

2019 SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL REPORT

Introduction

The 2019 annual meeting of the Scientific Council (SC) addressed the recent external review report of the A3ES Agency by a panel from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) as well as the formal letter of approval of A3ES for inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) by the Register Committee. These materials also included a Request to the ENQA Review Panel by the EQAR Register Committee, a Clarification by the Review Panel, and an appeal by A3ES to the EQAR Register Committee for a review of its stated conditions for the agencies' membership.

These materials appear to pose political and legal issues for A3ES, which the Council does not feel it has the competence to address. We perceive our role to be that of a scientific panel, offering commentary based upon established research and our multi-national practical experience. From that perspective the Council discussed a number of issues raised by these assessments: 1) the use of student "peer reviewers" in A3ES evaluations; 2) possible means for A3ES to "enhance" student engagement and effectiveness in HEI instruction; and 3) potential future actions by the A3ES related to its acknowledged professional expertise and its respected biennial conferences.

1. The Use of "Peer Reviewers" in A3ES Evaluations

The *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (2015) defines "peer review experts" conducting QA reviews (Standard 2.4) as: "external quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s)." While the ENQA Review Panel supported the current composition of A3ES assessment teams, the EQAR Register Committee formally concluded the agency was in "partial compliance" with this standard, because students were neither involved in external teams conducting prior accreditation of study programs (NCE) nor in teams conducting compliance checks of existing programs implemented in new settings abroad.¹ Basing itself on the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG), the EQAR Register Committee declared that "students should be involved as expert panel members in all activities that involve an assessment by a panel of experts" and recommended A3ES continue to address this and other mentioned issues and resolve them at the earliest opportunity.

The A3ES appealed this "partial compliance" decision. A3ES argued the cited reviews are in accord with existing Portuguese legislation on QA administrative verifications, which must be based upon specialized technical reports by relevant experts. While the A3ES agreed "students in external review panels of study programs is both useful and desirable," the agency argued the addition of students who lack the needed expert competence would also add costs and complexity to the cited reviews.

As noted by Hopbach (2019) there is a challenge for the EQAR Register Committee in applying the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* given the increasingly complex HE context and changing political milieu of

¹ Note the QAA also only gained 'substantial compliance' from ENQA and EQAR for standard 2.4.

the EU. While the inclusion of at least one student member in QA review teams has become a normal procedure among EHEA colleague agencies, almost 50% of which represent non-EU countries, our Council notes student participation in international QA activities takes place in a range of ways. Given the demonstrated efforts by A3ES to engage students in its QA processes, we offer the following suggestions.

First, as also indicated by the ENQA Evaluation Panel, a distinction can be made between the process for validating a proposed new study program (e.g., the NCE process in Portugal) and the ongoing quality review process, which occurs thereafter at both institutional and national levels. Student engagement in these two processes might be rather different. If students are involved at all in the initial validation process, it could be from a “user” perspective, mainly focused on pedagogic processes embedded in a new study program, rather than on subject knowledge or content. In our view, student involvement in later quality review processes can offer real value added. But as is now the case in A3ES quality reviews, this value is more likely if the student brief is carefully crafted via preparatory training and a code of ethics governing the behavior of review team members.

The ENQA Review Panel also noted: “Though students are members of the Advisory Council, the panel heard that there is some work to be done to ensure that they are active members.” A3ES was also deservedly praised by the ENQA Review Panel for its selection and training of students who do participate in most of the agency’s external reviews. Therefore, if some of the students on the Advisory Council have not participated in this day-long training session for student evaluators, inviting them to do so would help make them more knowledgeable and possibly more active contributors to the Council. In addition, HEI students are often less experienced in academic committee work than professors or administrators, therefore providing guidance to students on the Advisory Council regarding means of effective participation may also be warranted. As a useful example, see The University of Western Australia’s “The Effective Committee Member:” (<http://www.governance.uwa.edu.au/committees/principles/meetings/set-up/member>).

As A3ES makes the transition towards a greater focus on institutional quality assurance through the Audit/Certification of Internal Quality Assurance Systems (ASIGQ), the ENQA Review Panel argued the Agency “must find ways of harnessing expert views on this” and recommended the inclusion of QA officers of higher education institutions on external review teams. The Council agrees that the ASIGQ process needs to include necessary expertise. Unfortunately, as noted in our last Panel report, recent research on standardized student evaluations of academic instruction in both the US and in France (Stark and Freishtat, 2014; Boring, Ottoboni, and Stark, 2016) raises serious questions about the validity, reliability, and effectiveness of these means of evaluating instruction. As the very informative case study of QA at the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany reveals (Ganseuer, and Pistor, 2016), standardized student evaluations, often mandated by the state, are frequently of little value to academic staff interested in improving their instruction. In preparation for Germany’s new systemic form of institutional QA, the University of Duisburg-Essen developed, tested and, required faculty adoption of more valid and useful means of student evaluation.

It is ironic that after several decades of quality reviews with an emphasis on student learning, institutional reviews in many countries -- including the US where standardized student evaluations are commonly required in all classes -- have done little to critique or improve the existing ineffective means of evaluating academic instruction. With regard the composition

of ASIGQ audit teams we would encourage A3ES to include at least one academic member with demonstrated scientific competence who is assigned to evaluate the validity, reliability, and impact of each institution's means of assessing and improving academic instruction. We believe this action would be one of the most truly effective responses to the concerns raised about student engagement by the EQAR Register Committee.

2) Means for A3ES to “Enhance” Student Engagement and Effectiveness in HEI Instruction

Accumulating research in “learning sciences” (Massy, 2016) is making significant contributions to our understanding of how better designed student engagement in instruction and more effective means of teaching and student assessment in HEIs can improve academic quality. What additional steps might be taken by A3ES in its next cycle to improve student learning? One of the strong compliments to A3ES by the ENQA Review Panel was with regard the Agency's Code of Ethics. The Code sets a clear standard for the ways in which all people employed by the Agency, including external assessment team members, carry out their work. The Panel reported “it was clear that staff and [external team members] are clear about their roles and familiar with the Quality Policy, the Code of Ethics and the need to manage conflicts of interest.”

Productive behavior in self-governing organizations like HEIs has been discovered to be particularly dependent upon their processes for socializing and invoking social norms, i.e., the shared understandings about actions that are obligatory, permitted, or forbidden (Ostrom, 2000). The influence of professional norms on academic research behavior is especially influential in the most highly ranked research universities (Paradeise and Thoenig, 2015). Within these universities academic quality in research is primarily sustained and improved through the social interactions that occur within and between academic subunits and among academic staff. These interactions include many formal and informal internal conversations as well as repeated self- and cross- evaluations, which strongly regulate the behavior of faculty members in differentiated academic units. The communal norms generated and communicated through the collegial processes of internal regulation and socialization appear to be a primary form of social control in elite research universities.

While academic staff may have been socialized to ethical research behavior during their graduate training, only in the last decade have EU universities placed greater emphasis on pedagogical skills for their research doctoral students or entering teaching staff members. This raises the relevant question of whether each Portuguese HEI has in place a stated code of ethics governing teaching behavior and student assessment for all instructional staff. And whether the collective staff of each institution is effectively communicating and enforcing such norms and standards.

As we mentioned in our last report, some national policies and selected universities have attempted to address this issue. Related national guidelines have been developed in the UK by the Higher Education Academy (2017). At the institutional level “Principles of Teaching and Learning” were developed by the Eberly Center (2017) at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in the US and provided as a guide to all instructional staff. These principles were derived from the respected research on effective university course design by the CMU Open Learning Institute.

Given the current emphasis of A3ES on institutional development of more effective internal QA, it might be discussed with the higher education institutions whether a national effort to develop appropriate ethical standards for guiding the instructional and student assessment behavior of academic staff would be warranted. Or, alternatively, whether the ASIGQ external reviews could include a review and evaluation of each institution's voluntary collective faculty efforts to develop, communicate, and monitor appropriate ethical standards. This institutional effort could also be stimulated, as outlined below, by A3ES' educational activities.

3) Potential Future Actions by A3ES Related to its Acknowledged Professional Expertise and Respected Biennial Conferences

The ENQA Review Panel specifically commended the high value placed on research by A3ES, the ongoing research activities of the Office of Research and Analysis, and the ways in which the Agency uses its own and others' research to inform and improve its practice. The panel also received unanimous positive feedback about the biennial conference hosted by the Agency, which provides an opportunity for all actors in the system to come together, learn and identify lines of improvement. As the A3ES places more focus on the development of institutional QA, the SC would like to suggest some ways in which the Agency's research expertise could better contribute to this new effort

We would recommend that some future A3ES conferences have a stronger focus on institutional-level policies and practices. These conferences would continue to bring together scholars and researchers on the following types of topics, but should also include relevant case analyses on each topic by institutional representatives from Portugal and other EU countries, each case demonstrating an effective approach to the relevant topic. The case of the University of Duisburg-Essen mentioned above suggests one such example.

Potential topics could include:

- Valid, reliable, and influential means for evaluating academic instruction.
- Ethical responsibilities in instruction and student assessment for academic staff.
- Efficient institutional resource allocation for instruction and research (see particularly Massy's (2016) analysis of "The Cost of Teaching" and "Financial Planning and Budgeting").

A number of EU nations have also created competitive grants to stimulate excellent educational performance in HEIs, for example the Quality Pact for Education in Germany and the four-year Quality Agreements in the Netherlands. In Portugal the current major incentive for increased institutional effort in QA appears to be the possibility of a "lighter touch" approach to program accreditation. A3ES might consider proposing to the Ministry a new, competitive institutional grant to develop creative/innovative solutions in monitoring student learning, and to stimulate and spread innovative ideas for making education more effective and efficient. This competitive award might be made available to all HEIs in the university and polytechnic sectors, both public and private. A3ES could be tasked with designing the grant criteria, evaluating the applicants, and making recommendations to the Ministry on the eventual awards. This type of activity could help motivate a positive competition on QA development among all HEIs in Portugal.

Conclusion

As noted in the ENQA Panel Report as well as the EQAR Register Committee notification, higher education in the EU is becoming more characterized by university autonomy, stronger institutional management and governance, and increased competition for students, academic staff, and financial resources. In this new context national academic quality assurance policies are necessarily adopting a greater focus on institutional “enhancement” and this is also the case in Portugal. We have therefore focused on some emerging approaches to institutional QA, which may be of value to the further development of A3ES.

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