

Approval of the Application
by Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher
Education (A3ES)
for Renewal of Inclusion on the Register

Register Committee
1-2 July 2024

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 Ver. 1.0
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Application of:	2023-06-19		
Agency registered since:	2014-06-01		
Type of review:	Targeted	Site visit:	2024-01-24
External review report of:	2024-04-24	Submitted:	2024-05-29
Review coordinated by:	European Association for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ENQA)		
Review panel members:	Luis Carlos Velón Sixto, Marie Gould, Melita Kovacevic, Topias Tolonen		
Decision of:	2024-07-02		
Registration until:	2029-04-30		
Absented themselves from decision-making:	n/a		
Attachments:	1. External Review Report, 2024-04-24 2. Minuted Clarification with A3ES (eligibility), 2023-06-22 3. Clarification by the Review Panel, 2024-06-25		

1. The application of 2023-06-19 adhered to the requirements of the EQAR Procedures for Applications.
2. The Register Committee confirmed eligibility of the application on 2023-07-31 having considered clarification received from A3ES on 2023-06-22.
3. The Register Committee considered the targeted external review report of 2024-04-24 on the compliance of A3ES with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015 version).
4. The Register Committee sought and received clarification from the panel on 2024-06-25.

Analysis:

5. In considering A3ES's compliance with the ESG, the Register Committee took into account the following activities:
 - *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*
- *Programme assessment in Macau*
- *Joint programme accreditation*
- *Joint programme accreditation (following the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes)*

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6. As per the Policy on Targeted Reviews, the panel, during the targeted review process, is asked to consider other matters outside the focus areas specified in the terms of reference that may affect the compliance with the ESG, if brought to their attention.

7. The Register Committee learned the panel addressed two standards (ESG 2.6 and ESG 3.4) which were not within the tripartite terms of reference (annexed in the External Review Report) but which arose during the review. The Register Committee took the analysis for these two standards in consideration when making the judgement on A3ES's compliance.

8. The Register Committee found that the report provides sufficient evidence and analysis on A3ES's level of compliance with the ESG.

9. With regard to the specific European Standards, the Register Committee considered the following:

ESG 2.4 – Peer-review experts

10. In its previous decision for renewal of registration on EQAR (of 2024-11-05), A3ES was found to be partially compliant with the standard due to the absence of student reviewers in panels in the *New Study Programmes (NCE)* procedures and overseas accreditations. The Register Committee noted from the panel analysis that the status quo has not changed.

11. Furthermore, the Committee understood that except for initial trainings, the agency does not organise systematic training for new or revised processes and that some reviewers, including students, have not received training in the past five years. Furthermore, the Committee understood that student reviewers receive only training for programme reviews, but not for institutional reviews.

12. **Given the lack of students involvement in some procedures and the lack of systemic training for reviewers, the Register Committee concurred with the panel conclusion, and found that A3ES remains to be partially compliant with ESG 2.4.**

ESG 2.6 – Reporting

13. The Register Committee learned from the analysis by the panel that A3ES does not publish negative reports and decisions on the assessment of new study programmes (NCE).

14. Given the lack of transparency by not publishing negative reports and decisions for all procedures **the Register Committee concurred with the panel that A3ES only partially complies with ESG 2.6.**

ESG 3.4 – Thematic analysis

15. The Register Committee understood from the analysis by the panel that the most recent thematic analysis published by the agency were done in 2017. Furthermore, the Committee, noted that *“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.”*

16. **The Register Committee concurred with the panel that A3ES only partially complies with ESG 3.4. The Register Committee underlined the panel’s recommendation that the agency should resume conducting and publishing thematic analysis of the outcomes and findings of its external quality assurance activities.**

17. For the remaining standards, the Register Committee was able to concur with the review panel’s analysis and conclusion without further comments.

Conclusion:

18. Based on the external review report and the considerations above, the Register Committee concluded that A3ES demonstrated compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3) as follows:

Standard	Previous decision (2019-11-05)	Review panel conclusion	Register Committee conclusion
2.1	Compliance	Compliance	Compliance
2.2	Compliance	Compliance	Compliance
2.3	Compliance	Compliance	Compliance
2.4	Partial compliance	Partial compliance	Partial Compliance
2.5	Compliance	Compliance	Compliance
2.6	Compliance	Partial compliance	Partial Compliance
2.7	Compliance	Compliance	Compliance
3.1	Compliance	<i>Inherited</i>	Compliance
3.2	Compliance	<i>Inherited</i>	Compliance
3.3	Compliance	<i>Inherited</i>	Compliance
3.4	Compliance	Partial compliance	Partial Compliance

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3.5	Compliance	<i>Inherited</i>	Compliance
3.6	Compliance	<i>Inherited</i>	Compliance
3.7	Compliance	(not expected)	Compliance (by virtue of applying)

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19. The Register Committee considered that A3ES only achieved partial compliance with some standards. In its holistic judgement, the Register Committee concluded that these are specific and limited issues, but that A3ES continues to comply substantially with the ESG as a whole.

20. The Register Committee therefore approved the application for renewed A3ES's inclusion on the Register. A3ES's renewed inclusion shall be valid until 2029-04-30¹.

21. The Register Committee further underlined that A3ES is expected to address the issues mentioned appropriately and to resolve them at the earliest opportunity.

¹ Inclusion is valid for five years from the date of the external review report, see §3.25 of the EQAR Procedures for Applications.

Application by Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) for Renewal of Registration

Minutes of Telephone Conversation

Register Committee

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Date of the conversation:	2023-06-22
Representative of A3ES:	Maria Manatos
Representative of EQAR:	Melinda Szabo

1. A3ES has submitted on 2023-06-19 an application for renewal of registration on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).
2. In order to prepare the deliberations of the Register Committee on the eligibility of the application and A3ES's activities within the scope of the ESG, EQAR contacted A3ES via Zoom to clarify the matters below.
3. The agency representative clarified that programme assessment identified in the application is divided into: 'prior accreditation of new study programmes', 'assessments of programmes in operation' and "accreditation renewal of non-aligned study programmes". However, they should be considered separated activities, since they have different procedures and guidelines.
4. The prior accreditation has no visit (neither in sight nor virtual), with the exception of medicine study programmes, which have in sight visits.
5. With regard to the accreditation of programmes in operation, the external assessment teams will decide whether there should be meetings or (virtual) visits (once again with the exception of medicine, which has in sight visits) in order to clarify information presented in the reports filled in by the higher education institutions.
6. The non-aligned study programmes do not have neither in sight nor virtual visits. Since 2022 there are simplified procedures for the assessment of programmes on operation (Order 15/2022). This simplification will be reported as substantive change.
7. Furthermore, since 2019, more particularly, since the legal framework for online education changed (Decree-Law 133/2019), A3ES had to adapt their procedures and has developed specific guidelines for the assessment of online programmes in 2020. In 2022, A3ES has merged the guidelines for online programmes with the 'regular' programmes which means that since 2022, there is one guideline for online and 'regular' education. In these guidelines there are options related to online education, which are only filled in, in case an online programme

is being assessed. These changes with regard to online education will also be reported as substantial changes to EQAR.

8. Considering the agency's procedures for joint programme accreditation, the agency representative explained that the assessment of joint programmes can be employed using the European approach (see change report of 2023-06-19) or based on agreements ('commitment letters') signed by the agencies involved in the assessment process. In these cases, when A3ES is not the leading agency, the assessment processes follow the guidelines and procedures of the leading agency. This was only possible after the Decree-Law 27/2021, which enabled A3ES to follow the criteria of other quality assurance agencies, once they are aligned with the ESG.
9. A3ES intends to keep both assessment processes of joint programmes (based on the European approach and based on commitment letters between agencies and following the assessment criteria of the leading agency).

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Application by A3ES for Renewal of Registration

Clarification provided by the Panel

Register Committee

Date of the conversation:	2024-06-25
Panel members:	Melita Kovacevic, Marie Gould
Representative of EQAR:	Blazhe Todorovski

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1. A3ES has submitted on 2023-06-19 an application for renewal of registration on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). On 2024-05-29, A3ES submitted the external review panel's report of 2024-04-24.
2. In order to prepare the deliberations of the Register Committee on A3ES' compliance with the ESG, EQAR contacted the Panel to clarify the matter(s) below.

ESG 2.3 – Implementing processes

3. EQAR representatives asked the panel for further clarification on how does A3ES validates the evidence provided by HEIs when there is no site-visit in place for the simplified (*Via Verde*) procedures.
4. The panel explained that the shift to the fast track procedures in their perspective is related with the maturation of the internal QA systems at HEIs' and the maturation of the trust between the agency and the HEIs'. Furthermore, the panel elaborated that this process is ensured with consistency through the online platform where all steps and standards are covered thoroughly.
5. EQAR representatives further asked the panel to clarify how does the agency validates the evidence provided by HEIs' when there is no site-visit in place for the simplified procedure.
6. The panel clarified in all processes regardless of the fast-track or regular procedures, there is always an external assessment team (EAT), who are checking the submitted documents by the HEIs'. Furthermore, the EAT can always requested further information/documentation if needed and even request for a site-visit to take place in case some information needs to be checked at the HEI.
7. The panel also noted that the process is consistent with other processes, and the common set of assessment procedures is used, and that the only difference is that some institutions who meet the criteria of the internal QA system they would meet the criteria for the fast procedure where site-visit might not be required.

8. Finally the panel noted that they were assured of consistency as all reports are approved through the agency's management Board.

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