



Agence pour l'Evaluation de
la Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur

AEQES follow-up report, for the attention of the ENQA Board

Significant changes implemented over the last two years at AEQES,
consideration of the ENQA review and challenges for the future

07/03/2024

The ENQA Board, in its letter of 2/05/2022 confirming its status as a member of ENQA¹ to AEQES, asked AEQES to provide a report setting out the follow-up to the experts' conclusions and recommendations².

This follow-up report was drafted by the Executive Unit of AEQES, and submitted for validation to the Self-Assessment and Strategy WG³ on 20/12/2023, and to the AEQES Steering Committee on 19/02/2024.

It is structured as follows:

1. Significant changes implemented in the field of external quality assurance and consideration of the recommendations and suggestions of the ENQA review

A. On the methodological level

i. Programmatic evaluations: methodological improvements (following the assessment of the continuous evaluations)

ii. Institutional reviews

Publication of the first institutional review reports, action plans and system-wide analysis

Assessment of the pilot phase

Introduction of a transitional phase: revision of the decree in order to extend the conditions of the pilot phase for the first three years of the new 2023-2029 cycle and slight revision to the tools

Position of the Steering Committee on the future framework

B. In terms of governance and human resources

2. Upcoming challenges

1. Significant changes implemented in the field of external quality assurance and consideration of the recommendations and suggestions of the ENQA review

A. On the methodological level

The panel of experts appointed by ENQA visited AEQES between 29 September and 1 October 2021. At the time, AEQES was still carrying out a pilot phase relating to the deployment of institutional reviews and the revision of the continuous programmatic evaluation. Three evaluation formats were organised at the time, and they remain in place today:

- The so-called initial programmatic evaluations: this activity is the main mission that was entrusted to AEQES when it was formed in 2008,

¹ Letter available at [https://aeges.be/documents/Courrier%20du%20Board%20ENQA%20\(1\).pdf](https://aeges.be/documents/Courrier%20du%20Board%20ENQA%20(1).pdf) (French translation)

² Evaluation report produced by the experts available at [https://aeges.be/documents/RapportENQA-AEQES2021WEB%20\(1\).pdf](https://aeges.be/documents/RapportENQA-AEQES2021WEB%20(1).pdf) (French translation)

³ Working group of the AEQES Steering Committee, consisting of the AEQES Board, 5 members of the Steering Committee and a guest external to the Steering Committee

- The implementation of continuous programmatic evaluations, according to a reference framework reviewed in 2019-2020,
- The design and implementation, after a broad stakeholder consultation, of an experimental institutional review (centred on the HEI's learning and teaching mission), initially planned from 2019 to 2022 and extended until August 2023 due to the Covid-19-pandemic.

Since that visit, several significant changes have been made, and are set out below.

i. Programmatic evaluations: methodological improvements (following the assessment of the continuous evaluations)

In 2022, the Executive Unit of AEQES produced an assessment report on the continuous evaluation⁴ as it was implemented during the pilot phase. This assessment is based on 91 continuous evaluations carried out between 2019-2020 and 2021-2022. The assessment report presents a description of the methodology used, analyses the feedback received (from institutions and experts, as well as the ENQA experts recommendations) and identifies around 15 suggested adjustments. This report was presented to the AEQES Steering Committee during its plenary session on 29/11/2022.

Following the presentation of this assessment report, a number of changes were adopted:

- Revision of the continuous evaluation set of criteria to be applied from the 2024-2025 external evaluations onwards: the revision consists in clarifying the criteria, which will be reduced from 3 to 2. The revised set of criteria was adopted on 18/4/2023 by the Steering Committee.
- Introduction of the position of chair in the continuous evaluation panels: decision made by the Steering Committee on 3/05/2022, to be applied from the 2022-2023 external evaluations onwards.
- Addition of a summary (in the form of a SWOT analysis) written by the experts to improve the legibility of the reports published by the Agency. To be applied from the 2022-2023 external evaluations onwards for each continuous evaluation report (this summary was already included in the other types of evaluation reports).

ENQA experts' suggestion:

“ESG 2.4. For a better organization of external evaluation processes, AEQES should consider having the position of a designated chair for each type of evaluation.”

“ESG 2.6. The panel suggests that AEQES should consider the prior designation of a chair for any evaluation process; additionally, it should continue the process of issuing summary reports on the evaluations that are easier to read and be understood by non-professionals.”

⁴ Assessment report available at https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/20221116_BILAN_EC.pdf

ii. Institutional reviews

Publication of the first institutional review reports, action plans and system-wide analysis

In November 2021, the 17 institutional review reports relating to the HEIs that participated voluntarily in the pilot phase were published⁵. They also include the decisions relating to the "summative judgement procedure" for the 8 institutions that had requested it (decisions made between November 2021 and September 2023 – the most recent ones relate to conditional judgements having led to a second decision made on the basis of either a follow-up report or a follow-up visit).

The 17 institutions published their institutional action plan following the pilot institutional review.

Lastly, a system-wide analysis was also published⁶ in November 2021 following the pilot institutional reviews. A "Study day" was held (online, due to the Covid-19 pandemic) to share the conclusions of this system-wide analysis and initiate a debate on its key messages⁷. Nearly 250 participants attended.

Assessment of the pilot phase

As required by the decree, AEQES undertook to carry out an assessment of the pilot phase. To this end, it drew on the resources built up during the pilot phase and on feedback from the main stakeholders (HEIs, experts and members of the Methodological Support Council).

AEQES also prepared a scenario for the evolution of the QA framework. A consultation on this scenario was then organised with the HEIs representing bodies, students, unions and representatives of the socio-professional sectors between October 2022 and February 2023.

Feedback from the pilot institutions along with a summary of the opinions gathered⁸ during the stakeholders' consultation were shared at a "Study day" held on 25/5/2023, attended by around a hundred participants.

The opinions gathered during this consultation were then at the centre of discussions to adjust the previously established evolution scenario. Based on the above elements and the work of the Methodology & Standards WG, a basis for a new model for QA in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (WBF) was developed between June and November 2023. The AEQES Steering Committee endorsed it on 28/11/2023.

ENQA experts' suggestion:

"ESG 2.1. The panel considers it essential that at the end of the pilot phase of institutional evaluation, AEQES should make an in-depth analysis of the results, taking into account the various expectations of all actors involved and thus make the best decision on the final form of the process, including one or several reference frameworks according to the different types of HEIs."

⁵ At https://aeqes.be/rapports_list.cfm?documents_type=12

⁶ At https://aeqes.be/rapports_details.cfm?documents_id=863

⁷ Programme and recordings available at https://www.aeqes.be/calendrier_events_details.cfm?news_id=208

⁸ Available at <https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/RapportConsultationDesInstances.pdf>

The assessment report of the pilot phase and the main orientations of the future QA model will be submitted to the Government of the WBF in March/April 2024.

Introduction of a transitional phase: revision of the decree in order to extend the conditions of the pilot phase for the first three years of the new 2023-2029 cycle and slight revision to the tools

In the meantime (2022), in order to guarantee that the institutional reviews of the 2023-2029 cycle are properly carried out, the AEQES Steering Committee (via its Decree WG) proposed an amendment to the decree of 22/02/2008 to extend the conditions of the institutional review pilot phase for the first three years of the 2023-2029 cycle. This amendment to the decree was adopted by the Parliament of the French Community on 24/05/2023.

It stipulates that the institutional reviews to be carried out between 2023-2024 and 2025-2026 will make use of the tools employed during the pilot phase, namely:

- Use of part I of the ESG as a reference framework,
- Use of the methodological guidelines from the pilot phase, slightly modified at the beginning of 2023,
- Possibility of using the summative judgement procedure on a voluntary basis, following the criteria and descriptors employed during the pilot phase. The body in charge of decision-making is the Independent Commission, a commission formed on 01/09/2023 to replace the former Methodological Support Council (whose mission had been timed to end with the pilot phase). The impacts of a positive judgement were clarified (exemption from all AEQES initial and continuous programmatic evaluations). AEQES published a dedicated assessment report⁹ on the summative judgement procedure.

ENQA experts' suggestion:

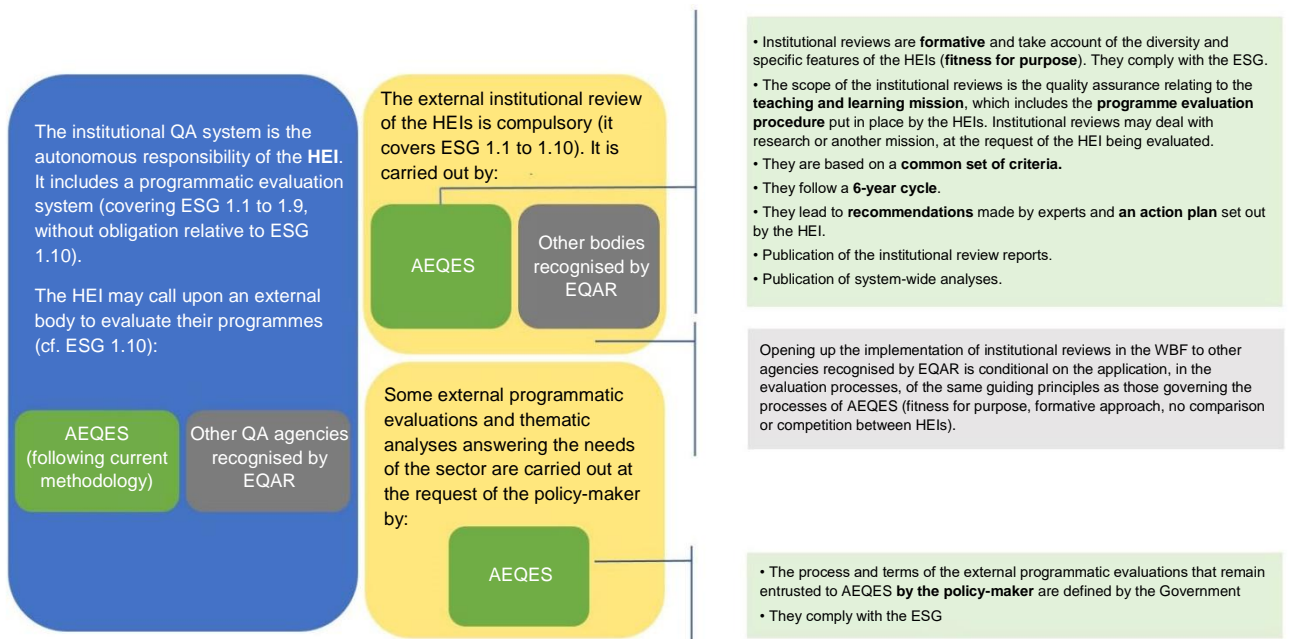
“ESG 2.2. The panel strongly encourages all stakeholders involved in AEQES’s work, following the completion of the pilot phase of the process, to move towards agreeing an institutional evaluation process and provide clarity on the consequences of the graded summative judgements arising from the application of this process, as quickly as possible.”

New legal provisions must now be drafted and submitted to the Parliament so as to come into force for the external evaluations planned for 2026-2027 onwards.

Position of the Steering Committee on the future framework

The main orientations for the future QA framework on which the AEQES Steering Committee took a position on 28/11/2023 for the years 2026-2027 onwards may be schematised as follows:

⁹ At https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/20221011_BILAN_PAG.pdf



In this model, institutional reviews are systematically carried out, making it possible in particular to assess the way in which the institution evaluates and guarantees the quality of its programmes. External evaluation of the programmes is no longer compulsory for institutions. For the evaluation of its programmes, institutions may decide to:

- implement their own evaluation methodology¹⁰,
- entrust AEQES with carrying out programmatic external evaluations,
- entrust another EQAR registered agency to carry out programmatic external evaluations.

Some programmatic evaluations and thematic analyses could continue to be conducted by AEQES at the request of the policy-maker.

The next stage in designing/developing the future QA model will focus on defining and detailing the processes inherent in this model, and on completing the legislative process (ensuring the reform of AEQES' current decree). At the same time, a set of criteria for institutional reviews should be drawn up in consultation with the stakeholders and the accompanying guiding tools should be established (guides for the institutions and panels of experts, in particular).

¹⁰ Unlike the model that was experienced during the pilot phase, in this model, the institutions becoming autonomous in the evaluation of their programmes would no longer be subject to an ex-ante examination of the robustness of their quality assurance system (the "summative judgement procedure" would then cease to exist).

B. In terms of governance and human resources

Wishing to obtain an in-depth analysis of its governance framework and to identify the changes to be made to it, AEQES called upon the services of an external auditor. To this end, AEQES was able to incorporate its request into a public procurement framework agreement prepared by the Walloon public authorities and the WBF. The audit specifications produced by AEQES were communicated in May 2022. However, it was not until 12/06/2023 that the winners of this public procurement were announced.

At the request of the AEQES Board, one of the winners (PwC) submitted an audit methodology plan on 28/11/2023 to the AEQES Steering Committee. The auditing work began in December 2023. The audit report is expected in April 2024.

ENQA experts' suggestion:

“ESG 3.3. The panel believe that for more efficient decision-making a smaller, competence-based, Steering Committee might be considered. Alternatively, a smaller Standing sub-committee could be delegated some of the more routine functions of the Steering Committee without losing the important parliamentary and representative nature of the existing system.”

ENQA experts' recommendation:

“ESG 3.6. The team strongly recommends to AEQES to conduct an evaluation process that addresses the effectiveness of its governance systems. External assistance may usefully be employed for this process.”

In terms of human resources, the Director of the Executive Unit retired on 1 July 2023. Interim management has been provided by an AEQES staff member since then. At the time of finalising this report, the process of appointing the future management had not yet been finalised.

2. Upcoming challenges

Part I of this report describes the changes made since the end of 2021 and those due to take place in the coming months. It also demonstrates that for some years now, AEQES has been going through a period characterised by many significant changes. In this context, AEQES must take particular care to:

- On the methodological level:
 - o present the reform of the QA framework to future WBF government¹¹,
 - o implement this reform: develop the set of criteria for institutional reviews and update the guiding tools (guides, quality handbook, etc.) that will reflect the chosen options on the methodological level, disseminate them to stakeholders and ensure the ownership of these new tools,
 - o assess the relevance of the new QA model and the achievement of the main objectives pursued by AEQES.
- In terms of resources:
 - o ensure an adequate transition with the future head of the Executive Unit,
 - o continue the efforts to reduce staff turnover within the Executive Unit (in particular by making changes to the type of employment contract concluded with the staff, where possible),
 - o prepare the Executive Unit to support the methodological changes underway,
 - o strengthen communication actions and materials with a view to improving ownership of the results of the Agency's evaluations.
- In terms of governance: complete the governance audit successfully, and use its results to improve, where necessary, the current governance. If needed, incorporate amendments into the Agency's decree.

These elements are included in the action plan drawn up by the AEQES Board for the years 2023 and 2024. It also calls for action in the fields of external communication (appointment of a new communication officer within the Executive Unit, future redesign of the AEQES website) and human resources management (reduction in turnover in the Agency's Executive Unit, as mentioned above).

In this particularly unsettled period, AEQES would like to ask ENQA for support in its reflections. For this reason AEQES is asking to receive a progress visit as soon as possible, focusing on the following questions:

- The first orientations for a future QA framework that were approved by the Steering Committee and will be proposed to the Government (illustrated on p. 5) aims to increase institutions' autonomy in the area of programme evaluation. AEQES wishes to make sure that this framework strikes the right balance between autonomy and responsibility in the area of quality assurance. AEQES would like to benefit from the experts' views on these considerations.
- The new quality assurance model brings about significant changes, both for the higher education sector and for AEQES itself. AEQES is reflecting on the deployment of the future model and in particular on the transition from one model to another. Including exchanges of good practices on this topic during the progress visit could be helpful to

¹¹ Elections are scheduled for 2024

consider a progressive change, with the aim of promoting ownership of the new system and adapting the resources dedicated to quality assurance, in the institutions as well as in the Agency.