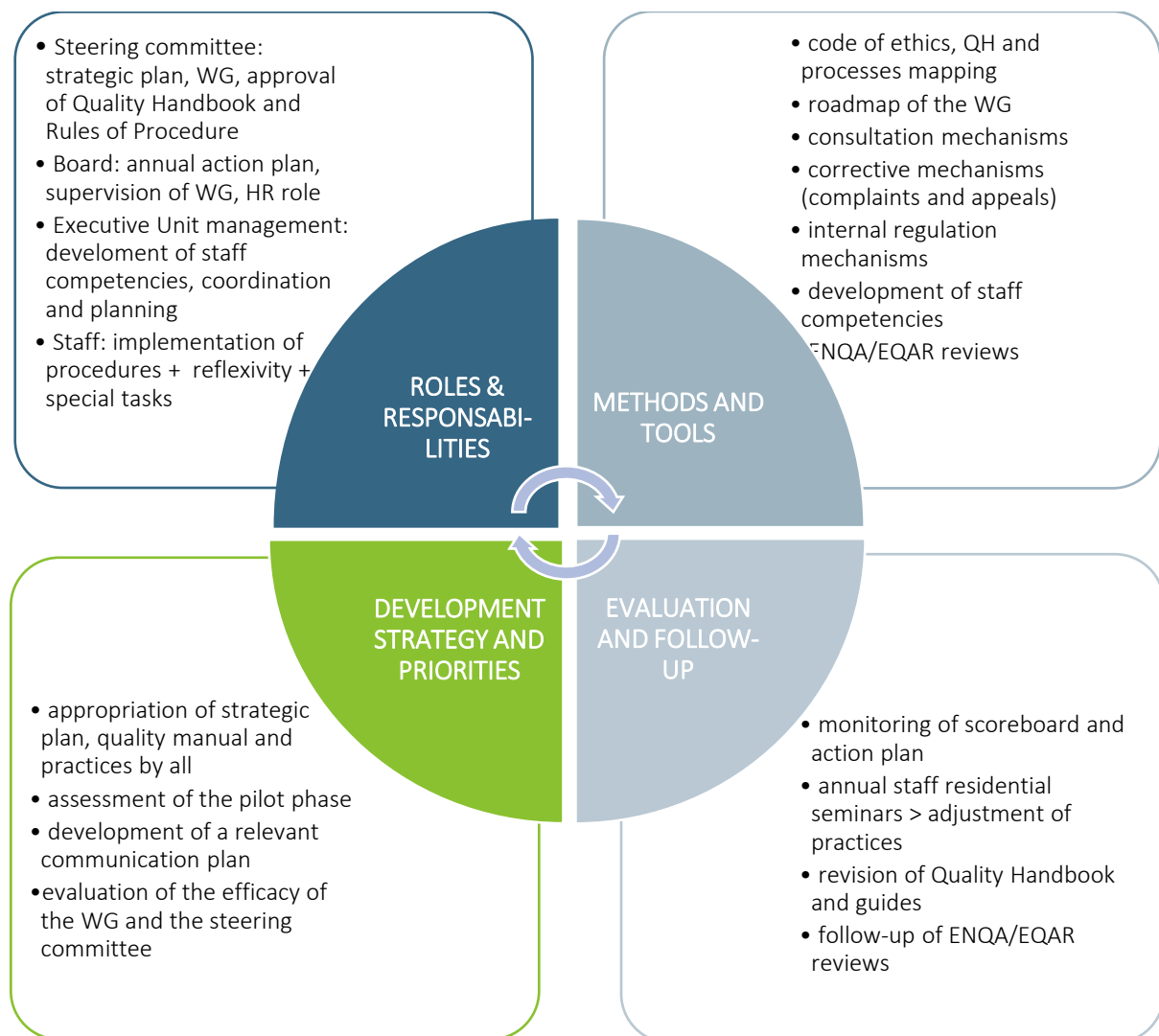


FIGURE 16: AEQES QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

The Agency makes sure that its [code of ethics](#) is respected so that all persons involved in all activities of the Agency act in a professional and ethical manner. This code applies to all: members of the Steering Committee, Agency staff and experts taken on for an assignment.

The responsibilities for internal quality assurance rest with : the Steering Committee (adoption of the strategic plan, rules of procedure, supervision of the WG, approval of the Quality Handbook, ...); the Board (in particular preparation and monitoring of the Agency's annual action plan); the Director of the Executive Unit (coordination and planning tasks, development of staff competencies) as well as each staff member involved in the implementation of procedures and in the reflection on their continuous improvement (as specified in the job profiles). Various tasks are also distributed within the staff (surveys and scoreboard, parliamentary watch, coordination and document management, communication, GDPR, etc.) and contribute directly or indirectly to the quality system.

7.2. Quality Handbook

Available on the AEQES website, the [Quality Handbook](#) describes how the Agency implements its various internal quality assurance processes. It is updated regularly. The most recent version was approved in November 2020. The Quality Handbook does not strictly speaking include the pilot phase, which has a document entitled "[Balises méthodologiques pour la phase pilote des évaluations institutionnelles – 2019-2022](#)" [Methodological guidelines for the pilot phase of institutional reviews - 2019-2022]. A new version of the Quality Handbook will be produced after the evaluation of the pilot phase.

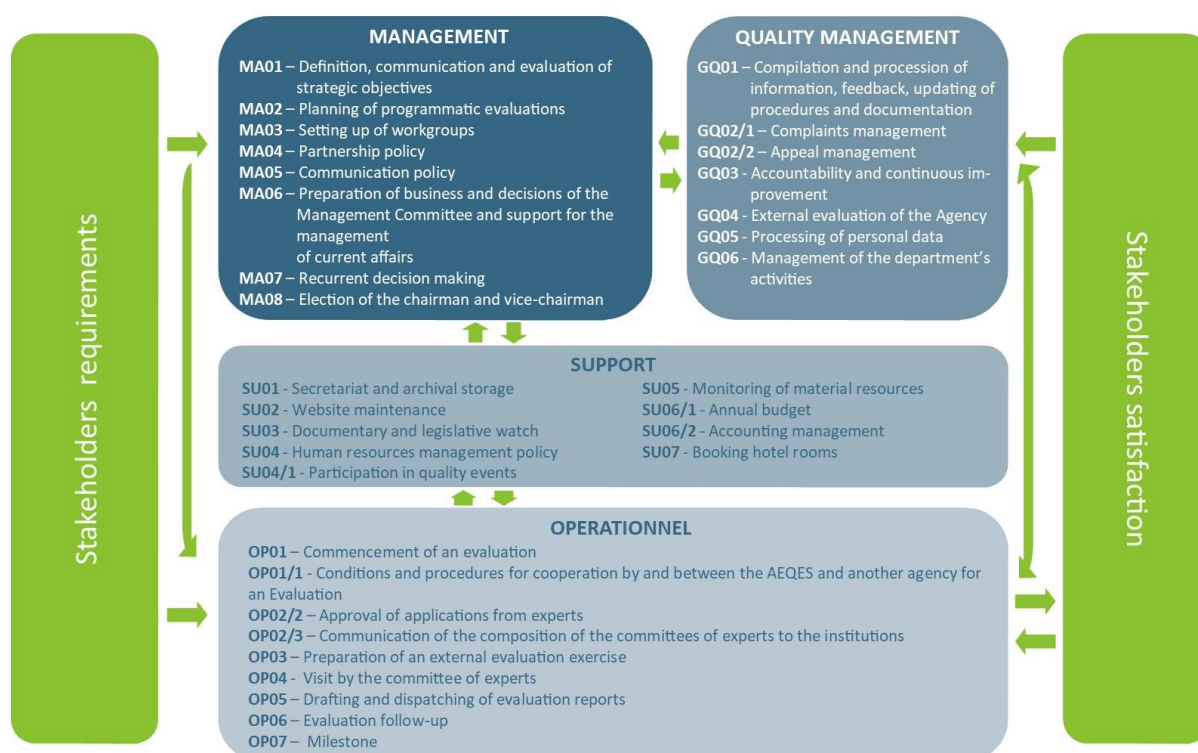


FIGURE 17: MAPPING of the AEQES PROCESSES & PROCEDURES
(SOURCE, QUALITY HANDBOOK, PAGE 6)

7.3. Methods and tools of the quality system

In addition to the aforementioned reference documents (Code of Ethics and Quality Handbook), various mechanisms contribute systematically to the Agency's ongoing improvement process. These include:

- 1 The use of working-groups²⁹ to prepare, analyse and improve procedures;

²⁹ see Annex 7 on the composition of the WG

- 2 Consultation mechanisms: systematic surveys of stakeholders (higher education institutions and experts) followed by analysis of the elements collected in a scoreboard with indicators, *ad hoc* consultations of stakeholders (e.g. for the pilot phase), organization of focus groups to examine the results of surveys in greater depth (e.g. co-construction mechanism for the pilot phase);
- 3 Internal regulation mechanisms: weekly service meetings, workshops on specific themes, annual residential seminar³⁰;
- 4 Corrective mechanisms (complaints and appeals commissions);
- 5 The ENQA/EQAR review mechanism, every 5 years, with its intermediate stages (follow-up report, progress visit). The self-assessment reports ([2011](#) and [2016](#)), the ENQA evaluation reports ([2011](#), [2016](#)) and the [2019 progress report](#) are also directly accessible on the Agency's website.

These mechanisms lead to adjustments to procedures, their updating and the updating of the materials used (reference frameworks, guidelines, Quality Handbook).

7.4. Focus on the competencies of the persons involved in the Agency's activities

For the members of the Steering Committee and its WG, an international *benchlearning* is ensured through participation in colloquia or their reports, or by explicitly working on this dimension in the work of said WG. In addition, the Agency has as of 2016 implemented induction processes to integrate new members better.

As regards the Agency's staff, their professional skills and knowledge are set out in the form of a job profile, which is used for all recruitment as well as for the evaluation of existing staff (annual interviews). The [ENQA Quality Assurance Professional Competencies Framework](#) produced by the ENQA Staff Development WG serves as a reference tool for professional development. This tool identifies knowledge (education systems, legislation, quality assurance and improvement), technical competences (analysis and problem solving, project management) and behavioural competencies (communication, leadership, autonomy, integrity, stress management, etc.). It also provides diagnostic tools and activities to develop further the required competencies.

In addition to the induction mechanisms of a new staff member (welcome, practical information document, designation of a mentoring person, trainings, shadowing site-visits, shadowing various meetings), the professionalism of the team can be reinforced through the active participation in events relating to quality and quality assurance in higher education (national and international events) as well as in training programmes available through the Ministry. Since 2016, the Executive Unit has worked to bolster professionalism by defining specific job profiles³¹ : an accountant profile in 2016 and a communication officer profile in 2021.

For the professionalism of experts, see ESG 2.4.

7.5. Evaluation, follow-up and priorities of the quality assurance system

The priorities for consolidating the Agency's quality assurance system are as follows:

The Steering Committee wishes to steer its new Strategic Plan 2021-2025 by developing impact indicators (work in progress) and by supporting the deployment of a relevant communication plan, particularly during the pilot phase, which is to be assessed shortly. It has also included an action in its strategic plan so as to analyse its structures for greater efficiency in its operations.

As to the Executive Unit, one of the priorities is to assure the adequate appropriation by all of the strategic plan 2021-2025, of the updated version of the Quality Handbook and current and future practices. In this respect, the whole Executive Unit had the opportunity to observe at least one pilot institutional visit.

³⁰ See Annex 9

³¹ Such job profiles are not included in the legal framework of the Agency

8. INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES of AEQES

AEQES pursues the objective of strengthening the visibility of the FWB higher education sector in the European and international space. It accordingly positions itself at the national³², European and international level through various activities: in terms of its organization, evaluation methodology, cooperation arrangements and partnerships, as well as its involvement in international bodies and projects.

8.1. Organization

In its Steering Committee, AEQES benefits from the involvement of two non-FWB members³³ which constitutes an added value in terms of openness to international practices. Moreover, the Methodological Support Council, set up for the pilot phase, is composed of experts from outside the FWB (see Annex 7). Finally, AEQES regularly analyses international practices in the evaluation and quality assurance³⁴ and draws on such analyses to develop its own thinking.

8.2. Evaluation methodology

The AEQES provides for an international dimension in its evaluation panels: 60% of the experts it commissioned between 2016-2017 and 2020-2021, (i.e. 184 out of 305 experts) were not residents in the FWB. This rate remains stable compared to the previous period (2011-2016). This desired diversity makes it possible to reduce the risks of conflicts of interest while enriching the analyses produced by the panels.

Prior to the pilot phase on institutional reviews, AEQES benefited from the support of several quality assurance agencies, in the form of hosting members of the Executive Unit in stages of their processes: FINEEC allowed a member to observe the quality audit of a Finnish institution (December 2017); QAA-Scotland hosted a member of the team during an expert training seminar (May 2019). Also the Director's engagement on request of QQI as an external international expert in an institutional review process (March 2019) was at the same time a learning opportunity of how institutional reviews are done. Made possible by the networking developed at European level, these various activities act as levers for professional development. In addition, the WG carry out desk research on the quality assurance methodologies of other European quality assurance agencies on a regular basis.

8.3. Cooperation arrangements and partnerships

Since 2014, AEQES has formed, together with the French (CTI and HCERES) and Swiss (AAQ) quality assurance agencies, the French-speaking network of quality assurance agencies (FrAQ-Sup) to promote exchanges and cooperation in quality assurance within French-speaking higher education. The network, which has been extended to other French-speaking agencies (Senegal and Quebec in 2015, Tunisia and Morocco in 2017, Guinea in 2019), has also signed a partnership agreement with the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF). It organizes³⁵ an international conference (in French) on current issues in quality assurance for higher education every other year.

AEQES regularly hosts colleagues or delegations from other quality assurance agencies at their request (e.g. Mali study visit, AMAQ-Sup, November 2019, NAQQA Egypt visit, December 2019, BFUG QA staff mobility NCEQE Georgia March 2020).

³² I.e. through cooperation with the authorities of the Flemish and German-speaking Communities of Belgium.

³³ At the time that this report is being finalized these are Lucien Bollaert and Stefan Delplace.

³⁴ By way of example, the Methodology and Reference Framework WG produced a Note on the future institutional review reference framework, after having conducted a comparative study of several QA systems in Europe

https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/AEQES_pilote_Note-GT-methodo_pts-attention-ref-inst.pdf.

³⁵ <https://www.fraq-sup.fr/evenements>

8.4. Involvement in international bodies, activities and projects

Between October 2012 and October 2019, the Director of the Executive Unit was an elected Board member of ENQA (and from 2016 to 2019, as Vice-President of the Board of ENQA). This involvement reflects the willingness of AEQES to contribute to the missions of ENQA and enables it to meet fully its seventh mission, namely to represent the FWB to national and international bodies in the field of quality assurance in higher education. The Director's involvement on the international scene is also reflected in her appointment (2015-2019) to the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Education (abbreviated as HCERES in French), her membership of the Scientific Council of AVEPRO, the Vatican Quality Agency for Higher Education (2018-2023) and her recent invitation to join the International Advisory Committee of UKA. The Director of the Executive Unit is also involved in the 'HAQAA1³⁶ and HAQAA2 initiative', a project for the harmonization of quality assurance on the African continent, including the development of the ASG-QA and the implementation of a methodology for the evaluation of African quality assurance agencies.

Finally, AEQES is involved in various national and international activities relating to its missions: international conferences, study tours, and participation in various projects led by European and international consortia. It maintains close exchanges with the higher education actors present in Brussels, especially with the other EHEA actors (EUA, ENQA, EURASHE, ESU, EQAR, European Commission).

³⁶ <https://haqaa.aau.org/>

9. COMPLIANCE of AEQES with the ESG, part 3

This section examines how the AEQES complies with the standards of Part 3 of the ESG. The analysis applies to all three external quality assurance activities, unless stipulated otherwise.

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. They should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

Regularity, aims and objectives

The regularity of AEQES's quality assurance activities is ensured for all three evaluation methodologies, initial and continuous programmatic evaluation and institutional review. As already mentioned, programmes that have not yet been evaluated or that are newly created programmes are systematically subjected to an initial evaluation. Other programmes are subject to mandatory continuous evaluation every six years. Once institutional reviews have entered their permanent phase, the higher education institutions will also be subject to review every six years.

The two main objectives of AEQES are to work towards continuous quality enhancement and accountability in higher education. In order to achieve these two main objectives, the Agency undertakes external quality assurance activities on a regular basis.

The quality enhancement objective is supported by:

- two programmatic evaluation frameworks, one of which - initial evaluation - is presented with a detailed accompanying guide [[available in French](#)]. The institutional reviews carried out in the pilot phase refer directly to part 1 of the ESG;
- methodological support for the institutions by the Executive Unit in the self-assessment phase and the evaluations conducted by organizing information sessions and distributing updated guidelines;
- encouraging higher education institutions to document their quality procedures in a portfolio;
- organizing exchanges and analyses with higher education institutions, and contributing to the professionalisation of quality assurance actors through interventions during training days. Since 2015, the Agency has organised an annual quality event [[Schedule available in French](#)] for higher education actors in FWB to exchange information, raise awareness and reflect on quality assurance related issues.³⁷

Meeting the accountability objective entails the publication and dissemination of various reports relating to a given curriculum (evaluation reports and system-wide analyses). By way of illustration, at the time of finalizing this self-assessment report, 636 evaluation reports and 44 system-wide analyses had been [published on the AEQES website](#).

In addition, the Agency publishes and disseminates various thematic analyses and studies (statements, meta-analyses, etc.).

[For this type of publication, see ESG 3.4.]

³⁷ This quality event was not held in 2020 because of the pandemic

❖ *Evidence*

The documents produced by AEQES are all available on its website or on the *ad hoc* website for the pilot phase. They itemize the objectives pursued by the Agency, the different stages of the various evaluation methodologies, etc.:

- [Strategic plan 2021-2025](#);
- [AEQES reference framework for initial programmatic evaluation](#);
- [AEQES reference framework for continuous programmatic evaluation](#);
- [Detailed accompanying guide \[available in French\]](#)
- [Guidelines for HE institutions \[available in French\]](#);
- [Planning evaluations \[available in French\]](#);
- [Methodological guidelines for institutional review \[available in French\]](#).

Involvement of stakeholders in the Agency's governance and work

Stakeholders are involved in the Agency's governance and work through the legal composition of the Steering Committee and the functioning of the various WG. All the stakeholders concerned with higher education are represented on the Steering Committee: universities, colleges, colleges of arts, adult education institutions, students, trade unions, civil society, the professional world and international experts. A representative of the Minister responsible for higher education also sits on the committee in an advisory capacity³⁸.

The representation of students in the structures and in particular in the Steering Committee is ensured by the presence of three representatives. As mentioned in the 2019 progress report, however, this appointment is for one year only³⁹, which does not facilitate understanding of quality assurance issues. As discussed with the student representatives, the Agency is not in a position to propose a definitive solution to this problem because this term is the same as the terms of office in their union organization (FEF - Fédération des Etudiants Francophones [Federation of French-speaking Students]).

Finally, beyond the activities of the Steering Committee, the stakeholders have been extensively involved on various occasions through surveys, consultation (e.g. preparation and implementation of the pilot phase) and in activities organized by the Agency (such as the annual quality event).

◆ *Room for improvement*

- Assure proper ownership of the continuous evaluation framework and produce practical guidelines;
- Continue efforts to increase the involvement of student representatives and other stakeholders in the Agency's various bodies.

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.

The role and responsibilities of the Agency for external evaluation are defined by the following implementing decrees:

- The [decree of 14 November 2002](#) (repealed by the decree of 22 Feb 2008);
- The [decree of 22 February 2008](#), amended on 9 February 2017, contains various measures on the organization and operation of the Agency for the Evaluation of the Quality of Higher Education organised or subsidized by the French Community. The Amendment made to the decree on 20

³⁸ For more information on the participatory approach in the FWB, cf. ESG 3.3 section a.

³⁹ The other members are appointed for four years (appointment reviewed once).

December 2017 tasks AEQES to design, implement and evaluate a pilot phase of institutional review. It provides for the future interval of six years for programmatic and institutional reviews and increases the Agency's allocation so as to be able carry out these assignments.

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.

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.

Organizational independence

The independence of the Agency is laid down in Article 2⁴⁰ of the decree of 22 February 2008, which specifies that AEQES is an "autonomous service without legal personality whose accounting and budgetary management is separate from that of the administration's departments."

The status, composition and functioning of the AEQES were discussed in section 4.3.

The Agency falls under a category of government agencies that has been delegated to perform functions that structure higher education while integrating stakeholders who cooperate in implementing higher education policies.

The presence of a representative of the Minister responsible for higher education on the Steering Committee does not entail an obstacle to the Agency's independence, as such representatives sit on the committee in an advisory capacity only. Attending the meetings of the Steering Committee allows the representative of the cabinet to be well informed of the issues being debated and this supports agile retroactivity.

The Agency is moreover at liberty to provide statements (suggestions and recommendations) to the Government (missions 5 and 6), although this possibility is little used.

Operational independence

Regarding independence in terms of human resources, AEQES has since 2014 been able to recruit staff with its own funds and not only with civil service funds. Although this is an improvement on the initial situation - and the cooperation with the human resources department of the ministry is professional and fluid - it must be said that the procedures remain lengthy. By way of reminder, AEQES does not have legal personality and the contracts are concluded by the ministry, which also determines the type of contract [see ESG 3.5].

In terms of methodological choices, although part of the initial methodology implemented by the Agency stems from legal requirements⁴¹, AEQES has made successive adjustments⁴² to define and implement an

⁴⁰ CHAPTER II. – Creation and missions of the Agency - Article 2. - An autonomous service, without legal personality, is hereby created, called 'Agence pour l'évaluation de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur organisé ou subventionné par la Communauté française', [Agency for the evaluation of the quality of higher education organised or subsidised by the French Community], hereinafter referred to as "the Agency". The budgetary and accounting management of this service is separate from that of the general administration services of the French Community, in accordance with article 140 of the consolidated State Accounting Acts.

⁴¹ The [AEQES decree \(2008\)](#) is fairly descriptive (selection of experts, content of SAR, phases of the evaluation, etc.)

⁴² See in particular FIGURE 3: SOME MILESTONES BETWEEN 2016 AND 2021, page 14.

improved methodology over the years, based on the experience gained (tried and tested practices, taking into account feedback from users, ENQA/EQAR recommendations following the Agency's reviews, benchlearning with other agencies, etc.). Thus, following the amendment of its decree in 2017, AEQES obtained increased autonomy in terms of quality assurance methodology and recognition of its proactive approach [See also 4.3. page 13].

Independence of official results

To ensure the independence of the official results, the AEQES Steering Committee is not entitled to review of the reports prepared by the experts prior to their publication. In addition, following the ENQA 2016 review, a change in format consolidates the visibility of the independence of the system-wide analyses. The Steering Committee previously had the possibility to attach an 'analytical note', summarizing the important elements of the report. Owing to the risk of a perceived conflict of interest for this note, it was removed in 2018 and replaced by a summary written by the evaluation panel itself.

With regard to the selection of experts, the analysis of applications, which used to be done by a WG composed of Steering Committee members, is now done by the Executive Unit. The selection of evaluation panel members is based on [jurisprudence \[available in French\]](#) which is validated by the Steering Committee.

(For details on the selection of the members of the evaluation panels, cf. 2.4. *infra*).

The Executive Unit acts as the exclusive intermediary between the evaluated institutions and the experts commissioned for the mission. By signing the code of ethics, the latter undertake to act in a personal capacity and to bring their expertise to bear for the benefit of the mission entrusted to them, without external influence. The process for ensuring the independence of experts is explained *infra* under ESG 2.4, as well as in the jurisprudence on the selection of experts.

In the context of the pilot phase, The Steering Committee has set up a body called the 'Methodological support Council' and has entrusted it with the tasks that enable it to guard against any risk of conflict of interest: selection of the institutions taking part in the pilot phase and the decision-making process (with the panel of experts) in the operationalisation of the summative judgement procedure.

Reflections on the functioning of these bodies

The 2008 AEQES decree laid the foundations for the functioning of AEQES in three bodies: the Steering Committee, the Board and the Executive Unit. The Steering Committee very quickly set up WG to address the need of analysing issues and documenting the decisions to be taken.

In November 2020, AEQES defined in its strategic plan 2021-2025 the following priority: '*improve its effectiveness by strengthening its organizational independence, its operational independence, and its independence in terms of evaluation results, as well as by guaranteeing the involvement of stakeholders.*' This priority follows on from the reflections initiated within the Steering Committee⁴³ and the ENQA progress visit (September 2019) which had been calibrated, at the Agency's request, on the governance and operation of the Agency, on the one hand, and its relations with stakeholders, on the other.

⁴³ [5 June 2018 minutes] .../...The Board opens a debate on 'governance and functioning of the Steering committee, the Board and the WG' with the objectives of strengthening the strategic role of the Steering Committee, reducing the workload of the Board and the Steering Committee and optimizing the functioning of the WG. The Board calls for suggestions in order to complete a note on these issues to be presented on the next session. [2 October 2018 minutes] .../... The note is presented but it is decided to postpone action. [7 May 2019 minutes] .../... The Steering Committee agrees on the format and expectations from the ENQA Progress visit (themes, documents and participants to invite). The themes are the relationships with the Agency's stakeholders and the functioning/governance of the Agency.

The ENQA progress visit pointed to the tensions between the concept of representativeness (which allows for ownership of quality assurance concepts and includes a large number of people⁴⁴ in the bodies given the institutional landscape of the FWB) and the concept of efficiency and agility in the decision-making mechanisms (which may require smaller groups). In October 2019, this viewpoint was discussed by the Steering Committee that decided to consider this in further debates. No decision has been made so far. The issue of organizational independence also needs to be considered in this context.

The two bodies set up for the pilot phase (CoPIL and CAM) hold regular meetings to address the deployment needs of this pilot phase and are constantly reflecting on their own functioning as well as future developments (e.g. agreement on the format and scope of the evaluation report to be produced).

❖ *Evidence*

- Increase in the Agency's overall budget in a context of budgetary restrictions, increase in the HR framework.
- Addition of the 8th mission in the decree (amendment of 20 December 2017) as well as of Article 9a (mandate to design and implement a pilot phase).
- Removal of the summary note drafted by the Steering Committee, replaced by a summary drafted by the evaluation panel.
- Establishment of the Methodological Support Council for the pilot phase.

◆ *Room for improvement*

- Develop a structural solution to strengthen the independence and efficiency of the Agency while ensuring stakeholder involvement (see priority 1 of Strategic Plan 1 2021-2025)
- Develop a structural solution for managing human resources within the Agency (see also 3.5)

3.4 Thematic analysis

STANDARD

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

The Agency has produced different types of thematic analysis since it commenced its activities: system-wide analyses, "meta-analyses" and other types of thematic publications or studies.

System-wide analyses (written by the panels of experts)

The programmatic evaluation carried out in clusters [cf. 4.1. infra] led the Agency to produce an initial type of thematic analysis: at the end of the evaluation visits, the experts write an argued perspective of the programmes evaluated at the level of the FWB, accompanied by points of reference drawn from the committee's international expertise (teaching and/or quality assurance practices from elsewhere, insights from the professional world, pedagogical reflections, etc.)

More than [44 system-wide analyses \[available in French\]](#) have been presented, published and disseminated to date [see ESG 2.6].

The system-wide analyses are presented by their authors to higher education institutions, Steering Committee members and other stakeholders in sessions conducive to exchange and discussion. A first edition in remote mode was organized as of December 2020.

⁴⁴ An alternate shall be appointed for each full member of the Steering Committee. The alternates of the Steering Committee shall attend the meetings regularly in the presence of the full members, but not with voting powers as long as their respective full members are present.

Pilot phase: A variant of these system-wide analyses has recently been introduced for the development of the continuous programmatic evaluation. As explained in section 7, continuous programmatic evaluation places greater emphasis on the quality culture and continuous improvement dynamics implemented by the institutions. The first system-wide analyses (carried out in 2021) of this new format will make it possible to draw lessons about internal quality assurance practices in the FWB. This type of analysis is intended to document the development of quality assurance and quality culture in the FWB and, in synergy with the development of the pilot institutional review, may contribute to strengthening the autonomy of higher education institutions in this area.

Meta-analyses

A second type of thematic analysis stems from this initial production. Tasked by the Steering Committee, the Reports WG examines a set of system-wide analyses on a regular basis to identify elements for more structural reflection and writes meta-analyses. Four such meta-analyses have been produced to date:

- [TRENDS](#) (seven recurring themes from the evaluations conducted in 2009-2010);
- [FOCUS \[available in French\]](#) (six themes from the evaluations conducted in 2010-2012) ;
- [PATHWAYS \[available in French\]](#) (2016) revisited the results of thirteen evaluations conducted in 2013-2014 in the light of part 1 of ESG (version 2015) ;
- [FROM PROGRAMMES TO GOVERNANCE \[available in French\]](#) 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 choice of this angle of approach makes it possible to articulate the priority areas relating to quality management by the higher education institutions and the processes to which they belong.

Other thematic publications

Finally, there is a third type of thematic analyses:

- the review⁴⁵ of the follow-up evaluations conducted in 2015-2016 (published in 2017) ;
- the summary of the [results of stakeholder surveys](#) (institutions, students, experts) on the period 2017-2018 (published in 2020);
- an [overview of quality assurance practices for joint degrees in Belgium](#) (Flanders and the FWB).

The Executive Unit monitors parliamentary debates to ascertain the impact of these reports on the political world. Parliamentary questions and their answers are published on the Agency's website. AEQES has however not yet carried out a study to measure the impact of the system-wide analyses on other stakeholders such as students and socio-professional partners.

It should be noted that the General Council for Adult Education has set up a procedure aimed at initiating systematically a reflection by its members after the publication of each system-wide analysis, which generally leads to a revision of the programmes. In this respect, the agreement between ARES and AEQES stipulates that 'ARES shall undertake to analyse, in particular with the authorities and management of the institutions, the reports, studies, analyses and surveys prepared by AEQES or other bodies and which are of interest for the promotion of quality in the FWB'. In fact, each system-wide analysis is processed at CoQER and transmitted internally to ARES⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ Lessons learnt from this first round, drafted by the executive unit in cooperation with the institutions (through surveys) and the experts (through focus groups) [\[available in French\]](#) (see also [Annex 4 in SER 2016](#)).

⁴⁶ ARES Activity report 2019-2020, page 33 [...] 'a great deal of the updating [LO or competences reference frameworks] result from the work carried out by ARES bodies following the AEQES evaluations. To mention a few: [...] Bachelor in insurance and risk management, Bachelor in industrial engineering. The system-wide analyses produced by AEQES are generally subject to a specific follow-up if the concerned HEIs consider that the findings and recommendations require a collective decision to be made. The usual procedure consists of setting up a WG to analyse the recommendations in depth and to come up with proposals to submit to the approval of the Board of ARES before being transmitted – if approved – to the Government.' <https://www.ares-ac.be/images/publications/rapports-d-activites/ARES-RA-2019-2020.pdf>

AEQES nonetheless needs to continue its efforts to analyse and disseminate all this work in order to raise awareness among the public for whom it is intended. The recent recruitment of a communication officer will enable the development of a communication plan and targeted actions.

❖ **Evidence**

- Publications of [system-wide analyses](#) and [other studies](#) on the AEQES website;
- Joint ARES-AEQES note for the consideration system-wide analyses;
- Actions by the communication officer to improve the visibility's of the AEQES's productions.

◆ **Room for improvement**

- Improve the dissemination of analyses and studies through targeted communication actions;
- Work on the "impact" dimension of quality assurance in the FWB.

3.5 Resources

STANDARD

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

Human resources

On 15 June 2021, the staff of the Agency's Executive Unit was as follows:

Surname	Forename	Position	Took up duties in	FTE	Contract
BREBANT	Maxime	Quality officer N 1 (resigned, to be replaced)	September 2016	80 %	TS ⁴⁷
COUDIIZER	Sandrine	Administrative assistant N2 (resigned, to be replaced)	January 2019	100 %	TS
DETAVERNIER	Aurélie	Quality officer N 1	November 2020	100 %	TS
DISKEUVE	Pascale	Accountant	September 2016	100 %	TS
DUYKAERTS	Caty	Director	October 2008	100 %	Officer in charge
JAROSZEWSKI	Eva	Quality officer N1	October 2008	100 %	employee
LEBAILLY	Hélène	Communication officer N1	March 2021	100 %	TS
LEFEVRE	Claire	Quality officer N 1	January 2019	100 %	TS
PARMENTIER	Romain	Quality officer N 1	January 2019	100 %	TS
SERET	Marie-Line	Quality officer N 1	November 2020	100 %	TS
TALEB	Dounia	Quality officer N 1	March 2021	100 %	TS
URBAN	David	Quality officer N 1	October 2019	100 %	TS
VERMOTE	Alexis	Quality officer N 1	March 2011	100 %	employee

FIGURE 18: COMPOSITION OF THE EXECUTIVE UNIT ON JUNE 15, 2021

Ten people have the position of 'Officer N1' according to the Ministry's nomenclature, which corresponds to a minimum recruitment level of a Master's degree. In fact, two officers have a doctorate and one is a doctoral student. An administrative assistant, an accountant and a director complete the team. The position of communication officer was created and filled recently.

In financial terms, the salaries are covered by two different budget lines: one from the FWB Ministry, the other from the AEQES endowment. The share of the Agency's allocation to staff recruitment has gradually increased since 2018 and it now represents 34%. Forecasts for 2021 indicate a further increase in the share of the Agency's allocation for staff remuneration to 43%.

⁴⁷ TS = *tâches spécifiques* [employment contract for specific tasks]. Indicates explicitly that statutory recruitment is not possible.

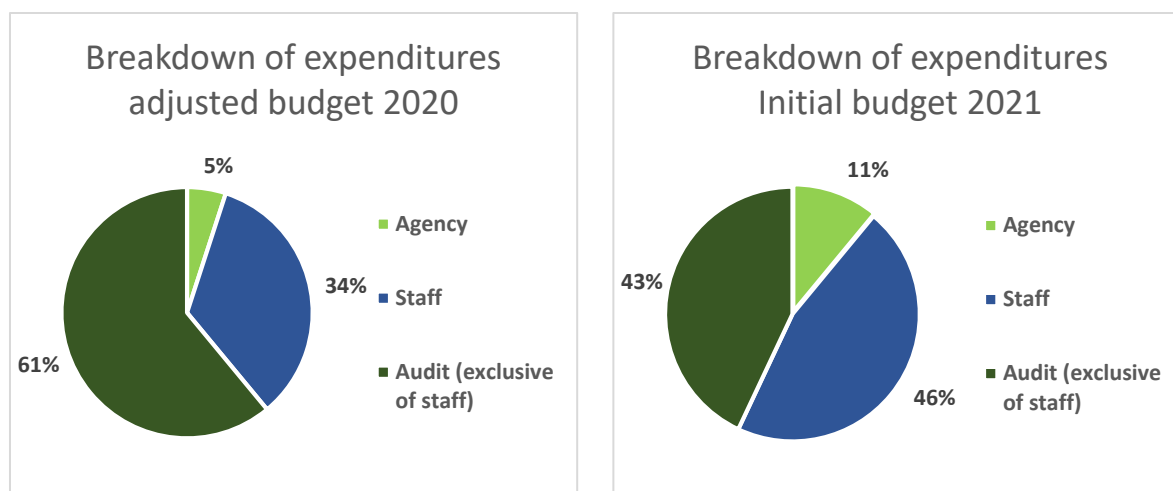


FIGURE 19: BREAKDOWN OF EXPENDITURES

Vigilance should be noted on three aspects:

- Since 2014, an article in the decree authorizes AEQES to recruit staff at the expense of the Agency's allocation. The number of people employed thanks to this option is increasing (5 people out of 10 in 2018, 10 people out of 13 in 2021).
- Its corollary, the granting of so-called employment contracts for 'specific tasks' (AGCF 16 Sept 1998) prevents stabilization in the civil service. These contracts do not in fact allow for statutory recruitment. It should be noted that the two officers recruited in January 2019 on ministry funds also signed a contract for 'specific tasks', which is part of a wider ministry policy over which the Agency has no control. For some officers, this dimension represents a loss of appeal for the position.
- Of the current staff, 6 out of 13 were recruited within the 2 past years. Between May 2019 and April 2021 five staff members (four officers and the accountant) resigned and 5 were hired. This important renewal represents a challenge in terms of transfer of expertise, training, reorganization and reallocation of tasks (and in particular in the context of a certain administrative red tape - recruitment process, validation by the Finance Inspectorate, etc. - to fill replacements).

Even if the number of people in the Executive Unit seems to be in line with the needs of the identified tasks at present, a reflection is underway to analyse the loss of appeal of the positions⁴⁸ in AEQES and to find solutions for a better stability of the team, in particular by offering prospects of status and promotion.

In addition, the Director of the Executive Unit is in permanent communication with the Cabinet of the Minister of Higher Education, as well as with the Ministry of the FWB to find a structural solution to consolidate the personal and professional development perspectives of the Executive Unit.

❖ Evidence

- Hiring of specialised profiles (accountant and communication officer)
- Definition of a coordination position in the team in order to objectify the distribution of tasks within the Executive Unit and improve processes.

◆ Room for improvement

- Identify the causes of staff turnover and find solutions, including structural ones, to stabilize staff.

⁴⁸ The average length of employment calculated on departures since 2008 is 4 years and 8 months.

Material resources and financial management

Legally, the Agency is a *service administratif à comptabilité autonome* (SACA) [administrative service with autonomous accounting and budgetary management]. It has no legal personality. The Agency is subject to regular audits by the Court of Auditors. It is allocated an annual budget allocation by the FWB Government.

In 2018, the Agency obtained an increase in its allocation of around 24%, despite a tight budgetary context. This increase is intended to make it possible to implement the pilot phase while continuing with the programmatic evaluations. In 2020, the Agency's annual allocation amounted to €1,024,390.

At the same time, following the completion of the 10-year plan and the implementation of almost all full programmatic evaluations, the proportion of continuous programmatic evaluations becomes much more important among the Agency's activities. As the budgetary burden of continuous evaluations is less than that of initial evaluations, this development has helped to control the Agency's expenditure on implementing evaluations.

Furthermore, the pandemic has had an impact on the Agency's work by changing the methods used to implement evaluations. Remote visits have replaced face-to-face visits, which has resulted in a non-expenditure corresponding to the estimated travel, accommodation and catering costs of the experts. The budgetary impact is a point to be considered, but a detailed analysis of the methodological impact of the remote working arrangements is still to be examined.

❖ Evidence

- Obtaining an increase in the Agency's endowment in a tight budgetary context

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.

The quality assurance policy of AEQES [see also Chapter 7] is made public through the publication of its Quality Handbook on the Agency's website. The five-yearly review process by ENQA with the publication of reports (SAR and review report) also supports and sheds light on the IQA processes of the Agency [see ESG 3.7].

The quality policy encompasses all the components of the Agency (the signature of the AEQES Code of Ethics by the members of the Steering Committee, the experts and the staff members is a formal act). It is also worth underscoring priority 1 of the new Strategic Plan 2021-2025, which aims to improve the efficiency of the Agency's operations.

The Executive Unit is continuously endeavouring to improve its quality assurance system. The actions are monitored through various mechanisms, whereby weekly staff meetings, annual residential seminars and systematic surveys in the framework of evaluations take centre stage. In addition, the coordination task - and responsibility for internal quality assurance - within the Executive Unit plays an important role in this context. The person in charge of this task has started work on mapping the Agency's processes, which should make it possible to objectify them in order to aim for greater consistency.

For the 'professional attitude and training'⁴⁹ the staff has an annual individual interview with the Director of the Agency. This interview is an opportunity to set professional development objectives (projects, training, etc.) for the coming year and to review the past year. The staff also have access to the catalogue

⁴⁹ See also Annex 9

of professional training courses organized by the École d'Administration Publique (EAP) [School of Public Administration], a joint structure of the FWB. The team members regularly follow training courses that they can apply in performing their duties (project management, process management, conflict management, conducting meetings, etc.). On a yearly base and in the framework of the AEQES-ARES agreement, a seminar on the higher education legal framework and its updating is attended by the whole staff.

Finally, staff are invited to participate in regional and international quality events.

❖ **Evidence**

- Results of surveys
- Mapping of the AEQES processes
- Role for the coordination of and responsibility of the IQA
- Updating of the [Quality Handbook](#)

◆ **Room for improvement**

- The use made of survey results could be more systematic and reported

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.

In Article 21, the decree of 22 February 2008 stipulated that: *'The Agency shall undergo a cyclical external review of its activities and methods at least every 5 years in accordance with the recommendations of ENQA. The results shall be published in a report which shall state the extent to which the Agency complies with the European standards and Guidelines. This report shall be forwarded to the Government and to Parliament.'* A government order briefly explains the details.

The reports and documents relating to this process are published and sent to Parliament and the Government. The results are discussed in greater depth at a hearing in Parliament at the end of these reviews.

This review is the third external review of the Agency after those conducted in 2011 and 2016. These reviews provide an opportunity to question and improve current practices. The external perspective from which the Agency will benefit during the external review in 2021 will complement the assessment made following the stakeholder consultations and the implementation of the 2021 - 2025 strategic plan adopted in 2020.

10. COMPLIANCE of AEQES practices with the ESG, part 2

This section examines how the AEQES complies with the references in part 2 of the ESG. The analysis is valid for all three external quality assurance activities, unless stipulated otherwise.

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.

The reference frameworks used by AEQES for its two programmatic evaluations are reviewed for compliance with the ten standards of Part 1 of the ESG. As mentioned above, the AEQES currently carries out 3 external quality assurance activities.

Initial programmatic evaluation

Each study programme has since 2012 been assessed for the first time by the full reference framework, which is based on five criteria, each of which is broken down into several dimensions. At the core of the reference framework are criteria for curriculum relevance (criterion 2), internal coherence (criterion 3) and efficiency and equity (criterion 4). The framework also provides for the assessment of governance and quality assurance policies (criterion 1) and reflexivity and continuous improvement (criterion 5).

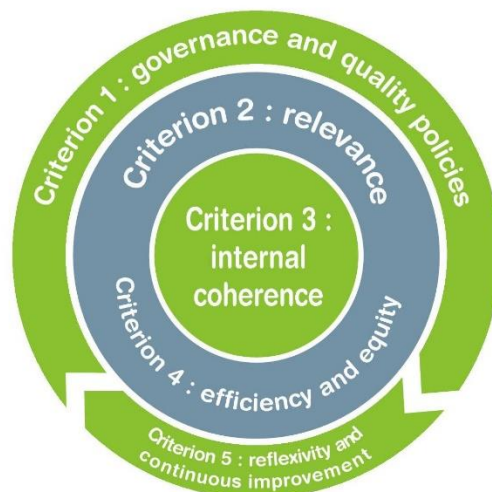


FIGURE 20: THE 5 CRITERIA FOR THE INITIAL PROGRAMMATIC REFERENCE FRAMEWORK

The initial programmatic evaluation reference framework is accompanied by [guidelines](#) that are useful for writing self-assessment reports and for the external evaluation phase. The framework supports a 'programme approach' and, as required by legislation, incorporates the concepts of competences reference frameworks and learning outcomes. It refers to the FWB qualification framework that is aligned to the EQF adopted by FWB. The guide presents, among other things, different tools, a glossary, questions to guide the evaluation and examples.

A concordance check between this reference framework and the 2015 version of the ESG was already carried out and presented in the 2016 self-evaluation report.

		ESG (part 1)																				
		1.1 Policy for quality assurance	1.2 Design and approval of programmes	1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and	1.5 Teaching staff	1.6 Learning resources and student support	1.7 Information management	1.8 Public information	1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance											
REFERENCE FRAMEWORK for the initial programmatic evaluation	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 programme.																					
	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 & 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																					
	the AEQES dimensions matching with the ESG																					

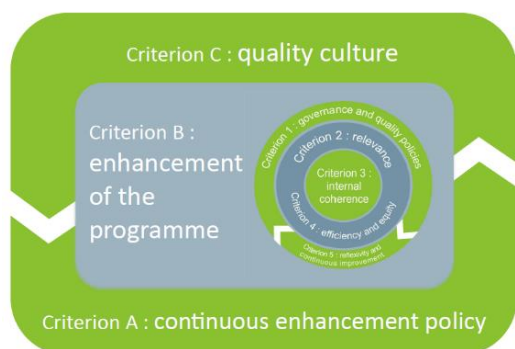
FIGURE 21: MAPPING of the INITIAL PROGRAMMATIC EVALUATION REFERENCE FRAMEWORK and ESG, PART 1

Continuous programmatic evaluation

Since the 2015-2016 academic year, each study programme has benefited from a continuous programmatic evaluation which takes place five to six years after the initial programmatic evaluation [see also chapter 5, p. 16-17]

Since 2019, the continuous programmatic evaluation has been accompanied by a specific reference framework divided into three criteria (A, B and C).

This reference framework takes into particular consideration the internal quality assurance processes of the higher education institutions (expectation of ESG 2.1) and also examines explicitly the quality culture present in the higher education institution:



Criterion A focuses on the commitment of the evaluated institution/entity to a continuous enhancement QA process adapted to the HEI's needs.

Criterion B highlights the progress made by the institution/entity which contributes to the enhancement dynamics of the programme/cluster, particularly in relation to criteria 2, 3 and 4 of the initial evaluation reference framework.

Criterion C addresses the link between individual and collective values and commitments with respect to quality.

FIGURE 22: THE 3 CRITERIA OF THE CONTINUOUS PROGRAMMATIC EVALUATION REFERENCE FRAMEWORK

The table below illustrates the concordance of this reference framework with the ESG.

		ESG (part 1)									
		1.1 Policy for quality assurance	1.2 Design and approval of programmes	1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and	1.5 Teaching staff	1.6 Learning resources and student support	1.7 Information management	1.8 Public information	1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance
CONTINUOUS PROGRAMMATIC EVALUATION REFERENCE FRAMEWORK	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.									
	This criterion envisages the continuous enhancement process that is specific to the institution/entity, relevant and sustainable.										
	It therefore aims to ensure that the institution/entity carries out a periodic, systematic, in-depth, participatory and validated analysis of its programme cluster.										
	On this basis, and with a view to continuous quality enhancement, it takes appropriate and reasoned decisions by means of an updated, prioritised action plan with defined monitoring indicators.										
	The process involves internal and external stakeholders.										
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.										
This criterion takes into account the implementation of the initial action plan, in											

particular as regards criteria 2, 3 and 4 of the AEQES reference framework for the initial programmatic evaluation. It considers the extent to and the manner in which the planned actions have been carried out, taking into account the contextual parameters. It makes sure that the developments of the programme cluster are valued.	
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.	
This criterion aims to analyse the quality culture at work in the entity. It considers how and to what extent the entity engages explicitly in the development of a culture that recognises the importance of quality and its management through appropriate procedures. These include a role for internal and external stakeholders.	
the AEQES criteria matching with the ESG	

FIGURE 23: MAPPING of the CONTINUOUS PROGRAMMATIC EVALUATION REFERENCE FRAMEWORK and ESG, PART 1

The reference framework for the continuous programmatic evaluation does not have a specific user guide at this time. Its recent use by higher education institutions and experts will be analysed and reflected in a 'continuous evaluation review' which may lead to adjustments. The first informal feedback actually shows some difficulties in the full ownership of the reference framework by both the higher education institutions and the panels.

Pilot institutional review

The pilot institutional review organized between 2019 and 2023 concerns the development of an institutional component to evaluations of the quality of higher education. The '[Methodological guidelines for the pilot phase](#)' [\[available in French\]](#) specify that this evaluation examines *the extent to which and the way in which the quality assurance system and, more generally, the functioning of the governance of a higher education institution is suitable for its objectives and profile (fitness for purpose)*.

The reference framework used for the pilot phase is precisely Part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG).⁵⁰ Thus, both the object of evaluation and the framework used for this pilot phase meet ESG 2.1. to the full.

Analysis of the three activities

Beyond the analysis of each of the reference frameworks, how does the AEQES take into account the effectiveness of the quality processes implemented by the institutions when it actually carries out its three external quality assurance activities?

Through the reading of the self-assessment reports submitted by the institutions, the documents made available to the panel of experts and the interviews with the stakeholders of the evaluated programmes - or of the evaluated institution -, the quality loops are systematically and continuously questioned and assessed. Furthermore, thanks to the involvement of a quality assurance expert in the panels, AEQES assures that the efficacy of the internal quality assurance systems is measured during an external evaluation.

It should be noted that the AEQES subscribes to a concept of quality that promotes fitness for purpose⁵¹ because the missions and objectives of institutions and programmes are different and the evaluation,

⁵⁰ Cf. [Phase pilote 2019-2022: évaluations institutionnelles, Balises méthodologiques approuvées par le Comité de gestion de l'AEQES, version 4, June 2019, pp. 7-12.](#)

although framed by common criteria, relies on the interpretation and appropriation of these criteria in the specific context of each institution. These evaluations have an important contextual dimension: Institutions determine their own institutional strategic plan and the overall and specific objectives of their programmes within the framework of their statutory missions. The AEQES methodology thus takes into account the diversity of higher education in the FWB.

❖ *Evidence*

- The methodology of the initial programmatic evaluation framework and its alignment with the ESG are robust and stabilized;
- The methodology for the continuous evaluation has been bolstered by the production of a specific framework;
- The very object of the pilot institutional review is the quality system, examined in the light of the 10 ESGs part 1;
- Explanatory video clips have been produced and put online [restricted access].

◆ *Room for improvement*

- Produce accompanying guidelines for the continuous evaluation reference framework;
- Sustain the ongoing and institutional programmatic evaluation.

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.

The mission of AEQES (decree of 22 February 2008) is to evaluate the study programmes leading to HE diplomas (120 ECTS), bachelor's and master's degrees in the FWB. These formative external evaluations are intended to support the institutions in developing their missions (they have no accreditation value and have no formal impact on the authorizations issued to the institutions).

While a large part of the methodology implemented by the Agency is based on legal requirements, AEQES is developing additional tools and procedures to further support the development of internal quality assurance processes:

- introduction of a so-called '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. [see Chapters 6 and 7];
- 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;
- One of the most promising initiatives is the launch of the pilot phase of institutional review which is currently underway.

⁵¹ Principal conceptions of quality identified by Martin and Stella (2007) from *Assurance qualité externe dans l'enseignement supérieur: les options*, Paris: UNESCO, Institut international de planification de l'éducation, p. 35.

The aims of these methods are stated explicitly in the supporting documents and reiterated during the meetings prior to the evaluations as well as in the evaluation visit interviews.

All these developments reflect the Agency's desire to 'Support institutions of higher education to develop an adequate and efficient quality system, embedded in a meaningful quality culture of their own⁵²' (a priority included in the Strategic Plan 2021-2025). In point of fact, the more efficient the quality systems within the institutions, the lighter the external quality assurance procedures can be.⁵³

The stakeholders are involved in methodological developments primarily in the Steering Committee and in the Agency's WG, in particular the one dedicated to methodology and reference frameworks.

The design and implementation of the pilot phase by itself illustrates the Agency's initiative in developing its methodologies in line with needs (search for optimal fitness for purpose) and the involvement of stakeholders. It entailed:

- an extensive consultation prior to writing the methodological proposal (surveys of higher education stakeholders and their bodies, experts and quality agency managers)
- the validation of the methodological proposal by the Steering Committee (October 2017);
- the launch of a co-construction website⁵⁴ (November 2017) documenting all the stages of these consultations and presenting the timeline of the pilot phase;
- the government's mandate to carry out this phase and draw up a report (December 2017);
- debriefing and co-construction stages with stakeholders.

❖ **Evidence**

- Launch of a pilot phase of institutional review, following a broad consultation, with a view to proposing a methodology that best meets the expectations of the stakeholders
- Turning to independent resources (the members of the Methodological Support Council) to guide the Agency in its pilot phase
- Ongoing assessment of this pilot phase with a view to possible methodological adaptations (reports of focus groups disseminated on the website www.aeqes-coconstruction.be).

◆ **Room for improvement**

- Develop impact measures for the activities of the AEQES
- Involve certain stakeholders (students, professional world) more in the design and development of methodologies.

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 visit
- a report resulting from the external assessment
- a consistent follow-up

The Agency ensures the reliability and consistency of its three external quality activities as follows:

⁵² See Annex 2

⁵³ ESG 2.2, guidelines 'The external quality assurance system can function more flexibly if institutions are able to demonstrate that their internal quality assurance is effective.'

⁵⁴ www.aeqes-coconstruction.be

	Initial programmatic evaluation	Continuous programmatic evaluation	Institutional review (pilot phase)
Description and documentation	Guide for institutions Guide for experts		Methodological guidelines for the pilot phase
Reference framework	Initial evaluation framework + accompanying guide	Ongoing evaluation framework	ESG, part 1
Information meetings for HEIs	Meetings with quality officers		Information and debriefing sessions
<i>Self-evaluation</i>	<i>Self-assessment report</i>	<i>Progress report</i>	<i>Institutional self-assessment report</i>
Site or online visit of HEIs (panel accompanied by one AEQES staff member)	2 to 3 days	1 to 1.5 day	2 to 5 days (depending on the implementing procedures)
Production of a report by the experts (+ system-wide analysis) and publication	Evaluation report Cf. ESG 2.6.	Continuous evaluation report Cf. ESG 2.6.	Institutional review report Cf. ESG 2.6.
<i>Action plan (follow-up)</i>	<i>Publication of an action plan by the higher education institution 3 to 6 months after the publication of the evaluation report</i>		
<i>Mid-term progress record (follow-up)</i>	<i>Transmission of a succinct report on actions already implemented for improvement (midterm of the six-year cycle)</i>		

FIGURE 24: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 4 PHASES PER EQA ACTIVITY

Regular surveys of institutions and experts indicate overall positive and fairly stable satisfaction rates year after year.

By way of example, the next figure shows the findings of all surveys for the 2017-2018 programmatic (initial and follow-up) evaluation campaigns. The compilation of these results was communicated to the Steering Committee in early 2020 (although partial results had already led to adjustments in practice within the Executive Unit). The 2018-2019 compilation is currently being finalized. The 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 surveys will be processed in a targeted manner according to the needs of the pilot phase in particular.

	Main strong points quoted by the respondents	Main areas for improvement quoted by the respondents	Courses of action
Initial evaluations	<u>Opinion of the HEIs:</u> tools (guides, frame of reference), prior interview with the chairman,	<u>Opinion of the HEIs:</u> quality and timeline for the provision of statistical toolboxes [5.4]*	N/A <i>the toolboxes currently fall under the purview of ARES</i>

	<p>committee's listening skills <i>[between 8 and 8.3]</i></p> <p><u>Opinion of the experts:</u> preparation of the mission (information, documents including the accompanying guide of the reference framework), logistics, support of the Executive Unit <i>[between 9 and 9.7]</i></p> <p><u>Opinion of the HEIs and experts:</u> right-of-reply mechanism <i>[9]</i></p>	<p>Slight drop in satisfaction with preparatory meetings, composition of committees and suitability of the feedback for the concerns <i>[between 7.1 and 7.4]</i></p> <p><u>Opinion of experts:</u> process for the preparation of reports and cross-sectional analyses</p> <p><u>Opinion of the HEIs and experts:</u> visit schedules too tight or crowded <i>[7]</i></p>	<p><i>Maintain prior interviews</i></p> <p><i>Readjustment of preparatory meeting formats</i></p> <p><i>Adjustments of system-wide analysis preparation methods and reinforcement of information on the workload</i></p> <p><i>Review visit schedules (fewer but longer interviews, fewer participants per group, etc.).</i></p>
Follow-up evaluations ⁵⁵	<p><u>Opinion of the HEIs:</u> composition of the panels, attainment of the objectives pursued by this evaluation <i>[between 7.6 and 8.5]</i></p> <p><u>Opinion of the experts:</u> the support of the Executive Unit, information prior to the training <i>[between 9 and 10]</i></p>	<p><u>Opinion of the HEIs:</u> less information available</p>	<p><i>Provide more exhaustive information</i></p>

*Figures in square brackets indicate the level of satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 10

FIGURE 25: SOME RESULTS OF SURVEYS OF HEIs AND EXPERTS (2017-2018)

More recently, from 2019 to the present, new methodological parameters are to be taken into consideration (continuous programmatic evaluation reference framework, inclusion of a student expert to the panel, institutional pilot phase, future mid-term progress record, etc.). These novelties will be the subject of surveys and focus groups in order to adjust practices accordingly.

2.4 Peer-review experts

STANDARD

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

⁵⁵ Follow-up evaluation = evaluation between two programmatic evaluations (cf. page 18-19). The continuous evaluation was implemented as of 2019.

External (programmatic or institutional) evaluation procedures rely on the human qualities, skills and expertise of the evaluators.

Principles and processes common to the three EQA activities, supported by a jurisprudence available on the website:

- transparency in the call for applications, recruitment and selection mechanisms (definition of expected profiles and competencies, jurisprudence and application forms available online);
- mechanisms to prevent any conflict of interest (detailed and updated jurisprudence, possibility for higher education institutions to report any potential conflict of interest);
- rules for panel composition (diversity of origin, profile, gender, coverage of disciplinary fields and competences);
- compulsory training for any expert mandated by AEQES and support for the mission by the Executive Unit;
- signing of a code of ethics.

Definition of profiles and expected competencies

Experts are expected to have up-to-date experience in their fields and a thorough understanding of the challenges of higher education and quality assurance at the FWB, European and international levels.

The profiles for the programmatic evaluations are as follows:

- Peer expert: a person with teaching experience in the field being evaluated in higher education;
- Professional expert: a person with professional experience in one or more of the job opportunities targeted by the field evaluated;
- Education expert: a person with experience in higher education, didactics and pedagogy (innovative teaching methods, student guidance and support, e-learning, student assessment methods, etc.);
- Expert in quality assurance: a person with experience in quality assurance and its tools, preferably in education;
- Student expert: a person who has been studying for or has graduated since a one year maximum at the time of the external evaluation (bachelor's, master's, advanced bachelor's or master's degrees; all forms of higher education combined), in Belgium or abroad.
- Chairman of the committee of experts: a person who is proficient in one of the above-mentioned areas of expertise (apart from student expert) and who has experience in quality assurance (external and/or internal), very good written and oral skills and experience in team management.

The expected expertise for the pilot institutional review is defined as follows:

- Governance: a person with expertise in governance and strategic leadership of a higher education institution or organization;
- Quality assurance: a person with experience in quality assurance and its tools in higher education;
- Pedagogy: a person with experience in pedagogical practice in higher education (e.g. pedagogical coordination and/or support, research in pedagogy, project management, quality assurance, student guidance and support, e-learning, etc.);
- Student experience: a person who, at the time of the external evaluation, is studying for a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, an advanced bachelor's or master's degree, a doctorate; all forms of education taken together) or who has been a graduate for a maximum of one year, in Belgium or abroad;
- Professional experience: a person with experience outside higher education, in the articulation between teaching, research and the needs of the professional world;
- Chairman of the evaluation committee: a person who is proficient in one of the above-mentioned areas of expertise (apart from student experience) and who meets the following criteria:

experience in governance/strategic leadership, experience in institutional review, experience in quality assurance, very good written and oral skills, and team management skills.

For the pilot phase, the experts were recruited from outside FWB insofar as possible (ensuring that at least one member of the panel had a good knowledge of the HE context in the FWB). The Methodological Support Council played a supporting role for the Executive Unit in the recruitment of experts and validation of the composition of panels.

Call for applications and recruitment sources

AEQES recruits experts following the launch of a call for applications⁵⁶ (research conducted by the AEQES officer in charge of an evaluation campaign), the receipt of unsolicited applications and the submission of a list of potential experts by ARES (provision included in the AEQES-ARES cooperation agreement).

Work of the EXPERTS Commission⁵⁷

The applications are examined by the Experts Commission within the Executive Unit, which analyses, approves⁵⁸ and ranks them according to their expertise. It also identifies potential conflicts of interest and may reject certain applications, if necessary.

For the initial programmatic evaluation, the Experts Commission also determines the profiles of those eligible for the chairmanship. Depending on the size of the cluster of programmes to be assessed, one or more persons may co-chair the panel. The experts who are eligible for the chairmanship are contacted and form the panel on the basis of the approved applications. In the composition of the panel (usually 4 or 5 experts), account will be taken of the coverage of all the fields evaluated, the diversity of origin and expertise desired within the panel and the respect of the expertise profiles drawn up by AEQES.

The role of the chair in an evaluation panel⁵⁹ justifies the particular care taken in its selection. Where possible, the Agency selects experts for this profile with whom it has already worked. It also ensures that the profiles hired for evaluations are frequently renewed however.

For the continuous programmatic evaluation, once approved by the Experts Commission, the Executive Unit composes the continuous evaluation panels on the basis of newly approved applications or from the database. A panel is composed of three persons: a 'disciplinary' expert (peer or professional), an expert in education or quality assurance ('transversal expert') and, since 2019-2020, a student expert. This composition includes insofar as possible experts who have already carried out an evaluation for AEQES and a new expert. Experts have equal responsibilities (and fees) and there's no chair in the panel.

As mentioned in the table below, the Methodological Support Council has played its role in supporting the selection of experts and the composition of the panels for the pilot phase of the institutional reviews. The assessment of the pilot phase will also include a focus on the selection of experts and the Executive Unit will take into account the lessons learned from this pilot in its future work in this area.

	Initial programmatic	Continuous	Pilot institutional review
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⁵⁶ How to apply? See http://www.aeqes.be/infos_documents_details.cfm?documents_id=17

⁵⁷ The Commission of Experts of the Executive Unit is authorized by the Steering Committee of AEQES. Its composition, missions and functioning are defined in the [Rules of Procedure](#) which are posted on the website of AEQES [available in French].

⁵⁸ On the basis of a published [jurisprudence](#) which is reviewed regularly by the Agency's Steering Committee [available in French].

⁵⁹ In addition to the evaluation remit assigned to all the experts, the chairman 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 system-wide analysis drawn up by the panel.

	evaluation	programmatic evaluation	
Executive Unit	Call for applications + Proposition for the composition of the panel	Call for applications + Proposition for and approval of the composition of the panel	Call for applications + Proposal for the composition of the panel
EXPERTS Commission	Analysis and approval of applications Choice of experts eligible for the chair	Updating of data for the panel (Formal approval based on updated CVs)	
Chairman(men) of the panel	Approval of the composition of the panel		
Methodological Support Council			Approval of applications + choice of experts eligible for the chair + Approval of the composition of the panel

FIGURE 26: RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THE SELECTION OF EXPERTS AND THE COMPOSITION OF PANELS FOR THE 3 EQA ACTIVITIES

Mechanism to prevent conflicts of interest

Once the evaluation panels are established, the names of their members are communicated to the higher education institutions concerned, who can consult a short biographical note published on the Agency's website. They then have a period of time to notify the Agency of any potential conflict of interest identified for members of an evaluation panel. The publication of the names and profiles of all the experts it commissions on its website⁶⁰ contributes to the transparency of the Agency's work. It should also be noted that a high percentage of experts are not from the FWB.

Training seminars for experts

Training seminars of 2 to 3 days are organized every year in September/October for all experts commissioned for the academic year. Plenary sessions, roundtables and practical workshops follow one another with the aim of understanding the contextual characteristics of higher education in the FWB and the challenges of the quality assurance approaches developed by AEQES, the appropriation of its reference frameworks and tools, the adoption of the expert's posture and work reflexes (setting up interviews, preparing visits, writing reports, ...), plus the deployment of group dynamics. The experts are asked every year about how satisfied they are with the seminar, which varies between 88% and 90% on average.

Because of the pandemic, the 2020 edition of the training seminar was conducted in remote mode and digital materials⁶¹ were produced and made available to the experts as part of their distance learning. AEQES placed at the disposal of the experts' presentation clips on the Agency and the various reference systems as well as an LMS platform in cooperation with the Ministry of the FWB in order to provide blended learning. This platform could be developed/enhanced in the future.

⁶⁰ The names of the experts and a summary of their professional experience are posted on http://aeqes.be/experts_comites.cfm.

⁶¹ See <https://view.genial.ly/5f573297c5ef2c0d90ddfdce/guide-referentiel-evaluation-complete-aeqes> and <https://view.genial.ly/5f69a6ef4d20af0cfc19c870/guide-referentiel-evaluation-continue-aeqes>

❖ *Evidence*

- Inclusion of students in continuous programmatic evaluation panels
- Possibility of including doctoral students or graduates after one year in the evaluation panels

◆ *Room for improvement*

- Better gender balance in the panels

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.

Principles and processes common to all three EQA activities

Given the formative approach of AEQES, evaluations lead to assessments and recommendations (without a formal decision). This evaluation approach is based on explicit criteria included in the reference frameworks for initial, continuous and pilot institutional reviews⁶².

The criteria and explanatory elements of the frameworks are published on AEQES website and are disseminated widely to institutions and experts (during the coordinators' meetings organized for higher education institutions and during the training seminars for experts).

AEQES has introduced several mechanisms to ensure that the reference frameworks are applied consistently by the experts:

- the experts are given clear explanations on how to conduct interviews and write reports so as to ensure rigorous and consistent treatment across all evaluated programmes and institutions;
- consistent treatment within an evaluation campaign: same expert panel and contact persons in the Executive Unit accompanying visiting experts;
- for evaluations involving co-chairmen, a meeting with them is organized halfway through the on-site or online evaluations. This meeting provides an opportunity to discuss the modus operandi of each chairman and, if necessary, to identify and adjust certain differences in that respect;
- practices are shared and coordination for the purposes of harmonization and consistency (fair treatment) is carried out in the Executive Unit (staff meetings, residential seminars, induction process for new members, visit observations, etc.).

Two specific procedures requested by the HE institutions

In the programmatic evaluations

Procedure for the recognition by AEQES of an evaluation/accreditation by another QA body (since September 2017) [see also 4.1. page 11]

The conditions and steps of the procedure for the recognition by AEQES of an evaluation or accreditation by another QA body are clearly defined (see [Quality Handbook](#) procedure Op01)

⁶² A procedure for the pilot phase entails a formal decision, i.e. the summative judgement procedure.

The application file of an institution is examined either by the Executive Unit (if the external body is listed on the EQAR Register) or by the Recognition Commission (if the body is not listed on the Register).

The following are examined: the evaluation criteria, the frequency of evaluations, the methodology for selecting experts and the publication of the results. A proposal for a decision is tabled for the Steering Committee which formally takes the decision. It should be noted that the Agency recognizes the process and not the result of the evaluation/accreditation. If an institution wishes to lodge a complaint or appeal, it should contact the specific agency that conducted the process.

Recent examples: engineering (CTI), management (AACSB and EQUIS) and veterinary (EAEVE) programmes.

For the institutional review (pilot phase)

Summative Judgement procedure⁶³

Eight of the 17 pilot institutions requested this procedure, which makes it possible to obtain a positive, conditional or negative judgement on their capacity to manage the external evaluation of their programmes autonomously at the end of the pilot institutional review. The formal consequence of a positive judgement is that the planning of programmatic evaluations by AEQES is terminated for a period of six years (duration of the programmatic and institutional review cycles). This is a decision, taken collegially by the panel of experts who carried out the evaluation and the Methodological Support Council. A matrix of descriptors of the 4 criteria used was constructed by said Council to reinforce the rigour of the collegial decision-making process. It is used internally by the experts panels and by the Council in their decision making process. In case of a conditional judgement, one or more conditions have to be met by the HEI within a defined period of time. If met, the collegial decision turns positive. In case of a negative judgement, the HEI is not authorized to gain such autonomy and its programmes are assessed by AEQES. The summative judgement procedure will be carefully examined in the assessment of the pilot phase and, if it is renewed in the Agency's future methodology, the procedure itself and its tools will be published on the Agency's website.

❖ Evidence

- For all three methodologies: strengthening of expert training;
- Pilot phase: development and use of a descriptor matrix for positioning against the 4 criteria of the summative judgement procedure (currently an internal tool).

◆ Room for improvement

- The writing of guidelines for the continuous programmatic evaluation reference framework after the assessment of this evaluation methodology.
- The finalization of the future methodology and the writing of useful documents (reference tool, guides, etc.)

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.

Process for writing reports and exercising the right of reply

At the end of an initial programmatic evaluation visit or a pilot institutional review visit, the chairman proposes a draft evaluation report to the panel. This draft is based on the oral report (compiled collegially), the verbatim rendition of the interviews produced by the member of the Executive Unit present during the visit, the documentation made available during the visit and specific contributions

⁶³ <https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/20190625-Phase-pilote-AEQES-balises-methodologiques-v4-valide-CoPIL.pdf> pages 21-24

from the experts in the form of notes, sheets, etc. This draft is commented and enriched by the experts who participated in the visit. The Executive Unit ensures that the evaluation guidelines are taken into account, that the 'findings, analysis and recommendations' triad is respected and that the guidelines for publication are followed. The entire panel approves the version of the preliminary report.

Given the absence of a panel chair, a methodology is adapted for the production of the continuous programmatic evaluation reports to ensure overall consistency while guaranteeing a balanced distribution of the workload. For instance, experts take turns in producing the draft report.

Prior to publication, all reports are subject to a right of reply by the institution. This right of reply may concern both the form and the substance of the report. 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 institution and included in the evaluation report.

The latest analysis of the surveys conducted by AEQES among the institutions and experts taking part in the evaluations showed satisfactory scores for the assessment of the right-of-reply mechanism.⁶⁴ Moreover, 80% of the HEIs considered that the reports met their expectations according to the results of the 2017-2018 surveys.

Conversely, for the experts, the surveys also showed that drawing up the reports remains a laborious process. In particular, the methodology for producing the system-wide analysis was identified as less satisfactory. The Executive Unit tends to believe that the size of the system-wide analyses makes the task demanding for the experts. Collegiality and consistency are not always easy to cope with. However, these system-wide analyses are known and used, for instance by ARES⁶⁵ or the members of Parliament⁶⁶. AEQES does not write the reports (or draft reports) for the experts. The reflection on the methodology for drafting reports is still ongoing and focuses more specifically on tools to support collegiality and the quality of the content of the reports.

Content of the reports

The external evaluation reports follow the structure of the evaluation reference framework used. The Agency has also produced editorial guidelines for the system-wide analysis.

Following the recommendations made during the ENQA evaluations in 2011 and 2016, AEQES has worked to make the evaluation reports easier to read. The external evaluation reports now include, in addition to the detailed analysis of the curriculum offered by an institution, a summary table with the main points of the SWOT analysis and the most important recommendations. The reports published by AEQES are intended for a very wide audience (current and would-be students, parents of students, teachers, directors, employers, decision-makers, etc.). Surveys show that few students consult the website or the reports of the AEQES website. The question as to the relevance of the target audiences of the reports is therefore still relevant and will be evaluated when a new communication plan is put in place.

The reports continue to be published exclusively in French. This choice remains consistent and the project with DEQAR does not foresee the publication of reports translated into another language. The possibility of extracting the summary from the evaluation reports for separate publication is an avenue to be considered for the implementation of a new communication plan and the Agency's new website.

Furthermore, certain legal guidelines in terms of publishable content are still an obstacle to the drafting of reports supported by statistical data. In addition, the management of statistics in the FWB does not

⁶⁴ See illustration 25, pages 45-46

⁶⁵ See footnote 60, see the [recent tool OSAQUA](#) [available in French]

⁶⁶ See [questions parlementaires](#) [available in French]

allow for easy comparison of data between the four types of higher education because they are not all available at the same time (different reference years).

❖ *Evidence*

- A summary with an adapted layout has been added to each report for more readability.

◆ *Room for improvement*

- Complete the process for obtaining authorization to publish certain statistical data, in consultation with the stakeholders and in accordance with the constraints of a highly competitive environment;
- Improve communication of external evaluation reports and system-wide analyses in line with the priorities of the communication plan.

Publication, dissemination and follow-up

The Agency publishes⁶⁷ all reports thus produced by experts (external programmatic evaluation reports, system-wide analyses and soon pilot institutional review reports) in their entirety. The publication of reports is widely communicated by AEQES. The Executive Unit sends an e-mail to all relevant stakeholders to inform them of the publication: institutions (management, staff and students), former students and representatives of the socio-professional world encountered during the external evaluation visits. In addition, AEQES systematically sends printed copies of its transversal analyses to ARES, to the Minister responsible for higher education, to the Ministers concerned by the subject matter (culture, health, etc.), to the professional associations concerned, to the *ad hoc* parliamentary committees, to the student federations, to the Service d'Information sur les Études et les Professions (SIEP) [Information Service for Studies and Careers] and to the Administration of the FWB. The publication of some reports has led to press articles and parliamentary questions. The Agency monitors⁶⁸ the follow-up of published reports.

2.7 Complaints and appeals

STANDARD

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

In 2016, the Agency adopted a Complaints Procedure to set up a Complaints Commission which deals independently with complaints from higher education institutions. The commission is called upon when no favourable outcome can be obtained during mediation between the complainants, the Executive Unit and the Board of the Agency.

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. The members of the Complaints Commission have no connection with the institution lodging the complaint and are not members of the Agency's Steering Committee.

No complaints have been lodged since the complaints procedure was adopted. Two complaints lodged prior to 2016 were dealt with through mediation.

The existence of the Complaints Commission is explained on the Agency's website⁶⁹, in the guidelines for HEIs and the associated procedure is detailed in the Quality Handbook, likewise available on the website.

⁶⁷ See http://aeqes.be/rapports_intro.cfm.

⁶⁸ See http://aeqes.be/agence_pr.cfm

⁶⁹ See http://www.aeqes.be/agence_composition_plaintes.cfm

It should be noted that, in the absence of a formal impact of the evaluations carried out by AEQES, the legislator did not provide for an appeal commission for the Agency.

Nevertheless, since February 2021 the Agency has considered it useful to have such a commission for the pilot phase. A procedure was adopted and a pool of 9 members for this Commission⁷⁰ appointed. This commission can be called upon to deal independently and impartially with any appeals lodged by the pilot institutions that have requested the summative judgement procedure. This procedure enables a higher education institution that obtains a positive opinion following its institutional review to be exempted from an external evaluation of its programmes by AEQES for a period of six years.

❖ *Evidence*

- The information available on the AEQES website and the [Quality Handbook](#).

⁷⁰ See Annex 7

11. INFORMATION and OPINIONS of AEQES' STAKEHOLDERS

AEQES has been organizing a quality event for stakeholders in the quality of higher education in the FWB every year, with the exception of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The day is organized into various plenary sessions as well as workshops and poster sessions. The latter allow representatives of higher education institutions, teachers and quality experts to share their practices and tools. These events are successful in gathering the AQ community of FWB⁷¹.

As part of the preparatory phase of the institutional pilot phase, the AEQES launched a consultation in 2016-2017 with the various stakeholders on reflections in terms of methodology: surveys among higher education institutions, open feedback from experts working for AEQES, information sessions organized across the FWB. An *ad hoc* website⁷² was launched for the pilot phase with the double ambition of co-constructing future methodologies and informing all the stakeholders. From informal feedback and surveys analysis, it seems that the dialogue function of this website is not as successful as expected; yet the website gives transparent and full account of the documents produced so far.

The surveys carried out systematically among those involved in the AEQES evaluations also enable stakeholders (teachers, students, professionals, staff members of higher education institutions, expert members of evaluation committees, etc.) to express their views on the quality and relevance of the procedures carried out by AEQES and to make observations and suggestions. The results of the surveys are summarized and communicated to the Agency's Steering Committee. Communicating these results of the surveys to the different stakeholders is necessary.

The system-wide analyses produced in the programmatic evaluations are presented systematically to the public with the participation of the evaluated higher education institutions, as well as representatives of the Steering Committee and other stakeholders. The system-wide analyses are published and widely disseminated to stakeholders and are available to the general public. Because of the protocols imposed by the pandemic, these presentations are now systematically online and, thanks to the very recent recruitment of a communication officer, these presentations are also disseminated for the press. This has resulted in greater visibility in the form of press articles in the written press and media. It is too early to know, however, whether this improves the level of information of the stakeholders.

⁷¹ 2019 edition http://www.aeqes.be/calendrier_events_details.cfm?news_id=185 and http://www.aeqes.be/calendrier_events_details.cfm?news_id=186 ;
2018 edition http://www.aeqes.be/calendrier_events_details.cfm?news_id=178
2017 edition http://www.aeqes.be/calendrier_events_details.cfm?news_id=162
2016 edition http://www.aeqes.be/calendrier_events_details.cfm?news_id=152 ;
2015 edition http://www.aeqes.be/calendrier_events_details.cfm?news_id=124

⁷² <http://aeqes-coconstruction.be>

12. RECOMMENDATIONS and MAIN FINDINGS from PREVIOUS REVIEWS and AEQES' RESULTING FOLLOW-UP

Annex 1 details the follow-up given to each recommendation.

The following can be cited on the whole:

- the design and implementation of the pilot phase, changes to the system-wide analysis or evaluation report format (methodological component in response to recommendations on the length of the cycle, the Agency's independence, the clarity of its reports);
- increased involvement of students in quality assurance (present in all external quality assurance activities, mobilized through various communication actions);
- the effort in terms of communication (welcome sessions for new members, speed-dating event, widening of the audience for the presentation of the system-wide analyses, co-construction website, updated and published key documents, and above all, the hiring of a communication officer)
- the increase in the Agency's budget and the regular transmission to the Minister responsible for HE of documented notes by the Board to indicate the Agency's structural needs.

There is still room for improvement, of course.

Finally, AEQES has opted to avail itself of the opportunity of a progress visit by focusing on questions that need to be answered in the near future.

13. SWOT analysis

S	W
The formative approach of quality assurance procedures is aligned to the expectations of the HEIs	
There is a fair satisfaction rate of the EQA procedures as measured by regular surveys (HEIs, students and experts)	The new continuous programmatic evaluation reference framework is not yet fully owned by both HEIs and experts
A scorecard of all survey results is in place and updated	The use made of survey results could be more systematic and reported
All experts are trained and their work is supported by the Executive Unit	
The professionalism of the Executive Unit is acknowledged	The HR framework is not stable and the status of the staff is not homogeneous
Pandemic : the Executive Unit reacted swiftly in constant dialogue with the HEIs and experts	
A pilot phase for institutional reviews was designed and implemented in a spirit of co-construction An assessment report to the government is to be written	Implementing the concept of co-construction is a difficult process
The methodology is well documented and published (accessible)	External communication is not based yet on a communication plan, thus is unstructured and inefficient (web site, information flow, dissemination of analyses and studies)
The recruitment of a communication officer demonstrates the professionalization of AEQES communication	
KPI are being developed for the new 2021-2025 strategic plan	There are no impact indicators to measure AEQES activities
O	T
There are new perspectives open by the co-constructed future legal framework, in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the methodological evolutions (following the pilot phase) - the Agency's governance - the Agency's resources <p>The Project 'E-Paysage' developed by ARES and the collaboration with ARES on the HOPS Database in connection with the DEQAR project will facilitate access to updated data</p>	There are uncertainties about the future legal framework in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the methodological evolutions (following the pilot phase) - the Agency's governance - the Agency's resources <p>The access to and use of updated statistical data in FWB is still difficult/weak</p>
	Some stakeholders (students, world of work) are still not sufficiently involved in the governance of AEQES
	The role and responsibilities of the different stakeholders (among which ARES) are still not clear and well-known
	The pandemic will impact the budget of FWB

14. CURRENT CHALLENGES and AREAS for FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Based on the assessment of its strategic plan for 2016-2020, AEQES has developed and adopted a new strategic plan for 2021-2025, which has enabled it to draw up a first action plan for 2021 (see Annex 3).

The three priorities and their associated lines of actions are defined for a period of 5 years. The actions and activities pertain to the year 2021 in the work plan 2021. Some of these are new specific actions, while others are recurrent.

The priorities of AEQES for the period 2021-2025 are based on three lines of actions which aim to improve the Agency's functioning, its interactions with stakeholders and the clarification of the environment in which it operates.

Some projects are priorities and transversal in nature through these different lines of actions:

- the continued reflection on the governance of the Agency, in conjunction with its effectiveness and the representativeness of its bodies;
- the stabilization of the framework of the Executive Unit and the Agency's resources;
- the communication of the AEQES in a transversal way;
- the finalization of the pilot phase and the management of the transition to a sustainable institutional approach;
- the clarification of the framework governing the quality of higher education in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, in particular through the adoption of a new decree.

The last two points are particularly important for the near future and are directly linked to the third priority defined as follows *'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.'*

Furthermore, in devising its new strategic plan, AEQES identified the need to measure the impact of its actions better in the future. In this context, a project to develop key strategic indicators has been launched in 2021. It will make it possible to define strategic indicators linked to the main lines of the strategic plan and identify achievement and impact indicators to be included in the annual action plans defined by the Board.