

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW

AGENCY FOR ASSESSMENT AND ACCREDITATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION (A3ES)

MELITA KOVACEVIC, MARIE GOULD,
LUIS VELON, TOPIAS TOLONEN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This targeted review analyses the compliance of the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education, (A3ES) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) following the methodology described in the Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews.

The purpose of the review is to confirm A3ES compliance with the ESG in order to renew the agency's membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and its registration in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The review was conducted in the period August 2023 and April 2024, with the site visit by the panel during 24 to 26 January 2024.

A3ES was established in 2009 and is the single national agency for external quality assurance of higher education in Portugal. The agency operates as a private foundation independently from the government. Institutional accreditation is mandatory in Portugal for public and private institutions, accreditation of study programmes is also mandatory, both within a six-year cycle. A3ES must adhere to the legal framework in the development of its guidelines and regulations for its external QA activities.

The first cycle of institutional assessment which A3ES undertook in 2016 was concerned with the compliance of institutions with Portuguese legal requirements for higher education and establishing a benchmark. Since then, the agency has been working towards fostering institutional responsibility and trust and transparency in IQA systems, this is an iterative process. The targeted review was conducted at a time when the agency had recently completed the second cycle of institutional assessment for 97 institutions and was in the process of finalising the reports.

This targeted review evaluates those standards for which A3ES was found partially compliant by the EQAR Register Committee following its last full review (2019), namely ESG 2.4 Peer Review Experts. Since that review, A3ES has reported to EQAR on substantial changes relating to changes in procedures and on the implementation of new procedures. This review evaluates those standards affected by these changes, namely ESG 2.2 Designing Methodologies Fit for Purpose, and ESG 2.3 Implementing Processes for both the simplification of the assessment procedures of study programmes in operation and of non-aligned study programmes; and all ESG Part 2 for the implementation of procedures for distance learning programmes. ESG 2.1 is evaluated across all A3ES EQA activities. In addition to the standards as outlined in the terms of reference, the panel also evaluated ESG 2.6 Reporting and 3.4 Thematic Analysis as additional questions regarding these standards arose from the panel's consideration of the SAR and its preliminary meeting with the agency, and clarification was sought during the review visit.

Finally, this report addresses A3ES selected enhancement area ESG 2.2 Designing Methodologies Fit for Purpose. A3ES compliance with the ESG Part 2 and Part 3, based on this review is summarised in the table below.

Summary of agency's compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3)

ESG	Compliance according to the targeted review ¹	Compliance transferred from the last full review ²
2.1	Compliant	N/A
2.2	Compliant	N/A
2.3	Compliant	N/A
2.4	Partially compliant	N/A
2.5	Compliant (for new or changed activities only)	N/A
2.6	Partially compliant	N/A
2.7	Compliant (for new or changed activities only)	N/A
3.1	N/A	Compliant →compliant
3.2	N/A	Compliant →compliant
3.3	N/A	Compliant →compliant
3.4	Partially compliant	N/A
3.5	N/A	Compliant →compliant
3.6	N/A	Compliant →compliant
3.7	N/A	Compliant →compliant

¹ Compliance refers to the focus areas that were evaluated in depth and are part of the Terms of Reference, i.e., standards that were only partially compliant with the ESG during the last full review, ESG Part 2 for newly introduced or changed QA activities of the agency, ESG 2.1 for all QA activities and any standard affected by substantive changes since the last full review. If any of the standards of Part 2 of the ESG are covered due to the newly introduced or changed QA activities, a remark "for new or changed QA activities only" is added in brackets to the compliance assessment.

² Compliance refers to the last EQAR Register Committee decision for renewal of inclusion on the Register, or in case when an agency is not renewing its registration in EQAR, compliance refers to the last ENQA Agency Review report and should its judgement differ from that of the panel, the judgement of the ENQA Board, as stipulated in the membership decision letter by the ENQA Board. Compliance refers to the QA activities of the agency that were reviewed during the previous full review.

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education in Portugal (Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior, A3ES) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. It is based on an external targeted review conducted between August 2023 and April 2024 and should be read together with the external review report of the agency's last full review against the ESG in 2019.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they act in compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

Registration on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) is the official instrument established by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for demonstrating an agency's compliance with the ESG. An external review is a prerequisite for registration.

As A3ES has undergone two successful reviews (in 2014 and 2019) against the ESG Parts 2 and 3, it is eligible and has opted for a targeted review. The purpose of a targeted review is to ensure the agency's compliance with the ESG by covering standards that were found partially compliant during the agency's last renewal of registration in EQAR and on standards that could have been affected by substantive changes³ during the past five years while at the same time further strengthening the enhancement part of the review.

During the period 2019 to 2023 A3ES submitted two substantive change reports to EQAR, both in 2023 (June and July). This review evaluates those standards where the agency was found to be partially compliant in the last review, those impacted by changes in the agency's current EQA activities and by the introduction of new EQA activities, and the standard for enhancement as selected by A3ES.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

A3ES external quality assurance (EQA) activities entail the accreditation/re-accreditation of public and private higher education institutions, and the accreditation/re-accreditation of study programmes.

According to the terms of reference, A3ES is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- Programme assessment.
- Programme accreditation renewal of non-aligned study programmes.
- Prior accreditation of new study programmes.
- Programme assessment for online study programmes.⁴
- Institutional assessment.
- Audit of internal quality assurance systems.
- Programme assessment in Macau.
- Joint programme accreditation.
- Joint programme accreditation (following the European Approach).

³ E.g. organisational changes, the launch of new external QA activities.

⁴ The review panel are using the term 'distance learning' throughout this report, as this is consistent with the terminology used by the agency in the SAR and during the site visit.

Also as outlined in the terms of reference, the following are within the scope of this targeted review:

In respect of standards arising from the last review, A3ES was found to be partially compliant with ESG 2.4, this targeted review addresses this standard, specifically, the involvement of students in panels for prior accreditation of study programmes and overseas activities.

The substantive changes, (i) simplification of the assessment procedures of study programmes in operation and (ii) simplification of the assessment procedures of non-aligned study programmes affecting ESG 2.2 and ESG 2.3 are addressed.

In respect of new quality assurance activities, the review addresses standards ESG 2.1 to ESG 2.7 for

- 1) Implementation of the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes by A3ES (where applicable) and
- 2) Implementation of assessment procedures for distance learning (online) study programmes

Note: the review panel is using the term *distance learning* throughout its report, this is the terminology used with the SAR and by the agency during the review.

As is required in ENQA guidelines for targeted reviews, ESG 2.1 is evaluated for all EQA activities.

Finally, the agency's self-selected standard for enhancement, ESG 2.2, is considered within this targeted review.

In addition, two standards which were not within the terms of reference for the review, but which arose during the panel's preparations for the review visit, ESG 2.6 and ESG 3.4 are also considered.

During its reading of the self-assessment report, the panel noted that A3ES does not publish documentation and reports on new study programmes that have had a negative accreditation decision, though other assessment processes with a negative accreditation decision are published, the panel decided to seek further clarification on ESG 2.6 during the site visit.

Within the self-assessment report and during its preliminary meeting with the agency the panel were made aware of significant changes within the agency's structure since the last review. In considering the self-selected standard for enhancement, ESG 2.2, analysis of the outcomes of the agency's external QA processes, namely the review/evaluation reports, is an important source of information for analysis of the design and implementation of the agency's EQA procedures. This led to questions arising for the panel with regards to responsibility within the agency and the agency's activities relating to ESG 3.4 Thematic Analysis. The panel decided to consider this standard further in the review.

Finally, in respect of the European Approach, at the time of this review, as A3ES had not conducted an evaluation of a joint programme using the European Approach, no evidence was therefore available to the panel. This is further elaborated on below in noting the changes to the agency's EQA activities since the last review.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2019 REVIEW

A3ES went through a full review in 2019, according to the decision of the EQAR Register Committee, the following was the status of compliance:

ESG Part 2

ESG 2.1 – Fully compliant

ESG 2.2 – Fully compliant

ESG 2.3 - Fully compliant

ESG 2.4 – Substantially compliant

ESG 2.5 – Substantially compliant

ESG 2.6 - Fully compliant

ESG 2.7 – Fully compliant

Regarding ESG 2.4, the Register Committee did not concur with the panel ‘given the absence of student reviewers in panels for NCE procedures and overseas accreditations’, the Committee concluded that A3ES only partially complies with the standard’.

ESG Part 3

ESG 3.1 - Fully compliant

ESG 3.2 - Fully compliant

ESG 3.3 - Fully compliant

ESG 3.4 - Fully compliant

ESG 3.5 - Fully compliant

ESG 3.6 - Fully compliant

ESG 3.7 - Fully compliant

A3ES is in substantial compliance with the ESG.

The 2019 review panel concluded that A3ES was substantially compliant with the ESG, and the conclusion of the Register Committee was, ‘that as A3ES only achieved partial compliance with one standard... A3ES continues to comply substantially with the ESG as a whole.’

The review panel notes the transfer of compliance with the ESG standards from the 2019 review applies to all activities that have been covered in the earlier review. Also noted, is that matters affecting ESG compliance may come up during the targeted review, and should be investigated by the panel, in this regard the panel investigated ESG 2.6 and ESG 3.4. The panel’s judgement on compliance with these standards, considering new and revised activities and/or changes within the agency, has been made based on the evidence presented and triangulated during this review.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2024 external targeted review of A3ES was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*, the EQAR Procedures for Applications, and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the targeted review of A3ES was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Melita Kovacevic, Full Professor, University of Zagreb, Croatia – Chair, academic (EUA nominee)
- Marie Gould, Head of Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review, QQI, Ireland – Secretary, QA professional (ENQA nominee)
- Luis Velón, Internal and External Quality Manager, ACSUG, Spain – Panel member, QA

- professional (ENQA nominee)
- Topias Tolonen, PhD Student, Uppsala University, Sweden – Panel member, student (ESU nominee, member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool).

Goran Dakovic, Head of Agency Reviews of ENQA acted as the review coordinator. The panel wishes to express their gratitude for his expertise and valuable support throughout the targeted review process, and in particular for his valuable advice and guidance to the panel in planning for the workshop session during the visit, on the standard for enhancement.

Self-assessment report

A3ES began the process of preparing their self-assessment report (SAR) in March 2023, with the appointment of the head of the studies and analysis office as project manager, and subsequently two additional team members assigned to work on the development of the SAR. The timeline and processes for engaging internal colleagues was agreed, and the team together with the management board prepared the initial report. Throughout the process, A3ES staff supported the SAR team by providing information and feedback on drafts. The SWOT analysis included within the SAR was developed initially by the SAR team in collaboration with the management board, and then circulated to A3ES staff for feedback. External stakeholders, including higher education institution representatives and students' unions were offered the opportunity to comment on the draft SAR. Following consideration of feedback and revisions, the SAR was approved through A3ES Management Board before being submitted to ENQA.

The review panel considered the SAR to be informative in narrating the changes within the Portuguese higher education landscape and within the agency's governance and management structures since the last review. The SAR also provided a clear description of both the changes to external quality assurance activities and of the new activities introduced. However, it was necessary for the panel to seek some additional documents and clarification in advance of and during the site visit. This included clarification and documentation relating to the organisation structure and staff numbers within the agency, which was not clear from the SAR, or from the preliminary meeting with the agency. The agency was also requested to provide translation of some documents to enable the panel to triangulate the evidence. The panel acknowledges and wishes to thank the agency coordinator for the prompt response to the panel's request, all requested documents were provided in advance of the site visit.

Site visit

The site visit took place on A3ES premises from 24 - 26 January 2024, with a preparatory meeting for the panel on the 23 January. In advance of the site visit, a preparatory online meeting was held with the agency review coordinator, the president and two executive members of the management board to clarify questions and/or issues arising from the SAR and to further discuss the motivation and rationale for the agency's choice of the self-selected standard for enhancement. The panel had made additional documentation requests in advance of the site visit, these were promptly provided as requested by A3ES.

While most of the sessions during the site visit were in-person meetings, some meetings were hybrid with representatives joining online, this all worked well, and all participants were given an opportunity to speak. The meeting with representatives from Macau was a fully online meeting, there were no

problems with the technology. Translation services were needed for some meetings, and though there were initially some issues with headphone sound, this was resolved.

During the site visit the review panel conducted fifteen meetings with a diverse range of internal and external stakeholders. This included meetings with representatives from the agency’s board of trustees, advisory and scientific councils, including student representatives, the management board and agency staff, and with a range of external stakeholder groups including, a representative from the ministry, representatives from public and private HEIs and with student representative bodies, and with representatives from Macau. In addition, a workshop session, with representatives from the agency staff, the HEIs and the ministry, facilitated by the review panel chair, was conducted to explore the selected enhancement area, ESG 2.2.

The site visit took place in a welcoming and open environment. The panel wishes to thank the management board of A3ES, the agency staff, the committee representatives and all stakeholders with whom the panel met during the visit for their openness and positive engagement in the process. In particular, the panel wishes to note the high quality of exchanges and discussion during the workshop session, and thanks all participants for giving so generously of their time and expertise and for such positive engagement.

All information related to the schedule of the visit including the roles and titles of the interviewed participants can be found in annex 1. Additional documentation and evidence were sought by the panel during the site visit. Arising from the discussions on the structure, and the functions and roles of staff, the panel sought evidence of the agency’s approach to and examples of thematic analysis. Additional information was also requested and provided during the site visit on the agency’s funding. The full list of additional documents is provided in annex 2.

CHANGES WITHIN THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

There have been several changes to the higher education landscape since the last full review of A3ES in 2019. Since the first institutional assessment cycle conducted by A3ES in 2017, the number of HEIs has reduced from 111 to 97, due to some mergers and 9 institutions that were *non-accredited* in this first cycle. The second cycle of institutional assessments which the agency conducted between September and December 2023 comprised 97 HEIs, both public and private, a reduction in the number of institutions since the last review, as illustrated below.

Portuguese Higher Education Institutions

Higher Education Institutions	Public	Private
Universities	16	20
Polytechnic	20	41
Total	36	61

Table 1: Portuguese Higher Education Institutions

Though there is broad regional coverage across the country of institutions, there is a high concentration within the two main cities of Lisbon and Porto. These 97 institutions offer circa 4000 programmes, of which, 38% are bachelor's degrees, 48% are master's degrees and 14% are PhD. Student registration numbers have grown over the past five years, going from 372,753 registrations in 2018 to 446,028 in 2023.

There have also been some changes within the legal framework for higher education which impact on A3ES activity. A Decree-Law published in 2018, created new requirements for qualifications of academic staff of higher education institutions, and for HEIs offering doctoral programmes, and a new professional masters was established. New legislation was introduced in 2019 for distance learning programmes, which defines in law the quality assessment criteria for these programmes.

To comply with the legislation, A3ES adapted its procedures and implemented a specific guide for the assessment of distance learning programmes in 2020/21 and in 2022/2023 this was merged with non-distance programmes, creating one single assessment guideline document for both face-to-face and distance learning study programmes, which incorporates the specific/additional parameters related to distance learning.

Further, since the last review, A3ES is now obliged to submit an annual report on quality assurance in Portugal to the Portuguese Parliament and to the National Council for Education. The agency has to date submitted four annual reports, for 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023.

CHANGES IN EQA ACTIVITIES

Recognising the evolving and maturing relationship between the agency and the HEIs, and the increasing development of a culture of quality in the institutions, A3ES undertook to improve the agency's assessment/evaluation procedures. A key amendment was to change the outcome of the assessment process from 'conditions' to 'recommendations'. Revisions to the assessment procedures were undertaken following dialogue with and feedback from the institutions and other key external stakeholders. The revised procedures were also open for public consultation. These changes are summarised below and further explored by the panel later in this report:

(i) Simplification of the assessment procedures of study programmes in operation (ACEF)

In the academic year 2017/2018 A3ES implemented revised procedures, the *Via Verde* (fast track) for the assessment of ACEF programmes. This allowed for a desk-based analysis and accreditation of these programmes without establishing an external assessment team (EAT). In the academic year 22/23, A3ES introduced new simplification procedures (with the publication of Order 15/22), which can involve the establishment of an EAT, who can decide whether it has sufficient information or can ask for additional information and/or additional meetings instead of the full site-visit.

(ii) Simplification of assessment procedures for non-aligned study programmes (PERA)

Revised guidelines were introduced in August 2023 for PERA programmes, allowing these programmes also to be accredited according to *Via Verde* procedures (if the criteria is met).

(iii) Adjustments in the assessment of new study programmes (NCE)

Revisions were undertaken to enhance the assessment process for new study programmes, this included for example the inclusion of an international expert on the EAT, and the enhancement of the guidelines relating to teaching, pedagogy, and student mobility.

(iv) Assessment procedures for distance learning – new study programmes (NCE EaD)

The first guidelines for the assessment of distance learning programmes were produced by A3ES in 2020/2021. These guidelines have since been merged into one single set of guidelines for the assessment of both face-to-face and distance learning programmes.

The European Approach

A3ES has published a 'Procedure for the accreditation of academic degrees in association promoted by European higher education institutions' with amendments to the conditions for accreditation of new study programmes and a determination that the European Approach to quality assurance is adopted whenever possible. Portuguese higher education institutions must request prior accreditation of the new study programmes (NCE) to A3ES, and in the event of the evaluation of the study programme being conducted by another Agency, A3ES will monitor the procedure through a collaboration protocol and verify the compliance of the documentation submitted on A3ES platform with the Portuguese legal provisions. Portuguese legislation, Article 41 from the Decree-Law 27/2021 states that A3ES can integrate the results of assessment and accreditation processes developed by foreign or international agencies when their assessment and accreditation processes follow the principles of the European quality assurance system.

The agency has been engaged with and cooperated with other agencies on the European Approach. In the submission of a new study programme, A3ES management board will, where possible, recognise the evaluation conducted by another European agency in considering the accreditation of the programme. The criteria used by the agency for the assessment of joint programmes are aligned to and consistent with the European approach. Seven joint degree programmes, for which the evaluation was conducted by another QA agency, have been accredited by A3ES through this process.

At the time of this review, A3ES had not conducted or coordinated the evaluation of a joint programme using the European Approach, the panel heard the main reason being the incompatibility of the A3ES IT system. The agency has been a collaborating partner with other agencies in European Approach evaluations. The collaboration and partnership on the European Approach provides a good platform for A3ES on which to progress should the agency plan to implement the process at a future date.

A3ES' ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

Changes in the agency's governance and organisational structure have also taken place since the 2019 review. The agency's management board consists of three executive members, including the president, and three non-executive members. The previous management board ended three mandates of four years each and a new management board was appointed by the board of trustees in December 2020. In addition, a new board of trustees appointed by the Council of Ministers took office in 2021, its tenure is for five years, and it has responsibility for appointing members of the management board and the appeals council of A3ES. The work of the agency is supported by an advisory council and a scientific council, the composition of the latter has been redesigned, and now includes three national and three international members. See figure 2 below.

The agency has established a number of thematic assessment committees, these committees which comprise of experts, advise the agency in specific topical areas of development. One such thematic assessment committee is the committee for distance learning study programmes that was set up in 2020 to support and advise the management board in respect of the assessment of distance learning programmes.

The internal organisation structure has also undergone some changes and is now divided into two key functional units, an assessment function, and a support function. A3ES has 24.5 (full time equivalent) staff divided across both these functions. The agency also has a contract with two external legal consultants. See figure 3 below.

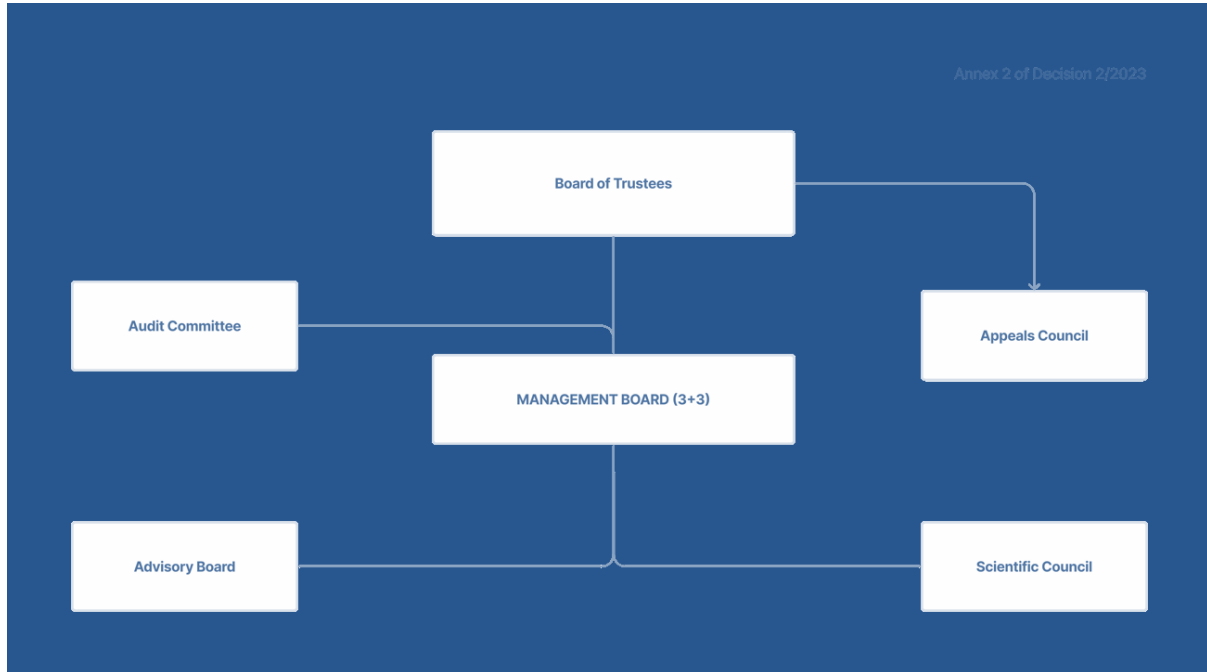


Table 2: A3ES Governance Structure

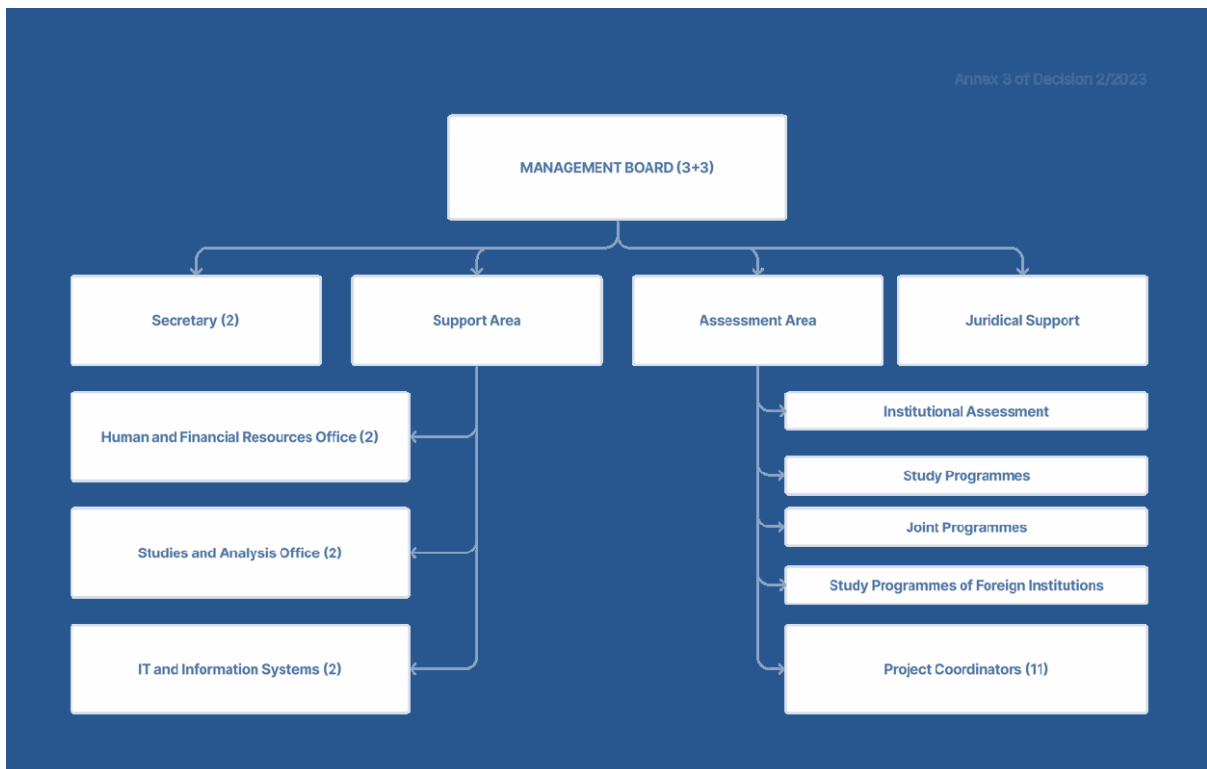


Table 3 A3ES Organisation Structure

A3ES' FUNDING

There have been no changes to the agency's funding structure since the last review. Following the initial set-up funding from the state in 2009, A3ES continues to be funded through income arising from the external quality assurance services it provides, and it remains financially independent from the public funds.

The panel requested and received additional financial information from the agency, this included extracts from the audited Income Statements and Balance Sheets from 2018-2022, and preliminary figures for 2023 which are subject to final audit. Based on the interview with the financial manager and a review of the financial statements provided, the review panel is satisfied with the liquidity of the A3ES at the time of this review.

FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF A3ES WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG) WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

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

2019 Review: fully compliant

In its 2019 review report the review panel noted the work of what was then the office of research and analysis within the agency. The panel were impressed by the activities of this office, and other areas of work of the agency which demonstrated at the time how A3ES was conducting and publishing systems level research and analysis, as well as research and analysis of its audit and assessment processes for the continued development and improvement of quality assurance.

The 2019 review panel found that 'A3ES makes good use of the findings of its research and analysis to inform and improve its own practice'. It commended the agency for 'the analysis of quality assurance work conducted by A3ES through its summary thematic studies, activity reports and other occasional studies and reports ... (and) the high value placed on research by A3ES and the ways in which the Agency uses its own and others' research to inform and improve practice.'

As the office of research and analysis is no longer in existence following the agency restructuring, during the targeted review process the panel sought clarification from the agency on where this responsibility now lies, and on current or planned thematic analysis activities.

Evidence

Significant organisational changes have taken place within A3ES since the 2019 review, with a new management board taking office in 2020 and a revised organisation structure established in 2021. Four staff left the research and analysis office, this is now the studies and analysis office and is staffed by two new members who since joined. Significant change has also been undertaken in the agency's governance and advisory structures. The work of the new management board, new process of governance and organisational restructuring was implemented during the challenging time of adjustments in the agency's working arrangements and EQA processes in response to the public health restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the site visit the agency confirmed it contracts out research to and works in collaboration with research units of the higher education institutions, the agency does not have in-house capacity for research activity. One such example is a study which was undertaken on pedagogic innovation in Higher Education carried out in 2022 by a working group supported by A3ES. The panel notes this is an interesting study with some general recommendations and good practices for higher education institutions.

The agency confirmed its intent to further explore the role and contribution of thematic assessment committees to assist both in defining lines of enquiry for and contributing to reflections on thematic analysis; they have not to date undertaken this activity. The agency's thematic assessment committees are convened from experts and researchers from higher education who provide the agency with the current research and thinking in specific thematic fields, one such example is the thematic committee on distance learning. Despite their name, these thematic committees do not currently have a role in producing or conducting thematic analysis of EQA activities.

The most recent thematic analysis that the panel could locate published on the agency website was for 2017. During the site visit a report on 'Reflections about the institutional evaluation (2021)' was made available to the panel. This report includes an analysis of the first round of institutional evaluation process carried out by A3ES in 2017. The general findings of the process are included in the report and also an internal reflection is made, identifying good practices and recommendations for the future.

The panel was also provided with study on PhD studies in Portugal, which was conducted in 2023 in collaboration with CIES (A Sociology Research Centre in Portugal), which analyses different characteristics of doctoral education in Portugal. The review panel notes, the references within this report to A3ES activities are limited and the recommendations provided are mainly oriented to improve the PhD study programmes in Portugal.

Analysis

A3ES has undergone significant organisational structural changes and reforms since the last review, and during this time the agency has also had to adapt processes and respond to the significant challenges presented by COVID-19. The agency embarked on and has completed a review and updating of its assessment procedures, including the process of consultation and development of assessment procedures for distance learning programmes. As outlined in the SAR, and in discussions with the panel during the site visit, strategically A3ES has been working on evolving and improving its external quality assurance relationship with the higher education institutions, moving towards enhanced trust and institutional responsibility for quality assurance. Review and adaptations to the agency's assessment procedures have been undertaken following analysis of feedback and surveys from the agency's key stakeholders, including members of its external assessment committees and institutions' senior leaders and representatives. Research undertaken has also informed the assessment practices of the agency, the study undertaken on pedagogical innovations for example informed the section on pedagogical methodologies in the assessment guidelines for study programmes.

Along with the programme evaluation cycle, A3ES has recently completed a challenging institutional evaluation process, with the evaluation of 97 institutions from the period September to November 2023. The planning and preparation for this process commenced in early 2023. During the site visit the agency confirmed to the panel that it does not currently have a systematic approach to conducting thematic analysis but confirmed its commitment to developing this. The panel notes the different research projects and assessments presented during the site visit, for example the CIES-collaborated study regarding doctoral-level education in Portugal illustrates trends and developments and has informed the agency's guidelines and procedures in accreditation of doctoral programmes. While this presents evidence in part for ESG 3.4, at the time of the review, there was limited evidence available to the panel of analysis of the findings arising from the agency's external quality assurance activities, though the panel notes the agency's commitment in this regard.

Analysis of the outcomes of the agency's external QA processes, of the 97 institutional assessment reports for example once these are completed, identifying common themes, good practice across the

institutions, system and sectoral wide areas for quality enhancement, would be a hugely valuable source of information to inform not only the analysis of the design and implementation of the A3ES' EQA procedures, but also to contribute to change and enhancement across the higher education system. As the single national EQA agency, A3ES is in a unique position to engage with stakeholders across the system, to extract, present and analyse system level findings arising from evaluation reports, to inform and lead the strategic change, which is so evidently aspired to, as outlined in the self-selected area for enhancement, ESG 2.2 and which was clear in the discussions with stakeholders during the workshop session.

Panel commendations

- I. The review panel commends the agency's cooperation and collaboration with the specialist higher education research units of the higher education institutions in undertaking specific research projects, for example the research publications on doctoral education and on pedagogical innovation.

Panel recommendations

- I. The review panel recommends that the agency conduct and publish thematic analysis of the outcomes and findings of its external quality assurance activities.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

- I. The review panel suggests that the agency consider how to develop its capacity and further explore current relationships with HEI research centres, not only for thematic analysis of its EQA activities and but for the development of thematic reports that would increase public awareness and enhance the quality of higher education in Portugal.
- II. The review panel suggests that the agency take the opportunity of the recently completed institutional assessment cycle to conduct a meaningful thematic analysis of the institutional assessment reports, which could inform the agency's strategic development and future EQA methodologies.
- III. The review panel suggests that the agency develop and publish a strategy on conducting and publishing thematic analyses of the outcomes of its EQA activities on a periodic and systematic basis.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part I of the ESG.

2019 Review: fully compliant

During the 2019 review, the review panel found A3ES to be fully compliant with this standard while making the following suggestions for improvement.

The Agency should consider ways in which it can provide higher education institutions and teams with a complete set of references to consider in the quality assurance process by including, and where necessary, repeating standards and criteria that are also provided for in legislation thereby allowing for their development and interpretation over time.

The Agency should consider making more explicit in its documents the four overarching educational objectives formulated by the Council of Europe, endorsed in the Bologna Process and included in the ESG Guidelines under ESG 2.1., in order to draw attention of higher education institutions and Teams to the full breadth of the remit of higher education.

Evidence

A3ES conducts different types of external quality assurance activities, including institutional accreditation of higher education institutions which is a mandatory process for public and private HEIs, every six years, and the accreditation of study programmes also on a six-year periodic cycle, and any new study programme must undergo accreditation. Since the last review A3ES has undertaken some review and development of its EQA procedures. New procedures were developed for the assessment of distance learning study programmes; these have subsequently been merged into a single guide on assessment procedures for New Study Programmes (NCE), inclusive of face to face and distance learning. The agency also streamlined its procedures for Study Programmes in Operation (ACEF) and non-aligned study programmes (PERA).

One of the objectives of this process of streamlining these procedures was to reduce the burden of reporting on HEIs and avoid duplication of information previously provided by the institutions. The table below, extracted from A3ES SAR (p. 30) illustrates the explicit mapping between ESG Part I, and A3ES procedures for institutional assessment, and at programme assessment level, for new study programmes, which incorporates distance learning, and for study programmes in operation and non-aligned study programmes.

As the assessment of distance learning programmes is merged into the NCE process, this is considered by the panel in the context of the single programme accreditation process. Proposals are submitted and managed through the agency's electronic platform, and assessment is carried out by an external assessment team.

The agency recently completed its second cycle of institutional accreditation for 97 institutions between September and November 2023, in advance, a review was undertaken of the guidelines for institutional assessment. A key goal in this cycle of institutional assessment was the integration of quality assurance within the guidelines, and the recognition of institutional responsibility for internal QA, reflecting the maturing and evolving nature of IQA within the higher education institutions. An extensive process of analysis and consultation was undertaken to review the institutional assessment guidelines. During the process for institutional assessment, the assessment of the IQA of institutions was strengthened by ensuring there was an expert in quality assurance in higher education on the Expert Assessment Team (EAT).

Table 9. Mapping grid: New assessment procedures and ESG Part 1

ASSESSMENT LEVEL		INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL		PROGRAMME LEVEL	
ESG PART 1	ESG Description	Institutional Assessment	New study programme and Distance Education	Study Programmes in Operation and non-aligned study programmes	
ESG 1.1	Policy for quality assurance	2.3. Quality management	3. Scope and objectives of the study programme. Coherence with the institution's educational, scientific and cultural project	4. Curricular development and teaching and learning methodologies.	
ESG 1.2	Design and Approval of programmes	3.1. Educational offer	The whole guidelines[1]	3. Summary of improvement measures and changes to the study programme since the previous assessment. 4. Curricular development and study plan	
ESG 1.3	Student centred learning, teaching and assessment	3.2. Educational methodologies	4.5. Curricular Design and Teaching and Learning Methodologies	8. Assessment standards in the study programme (*Also in the curricular units sheets, when there is a change proposal)	
ESG 1.4	Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	3.4. Students	1.10 Specific enrolment requirements, 1.13[2] Regulation for crediting academic education and professional experience	1.14 Regulation for crediting academic education and professional experience 8.3. Academic Results.	
ESG 1.5	Teaching staff	6.1. Academic and research staff	5.2 Teaching staff team details 5.3 Teaching staff performance	5.2 Teaching staff team details,	
ESG 1.6	Learning resources and student support	6.2. Technical, administrative and management staff 6.3. Facilities and equipment	6. Non-academic staff, 7. Facilities and equipment	6. Technical, administrative and management staff 7. Facilities, partnerships, and structures supporting the teaching and learning processes	
ESG 1.7	Information Management	2.3. Quality management	4.5. Curricular Design and Teaching and Learning Methodologies	8.6. Self-assessment report of the study programme prepared within the framework of the internal quality assurance system.	
ESG 1.8	Public information	2.3. Quality management [4]	[4]	[4]	
ESG 1.9	On-going Monitoring and periodic review of programmes	2.3. Quality management	4.8. Student assessment methodologies (4.5.2.1.6. Demonstration of the existence of mechanisms to monitor the academic path and success of students)	8.6. Self-assessment report of the study programme prepared within the framework of the internal quality assurance system.	
ESG 1.10	Cyclical external quality Assurance	2.3. Quality management [5]	[5]	[5]	
SUPPORTING DOCUMENT		Guidelines for the Development of the Institutional Self-Assessment Report ³⁸	Guidelines for requesting prior accreditation of a New Study Programme (PAPNCE2022 EN) ³⁹	Guidelines ACEF 2023/2024-2028/2029 ENG, Guidelines PERA 2023/2024-2028/2029 ENG ⁴⁰	

- [1] The design and approval of new study programmes is the object of whole process NCE.
- [2] Institutions are required by law to adopt and publish academic regulations (Decree-Law 74/2006, articles 14, 26 and 38). As regards certification of qualifications, institutions are required by law to issue the Diploma Supplement (Decree-Law 74/2006, article 49, §4).
- [3] 7.2.1. Mechanisms for quality assurance of the study programmes and the activities promoted by the services or structures supporting the teaching and learning processes, namely regarding the procedures for information collection (including the results of student surveys and the results of academic success monitoring), the monitoring and periodic assessment of the study programmes, the discussion and use of the results of these assessments to define improvement measures, and the monitoring of their implementation.
- [4] The legal framework for HEIs establishes a set of core information on the institution and its study programmes that must disclose on the institution's website (RJIES, article 162). This is checked by the external assessment teams.
- (5) Study programme accreditation, institutional assessment and audit/certification are cyclical processes that require renewal every six years.

Table 4 ESG Part I Mapping Grid (Table from SAR pp. 30-31)

Analysis

Following a comprehensive analysis of the evidence provided within the SAR, additional documentation provided to the panel in advance of the review, including institutional assessment reports for example for the Instituto Politécnico De Lisboa and ISPA - Instituto Universitário de Ciências Psicológicas SPA, and reports on assessment of new study programmes and programmes in operation, for example for Universidade Do Porto, and interviews conducting during the site visit, the panel is confident that A3ES EQA processes address Part I of the ESG, though the panel notes limited responses from EAT and some inconsistency across the programme accreditation reports.

The regulatory compliance of the institutions is assessed through the agency's EQA processes, during the site visit the panel heard from the agency of its strategic intent to further develop its relationship with institutions, moving from a regulatory and compliance-based relationship, to a more mature enhancement-based relationships, with the agency's EQA activities supporting the development of a quality culture and quality enhancement as integral parts of institutions' IQA systems. This is reflected within the SAR and was endorsed during the site visit in panel discussion with representatives of the institutions and during the workshop session. The reflections provided to the panel from a meeting of the agency's Thematic Assessment Committee Quality Assurance, notes 'in many higher education institutions, there is a lack of internal quality assurance systems. It is expected that the Institutional Assessment (cycle)... will identify the main deficiencies and promote the overcoming of these difficulties in the future.' The enhancement of the processes for institutional assessment, the completion of the current institutional assessment, and the work of the agency in dialogue and consultation with institutions, are all positive steps in further progressing this quality culture and institutional autonomy for its internal quality assurance.

Panel commendations

- I. The review panel commends A3ES for the continued review and improvement of its suite of assessment guidelines for institutions in support of continued IQA enhancement.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. The review panel encourages A3ES to utilise the commendations and recommendations arising from the current cycle of institutional assessment reports to identify good practice to further enhance and support the development of IQA and institutional level quality culture.
2. The review panel encourages A3ES to explore opportunities for institutional staff at different levels to network across the system and share good practice and challenges in IQA systems.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 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.

2019 Review: fully compliant

A3ES was found to be fully compliant with this standard by the panel in its 2019 review report. For this targeted review the panel considered this standard specifically with regard to the implementation of the new EQA activity, namely assessment procedures for distance learning programmes, and for other areas affected by substantive changes, namely the simplification of assessment procedures of study programmes in operation and of non-aligned study programmes.

The 2019 review panel noted and acknowledged in its report the process underway, and progress made by the agency ‘towards growing a more autonomous quality assurance system for strong institutions’.

Evidence

A3ES continues to operate within a legal framework for higher education which dates to 2007, according to the SAR, there is a process of self-reflection underway in the Portuguese higher education system and the legislation is under revision. A3ES’ institutional assessment process aims to further contribute to and clarify some of these elements at institutional level, including institutional strategy, inclusion and cooperation with students, scientific research, national and international cooperation. The recently completed cycle of institutional assessments saw a greater emphasis being put by the agency on the effectiveness of the institutions’ internal quality assurance systems. This context of enhanced trust in and responsibility for internal QA, and an improved relationship between A3ES and institutions led to the simplification of some assessment procedures with the intent of reducing the burden on institutions and assessment fatigue, and as a further step in recognition of and progress towards a mature quality system and culture.

According to SAR and noted by the review panel in its 2019 report, A3ES started the process of simplification and streamlining some assessment procedures in 2017/2018, and more flexible procedures were adopted and implemented for the assessment of study programmes in operation (ACEF), through what is called *Via Verde*. The process of simplification of assessment procedures has continued by the agency, with the adoption in 2022/2023 of more flexible procedures for non-aligned study programmes (PERA). Provided certain requirements and criteria are met, programmes for some institutions can be accredited according to the *Via Verde* procedures, without forming an EAT, and after the academic year 22/23 other procedures may involve the establishment of an EAT, who can

then decide whether it has sufficient information or ask for additional information and/or for additional meetings instead of a full site-visit. Table 7 in figure 5 below shows the increasing implementation of these procedures by A3ES since commencing in 2018.

Table 7. Evolution of assessment processes (ACEF and PERA) – simplified assessment model

YEAR-PROCESS	VIA VERDE (WITHOUT EAT)	SIMPLIFIED MODEL (WITHOUT VISIT)	SIMPLIFIED MODEL (WITH SIMPLIFIED VISIT)	REGULAR PROCESS	TOTAL
2018-ACEF	16 (9.5%)	n/a	n/a	153 (90.5%)	169
2019-ACEF	96 (23.7%)	n/a	n/a	309 (76.3%)	405
2020-ACEF	367 (51.1%)	n/a	n/a	351 (48.9%)	718
2021-ACEF	177 (35.7%)	n/a	n/a	319 (64.3%)	496
2022-ACEF	245 (30.2%)	17 (2.1%)	23 (2.8%)	527 (64.9%)	812
2023-ACEF*	21 (5.3%)	247 (62.5%)	106 (26.8%)	21 (5.3%)	395
2023-PERA*	57 (49.6%)	n/a	n/a	58 (50.4%)	115

*Until the 31st July 2023 / Source: A3ES IT System

Table 5 Evolution of simplified assessment processes (from SAR p.26)

The new electronic platform, which the agency continues to develop and fully implement, supports the implementation of the assessment procedures, including follow-up procedures which were not on the former platform.

With regard to distance learning study programmes, the guide for the assessment of distance learning study programmes was merged with those for face-to-face programmes in 2022/23, so there is a single programme assessment process. This single, merged procedure, follows the same procedures as previously. As outlined in the SAR (p.22), this involves:

- submission of a proposal by the HEI;
- preliminary analysis of legal requirements, which may lead to a preliminary decision of non-accreditation;
- EAT nomination;
- analysis of incompatibilities by A3ES and sending the composition of the EAT to the HEI to identify any other incompatibilities.
- formal appointment of the EAT;
- assessment of the SAR by the EAT;
- EAT requests for additional information, if necessary;
- preliminary assessment report, by the EAT;
- preparation of response, by the HEI;
- submission of the final report, by the EAT;
- decision of the Management Board;
- appeal to the Appeals Council (when applicable).

Currently, the procedures for new study programmes have been applied to distance learning programmes as agency does not have any distance learning study programmes in operation to assess, this will likely be in the next cycle of assessment. The implementation of site visits for the combined procedures is considered in ESG 2.3 below.

Analysis

The processes for the assessment of all study programmes, including distance learning study programmes, are described in the guides and handbooks published by A3ES, which clearly detail the procedures and criteria that are applied to each process, this facilitates and enables the institutions to interpret the guidelines and supports the EATs in their evaluation work. The development of these assessment guidelines documents was undertaken through a process of extensive consultation with key stakeholders, this included the provider representatives' bodies, APESP, CCISP and CRUP, a survey to institutional presidents and deans, and to the external expert teams, as well as a public consultation. A3ES is supported by an Advisory Council, through which changes in processes are discussed and considered, this council includes representatives of all Professional Orders and other entities representing the HEIs: APESP, CCISP, CRUP, students' unions, workers' unions, employers' associations and partnered laboratories.

During the site visit the review panel met with representatives of the Professional Orders, these are key stakeholders for the quality assurance activities of A3ES, the panel heard of the excellent relationship with the A3ES and how the Professional Orders collaborate closely with the agency in the assessment of study programmes in certain regulated and professional disciplines. The panel also met with the representatives of the institutions, their representative bodies, the students and of the Directorate General for Higher Education.

From all these stakeholders, the panel heard consistently that the agency has a strong presence in regulation of the higher education system, and of how this system and the agency is moving to a more mature phase. Stakeholders supported the process of bringing some simplification to the system, and of further developing the trust in the institutional IQA. The panel also heard of the positive impact of the new electronic systems, and how this has assisted the institutions in particular. All stakeholders noted the positive impact of this streamlining and simplification process and that 'year on year the process is improving.' It is clear to the review panel that from the perspective of the HEIs and from the staff of the agency perspectives, these methods make both study programme evaluation and institutional review more effective and less burdensome while maintaining a robust process of assessment.

As discussed by the panel in the additional observations section in this report, the review and refinement of assessment processes and implementation of new processes are all elements of the agency's evolution and development. It is clear to the panel that these developments are welcomed by the higher education institutions and as processes continue to improve and enhance quality culture and institutional IQA, this will further contribute to a positive and constructive relationship between agency and institutions.

Panel commendations

- I. The review panel commends A3ES on its proactive engagement with a wider range of stakeholders across the higher education system to ensure the ongoing enhancement or assessment processes to ensure such processes are fit for purpose.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

- I. The review panel suggests that A3ES continues to strengthen its relationship with the key stakeholders and explore the creation of structured mechanisms for open discussion on the evolution of its external quality assurance processes.

Panel conclusion: compliant

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

2019 Review: fully compliant

In its 2019 report the review panel considered the adoption by the agency of a 'lighter touch approach' to some programme accreditation processes, the panel supported 'the removal of the need for a site visit in the case of new programme accreditations as it has been carefully considered by the agency and its stakeholders, and robust procedures have been put in place to mitigate any risk that this might present.' In the context of this targeted review, the review panel has considered this standard in respect of the substantive changes since the 2019 review, namely, the simplification of the assessment procedures of study programmes in operation, and simplification of the assessment procedures of non-aligned study programmes.

Evidence

As outlined in ESG 2.2 above, the procedures and criteria for the assessment of study programmes are detailed in guidelines and handbooks of A3ES. These documents are designed following extensive dialogue and consultation with the stakeholders. The processes for which no site-visit is required are for, NCE, 'Via Verde' ACEF and PERA.

For assessment of NCE and PERA the assessment of the programme is conducted based on a document and desk analysis by the EAT. The EAT can seek additional documentation or clarification through an information request on the electronic platform.

'Via Verde' ACEF assessments are conducted internally by a project coordinator of the agency staff. The project coordinator verifies conditions of the Via Verde process:

1. The institution has an internal quality assurance system (even when not certified by A3ES).
2. The study programmes of the same scientific area have been accredited without conditions.
3. In the case of universities, have a level of research rated by FCT at least as 'Very Good' or, in polytechnic institutions, R&D activities in the scientific areas of the study programme are scientifically relevant.

In its published procedures online, the agency states that ‘the determination of which area(s) and study programmes will be assessed with a visit from the respective EAT, and those will only be the subject of documentary assessment and, therefore, exempt from the visit’.

All guidelines and steps in the process are defined and implemented through an electronic platform, the development of the new electronic platform now allows for incorporation of follow-up procedures. In respect of follow-up procedures, this is implemented by the agency if a programme is accredited with conditions. The agency normally establishes two types of conditions:

- i. Conditions relating to internal organisation and/or curriculum structure and the quality of teaching staff - normally a period of one/two years is given for the HEI to address the conditions, after which the programme is fully accredited.
- ii. Conditions relating to scientific research – may relate to deficiencies in the level of production of scientific research by staff, a follow up report is needed from the institution to address the conditions.

The follow-up reports are reviewed by the project coordinator, where conditions are straightforward and have been addressed, they propose a decision to the management board, if conditions are more complex, the EAT chair reviews and confirms conditions have been met.

In the additional evidence provided by the agency, the panel reviewed 3 follow-up reports from different institutions (CESPU, Universidade de Evora and Instituto Politécnico de Castelo Branco). The panel noted the consistency in the follow-up reports, including relevant information with respect to the accreditation conditions and the improvements by the institutions to address these conditions.

Analysis

During the site visit the review panel heard consistently from stakeholders of the progress made by the agency in the review and simplification of programme assessment procedures, and of the benefit and impact of this work, not just in reducing the burden on institutions but in moving the axis from an external control model of QA to a focus on institutional level QA and responsibility. It is clear to the panel that the agency has transparent, well respected, and reliable procedures in place, which it continues to improve and enhance. The agency requires the HEIs to publish all documentation produced within the scope of the self-evaluation on their website. Programme accreditation documentation must be submitted through the electronic platform, in proposals for a new study programme for example, this requires the institutions to submit detailed information on objectives and expected learning outcomes, curricular development, teaching and learning methodologies, human and material resources available, and the research environment. The outcome of the accreditation process leads to published reports and any conditions arising from the process are managed through consistent follow-up procedures. During the site-visit the review panel heard of the importance of the development of the new electronic platform which was welcomed by the institutions, and other stakeholders, though the panel also heard of teething problems and some ongoing challenges in the implementation of the new platform from the agency staff.

There is a transparent and consistent approach to implementing site-visits, as set out in table 6 below, which was provided as additional information on request to the review panel. Regarding distance learning programmes, as noted in ESG 2.2 above, Distance learning new study programmes follow the same procedures as the other programmes, currently the agency does not have any distance learning study programmes in operation to assess, this will likely be in the next cycle of assessment.

	Procedures	Site-visit
NCE and NCE EaD	Submission of a proposal by the HEI, Preliminary analysis of legal requirements (may lead to a preliminary refusal, i.e. if certain legal requirements are not met, the proposal is not evaluated), EAT nomination ^{*1} , Formal appointment of EAT (after analysis and approval of the HEI), Submission of SAR, Additional information asked by the EAT to the HEI if needed, Preliminary report by the EAT, Response by HEI (not mandatory), Final report by the EAT, Final decision by A3ES' Management Board	No, except for Medicine study programmes, which always have site-visits.
ACEF	Submission of SAR by HEI, if fast track requirements are not met, EAT nomination ^{*1} , Formal appointment of EAT (after analysis and approval of the HEI), Additional information asked by the EAT to the HEI if needed, Virtual visit to the HEI if deemed necessary by EAT, Preliminary report by the EAT, Response by HEI (not mandatory), Final report by the EAT, Final decision by A3ES' Management Board Fast track: Submission of SAR by the HEI, Assessment of SAR by A3ES' project coordinator without forming EAT when fast track requirements are met (with or without an opinion by a member of the former EAT), Final decision by A3ES' Management Board	No, if fast track <i>Via Verde</i> requirements are met (see SAR page 24), except for Medicine study programmes, which always have site-visits. YES, if fast track <i>Via Verde</i> requirements are not met. Before the pandemic, there were site-visits, and since the pandemic all visits became virtual. However, site-visits return in the 3 rd cycle of assessment (which have begun in 2023 with the submission of the SARs by the HEIs).
PERA	Submission of SAR by HEI, if fast track requirements are not met, EAT nomination ^{*1} (reduced EAT), Formal appointment of EAT (after analysis and approval of the HEI), Additional information asked by the EAT to the HEI if needed, Preliminary report by the EAT, Response by HEI (not mandatory), Final report by the EAT, Final decision by A3ES' Management Board Fast track: Submission of SAR by the HEI, Assessment of SAR by A3ES' project coordinator without forming EAT when fast track requirements are met, Final decision by A3ES' Management Board	No.
AINST	Submission of SAR by the HEI, EAT nomination ^{*1} , Formal appointment of EAT (after analysis and approval of the HEI), Additional information asked by the EAT to the HEI if needed, Site-Visit, Preliminary report by the EAT, Response by HEI (not mandatory), Final report by the EAT, Final decision by A3ES' Management Board.	Yes.
ASIG	Submission of SAR by the HEI, EAT nomination ^{*1} , formal appointment of EAT (after analysis and approval of the HEI), Additional information asked by the EAT to the HEI if needed, Site-Visit, Preliminary report by the EAT, Response by HEI	Yes.

	(not mandatory), Final report by the EAT, Final decision by A3ES' Management Board.	
Macao	<p>Invitation to A3ES by the Higher Education Institution (HEI) to be the External Quality Assurance Agency responsible for the programme review. Acceptance by A3ES and by the Directorate for Education and Youth Development Services (DSES).</p> <p>Accreditation of new study programmes: Submission of a proposal by the HEI, EAT nomination^{*2}, Verification of conflict of interest of the panel members, Formal appointment of EAT (after analysis and approval by the HEI), Additional information requested by the EAT to the HEI if needed, Site visit, Draft report by the EAT, Factual accuracy check by HEI, Final report by the EAT, Final decision by A3ES' Management Board, in case of accreditation with conditions HEI submits a follow-up report.</p> <p>Review of study programmes in operation: Submission of a self-evaluation document (SED) by the HEI, EAT nomination proposal^{*2}, Verification of conflict of interest of the panel members, Formal appointment of EAT (after analysis and approval by the HEI), Pannel meeting to analyse the SED and to decide whether it is necessary to request additional information, and/or to hold (online) meetings with programme leaders or relevant stakeholders, and/or to have a site visit, Draft report by the EAT, Factual accuracy check by HEI, Final report by the EAT, Final decision by A3ES' Management Board, in case of accreditation with conditions HEI submits a follow-up report.</p>	<p>Yes.</p> <p>Yes or No (It depends on the EAT decision).</p>
Joint study programmes	Procedures vary depending on the approach being carried out. When the assessment is carried out by other QA agency the procedures are defined by the leading agency, but A3ES monitors the procedures thorough a collaboration agreement between agencies and a verification of the legal requirements.	Yes or No (It depends on the assessment procedure).

Table 6 Implementation of site visits

As outlined in the SAR (pp. 25-26) and confirmed during the site visit, the simplification procedures are applicable and available only to those institutions that have met the necessary criteria and conditions relating in respect of their internal quality assurance, institutions confirmed to the panel that they are trying to improve their internal quality systems in order to access and meet the conditions of the simplified procedures.

Panel commendations

- I. The review panel commends the agency in the development of the simplified external evaluation processes, and for the clarity of conditions under which the programmes and

institutions are eligible to use the simplified methodologies, which are positively welcomed by agency staff, the HEI's, and the stakeholders.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard:

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

2019 Review: substantially compliant

2019 review recommendation

The 2019 review panel found A3ES to be substantially compliant with this standard and made the following recommendation:

‘Aside from the use of student reviewers, the agency has interpreted the concept of a peer reviewer in an academic sense i.e. subject-matter expertise, and this is not fully aligned to the purposes of their assessments, particularly institutional assessments. The panel recommends that the Agency takes a wider interpretation, aligned to the explanation of the concept of peer reviewer in the Guidelines for ESG 2.4. In doing so, the existing network of independent institutional quality assurance officers provides a group with expertise that might prove useful for institutional assessments.’

However, the Register Committee did not agree fully with the review panel and concluded that A3ES was partially compliant with ESG 2.4 given the absence of student reviewers in panels for NCE procedures and overseas accreditations.

Evidence

As outlined in the SAR each external assessment process has an External Assessment Team (EAT). The EATs have two to five members, one of which is appointed as chair. According to the SAR, all EATs have an international member.

According to the A3ES follow up report submitted to ENQA in 2021, the EATs are formed by the management board. In addition, according to new guidelines established by the current management board, the subject based TACs assist the board in identifying suitable members with appropriate experience and expertise for the EATs. The composition, requirements, and process for selecting EATs is also outlined in the SAR. The selection of experts for non-student members is done based on the relevance of the expert's expertise and the fit of their profile. For example, the selection and requirements for assessment of study programmes and institutional assessment differ slightly, reflecting the specific needs of the distinctive processes. For study programme assessment, the EAT members must be experts in the subject fields/disciplines of the programmes that are being assessed.

For institutional assessment, with the exception of student members, EATs members are selected from among (former) leaders of HEI's and/or academics with experience in HE governance, as well as QA experts. According to the SAR any potential conflict of interest is carefully considered, i.e. the

expert must not have professional ties to the institution being reviewed, and it is preferred that the expert lives and works in a different part of the country.

Thematic Assessment Committees (TAC) are an important structure for the agency in compiling EATs. Some of the TACs are established within specific scientific fields and may create subject-specific guidelines and criteria for the EAT's for specific programme assessments for example. In addition, the TAC's can play a role in selecting experts for an EAT. During the site visit the panel met with representatives of the EATs, of TACs and agency staff responsible for coordinating the EATs and confirmed the criteria and process of selection.

According to the SAR, the agency recruits student members of EATs through an annual open call. The student selection process includes a full-day training followed by a written test of the student's understanding of the assessment process prior to being appointed to the pool of experts. The panel reviewed a recent sample test (2022) which consisted of multiple choice and short essay questions. During the site visit, the panel learned from the agency that the reason for this approach is that otherwise there would be a huge response to a call from students, as the experts receive a fee, and the test provides a mechanism to differentiate those students that understand and are committed to the process.

Students interviewed during the site visit generally responded positively to the current format of selection of student experts, although some feedback suggests the training could be improved. However, the panel learned from the interviews that after the initial one-day training, there is little or no follow-up training, for new processes for example, such as the institutional assessments. The panel learned that only those student experts who had participated previously in programme evaluations can participate in EATs for institutional assessment, but these student experts did not receive additional training on this process.

During its meeting with student experts the panel heard that they saw their role as important and were treated and considered as full members of EATs. The panel heard that often the students contribute to the report or and that sometimes they are delegated the responsibility of chairing meetings with other students during the process. Though the extent of their involvement can be dependent on the chair, overall students felt they were equal and respected members of the EATs.

According to the SAR, students are not members of the EATs for the assessment of New Study Programmes (NCE and NCE EaD). This is predominantly a desk based and documentary analysis by discipline experts, as previously discussed. The agency did advise there is no aversion to including students on these EATs, and they will consider this in the future.

Additionally, it was confirmed during the site visit that student experts are not included in EATs for external assessments that the A3ES conducts in Macau, this has been historical practice to date. This was confirmed during the site visit interviews. During the site visit, representatives from Macau indicated to the panel that there would be no resistance to including student experts on these EATs, and in further meetings with the agency, A3ES confirmed that they would explore practical elements with a view to including student representatives on these EATs.

During the site visit, the panel learned that there have been several regional training sessions for experts over the past few years, however most recently this training has focussed on using the agency's new electronic platform. As noted previously, there was very limited updated training provided to experts on new processes, such as the recent institutional assessment cycle. A3ES identifies as a weakness in its SWOT analysis the difficulties in training international members, the panel learned during the site visit that this weakness is not just limited to international members but was raised by other members of EATs also.

Analysis

Both from the SAR and other material provided to the panel both prior to and during the site visit, the review panel learned the agency selects members of the EATs through a robust process and that all members of the EATs have respected and equal roles, including the student members.

EATs for programme assessments (with the exception of NCE as previously noted) and for institutional assessments have a student member, but the panel learned that this practice does not extend to the agency's overseas activity in programme assessments in Macau. It was not fully clear to the review panel as to why the agency does not include student members on its EATs for its EQA processes in Macau. The agency explained though the procedures of A3ES are implemented in Macau, the procedures are adapted to comply with the regulations of Macau, such regulations do not require a student member as part of the expert review teams/peer review panels, though this is inconsistent with the practice of the agency's own criteria and processes and with the ESG. During its discussions with representatives of Macau the panel learned from the institutional representative and the representative of the ministry that inclusion of student experts in external panels would not be a problem, both were open to this.

During the site visit the panel heard from a range of EAT representatives that though some initial training is undertaken for EATs, systematic training in new or revised processes for example, is not provided, some EAT representatives including students, had not received training for five years. Though training was provided on the new electronic platform, the agency relies on the experience and prior competence of the people selected as EAT members and has not provided additional process specific training on changes to EQA processes. For students, for example, the training prior to being accepted as a student evaluator is seen as sufficient and extensive, equipping the students with skills needed for all external assessments. However, the students noted they were not fully trained for the institutional assessment process, which is quite different to programme assessment.

During the site visit from its interviews with agency staff, institutions and EATs, the panel learned that all EATs assembled are different and the profile and expertise of each EAT is chosen because of specific discipline or scientific field, the diversity of EAT composition by the agency is significant.

Panel commendation

- I. The review panel commends the agency for the diversity of the EATs selected for different assessments.

Panel recommendations

- I. The review panel recommends that the agency includes student experts on EATs for all external quality assessment processes, specifically the implementation of its EQA processes in Macau and for the assessment of new study programmes (NCE and NCE EaD).
- II. The review panel recommends that the agency provide periodic and updated training, and training on new processes for all EAT members.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG 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.

2019 Review: substantially compliant

2019 review recommendation

In its 2019 report the review panel found the agency substantially compliant with this standard and made the following recommendation,

‘The panel recommends that the Agency uses Article 25 of the Regulations as the basis for providing a range of overarching criteria to complement the existing specific criteria, thus allowing EATs to broaden the scope for interpretation of specific criteria in order to apply these more appropriately for the diverse contexts within which different HEI’s operate.’

‘The panel therefore recommend that A3ES clarify the distinct purposes of their criteria and guideline statements and, arising from this, reformulate a series of separate but complementary guideline and criteria statements.’

Evidence

As outlined in the follow-up report submitted by A3ES in 2021 and reiterated in the SAR, the agency has published new guidelines which include criteria, guidelines, and instructions to provide clarity for EATs. The agency has collaborated closely with relevant TACs in the development of these guidelines’ guidelines for the assessment processes. The agency has also developed a range of supporting material both for the institutions in developing their self-assessment report and for the EATs. This includes for example, a specific manual/guideline for writing the self-assessment report, and a video for EAT members.

For distance learning programmes, the A3ES in collaboration with the TAC published a document clarifying the 2019 legal requirements for distance learning. In the first instance in the implementation of assessment of distance learning programmes in 2020/21, A3ES launched a specific assessment guide, subsequently this guide was merged with non-distance/face-to-face programmes (in the academic year 2022/2023). The agency therefore has one set of guidelines for both face-to-face and distance education, with additional criteria related to distance learning programmes.

A further example is doctoral programmes, the legislation specifies certain criteria for the provision of doctoral programmes, to ensure consistent interpretation of this criteria, A3ES published guidelines and conducted a number of clarification meetings with representatives from a range of HEIs, including, public and private, universities and polytechnics.

The implementation of the new electronic platform by A3ES for the evaluation processes, not only facilitates the management of the assessment process, but also to provide quick and easy access to all the relevant information and guidelines for the stakeholders (agency staff, EAT and institutions).

The SAR highlights the importance of the TACs in the development of the guidelines for all the assessment processes.

With respect to the specific activity of the assessment of study programmes in Macau, the guidelines are not integrated with the other assessment processes carried out by A3ES, it is a separate document, but the design of the guidelines is influenced and aligned to the ESGs.

Finally, in the field of pedagogical innovation, A3ES has published a book/manual which has been used to establish and explain the criteria used in the pedagogical field.

Analysis

From the SAR, additional evidence, and the interviews with the relevant stakeholders (A3ES staff, members of the EATs, universities, representatives from the ministry) it is clear to the panel the progress made by the agency in the improvement of the assessment guidelines and other documents developed to assist institutions and EATs in interpretation of the criteria.

During the site visit, the panel heard of the implementation and continued development of the new electronic platform, and how the platform has enabled more accessible and clearer information on assessment processes, evaluation process easier and to provide complete information accessible for all the stakeholders. Regarding assessment of study programmes in Macau, arising from the interviews with representatives of the agency responsible for this activity and from representatives of an institution in Macau, the review panel is confident that though this is a distinct set of guidelines, it follows and adheres to the agency's processes.

Panel commendation

- I. The review panel commends the agency for the developments undertaken and progress made not just on the agency's criteria and guidelines but in communicating and disseminating the criteria to HEIs and EATs through different mechanisms.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 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.

2019 Review: fully compliant

Evidence

In the 2019 review report, the review panel found A3ES was fully compliant with this standard. The panel noted in its analysis that 'EAT reports are published online, easy to read and written in a professional way. The formal decisions of the Agency are published with the reports...' (p.45). The new electronic platform being implemented by A3ES is expected to further improve and promote a higher level of consistency and further transparency in these reports. During the course of the targeted review, the review panel heard that the platform should provide comprehensive information on the assessment of study programmes, including the EAT reports, level of complaints, feedback from stakeholders, decisions of the management board, and of the appeals council.

Within its overall objective of the continuous improvement of study programmes and institutional internal quality assurance, the review panel heard the agency intends to focus more on qualitative quality assurance assessment and provide constructive feedback to institutions.

While the assessment and certification of institutional quality assurance is recommended by Portuguese legislation, it is voluntary, the agency has included this within its process. The aim is to get an overview of the quality assurance status for all HEIs and to facilitate decisions on follow-up. The agency requires that all documents produced by the institutions within their self-evaluation process must be published on the institutions' website. The panel learned of the implementation of these procedures to promote transparency in IQA and EQA processes.

However, despite the implementation of these procedures and the promotion of transparency, the panel learned from the SAR and confirmed with the agency during the site visit, that for new study programmes negative assessment reports are not published.

The agency publishes a wide range of QA related information, including all orders, information and various publications on its activities and processes.

Analysis

The review panel notes that there is a clear focus on transparency in A3ES as all information, documents and final reports are available to the academic community and general public. The newly established electronic platform which is still being refined should help to further achieve a high level of homogeneity in the process report production. For example, the panel heard that the old platform did not have certain functions built in, such as follow-up reports, which the new platform will have.

As noted above, during the site visit it was confirmed to the review panel that negative accreditation reports and decisions on the assessment of new study programmes are not published. During panel interviews with various stakeholders, including representatives of ministries and institutions, this was confirmed, though the ministry did suggest it would be helpful to them within their processes if negative assessment reports were published and made available.

Panel commendations

- I. The review panel commends A3ES in the development of the new electronic platform and the functionalities in report processing which the platform will facilitate.

Panel recommendations

- I. The review panel recommends that A3ES publish all reports of its EQA processes, including the reports of a negative assessment decision.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Standard:

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

2019 Review: fully compliant

In its 2019 review report the review panel found A3ES to be fully compliant with this standard and the panel acknowledged the agency had robust complaints and appeals procedures in place. The panel also suggested that ‘as a means to reduce the number of invalid appeals and to clarify the remit of the appeals Council...the agency optimises its approach to communicating the criteria for appeals...’. The panel also advised the agency to ‘provide a definition of what constitutes a complaint in its published complaints procedure in clear and simple text, thereby reducing the number of evidently groundless complaints.’

For the targeted review, the review panel considered the agency’s complaints and appeals process in the context of the implementation of the new external QA activity as noted previously in different sections of this report.

Evidence

According to the SAR and confirmed during the site visit, the complaints and appeals processes remain in place and are applied in full to new external quality assurance activities. The appeals council is established by the board of trustees. Currently the appeals council is chaired by a former judge of the supreme administrative court, it includes three former professors one of whom is international, and the decisions of the council are made public through A3ES website.

As evidence in the SAR, the number of appeals to the agency has been declining, illustrating both the impact of efforts by the agency to communicate and clarify the criteria for appeals, and better preparatory work by institutions prior to submitting programmes. Table 13 from the SAR shows the decreasing number of appeals.

Table 13. Evolution of the number of complaints and their results in the different assessment levels

ASSESSMENT LEVEL		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023*
STUDY PROGRAMMES IN OPERATION (ACEF)	Accreditation	0	0	0	2	0	0
	Accreditation with conditions	0	1	3	4	3	1
	Non-accreditation	0	11	8	0	0	3
NEW STUDY PROGRAMMES (NCE)	Accreditation	0	0	1	0	0	0
	Accreditation with conditions	2	0	1	0	0	0
	Non-accreditation	5	3	5	10	5	4
NON-ALIGNED STUDY PROGRAMMES (PERA)	Accreditation	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Submission to new assessment	0	0	0	0	1	0
TOTAL	Accreditation	0	0	1	2	0	0
	Conditional Accreditation	2	1	4	4	3	1
	Non-accreditation	5	14	13	10	5	7
	Submission to new assessment	0	0	0	0	1	0
	Total	7	15	18	16	9	8

*Until the 31st of July of 2023 / Source: A3ES IT System

Table 7 Appeals and Complaints - Table 13 extract from SAR

Analysis

In its last review in 2019, A3ES was fully compliant with the standard and for this targeted review the panel is assured and confident that the robust complaints and appeals processes in place apply to all EQA processes, including new processes implemented. The agency has made progress in better communicating both accreditation guidelines and the criteria for appeals.

Panel commendations

- I. The review panel commends A3ES for its transparent appeals procedures and its efforts and progress in communicating appeals criteria.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ENHANCEMENT AREAS

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

A3ES selected ESG standard 2.2 Designing Methodologies Fit for Purpose as the standard for the enhancement-oriented element of the review. In selecting this standard A3ES considered this review as an opportunity to explore the agency's processes, its relationships with HEIs and key stakeholders and how the methodologies of the agency and its stakeholder relationships can lead and support more enhancement-oriented quality assurance within the HEIs, at institutional level, and across the Portuguese higher education system.

A3ES did not provide specific questions in advance for the panel to address but rather conveyed to the panel their objective of seeking the perspectives of external stakeholders, potentially exploring new and ambitious perspectives which could inform the agency's strategic development.

The panel had discussed and considered this during the preliminary meeting with the agency and suggested hosting a 90-minute workshop with some expert participants and representatives also suggested by the panel. The workshop, which had nine participants, included the Secretary of State for Higher Education, institutional representatives, and representatives from the agency. The review panel did not contribute to the workshop, it was chaired by the review panel chair and facilitated and supported by panel members.

WORKSHOP METHODOLOGY

The panel commenced the workshop by asking everyone to consider and rank the following statement on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = not at all, 3 = somewhat and 5 = absolutely.

'A3ES is in a position in their evaluation processes to challenge the diverse higher education institutions in implementation of their own missions in a changing context of higher education.'

Each participant was then asked to openly share their 'ranking' and their reasons for the selection with the rest of the group and these were recorded by the review panel on a visible flip chart.

For the second part of the workshop, the group was split into two, group A and B, individuals were asked first to note and identify individually three strategic actions and/or areas for improvement which should be taken by the agency, and then the groups were asked to collectively discuss and agree as a group on the final three.

The feedback from the two groups was exchanged in an open format and recorded on a visible flip chart.

The workshop and discussions were highly engaging with involvement from all participants and evident enthusiasm and positivity for the process. The opportunity to explore and openly discuss the agency's methodologies, and potential for further change and enhanced impact was clearly welcomed. Participants noted the positive evolution of the agency culture and methodologies which had taken place over the past five years, and the potential for the agency's impact on the quality of higher education in Portugal in the future. Participants in the workshop are evidently committed to and ambitious for A3ES.

WORKSHOP DISCUSSION

During the workshop discussion all participants acknowledged that the agency has had a very important impact on quality and on the development of quality in higher education institutions in Portugal since its establishment. The fragmented and unregulated nature of higher education institutions and lack of trust in the higher education system prior to the agency's establishment was noted. Since this time, the higher education landscape has changed and continues to evolve and change. There remains a significant diversity of higher education institutions in Portugal, while for some institutions the changing and future landscape will be challenging, for other mature institutions, there was a sense that they will be constrained in their development by the agency's current approach and processes, which are not perceived as supporting strategic enhancement and development of the HEIs.

A consensus arising from the workshop discussions, and shared by the panel, is that there is a much greater potential for the agency to utilise its role and processes for the further development and enhancement of quality in higher education institutions and to have a more significant impact on the higher education system. As the single national agency responsible for quality in higher education, trusted and respected by the higher education institutions and other stakeholders, such as the professional orders and the ministry, A3ES is in a unique position to lead and support innovation and change.

A3ES engages with a diverse range of institutions, with differing capacities and capabilities within their own IQA systems, and the specific mission and status of these different HEIs needs to be considered in the implementation of the agency's processes, a one size may not fit all, and may hinder progress and developments in some of the HEIs and the wider HE system. In its next strategic planning phase, the agency has a great opportunity to build on the trust and respect it has established, to consider how to recognise and nurture progress in quality where it has been made within HEIs, and how to further foster a quality culture in institutional IQA systems.

There was a clear consensus emerging from the discussion on the important strategic and leadership role which could be taken by the agency, and the discussion also helped to highlight specific themes and/or actions which could be considered in shaping this strategy.

EMERGING THEMES

Agency Mission and Goals

During the discussion, the current mission of A3ES which is, 'to contribute to improving the quality of Portuguese higher education, through the assessment and accreditation of higher education institutions and their study programmes, and to ensure the integration of Portugal in the European quality assurance system of higher education' was considered. Whilst noting there is nothing wrong in the accuracy of the current mission, it was felt that this mission is compliance and not enhancement focussed and is not amenable to leading or fostering change. It was apparent from the discussions that the agency has the possibility and potential to create a different dynamic and take on a more strategic leadership role in quality in higher education, and their stakeholders have the desire and wish for A3ES to do so. However currently, the agency's EQA processes are not sufficiently sophisticated to drive and support enhancement and change in institutions, it was suggested that there 'has to be a different way to engage people in the work of the agency'. In considering its strategic approach, A3ES has an opportunity to explore how its external processes and instruments could assist in stimulating the

institutions to improve their IQA systems and culture, such as the quality of their teaching/learning/research/societal engagement activities.

The co-design with the higher education institutions of enhancement instruments within the agency's external quality assurance framework, for example, establishing shared values, expectations and commitment to quality, and the core elements of internal QA instruments, such as, leadership, QA policies, communication structures, communities of practice/networks among staff within and between institutions, with regular reporting and reflecting within institutions, are all elements of creating and sustaining a quality culture. It is apparent to the panel that A3ES has made progress in reducing the burden of EQA assessment, also apparent to the panel is that working more closely with the HEIs in enhancing its EQA instruments and framework, with a strategic focus on the enhancement of a quality culture in institutions, the agency can further develop its trust in the HEIs and assure itself that the institutions are in control of their internal quality, further reduce EQA bureaucratic burden, and further enhance quality culture in institutions across the system.

Arising from the discussions, it seems to the panel, that the current engagement by agency with the higher education institutions is focused on implementation of processes not on collaborating or codesigning to stimulate or support change or enhancements in quality. Strategically, A3ES has an opportunity to explore how it can utilise current structures, such as the thematic assessment committees, and build on current relationships, with provider representative bodies for example, to raise awareness about quality, and to consider its own mission and goals and to strategically commit to developing shared values and beliefs on quality in higher education for the Portuguese higher education system.

QA enhancement

A theme arising from the workshop discussion was the desire and recognition of both the internal stakeholders (agency staff) and external stakeholder to shift the strategic focus and mission of the agency and its EQA framework from QA compliance to QA enhancement, not just at individual institutional level, but across the HE system. Student partnership was cited as an example of a topic which could be considered across the system between institutions and the agency. 'Institutions can comply with the criteria from the agency, but in reality, we don't ask students the things that are important for change'. The engagement, approach and current processes of the agency do not provide the opportunity at system level or force institutions to address or talk about such topics, which are systems wide.

The agency could explore and consider ways to enable people to work together across the system and participate in the process of development and enhancement that helps the whole system to move forward. One participant noted for example that the agency had organised a seminar on artificial intelligence, but that was only once. The group agreed that this enhanced-led activity and approach is missing, the approach is forms/paperwork and process driven currently, as one participant stated, 'QA enhancement is not something that can be checked once every 6 years, but it is a process that needs to be nurtured'.

It is clear from the discussions that key stakeholders are in agreement on the need to enhance the strategic thinking and institutional responsibility for QA, and to shift the focus and relationship with the agency from a QA compliance to a QA enhancement-based relationship. There is an opportunity to involve the key stakeholders from across the Portuguese HE system in collectively exploring

system-wide topics, and considering mechanism for sharing and recognising good practice, both national and international, through for example networks, seminars and targeted funding initiatives.

Follow-up processes

Group participants shared specific reflections on the EQA follow-up process of the agency which is considered to be a technical exercise and checklist-based process. It was suggested during the discussion that more succinct and qualitative engagement is needed with the HEIs to consider how the HEIs can learn from each other, and how the agency can facilitate and enable this, by providing opportunities to share good practice and developing and publishing case studies for example. It was felt that there could be better communications with institutions, a new quality paradigm is needed for agency staff, this may require professional development of agency staff, shifting the focus from quality compliance to quality enhancement in this follow-up process. The recent ENQA thematic analysis⁵ 'What comes after the agency reports are published? – An analysis of approaches to follow-up (ESG 2.3)' provides insights into the variety of approaches of agencies across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) may be helpful to A3ES to explore in considering different approaches and practice to follow-up processes.

Engagement, dialogue and trust

Consistently a cross cutting theme emerging throughout the discussions is the desire and need for more and better strategic dialogue between A3ES and the HEIs. During the workshop participants were positive on in their comments on how trust in the agency has improved over the last five years, but it was also clear that there still remains a lack of trust and a fear among some institutions. There are diverse and different institutions, it is clear to the panel that some institutions fear the agency, and this is something that should be addressed. The agency can help and guide institutions in gaining a better understanding of what is needed within their internal quality systems, the core elements needed to support the development of a quality culture within institutional IQA systems. The agency has limited contact and engagement with higher education institutions and does not visit institutions outside of the external assessment process which is at a specific moment in time and for that specific purpose. According to some participants in the workshop, it was felt that the agency relates very much to senior teams within the institutions, one participant stated that there is a perception from some HEIs that the agency is seen as somewhat of a 'bogyman only there to inspect at a point in time', generally it would seem from institutional participants that the agency is not perceived as an integrated part of the HE system. This perspective and perception of the agency from the HEIs in particular could be addressed through improving strategic dialogue with the HEIs, by establishing for example structured networks/forums working collaboratively to identify and collectively consider systems wide issues and topics.

EMERGING ACTIONS

Participants all agreed that the relationship between A3ES and the HEI's and other stakeholders has improved over the past five years and continues to improve. It was acknowledged that A3ES has been working on reducing the burden of EQA, and on promoting dialogue and developing trust-based relationships with institutions, but there is an appetite and desire for more.

⁵ https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/ENQA_2023_Thematic-analysis.pdf

There was a rich discussion and many suggestions for what the priority goals and strategic actions should be, including enhanced structures and processes for stakeholder communications and engagement, better student participation, changes to the legal framework of A3ES, more transparency in the design and decision processes (through open consultation processes for example), clearer criteria, and more strategic thinking. There was specific feedback around culture, requesting A3ES to consider how it can better nurture a strategic culture in the agency itself and consequently within higher education institutions.

The future strategic mission and goals of the agency strategy should promote assessment methodologies which change from measuring the minimum criteria to an institutional enhancement focus. All of this should be considered in future strategic planning of the agency. All participants agreed that the third cycle of institutional and programme assessment should be QA enhancement focussed and the guidelines and criteria should be developed in collaboration with higher education institutions.

The following were identified as three specific suggested actions which arose from the workshop:

1. Guidelines and criteria to support the development of an institutional level strategy and enhancement focussed mission for the HEIs.
2. Strategic structured engagement and communication with HEIs and other stakeholders and enhanced internal engagement within the agency, between agency staff and management structures.
3. Enhanced and transparent assessment criteria for EQA activities to support a QA enhancement focus, co-designed and co-developed in collaboration with institutions.

PANEL REFLECTIONS

The workshop was a highly engaging and enormously rewarding experience for the panel members, and more significantly for the external stakeholders and agency staff that participated. It was the first time such a group had come together for a strategic discussion on the role and impact of A3ES in the Portuguese higher education system. The discussion summarised above generated rich dialogue, ideas and concrete suggestions and actions, and though a diversity of stakeholders with diversity of perspectives were in the room, there was a clear consensus on the value which could be gleaned by the agency and HE system in more collaborative working partnerships and strategic engagement, in particular, with the higher education institutions.

In its preliminary meeting with the review panel, the A3ES president and representatives of the management board expressed their objective for the enhancement focused workshop as being to seek the perspectives of external stakeholders and explore new and ambitious perspectives which could inform the agency's strategic development. It is very clear to the review panel that stakeholders are ambitious for the agency and there is a tremendous appetite to explore new perspectives in collaboration with the agency. There is great positivity from institutions and other stakeholders towards A3ES and an appetite from the HEIs to grow, develop and enhance quality across the HE system with the agency and institutions as collaborative partners. The review panel encourages A3ES to build on the momentum of this workshop and consider hosting further additional workshops/forums to identify and agree some strategic priorities /actions which can be collectively worked on and progressed with the HEIs and other key stakeholders.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

The relevance and impact of a relatively small agency with a relatively short history on the quality assurance system of higher education in Portugal, and the strong commitment of the agency to further building on this is evident to the review panel. This was confirmed and reiterated by all stakeholders during the review visit. The higher education institutions recognise and value A3ES as a relevant partner. Whilst being a highly relevant national institution responsible for the quality of higher education institutions and respected by the relevant national stakeholders the agency faces internal and external challenges. The following are some of the observations of the panel which it hopes will further contribute to the A3ES development.

ROLE OF THE MANAGEMENT BOARD - OPERATIONAL FUNCTIONS

The establishment of the new management board, the organisational restructuring, and the review and refinement of assessment processes and implementation of new processes are all elements of a new phase of the agency's functioning and its overall development. The review panel heard of the substantial volume of activity and of the demanding process of the recent assessment of 97 HEIs. Within both the institutional assessment process and the programme assessment processes, the management board have significant operational tasks and functions, and operate in a highly centralised way.

It would seem to the panel that staff, including senior and management staff are not empowered to make operational decisions within processes. Staff expressed their observations to the panel in relation to the agency's decision-making processes which have an impact on efficiency and on staff morale, with a relatively high staff turnover being apparent. The distribution of roles and responsibilities within the agency may need to be reviewed, and identifying opportunities to better empower staff could be considered. Doing so could achieve a higher level of efficiency at the operational level, enhance staff motivation, and enable the management board to take a more strategic role.

CONTINUED ENHANCEMENT OF PROCESSES

The panel supports the agency in and acknowledges the importance of the simplification of assessment processes to reduce assessment fatigue and ensure processes are fit for purpose. The panel considers this is very important and necessary for the sustainability of the higher education system. It is clear to the review panel that institutions are also in favour of this strategy and see the potential for further positive impact on IQA and for improving the relationship between agency and institutions, further fostering a quality culture in institutions.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The agency has a relatively large number of programme and institutional assessments. Its expertise from this work is important for the stakeholders and the agency should make more use of the outcomes of this work by collecting and analysing the results of different procedures. Thematic analysis adds value to the agency's work, its credibility and to the higher education institutions. Additional work on thematic analysis will enable the agency to emphasise the scope of work and what the agency can offer to the system and its stakeholders. At the same time, it will contribute to the agency's strategic planning.

NATIONAL COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT

As the single national agency, which is well respected by institutions and other stakeholders, A3ES is in a strong position to bring leadership and stimulate debate and discussion across the system on issues pertaining to quality of higher education and societal impact. Creating structured partnerships and networks with institutions and other stakeholders (such as the professional orders) to discuss and progress cross cutting themes in quality enhancement in higher education, exploring initiatives on which institutions could work collectively with the agency for mutual benefit in QA development, encouraging institutional staff, such as QA directors/officers to establish networks, are some of the different ways the agency could lead on system wide collaboration and engagement.

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

During the site visit in its observations to the review panel, the management board noted the importance of the agency's international relationships with other foreign Portuguese speaking countries, from a historical, cultural, and strategic perspective. During the visit the panel also heard of a staff member's recent staff mobility visit to another ENQA agency. The review panel supports such mobility visits and encourages A3ES in the process of its own learning and strategic development to consider strengthening its engagement and collaboration with other European agencies and projects.

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

1. The review panel commends the agency's cooperation and collaboration with the specialist higher education research units of the higher education institutions.
2. The review panel commends A3ES for the continued review and improvement of its suite of assessment guidelines for institutions in support of continued IQA enhancement.
3. The review panel commends A3ES on its proactive engagement with a wider range of stakeholders across the higher education system to ensure the ongoing enhancement or assessment processes to ensure such processes are fit for purpose.
4. The review panel commends the agency in the development of the simplified external evaluation processes, and for the clarity of conditions under which the programmes and institutions are eligible to use the simplified methodologies, which are positively welcomed by agency staff, the HEI's, and the stakeholders.
5. The review panel commends the agency for the diversity of the EATs selected for different assessments.
6. The review panel commends the agency for the developments undertaken and progress made not just on the agency's criteria and guidelines but in communicating and disseminating the criteria to HEIs and EATs through different mechanisms.
7. The review panel commends A3ES in the development of the new electronic platform and the functionalities in report processing which the platform will facilitate.
8. The review panel commends A3ES for its robust transparent appeals procedures and its efforts and progress in communicating appeals criteria.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The review panel recommends that the agency conduct and publish thematic analysis of the outcomes and findings of its external quality assurance activities.
2. The review panel recommends that the agency includes student experts on EATs for all external quality assessment processes, specifically the implementation of its EQA processes in Macau and for the assessment of new study programmes (NCE and NCE EaD).
3. The review panel recommends that the agency provide periodic and updated training, and training on new processes for all EAT members.
4. The review panel recommends that A3ES publish all reports of its EQA processes, including the reports of a negative assessment decision.

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions A3ES is in compliance with the ESG.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

1. The review panel suggests that the agency consider how to develop its capacity and further explore current relationships with HEI research centres, not only for thematic analysis of its EQA activities and but for the development of thematic reports that would increase public awareness and enhance the quality of higher education in Portugal.
2. The review panel suggests that the agency take the opportunity of the recently completed institutional assessment cycle to conduct a meaningful thematic analysis of the institutional assessment reports, which could inform the agency's strategic development and future EQA methodologies.
3. The review panel suggests that the agency develop and publish a strategy on conducting and publishing thematic analyses of the outcomes of its EQA activities on a periodic and systematic basis.
4. The review panel encourages A3ES to utilise the commendations and recommendations arising from the current cycle of institutional assessment reports to identify good practice to further enhance and support the development of IQA and institutional level quality culture.
5. The review panel encourages A3ES to explore opportunities for institutional staff at different levels to network across the system and share good practice and challenges in IQA systems.
6. The review panel suggests that A3ES continues to strengthen its relationship with the key stakeholders and explore the creation of structured mechanisms for open discussion on the evolution of its external quality assurance processes.

ANNEXES

ANNEX I: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW (to be restricted to 7 max)
16.01.2024 - Online meeting with the agency's resource person			
1	120 min	Review panel's kick-off meeting and preparations for site visit	<i>Name and Title</i>
2	11.00-12.30 (CET) 90 min	An online clarifications meeting with the agency's resource person to clarify the agency's changes since the last full review against the ESG and to understand the background and motive of the agency's choice of the self-selected ESG standard for enhancement (next to the overall HE and QA context of the agency)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinator of the Study and Analysis Office President of the Management Board Two executive members of the Management Board
23.01.2024 – Day 0 (pre-visit)			
3	17.00-19.00 (120 mins)	Review panel's pre-visit meeting and preparations for day 1	
4	TBC	A pre-visit meeting with the agency's resource person to clarify any remaining questions after the online clarifications meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agency resource person
24.01.2024 – Day 1			
	08.30-9.00 (30 min)	Review panel's private meeting	
5	09.00-09.45 45 mins	Meeting with the President, Representatives from the Management Board and the Senior Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> President Two Executive members of the Management Board Three Non-Executive Members of the Management Board Coordinator of the Assessment Area
	9.45-10.00 15 min	Review panel's private meeting	
6	10.00-10.30 30 min	Meeting with President and representatives from Board of Trustees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> President of the Board of Trustees President of the Appeals Council Representatives of the Appeals Council (online)
	10.30-10.45 15 min	Review panel's private meeting	

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW (to be restricted to 7 max)
7	10.45-11.15 30 min	Meeting with the Chair and Representatives of the Advisory and Scientific Councils, including student representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representatives of the Advisory Council: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - President of the Advisory Council - Psychologist Order • Two Student Representatives of the Advisory Council • Representative of the Scientific Council
	11.15-11.45 30 min	Review panel's private meeting	
8	11.45-12.15 30 min	Meeting with Self-Assessment Report Team (SAR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-assessment report team: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordinator of the Studies and Analysis Office - Project Coordinator - Project Coordinator
	12.15-12.30 15 min	Review panel's private meeting	
9	12.30-13.15 45 min	Meeting with key staff of the agency/staff in charge of Programme evaluation – including online/distance learning programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff – Area Coordinator and Project Coordinators for Study programmes, to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distance learning: Project Coordinator - European Approach: Project Coordinator - Study Programmes in Macau: Project Coordinator
	13.15-14.00 45 min	Lunch (Review Panel Only)	
10	14.00-14.30 30 min	Meeting with key staff of the agency in charge of institutional evaluations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinator of the Assessment Area • Six Project Coordinators
	14.30-14.45 15 min	Review panel's private meeting	
11	14.45-15.15 30 min	Meeting with managers and staff from Support Area, responsible for internal quality assurance, financial and human resources, IT & Information Systems, Communication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinator of the Studies and Analysis Office • Coordinator of the Human and Financial Resources

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW (to be restricted to 7 max)
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinator of the IT and Information Systems Communication Support Two Judicial Support representatives
	15.15-15.30 15 min	Review panel's private meeting	
12	15.30-16.00 30 mins	Meeting with representatives of (i) the Committee for Distance Learning Programmes and of (ii) the Thematic Assessment Committee.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two Representatives of the Committee for Distance Learning Programmes Representatives of Thematic Assessment Committees (TAC): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - TAC for Institutional Assessment - TAC for Dental Medicine
	16.00-16.15 15 mins	Review panel's private meeting	
13	16.15-16.45 30 mins	Meeting with representatives of the External Assessment Teams (EATs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversity of EATs for programme and institutional assessment, to include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Chair: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professor I Professor II -International Reviewer: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Representative I (online) Representative of the Engineers Order - Student representative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student I Student II (Project Coordinator)
	16.45-17.30 45 mins	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day 2	
		Dinner (panel only)	
25.01.2024 – Day 2			
	8.30-9.00 30 mins	Review panel's private meeting	
14	09.00-09.30 (Hybrid) 30 Min	Meeting with representatives from Macau; Institutions that have completed programme evaluations. Representative from Higher Education Bureau (DSES)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HEI representatives Macao: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vice-Rector of the University of Macao

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW (to be restricted to 7 max)
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Representative from DSES - Chief of the Higher Education Department (all online)
15	09.30-10.00 30 mins	Meeting with representatives of the General Directorate of Higher Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representative of the General Directorate of Higher Education
	10.00-10.15 15 mins	Review panel's private meeting	
16	10.15-11.00 45 min	Meeting with heads and representatives of reviewed public and private HEIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HEIs Heads public and private • Representative bodies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Representative of the Portuguese Association of Private Higher Education-APESP - Vice-Presidente of the Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities-CRUP - Representative of the Portuguese Polytechnics Coordinating Council-CCSISP
	11.00 -11.15 15 min	Review panel's private meeting	
17	11.15 -11.45 30 min	Meeting with the quality assurance officers of HEIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality assurance officer representatives public and private HEIs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Representative of ISCTE-IUL - Representative of ISPA - Representative of Universidade Lusíada - Representative of Universidade de Lisboa - Representative of Instituto Politécnico de Leiria - Representative of ISTECPorto
	11.45-12.15 30 min	Review panel's private meeting	
18	12.15-13.00 45 min	Meeting with Student Representatives of EATs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variety of student reviewer representatives, from graduate and post graduate programmes,

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW (to be restricted to 7 max)
			and institutional assessments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student I - Student II - Student III - Student IV (online) - Student V (online) - Student VI (online) - Student VII (online)
	13.00-14.00 60 Min	Review panel private discussion and lunch (panel only)	
19	14.00-14.45 45 mins	Meeting with stakeholders, such as employers, Professional Orders, students unions, workers' unions, employers' associations and partnered laboratory – stakeholders as noted in the SAR (p.32)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder representatives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - President of the Student Federation for the Polytechnic Higher Education Sector - Representative of the Academic Federation of Porto - Workers' Union Representative in the Advisory Council of A3ES - Representative of the Technical Engineers Order in the Advisory Council of A3ES
	14.45-15.15 30 min	Review panel's private meeting	
20	15.15-16.45 90 mins	Workshop on Enhancement Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two senior representatives from the agency • A representative from each of the HEI representative bodies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - APESP representative - CRUP representative - CCSISP representative - Secretary of State for Higher Education - Pro-Rector for Student Affairs and Pedagogical Innovation in the University of Minho
	16.45-17.15 30 min	Review panel's private meeting	
21	17.15-17.45 30 min	A session to further investigate	-TBC

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW (to be restricted to 7 max)
		additional topics that may arise during the site visit regarding agency's compliance with the ESG (as necessary)	
26.01.2024 – Day 3			
	08.30-9.30 60 min	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify	
22	9.30-10.15 45 min	Meeting with President to clarify any pending issues	President
	10.15-11.45 90 min	Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings	
23	11.45-12.15 30 min	Final de-briefing meeting with staff and Board members of the agency to inform about preliminary findings	
	12.15-13.15 60 min	Wrap up meeting and lunch (Panel only)	

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

Targeted review of Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) against the ESG

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

The present Terms of Reference were agreed between A3ES (applicant), ENQA (coordinator) and EQAR.

1. Background

Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education-A3ES has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since and is applying for renewal of EQAR registration based on a targeted external review against *the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* coordinated by The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education-A3ES has been a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since 2014 and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership.

A3ES is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- *Programme assessment **
- *Programme accreditation renewal of non-aligned study programmes**
- *Prior accreditation of new study programmes**
- *Programme assessment for online study programmes*
- *Institutional assessment*
- *Audit of internal quality assurance systems*
- *Program assessment in Macau*
- *Joint programme accreditation*
- *Joint programme accreditation (following the European Approach)*

The accreditation of study programmes closely follows the same methodology (*) i.e. programme assessment, programme accreditation renewal of non-aligned study programme.

All these activities will be included on the agency's profile on the EQAR website and linked to DEQAR database. NB: The agency may not upload reports from other activities to DEQAR.

Should anything change between the time of application and the review i.e. any type of changes that may affect the registered agency's substantial compliance with the ESG, the agency is expected to inform EQAR at the earliest convenience⁶.

2. Purpose and scope of the targeted review

This review will evaluate the extent to which A3ES continues to fulfil the requirements of the ESG. The targeted review aims to place more focus on those parts that require attention and provide sufficient information to support A3ES's application to EQAR.

The review will be further used as part of the agency's renewal of membership in ENQA.

2.1 Focus areas

A) Standards with a partial compliance conclusion in [the Register Committee's last renewal decision](#)⁷:

- ESG 2.4: to consider the involvement of students, in particular those that are not part of the panels for prior accreditation of study programmes or part of the panels for A3ES activities overseas.

B) Standards 2.1 to 2.7 for the following activities⁸:

- Implementation of the *European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes* by A3ES (where applicable, i.e., if and when A3ES practice differs from the Agreed Standards and the Agreed Procedure, given that these are aligned with the ESG).
- Implementation of *assessment procedures for online study programmes*

C) Standards affected by other types of substantive changes, namely the *simplification of the assessment procedures of study programmes in operation*, and *simplification of the assessment procedures of non-aligned study programmes* (see substantive change report of 2023-07-31)⁹,

- ESG 2.2: how does the agency develop, review and update its processes and criteria, whether the methodologies are fit for the

⁶ See EQAR's policy on reporting changes <https://www.eqar.eu/register/guide-for-agencies/reporting-and-renewal/>

⁷ See A3ES's profile on EQAR's website: <https://data.deqar.eu/agency/1>

⁸ See Change Report of 2023-06-30 on the agency's profile: <https://data.deqar.eu/agency/1>

⁹ See Change Report of 2023-07-31 on the agency's profile: <https://data.deqar.eu/agency/1>

purpose, if stakeholders involved in the design and continuous improvement;

- ESG 2.3: how are the key features in the standard implemented by the quality assurance agency in each of these activities and where no site visits are used, how does the agency validate the evidence provided by institutions and whether the processes implemented consistently.

D) ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance;

E) Selected enhancement area: ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

F) Other matters regarding ESG compliance that come up during the targeted review and that may affect the agency's compliance with the ESG (if any). These issues should be investigated by the review panel as far as possible, providing an analysis and conclusion on the ESG standard(s) concerned.

3. The review process

The review will be conducted in line with the requirements of *the EQAR Procedures for Applications* and *the Policy on Targeted Reviews*, and following the methodology described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Agreement on the Terms of Reference between EQAR, A3ES and The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);
- Self-assessment by A3ES including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to A3ES;
- Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee;
- Analysis of the final review report and decision-making by the EQAR Register Committee;
- Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board;
- Attendance to the online follow-up seminar.

3.1 Independence of the review coordinator

The coordinator has not provided remunerated (e.g. consultancy) or unremunerated services to A3ES during the past 5 years, and conversely A3ES has not provided any remunerated or unremunerated services to the coordinator.

3.2 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of at four members including an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member and one other expert. At least two members are from another country.

At least one panel member should be a quality assurance professional that is currently employed by a QA agency and has been engaged in quality assurance within the past five years. When requested by the agency under review or when considered particularly pertinent, other stakeholders (for example, a representative of the labour market) may be included. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and one as the review secretary. At least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. At least two panel members come from outside the national system of the agency under review (if relevant).

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator (an ENQA staff member) who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The Review Coordinator will not be the secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

ENQA will provide the agency with the proposed panel composition and the curricula vitarum of the panel members to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The reviewers will have to agree to a non-conflict of interest statement that is incorporated in their contract for the review of this agency.

Once appointed, the coordinator will inform EQAR about the appointed panel members.

3.3 Self-assessment by A3ES, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

A3ES is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-assessment includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;

The self-assessment report is expected to contain:

- a description of the self-assessment process and the production of the SAR;

- a description of changes occurred within the agency since the last full review, including any eventual changes in the higher education system and quality assurance system in which the agency predominantly operates, the agency's structure, funding, its list of external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG, as well as the changes in the agency's quality assurance activities abroad (where relevant);
- a section that addresses the focus areas of the review, including standards that were considered to be partially compliant with the ESG in the last full review as well as ESG 2.1 and one self-selected ESG standard for enhancement (see 2.1 Focus areas);
- a SWOT analysis of the agency as a whole;
- for each of the individual standards enlisted above (see section 2) a consideration of how the agency has addressed the recommendations as noted in the previous EQAR Register Committee decision of inclusion/renewal (if applicable).

The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which A3ES fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and continues to meet the ESG and thus the requirements for EQAR registration.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the review coordinator, which has two weeks to carry out a screening. The purpose of a screening is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The coordinator will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*, is present. If the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to ask for a revised version within two weeks.

The final version of the agency's self-assessment report is then submitted to the review panel a minimum of eight weeks prior to the site visit. The agency publishes the completed SAR on its website and sends the link to ENQA. ENQA will publish this link on its website as well.

3.4 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule considering the aspects included under the focus area (as defined under point 2.1 of the Terms of Reference).

The schedule will include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit. The approved schedule shall be given to A3ES at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The site visit should enable the review panel to explore how the agency has addressed the standards where it has been found to be partially compliant (if the case), aspects of substantive change, consideration of internal quality assurance (ESG 2.1) and the self-selected ESG standard(s) for enhancement. The panel will include extra time during the site-visit to address any other arising issues (if the case) that might have an impact on the agency's compliance with the ESG.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the panel's overall impressions but not its judgement on the ESG compliance of the agency.

Prior to the physical site visit, the panel attends a joint briefing call between the panel, ENQA and EQAR to clarify the review expectations and address any possible arising matters.

In advance of the site visit (at least two weeks before the site visit), the panel will organise an obligatory online meeting with the agency. This meeting is held to ensure that the panel reaches a sufficient understanding of:

- The specific national/legal context in which the agency operates;
- The specific quality assurance system to which the agency belongs;
- The key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities.

3.5 Preparation and completion of the final review report

The review report will be drafted in consultation with all review panel members and correspond to the purpose and scope of the review as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. In particular, it will provide a clear rationale for its findings concerning each ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG* to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR¹⁰.

The external report will present the facts and analysis reflecting the reality at the time of review. This will form the main basis for the Register Committee's decision making.

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language. After panel has considered coordinator's feedback, the report will go to the agency for comment on factual accuracy. If A3ES chooses to provide a position statement in reference to the draft report, it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report.

Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the statement by A3ES and submit the document for scrutiny to ENQA's Agency Review Committee and then to EQAR along with the remaining application documents (self-evaluation report, Declaration of Honour, statement to review report-if applicable). The report is to be finalised

¹⁰ See here: <https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/UseAndInterpretationOfTheESGv2.0-2015.pdf>

normally within 2-4 months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 30 pages in length. All panel will sign off on the final version of the external review report. The coordinator will provide to A3ES the [Declaration of Honour](#) together with the final report.

4. Publication and use of the report

A3ES will receive the expert panel's report and publish it on its website once the ENQA Agency Review Committee has validated the report. Prior to the final validation of the report, the ENQA Agency Review Committee may request additional (documentary) evidence or clarification from the review panel, review coordinator or the agency if needed. The review report will be published on ENQA website regardless of the review outcome. The report will also be published on the EQAR website together with the decision on registration, regardless of the outcome.

ENQA will retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the review panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, will be vested in ENQA. In the case of an unsuccessful application to EQAR, the report may also be used by the ENQA Board to reach a conclusion on whether the agency can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA.

5. Decision-making on EQAR registration and ENQA membership

The agency will submit the review report via email to EQAR before expiry of the agency's registration on EQAR. The agency will also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), the Declaration of Honour and any other relevant documents to the application to EQAR (i.e. annexes, statement to the review report).

EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting in autumn 2024. The Register Committee's final judgement on the agency's compliance with the ESG as a whole can either be substantially compliant (approval of the application) or not substantially compliant (rejection of the application). In case of a positive decision (substantially compliant with the ESG), the registration is renewed for a further five years (from the date of the review report).

The decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board will take place after EQAR Register Committee decision.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which the agency expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be considered by the Board together with the confirmation of EQAR listing when deciding on the agency's membership. Should the agency not be granted the registration in EQAR or the registration is not

renewed, the decision on ENQA membership will be taken based on the final review report, the application letter, and the statement from the Agency Review Committee. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

6. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	August 2023
Appointment of review panel members	September 2023
Self-assessment report (SAR) completed by A3ES	6 October 2023
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	October 2023
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	November 2023
Briefing of review panel members	November 2023
Review panel site visit	January 2024
Submission of the draft review report to ENQA Review Coordinator	Early March 2024
Factual check of the review report by the A3ES	End March 2024
Statement of A3ES to review panel (if applicable)	April 2024
Submission of review report to ENQA	End-April 2024
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	May/June 2024
EQAR Register Committee meeting and decision on the application by A3ES	Autumn 2024
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	Autumn 2024

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

ACEF	accreditation of study programmes in operation
AINST	institutional assessment
APESP	Portuguese Association of Private Higher Education
ARES - CPLP	Regulatory agencies of higher education of the community of Portuguese speaking countries
CCISP	Portuguese polytechnics coordinating council
CHEA	council for higher education accreditation
CRUP	council of rectors of Portuguese universities
EAT	external assessment team
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ESG	<i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015</i>
HE	higher education
HEI	higher education institution
NCE	new study programmes
NCE EaD	distance learning new study programmes
PERA	special request for renewal of accreditation of non-aligned study programme
QA	quality assurance
SAR	self-assessment report
TAC	thematic assessment committee
VIA Verde	fast track assessment procedure

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY A3ES

The following additional documents were provided by the agency in advance of the site visit:

1. A3ES Decision no. 2392/2013- Modification of the elements characterising a study cycle
2. Agricultural Sciences TAC meeting note 13 March 2023 (translated)
3. Dental Medicine TAC meeting note 25 November 2022 (translated)
4. Report for the National Assembly November 2023 (translated)
5. Programme Assessment Report - NCE/22/2200583
6. Programme Assessment Report - ACEF/2122/0513667
7. 3 Reports of European Approach (Decision of the Committee for Sciences of Unibasq)
8. Assessment Report of a private higher education institution - AINST/22/2200066
9. Assessment report private higher education institution - AINST/22/2200092
10. Assessment report of a Polytechnique - AINST/22/2200061
11. Assessment report of a public higher education institution - AINST/22/2200025
12. Sample test for student EATs (2022) - FORMAÇÃO DE ESTUDANTES A3ES, 2022
13. Note of Advisory Council Meeting 6 December 2023(translated)
14. A3ES Distance Learning Order 16/2022 (translated)
15. Follow-up Report Universitário de Ciências da Saúde - CESPU (ACEF/1920/1201796)
16. Follow-up Report Universidade de Évora,
17. Follow-up report ACEF 2021 0416372

During the site visit the following additional documents were provided by the agency:

1. Financial statements - five-year summary income and expenditure statements
2. Staff list and contract status
3. Thematic analysis on 2017 institutional review cycle
4. A3ES Activity Plan 2024
5. Research publication on doctoral education in Portugal
6. Research publication on pedagogical innovation in higher education

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL

A3ES website (<https://www.a3es.pt/en>)

A3ES Follow Up Report submitted to ENQA 2021

ENQA Review Report 2019

EQAR Register Committee Renewal Decision November 2019

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW 2024

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Targeted Review of the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES), undertaken in 2024.