



ACADÉMIE
DE RECHERCHE ET
D'ENSEIGNEMENT
SUPÉRIEUR



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

JOINT NOTE on the roles, missions and actions of the
Académie de Recherche et d'Enseignement Supérieur (ARES)
[Academy for Research and Higher Education]
and the *Agence pour l'Évaluation de la Qualité de
l'Enseignement Supérieur* (AEQES) [Agency for Quality Assurance
in Higher Education] for quality in higher education

1 BACKGROUND

1 Motivation

With due respect for the autonomy of the institutions and in order to support the steps for the permanent development of the quality of the entire higher education sector in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, ARES and AEQES have jointly¹ drawn up this note which, for the sake of optimal organization, defines an arrangement for cooperation and for complementary activities by and between the two bodies in the areas for which they are responsible respectively, exclusively and jointly.

In the constantly developing context of higher education (HE), this note gives ARES and AEQES the opportunity to affirm their commitment to work together effectively and efficiently in the interest of all, particularly of all students. More specifically, both ARES and AEQES are committed to working for excellence in higher education within the framework of the relevant legislation of FWB (Wallonia-Brussels Federation), in particular the so-called Landscape Decree of November 2013². This note aspires to foster trust between the organisations and to build coherence between their actions so as to simplify the procedures relating to quality assurance.

The adoption of this decree has altered the environment in which the Agency operates. The changes brought about by the creation of ARES include a repositioning of the stakeholders involved. In this context and in support of the missions entrusted to it by the legislator, it is necessary for the Agency to be seen as a partner of ARES in terms of support for quality. In this context, the note is also intended to provide a better understanding of the interrelations between ARES and AEQES. Both organisations will support its dissemination to all relevant stakeholders.

This note defines the principles and a *modus operandi* that respect the provisions of application and the spirit of the legal frameworks. The signatories undertake to draw up an annual review of the cooperation and to proceed to the necessary adjustments and developments.

2 Frame of reference

The legal responsibilities and missions of both organisations are spelled out in the following pieces of legislation:

- The Decree of 7 November 2013 defining the landscape of higher education and the academic organisation of studies;
- The Decree of 22 February 2008 on various measures relating to the organisation and functioning of the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education organised or subsidised by the French-speaking Community.

¹ A joint working group consisting of Julien Nicaise, Freddy Coignoul, Arielle Bouchez, Cécile Dujardin and Christiane Cornet for ARES, and Elfriede Heinen, Philippe Lepoivre and Caty Duykaerts, for AEQES met on 8 December 2015, 25 February 2016, 14 March 2016, 19 April 2016 and 23 June 2016 to draft a note. The joint note was approved by both organisations.

² *Decree of 7 November 2013 defining the landscape of higher education and the academic organization of studies.*

The repeated commitment - through the signing of Conference communiqués - of the European ministers for higher education to support the Bologna Reform, as it is known, and in particular the development of quality assurance should also be mentioned. In point of fact, in 2005 (Bergen Communiqué), the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were adopted and the decision to establish a European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) was taken. In May 2015, a revised version of the ESG was adopted at the Yerevan conference. This version takes into account developments in higher education and strengthens the responsibility of institutions for the quality assurance of all their activities.

3 Missions and role of the ARES

The *Académie de Recherche et d'Enseignement Supérieur* (ARES) [Academy for Research and Higher Education] is a public interest organisation³ which brings together higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. 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 HEIs. The ARES carries out its various missions without prejudice to the autonomy of HEIs.

Article 21 of the Landscape Decree describes the 25 missions of ARES. These can be summarised around six action lines:

- Academic action line (in particular to ensure the coherence of higher education provision and to encourage consultation and cooperation by and between higher education institutions);
- “Research and development” action line (promotion of joint research, management and dissemination of statistical data, promotion of good practices, development of studies and analyses);
- Institutional action line (submission of statements and proposals to the government, particularly as regards the coherence of the higher education provision and proposals for new study programmes (to be authorized), liaison work between the institutions and various bodies);
- “Information” action line (information on studies, qualifications and professions);
- “Cooperation for development” action line (coordination of HEIs participating in development cooperation projects);
- International action line (promotion of international visibility of higher education and coordination of HEIs, particularly in terms of HE provision and joint degrees).

4 Missions and role of AEQES

An autonomous service without legal personality, AEQES is the public service quality agency for higher education of FWB. Active since 2008-2009, it has been a full member of ENQA since 2011 and has been registered in the EQAR register since 2012. Its missions are defined by the Decree of 22 February 2008 (Article 3).⁴ This decree entrusts it in particular, with *making suggestions to policy makers on improving the overall quality of higher education* (mission 5), *making any proposal it deems useful for the accomplishment of its missions, on its own initiative or at the request of the Government* (mission 6) and

³ Public interest body of category B within the meaning of the Control of Certain Public Interest Bodies Act of 16 March 1954 (see Article 20 of the Landscape Decree).

⁴ See Annex 2 of this note.

ensuring that it develops and implements, in consultation with stakeholders, methodological approaches to quality assessment adapted to the needs of higher education and to changing contexts (mission 8).

As regards its external evaluation activities (missions 1, 2, 4), AEQES pursues two main missions, namely to report on the quality of higher education and to work towards its continuous improvement.

AEQES offers an external and formative evaluation to HEIs and produces and disseminates the results of the evaluations carried out, in the form of reports, analyses and meta-analyses (diagnoses and recommendations) through the development of a specific methodology and an evaluation framework, and the involvement of experienced national and international evaluators. In carrying out these activities (mission 2), AEQES keeps a methodological monitoring by analysing European and international quality assurance practices so as to develop approaches for the FWB institutions that are in line with the changing contexts of higher education.

It moreover supports cooperation by and between higher education stakeholders (mission 3), in particular by organising events for the benefit of and in partnership with stakeholders to share practices on quality and quality assurance issues.

The Agency contributes to the international visibility of the FWB higher education (mission 7) by developing its position at European and international level and by establishing international collaborations.

5 Concepts: internal and external quality assurance, quality culture

Internal quality assurance is the responsibility of the institutions. They are in fact required *to monitor and manage the quality of all their activities and to take all measures to ensure an effective internal self-evaluation and follow-up* (Article 9 of the Landscape Decree). The institutions are responsible for defining their strategies, modes of governance, quality policies, objectives and the means to be deployed to attain them, in alignment with part 1 of the ESG.

ARES endeavours through the Commission for the Quality of Education and Research (CoQER) to promote and improve the dialogue between HEIs and to support them in strengthening their quality culture. In so doing, it acts as a link between the external quality assurance (developed and implemented by AEQES) and the internal quality assurance (managed individually by the institutions). In this way, ARES aims to facilitate capacity building for HEIs to develop their own internal quality assurance and to respond to the evaluations conducted by AEQES.

For its part, AEQES is responsible for the external quality assurance of higher education (with reference to Part 2 of the ESG) and for the methodological mechanisms used in evaluation. External quality assurance takes into account in particular the effectiveness of internal quality assurance processes. It also aims to provide stakeholders - including ARES - with independent information on the quality of higher education.

The (internal or external) evaluations, which are the most visible part of QA activities, are nonetheless only a tool, as the ultimate aim is to support the development of a quality culture enabling the improvement of quality of higher education. This quality culture is

reflected in the reflexivity and strong commitment of the stakeholders. The latter rely on shared values and visions, as well as on fit for purpose quality assurance and contribute to the continuous improvement of higher education. This quality culture is aimed at the FWB level as a whole and within each institution in particular.

2 SHARED OBJECTIVES and ACTIONS

1 Objectives

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:

- i. Make publicly available up-to-date information on the range, coherence and quality of the higher education provision and the quality assurance developed in the FWB higher education institutions;
- ii. Support HEIs to develop a sustainable quality culture for their missions;
- iii. Define, maintain and improve the articulation between internal and external quality assurance;
- iv. Define and implement operational procedures for the conduct of external evaluations;
- v. Inform, document and prepare studies and analyses on all matters relating to the quality of higher education for decision-makers and stakeholders;
- vi. Ensure that no conflict of interest arises.

2 Actions

The two organisations carry out actions in an articulated manner, a non-exhaustive list of which is provided in Annex 3.

3 Implementation and follow-up of the note

For the proper implementation of this note, the two organisations undertake to facilitate communication through the ARES Administrator and the AEQES Executive Unit Director and to hold at least one extended annual meeting to take stock of the situation and make any necessary adjustments and developments.

Depending on the topic, joint ARES/AEQES meetings will be organised to carry out joint reflections and implement this joint note.

<p>For ARES,</p> <p>Mrs Annemie Schaus, President of the Board</p>	<p>For AEQES,</p> <p>Mrs Anne-Joëlle Philippart, President</p> <p>Mrs Karin Van Loon, Vice-President</p>
<p>M. Laurent Despy, Admisnitrator</p>	<p>Mrs Caty Duykaerts, Director of the Executive Unit</p>

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Extract relating to the missions of ARES

Decree defining the landscape of higher education and the academic organisation of studies (D. 07-11-2013 – *Moniteur Belge* [Belgian Official Gazette] 18-12-2013)

(...)

Amended by Judgment of the Constitutional Court of 21-04-2016

Article 21. –The missions of the ARES shall be to:

- 1° issue an opinion to the Government, on its own initiative or at the request of the Government, a higher education institution or an Academic Hub, on any matter relating to one of the missions of institutions of higher education;
- 2° respond, with a reasoned opinion, to any proposal from an inter-cluster academic zone concerning the provision of the professionally-oriented higher education and to propose the authorisations to the Government, taking due care to limit competition between institutions, forms of education and academic clusters;
- 3° for the rest, propose to a change in the educational provision to the Government, after the opinion of concerned thematic Chambers concerned, upon request of one or several institutions or following the opinion of the Advisory Board;
- 4° ensure the coherence of the provision and the content of studies and training in its opinions by avoiding any unjustified redundancy, option or specialisation;
- 5° take charge of the material organisation of common admission tests or examinations;
- 6° organise consultations on all matters relating to its missions and promote cooperation by and between higher education institutions or Academic Hubs, as well as with other institutions or associations of higher education or research institutions outside the French-speaking Community, in particular with federal institutions or bodies and other Belgian federated entities;
- 7° be the link of these Academic Hubs and institutions with Community, regional or federal institutions or bodies, in particular the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (AEQES), the Higher Council for Student Mobility (CSM), the Science Policy Councils (CPS), and the Scientific Research Fund (FRS-FNRS);
- 8° coordinate, in cooperation with the services of the Ministry of the French-speaking Community, the representation of higher education institutions in the French-speaking Community within the framework of inter-community and international missions and relations;
- 9° promote the international visibility of higher education in the French-speaking Community and coordinate the international relations of the Hubs and institutions, in particular as regards the provision of higher education and joint degrees;
- 10° distribute the participation of the Hubs and institutions in academic cooperation for development and all similar and humanitarian projects;
- 11° promote joint research activities and draw up opinions and recommendations on the orientations of scientific policy, on the means to be implemented so as to encourage the development and improvement of scientific or artistic research in HE institutions and on the participation of the French-speaking Community and its institutions in national or international research programmes or projects;

- 12° organise, in consultation with the doctoral schools at the FRS-FNRS, the thematic doctoral schools and the doctoral training courses and establish the rules for the boards of examiners responsible for conferring doctorates in the universities;
- 13° accredit continuing education studies leading to the granting of credits;
- 14° set the amount of tuition fees which are not determined by the legislation;
- 15° develop and coordinate collective structures dedicated to lifelong learning activities in higher education;
- 16° define, on the proposal of commissions created for this purpose by ARES and the institutions concerned, the competences reference frameworks corresponding to the academic degrees awarded, and certify their compliance with the study programmes proposed by the institutions, as well as their conformity with the other provisions concerning professional access for graduates;
- 17° provide and disseminate complete and objective information on higher education in the French-speaking Community, on the degrees awarded and on the professions to which they lead, as well as on the skills and qualifications profiles at the end of these studies;
- 18° manage a statistical data compilation system relating to all the missions of higher education and to the future of its graduates, publish synthetic analyses and a detailed overview concerning students and staff members, and ensure the interoperability of the systems for a permanent confidential follow-up of the personal pathway of students in higher education;
- 19° collect information on the social situation and welfare of students, on the services and support provided to them, on study grants and loans and on activities to help them succeed, on remedial measures, on education follow-up and on advice and support for personalised study paths;
- 20° identify the most effective measures and good practices in terms of helping students succeed, provide educational support to teachers, and promote their implementation within the academic clusters and institutions;
- 21° serve as a source of information for the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the Higher Council for Mobility, the Academic Hubs and the institutions of higher education, as well as for the Government Commissioners and Delegates to said institutions;
- 22° implement the provisions contained in the Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council concerning the production and development of statistics on education and lifelong learning for higher education in the French-speaking Community in cooperation with its administration,
- 23° carry out or commission scientific studies and research relating to higher education and particularly to student populations, study paths, conditions of success and diplomas awarded, on the initiative or at the request of the Minister responsible for higher education;
- 24° more generally, contribute to the development of tools for analysis and evaluation of higher education, keep an inventory of studies and scientific research carried out in this field and ensure a monitoring function for such instruments developed in the French-speaking Community as well as at the European or international level;
- 25° provide administrative and logistical support for any mission of the higher education institutions or the Academic Hubs, at their request and with the agreement of their Board of Trustees, or entrusted thereto by the relevant legislation.

(...)

Annex 2: Extract relating to the missions of AEQES

Decree on various measures relating to the organisation and functioning of the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education organised or subsidised by the French-speaking Community (D. 22-02-2008 – *Moniteur Belge* [Belgian Official Gazette], 23-04-2008, amended by D. 20-12-2017 – *Moniteur Belge* [Belgian Official Gazette], 25-01-2018)

(...)

Article 3. – The Agency’s mission shall be to:

- 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 described in Chapter 4;
- 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.

(...)

Annex 3: Actions relating to the general objectives

i) Make public up-to-date information on the range, coherence, and quality of the higher education provision as well as the quality assurance developed in the FWB higher education institutions:

Each organisation is required to provide information to all Belgian and international stakeholders, including the general public (presentation of the FWB higher education, its provision and quality, etc.). AEQES and ARES are determined to work together in this process for the sake of coherence. They will pay particular attention to coordinating communication with all higher education stakeholder - a dimension they consider to be of the utmost importance.

Thus, ARES undertakes to:

- provide objective information on higher education provision, the nature of the providers (e.g. public or private), the qualifications awarded and the professions to which they lead;
- constitute a consultation platform (to share objectives and projects, implement the Landscape Decree, develop solutions);
- serve as a source of updated information for the Agency (updated register of HE provision, including changes in programmes and new authorisations, statistical data, opinions on specific issues, contribution to updating of the AEQES higher education syllabus for experts, etc.);

For its part, AEQES undertakes to:

- communicate and disseminate the results of the evaluations (publication on its website of the reports and system-wide analyses, presentation and dissemination)
- invite representatives of ARES to the presentations of the system-wide analyses;
- disseminate studies (carried out by AEQES or in partnership with other stakeholders) related to quality assurance activities;
- respond to invitations from ARES to present any issues relating to its activities or methodological developments.

The two organisations aim to use information produced by each of them and made accessible or disseminated by them and to harmonise reporting data so as to reduce the burden on institutions, particularly in terms of statistical collection. For the rest, E-Paysage constitutes the reference tool for data collection and access.

ii) Support institutions in developing a sustainable quality culture for their missions:

ARES undertakes to:

- analyse, in particular with the authorities and management of the institutions, the reports, studies, analyses and surveys drawn up by AEQES or other bodies which are of interest for the promotion of quality in FWB;
- support the development and strengthening of quality assurance capacity in institutions;
- organise regular training and reflective activities on topics of common interest to quality officers and managers.

AEQES undertakes to:

- advise and guide the institutions participating in the pilot institutional review phase;
- develop the continuous evaluation procedure (with its specific reference framework), as well as the procedure for mid-term progress record;
- organise a regular study day for quality managers and authorities in the institutions.

The two organisations can support each other in carrying out their respective activities. They may also carry out joint activities in the field of quality.

iii) Define, maintain and improve the link between internal and external quality assurance:

ARES undertakes to:

- inform the AEQES of the follow-up actions carried out or envisaged following the external evaluations;
- invite members of the Executive Unit to the activities it organises in relation to quality.

AEQES undertakes to:

- keep ARES informed of methodological developments (participation of an ARES member in the Steering Committee of the pilot phase; response to invitations from CoQER, etc.);
- collect and analyse with the institutions the feedback on the pilot institutional review and the programmatic evaluation methods;
- use this information to feed the assessment report to be drawn up at the end of the pilot phase and to contribute to this objective iii.

Finally, with a view to continuous training and for a better understanding of the issues relating to quality and quality assurance and the context of FWB, the two organisations implement training courses for the ARES teams (quality assurance for HE, issues and prospects, etc.) and for AEQES (evolution of the regulatory framework for HE, etc.) on a regular basis.

iv) Define and implement certain operational procedures for the conduct of external evaluations:

ARES undertakes to:

- provide AEQES with proposals for the development of the six-year plan of programmatic evaluations according to the development of the provision and to their strategic analysis for clustering programmes (impact on the system-wide analyses);⁵
- provide AEQES with one or more lists of potential experts in addition to those available to the Agency from other sources (unsolicited applications, pool of

⁵ The choice of programme groupings has an impact on the content of the system-wide analyses drawn up by the expert panels at the end of the evaluation process.

experts from the Agency or partner agencies, etc.) for analysis, selection and validation by AEQES;

- participate in training seminars for AEQES experts (by invitation and in accordance with the terms of reference defined by AEQES);
- provide AEQES with statistical data.

AEQES undertakes to:

- provide the "HOPS" database with evaluation reports;
- indicate to ARES its needs in terms of experts and the desired skills for the planned evaluations;
- provide ARES with an annual report on the recruitment of experts.

v) Inform, document and prepare studies and analyses on all matters relating to the quality of higher education for decision-makers and stakeholders;

ARES undertakes to:

- Share the results of studies, projects and work related to quality.

AEQES undertakes to:

- collect and analyse feedback on the pilot phase in order to prepare and produce a report for the Government [Article 9bis, AEQES decree];
- share the lessons learned from the pilot phase with ARES.

In general, the two bodies undertake to share information relating to this type of issues. With a view to the needed changes of the legal framework concerning quality, they are to inform each other of the reflections carried out in their own organisation and envisage joint work as and when necessary.

In addition, they cooperate when hosting international delegations interested in the FWB higher education and its quality assurance.

Finally, they work together in the Quality working group set up by the body responsible for the French-speaking Qualifications Framework.

vi) To avoid any conflict of interest:

Both organisations undertake to choose the persons to be appointed in the various working structures with care. Thus, pursuant to Article 5 of the AEQES decree, the members of the Steering Committee are appointed by the Government on the basis of double lists submitted by the ARES and various bodies.