

# Fifth Report of the Scientific Committee to A3ES

*Meeting of 8 October 2014*

The Scientific Council (SC) hereby submits its fifth Report to the A3ES, the Agency for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education in Portugal.

## **ENQA Review of A3ES**

The main point on the agenda at this year's meeting of the SC was the external review report made on behalf of ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Entitled 'Report of the Panel for the External Review of the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) Portugal', it was produced in March 2014 by a team chaired by Stephen Jackson (Director of Reviews, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), UK). Our report builds on its predecessor of 2013, which focused on A3ES' self-evaluation report drawn up for the Panel in preparation for this external evaluation of A3ES' role, functions and operations.

The SC welcomes the very positive assessment of A3ES the external evaluation committee reached; A3ES was judged an 'excellent organisation contributing to the enhancement of higher education quality in Portugal'. The ENQA team has been both sensitive and alert to the ways in which A3ES works. The ENQA team recognises the strong points for which our Committee commended A3ES in its previous reports.

The SC values the recommendations the ENQA review laid before A3ES. Given the very positive view ENQA reviewers expressed about A3ES, the SC hopes that A3ES will likewise see the recommendations as both positive and beneficial. The main recommendations made touched on three areas alone. The three main recommendations concern the only areas where the ENQA review team concluded that there was not more than substantial compliance by A3ES, viz.:

2.1 Use of internal quality assurance procedures – since most higher education institutions do not yet have fully developed internal quality assurance mechanisms in place;

2.4 Processes fit for purpose – since the review team encourages the agency to do more to involve students in the procedures;

2.5 Reporting – since reports could be produced in a way that is better accessible and readable for the general public.

From these findings, the following recommendations were made:

- continue actively supporting higher education institutions to develop their internal quality assurance mechanisms in an effective but self-critical manner
- reconsider the structure and accessibility of its reports to ensure that a broader audience, in particular students and their parents, are informed and, indeed, sensitised to the significance of quality and its assurance
- continue developing the engagement of students in the external evaluation teams.

The SC noted with pleasure that A3ES accepted these recommendations as useful and relevant. The first and the third recommendations were already being implemented. Indeed, the former underscores A3ES's standing policy to stimulate and support Portuguese higher education institutions to engage in quality enhancement. The third underwrites A3ES's standing policy.

### **Communication: Sensitization for quality among a broad audience**

The SC was asked to reflect in more depth on the second recommendation, namely to make A3ES's reports more accessible to a broader audience. The SC and the A3ES leadership agreed that sensitising a broad audience to the importance of quality in higher education remained highly relevant and merited higher priority. A major issue debated by both the SC and A3ES leadership was how best to achieve it.

The SC noted that A3ES already initiated several measures in recent years that directly addressed this recommendation. Most important among these are the biannual conferences organized by the agency in collaboration with CIPES addressing current issues of importance to Portuguese higher education. The SC has noted the large interest these conferences have created in the sector, and see the establishment of such arenas as important for stimulating broader knowledge exchange in higher education in Portugal.

The view was generally held that given the expected revision in 2015 of the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA* (ESG), the task might become even more pressing. A comprehensive communication strategy will be needed, with different approaches assigned for reports on programme and institutional accreditation, annual overview reports, and as well as the A3ES website. A number of suggestions were made. The SC, in making these suggestions, acknowledged that potential initiatives might impose several dilemmas for the agency; between the need for organizational expansion and the need to maintain its current profile as a small and efficient agency, and between serving the interests of the higher education sector versus serving a broader audience, ultimately paying more attention to accountability issues. In balancing between these dilemmas the SC has tried to maintain one of A3ES's strengths, i.e. its small and efficient office: Inflating A3ES with a full-blown public relations department would not, the SC felt, be welcomed by anyone in Portuguese higher education.

In any strategy to ensure A3ES reports are more accessible to a broader audience, training of reviewers in report-writing, possibly through an IT-based program, stands as an important element. Equally, however, it would in all likelihood not be feasible for A3ES to edit all accreditation reports 'in house'. Each year, for instance, more than 700 programme accreditation reports alone are produced. The SC agrees with A3ES that the primary audience of these reports, i.e. institutional leadership, quality managers, and teachers/researchers, are the priority. They require sophisticated and nuanced information to maintain and to enhance quality. One option that might render such training both more effective and more efficient, would be to involve reviewers in several accreditation and evaluation procedures rather than confining them to a single one. Such an initiative strikes the SC as worth further exploration especially if the move to institutional-level audits were put in hand.

A substantial grasp of the practicalities involved, it was suggested, would be to look at how the Danish accreditation council sets about alerting a broad audience to recent evaluation reports by means of regular press releases and broader status reports.

Another instance of 'good practice' that might help shape A3ES's communication strategy is the UK's QAA's publication series 'Learning from audit'. These summary reports are, in principle, directed towards an audience of quality assurance officers and leadership of higher education institutions. It is intended to assist them to develop their internal quality assurance mechanisms. Here, the SC is of the opinion that A3ES's Office of Research and Analysis could play an important part in compiling publications such as these: One particular issue for such a report that commanded wide support amongst SC members, could be how higher education institutions might benefit from the new (and mandatory) concept of learning outcomes to improve teaching and learning.

Finally the SC would wish to point out that higher education institutions, as the prime party responsible for their own quality, have an equal responsibility for making their quality known to a broad audience. This might even be regarded as an implication that follows on from ESG standard 1.7 as it applies to public information.

### **Some other elements from A3ES's self-evaluation report**

The SC took note that certain key and identifying details of A3ES's operation as one among quality assessment agencies, might have been afforded greater attention from the ENQA review team. In this setting, the SC would wish to commend the Office of Research and Analysis. The SC notes with satisfaction that the Office of Research and Analysis not only fulfils its mandate in providing analyses for the internal purposes of A3ES. It has, at the same time, also sustained its analytic output to the scholarly literature at the international level.

## **Differential treatment and ‘lighter touch’ evaluations**

The SC concurs with A3ES in developing a ‘lighter touch’ evaluation approach for higher education institutions and study programmes wherever possible. It awaits with interest the plans A3ES is currently developing to find empirical indications that are not just based on an higher education institution’s track record in quality assurance alone. A3ES quest for forward-looking elements that provide confidence to A3ES and other stakeholders is, the SC feels, both desirable and strategically central. Such elements should ensure that the institutions of higher education institution will remain placed for high quality in the years to come.

## **In conclusion**

The SC would wish to thank A3ES for the opportunity to discuss both current and future issues that follow from its activities and strategies. The discussion with A3ES leadership about sustaining, advancing and enhancing quality assurance in the higher education institutions of Portugal, was open and frank. It was, in the views of the SC, an exchange of high quality. And on this the SC would wish to go on record.