

# A3ES

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Agência de Avaliação  
e Acreditação  
do Ensino Superior

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**ENQA COORDINATED EXTERNAL REVIEW OF A3ES**

**Self-Assessment Report**

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**November 2018**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Portuguese Parliament passed [Law 38/2007](#) of 16 August defining the new legal framework for the Portuguese higher education quality assurance system. Decree-Law 369/2007 of 5 November established the new Portuguese quality assurance agency - *Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior* (henceforth referred to as the Agency or A3ES) - and endorsed its statutes. The members of the Agency's Management Board were appointed in December 2008 and the Agency started its operation in 2009.

After an ENQA-coordinated positive evaluation in 2014, A3ES was granted the statute of Full-member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and became listed in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).

The formal purpose of the present review is both to comply with the requirements of Portuguese legislation and to maintain the full membership status in ENQA and the registration in EQAR. In addition, the A3ES will use the recommendations of this review process to improve its operations, with the expectation that discussions with the review team will provide an opportunity to improve our proposals for the future development of the system.

The Agency has some special characteristics that should be examined in the discussions with the review panel. These include:

- the use of an electronic platform for all the quality assessment and accreditation procedures, including reporting, additional information, messages to institutions and stakeholders, institutional responses, accreditation decisions, assessment processes;
- an office of research and analysis of the higher education system and its policies;
- an international advisory scientific council composed of leading researchers in quality assurance and higher education policies.

At this stage, the Agency has finished the first complete accreditation cycle of all the study programmes in the Portuguese higher education system and is finishing the institutional assessment of all higher education institutions operating in Portugal, while promoting the implementation of internal quality assurance systems in higher education institutions. The system is being changed for the second cycle of programme accreditation, with the introduction of a more flexible approach partly supported by audits of internal quality assurance systems, performance indicators and sampling. The Agency would like to discuss these plans with the panel.

## 2. THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS

This self-assessment report (SAR) is the final product of a self-assessment process conducted by the Agency for presentation to the review panel. The structure of the report follows closely the *Guide of content for the SAR* provided in the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews.

The report was extensively discussed with all staff-members and the Agency's Office of Research and Analysis has given a valuable contribution by collecting and organising data and contributing to its drafting.

The report was then submitted to the Agency's bodies, including the Board of Trustees, the Advisory Council and the Appeals Council. All relevant stakeholders are members of the Advisory Council, including representatives of the Council of Rectors, Council of Presidents of Polytechnics, Association of Private Institutions, Student Unions, Professional Organisations, Employers' Associations, Trade Unions, etc. Higher education institutions were consulted via their representative bodies. The Presidents of the external assessment teams were also consulted.

Lastly, after collecting the opinions of all consulted members, the final draft was produced, being approved by the Management Board.

The SAR and the report and recommendations of the review panel will be sent to the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education and will be published on the A3ES website.

### **3. THE PORTUGUESE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM**

#### **3.1. The education system**

The Comprehensive Law on the Education System (Law 46/86, of 14 October, subsequently amended by Law 115/97, of 19 September, and by Law 49/2005, of 30 August) establishes the framework for the education system.

School education comprises the following stages: basic, secondary and higher education. Pre-school education is optional and intended for children from the age of three to the age for admission into the first cycle of basic education.

Basic education is universal, compulsory and free, and consists of three consecutive cycles. The first cycle lasts 4 years, the second 2 and the third 3 years.

Secondary education is also compulsory and comprises a 3-year cycle (10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> years of schooling). Permeability is guaranteed between courses mainly oriented to working life (technological courses) and courses oriented to continuation of studies at higher education level (general courses).

Higher education is provided at universities and polytechnics (binary system), both public and private.

#### **3.2. Recent developments of the higher education system**

At the time of the 1974 revolution, the Portuguese higher education system was an elite system with low participation rate, around 7%. In the aftermath of the revolution there was an explosive rise in demand for higher education and the government reacted by implementing a generalised *numerus clausus* system. This political decision resulted in rising social tensions instigated by students who could not enter higher education, and their families. These tensions were met by two simultaneous processes: by allowing the development of a private sector of higher education and by implementing, following advice from the World Bank, a polytechnic sector providing shorter and more vocational degrees.

In the academic year 1983/84 public universities were responsible for 76.2% of total enrolments, with 12.6% in public polytechnics and 11.2% in the private sector. The expansion of the system has resulted in changes of the relative contribution of the different sectors (see Figure 1), because of a very fast initial increase of enrolments in public polytechnics and the private sector, while enrolments in public universities increased at a slower pace. For example, from 1990 to 2000, total enrolments increased by 105.8%, but enrolments in public universities only increased 62% while in public polytechnics and in the private sector they increased 225% and 121 %, respectively.

The number of traditional students has been declining due to persistent low birth rates. To counteract this trend, the Ministry has taken a number of initiatives, including legislation (2005) to make easier the access of mature students by decreasing the lower limit age from 25 to 23 years and transferring to higher education institutions (HEI) the responsibility for the selection of candidates. The results of the new policy were immediate and the number of new mature students jumped from 551 in 2004/05 to 10,856 in 2006/07 and 11,773 in 2007/08 [1].

However, the number of these students has been declining (8,231 in 2011/12, 6,572 in 2012/13 and 5,513 in 2013/14).

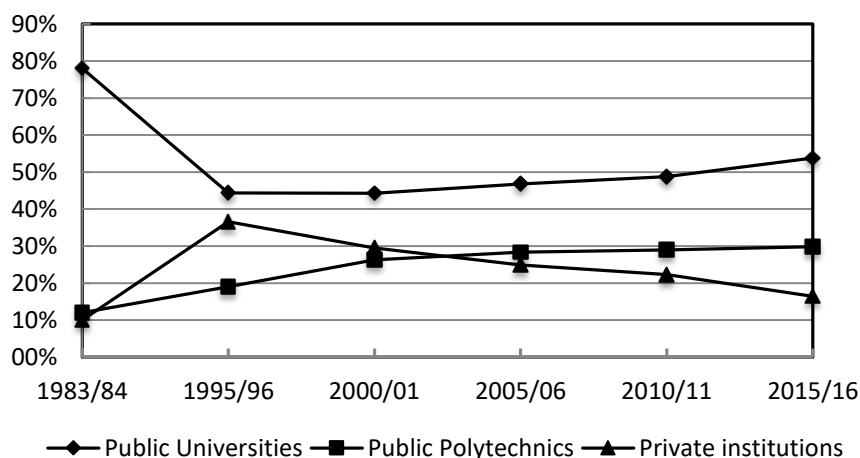


Figure 1 – Enrolments (%) in the different higher education sectors

Table 1 presents the annual enrolments by sector and for the whole system and confirms that enrolments in the private sector have been decreasing, with this sector losing about 53,600 students (47%) from 2000/01 to 2013/14. The public sector shows a more erratic behaviour, with several ups and downs, although enrolments in the sector over this period have increased by almost 28,000 students (10%).

Table 1 – Students enrolled in Portuguese HE

		2000/01	2005/06	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18*
Public	University	171 735	171 575	198 380	191 707	185 076	184 698	187 078
	Polytechnic	101 795	103 946	103 274	100 652	105 287	107 732	110 152
	Total	273 530	275 521	301 654	292 359	290 363	292 430	297 230
Private	University	81 544	61 197	44 495	42 666	40 956	40 894	44 048
	Polytechnic	32 629	30 594	16 051	14 633	15 028	15 655	17 641
	Total	114 173	91 791	60 546	57 299	55 984	56 549	61 689
TOTAL		387 703	367 312	362 200	349 658	347 347	349 979	358 919

- Provisional values for the 1<sup>st</sup> semester, including CTeSP (see 3.3).

The Portuguese HE system comprises at present 113 institutions, 16 in the University public sector, 20 in the Polytechnic public sector, 23 in the University private sector, 53 in the Polytechnic private sector and the Catholic University with campus in 4 different locations.

### 3.3. Structure of the higher education system

The university and the polytechnic subsystems are differentiated by their conceptual and formative matrices, although the definition of the borderline has always been rather controversial. One can say that polytechnic institutions are more oriented towards professional training, providing a scientific and technical education more focused on the transfer of existing knowledge to meet today's needs, rather than on the advancement of knowledge to meet the future needs of society and industry.

The degree structure was changed in 2006 to comply with the Bologna process. Universities and polytechnics award the degrees of *licenciado* (*licenciatura*) and *mestre* (master).

Universities may also award the degree of *mestre* after an integrated cycle of studies of 10 to 12 semesters, in cases where, in order to access the right to practice a regulated profession, such duration is determined by a EU Directive or results from a consolidated practice in the EU member states.

The degree of *doutor* (PhD) is awarded only at university institutions with qualified teaching staff, adequate facilities and an accumulated scientific experience.

The Portuguese higher education system also includes short-cycle higher education programmes (*Cursos Técnicos Superiores Profissionais – CTeSP*), taught in polytechnics. CTeSP programmes award a higher education diploma and have duration of two years (120 ECTS).

### **3.4. Access and equity**

Access to higher education complies with the constitutional principles of “equality of opportunities” and “democratisation of the educational system”, aiming at the “enhancement of the educational, cultural and scientific level of the Country” (article 76.2 of Constitution).

In Portugal, access to higher education is governed by a generalised system of *numerus clausus* that applies to all study programmes, university or polytechnic, public or private, and not only to a few programmes in very high demand. Students compete for a place in a public institution by indicating six possible combinations of institution/study programme by order of preference, relying on an access grade that is a weighted combination of their upper secondary school grades and grades in national examinations for the core scientific areas.

The percentage of female students is higher than 50% for all types of degrees, except for integrated masters, where they only represent 49.5%, probably due to the fact that many integrated masters are engineering programmes. Students show preference for programmes in the area of Social Sciences, Commerce and Law, followed by Engineering, Transforming and Building Industries and the Health sector. The presence of female students is very strong in areas such as Education and Teacher Training (85%) and Health (79%), with Engineering and Sports being the only areas where they are a minority (26% and 27%, respectively).

### **3.5. Autonomy and Governance**

In 2005 a new government decided to rely on the advice of international organisations, such as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and EUA (European University Association), to increase the internationalisation of the system.

So, the legal framework was deeply reviewed, covering almost every aspect of higher education: Law 62/2007 (RJIES) established the new legal framework for HEIs; Law 38/2007 defined a new quality assurance system; Decree-Law 369/2007 established a new quality agency; Decree-Law 74/2006 defined a new degree structure compatible with the Bologna process. Other legislation dealt with academic careers of public universities and polytechnics.



The RJIES was presented as the implementation of New Public Management (NPM) in Portuguese HE. The new Law strongly reduced collegiality and enforced the presence of external stakeholders in the main governance bodies of all institutions.

The most important decision-making body in public universities is the General Council that detains most powers that previously were held by the University Assembly and the Senate. It has a small number of members: 15 to 35, depending on the dimension of the institution. At least 50% of its members are academic staff and researchers, external stakeholders represent at least 30% and students represent at least 15%. The presence of non-academic staff is optional. Academic staff and researchers and students elect their own representatives. The elected members co-opt the external stakeholders. The General Council elects one of the external stakeholders as Chairman. The Council ratifies alterations to the statutes, elects or dismisses the Rector and appraises his decisions.

The institutional strategies are defined by the Rector, who presents proposals to the Council and holds decision power on matters that were previously under the remit of the Senate, such as the disciplinary power; creation, suspension and extinction of study programmes; the number of new admissions and enrolments; allocation of social support for students.

The provisions of the law are similar for polytechnics, also with elimination of collegiality and having a president instead of a rector. For private institutions the legislation recognises the role of their founding entity and adapts the rules governing the statutes to the private nature of the institutions.

The new legal framework has introduced the possibility of a higher education institution becoming a public foundation operating under private law. Higher education foundations have, in principle, more management flexibility, for instance in the areas of finance and staff management, than institutions operating under public law. Presently, there are five universities and one polytechnic operating under the foundation regime.

### **3.6. Quality Assurance: a historical perspective**

The University Autonomy Act (Law 108/88 of 24 September) awarded public universities a considerable degree of autonomy, although it commanded the government to present to the Parliament a proposal of legislation regulating the assessment and supervision of the activities of universities. The Polytechnic Autonomy Act (Law 54/90 of 5 September) awarded autonomy to public polytechnic institutes, although to a lower degree when compared to public universities. The activity of private institutions was regulated by Decree-Law 16/94 of 22 January (later including changes resulting from Law 37/94 of 11 November and Decree-Law 94/99, of 23 March). Although private institutions have very extensive autonomy in what concerns financial matters and staff, their pedagogic autonomy was limited and they needed a prior permission of the Ministry before being able to start, suspend or cancel study programmes. The law also commanded the Ministry with responsibility for higher education with the task of ensuring the assessment of the pedagogic, scientific and cultural quality of private higher education, in parallel with that of public higher education.

Expansion and diversification of HE, as well as the increase of student enrolments in fields that were of economic importance, were explicit government policy goals for many years after

the revolution. Over this expansion period public policies were mainly concerned with increasing enrolments at any cost without paying much attention to quality. Several factors have contributed to establishing a consensus around the necessity of setting up a quality assessment system, namely the idea that there were quality problems due to the very fast expansion of the system.

In Portugal, the initial quality assurance activities were an initiative of the Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities (CRUP) that organised a pilot experiment in 1993 following the Dutch methodology. The Quality Assessment Act, Law 38/94 of 21 November, passed by the Parliament, followed closely the CRUP's exercise. The Foundation of Portuguese Universities, similar to the Dutch VSNU, became the agency responsible for the assessment of public universities after being recognised by the Ministry.

The first assessment round was completed in 1999 and included only the public universities and the Catholic University. The public polytechnics and the private higher education institutions took some time to join this process. This was the result of the government's decision to define the global coordination of the quality assurance system and to establish the requisites for the recognition of new sectorial agencies. This was a lengthy process that had to wait for the publication of the Decree-Law 205/98 of 11 July, which created an overall coordination council (CNAVES). New agencies were recognised in 1998 for the public polytechnics (ADISPOR) and in 1999 for the private sector (APESP).

The second assessment round began in 2000 and included all institutions, while CNAVES became responsible for ensuring the "harmony, cohesion and credibility" of the overall system and carrying out the meta-evaluation of the system, if necessary using foreign experts [2].

In 2005, a new government commissioned from ENQA a review of the Portuguese quality assurance system. The report of the ENQA panel was used for drafting the legislation framework regulating the new quality assurance system and its compliance with the ESG [3]. In 2007 the Parliament passed a Quality Assessment Act (Law 38/2007) defining the new quality framework, and the government passed Decree-Law 369/2007 defining the statutes of the present Assessment and Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (A3ES).

### 3.7. Legal Framework

A first essential aspect of the legal framework on higher education is that *university autonomy* is a fundamental Constitutional right (article 76.2 in its original version). The main legal documents regulating the area of higher education are:

- a) The Comprehensive Law on the Education System (Law 46/86, of 14 October, amended by Law 115/97, of 19 September, and by Law 49/2005, of 30 August), defining the scope and organisational structure of higher education and the conditions for access.
- b) [Decree-Law 74/2006](#), of 24 March, amended and republished by Decree-Law 65/2018, of 16 August, regulating the organisation of higher education degrees and its adaptation to the Bologna process.
- c) [Law 38/2007](#), of 16 August – framework law for quality assurance.
- d) [Law 62/2007](#), of 10 September – framework law for higher education institutions.

- e) [Decree-Law 369/2007](#), of 5 November, creating a new quality assurance agency and defining its statutes.
- f) Decree-Law 205/2009, of 31 August, regulating the academic career for public universities.
- g) Decree-Law 207/2009, of 31 August, regulating the academic career for public polytechnics.

## References

- [1] A. Amaral and A. Magalhães, Access policies: between institutional policies and the search for the equality of opportunities, *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, **15.2**, 155–169 (2009).
- [2] Amaral, A. and Rosa, M.J. (2004) Portugal: Professional and Academic Accreditation – The Impossible Marriage? in S. Schwarz and D. Westerheijden (Eds.), *Accreditation and Evaluation in the European Higher Education Area*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht.
- [3] ENQA (2006), *Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Portugal – An Assessment of the Existing System and Recommendations for a Future System*, Helsinki, ENQA.

## 4. A3ES – HISTORY, PROFILE AND ACTIVITIES

### 4.1. Organisation

The new Assessment and Accreditation Agency (A3ES) was established as a private foundation, independent both from the government and from higher education institutions. The organisation chart of the Agency is presented in Figure 2.

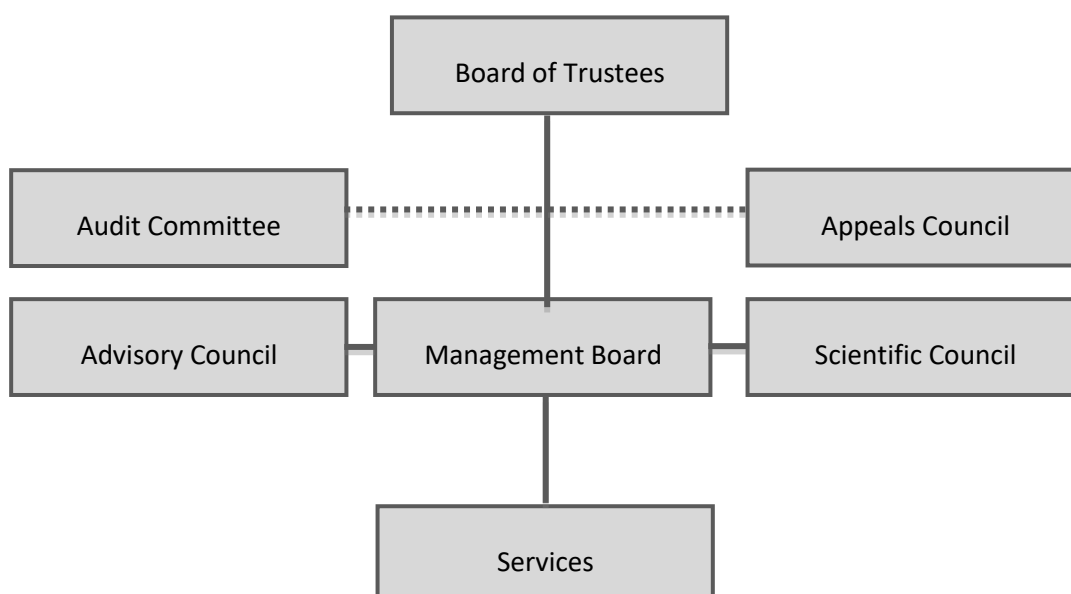


Figure 2 – Organisation chart of the Agency

The [Board of Trustees](#) is composed of five members appointed by the Council of Ministers in consultation with the bodies representing the higher education institutions (public and private, universities and polytechnics). The period in office is five years, which can be extended for a further additional year but cannot be renewed. The Board of Trustees has, amongst its areas of authority, the mandate to appoint the members of the Management Board and of the Appeals Council; formulates views about the operation of the Management Board and issues recommendations for its operation; reviews the Agency's Annual Activity Plan, the Annual Management Report, the budget and the accounting.

The [Management Board](#) is responsible for performing all the necessary actions for fulfilling the Agency's objectives that the statutes do not commit to other bodies. The Board of Trustees appoints the members of the Management Board (a maximum of 4 executive members and 3 non-executive members) for a 4-year term of office that can be renewed. At present the Management Board is comprised of 4 executive members and 3 non-executive members. The executive members were appointed on 18 December 2008, being reappointed in 2012 for another term of office and again in 2016. The non-executive members were appointed in 2016.

The Management Board enjoys extensive powers of representation and management and its mandate can only be terminated by a decision taken by four fifths of the total number of members of the Board of Trustees based in ponderous motives such as permanent disability, serious violation of the duties or obvious incapacity. The Management Board is responsible for starting any assessment and accreditation procedure; approval of reports resulting from assessment and accreditation procedures and making final assessment and accreditation decisions (if necessary the Board's decisions may not follow the recommendations of the external assessment teams); the potential adoption of the results of assessment or accreditation carried out by other quality assurance bodies, national or foreign; the approval of regulations in the area of quality assurance in higher education.

The [Audit Committee](#) is responsible for checking the legality, regularity and proper management of the Agency's finances and equity, consisting of three members, with a three-year mandate, renewable once for a further three-year period, who are appointed by the member of the Government responsible for Finances. One of the members must be an official auditor.

The [Appeals Council](#) is the body for appeals against the decisions of the Management Board on assessment and accreditation. The Appeals Council consists of five members, appointed by the Board of Trustees, with relevant professional experience, without permanent ties to Portuguese higher education institutions, and must include people with experience in foreign counterpart bodies. At present the president of the Appeals Council is a judge, former president of the Portuguese Supreme Administrative Court, and the remaining members are two retired academics (a former rector of a private university and a former dean of a public university school), and two foreign experts (Dr. Andree Sursock and Dr. Pdraig Walsh).

The [Advisory Council](#) is a body that advises on matters of higher education quality assurance and provides support for the decisions of the Management Board. The Advisory Council must issue an official opinion about the Agency's annual activity plan and its general activity lines and strategic orientation. The membership of the Advisory Council integrates representatives of higher education stakeholders, including the Council of Rectors of Portuguese [Public] Universities; the Coordinating Council of the [Public] Polytechnic Higher Institutions; the Portuguese Association of Private Higher Education; the student unions for higher education, one of them representing university higher education and the other representing polytechnic higher education; the existing professional associations; the Council of Associated [Research] Laboratories; associations representing industry, commerce and services and agriculture; trade union confederations; interested ministries; up to five specialists co-opted by the Council itself.

The **Scientific Council** is a non-statutory body integrating six foreign experts with recognised international competency in the area of higher education quality assurance. The Council convenes once a year to discuss a report of the Agency's annual activity and its development proposals. The Council produces a report containing its views and recommendations aiming at improving the performance of the Agency. The members of the Council are at present:

- David Dill, Professor Emeritus of Public Policy, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA.

- Don Westerheijden, Senior Research Associate, Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), the Netherlands.
- Bjørn Stensaker, Professor at Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Oslo, and Research Professor at the Norwegian Institute for Studies in Research and Higher Education (NIFU), Norway.
- Maarja Beerkens, Assistant Professor at the Institute of Public Administration at Leiden University, the Netherlands.
- Murray Saunders, Co-Director of the Centre for Higher Education Research and Evaluation and Professor of Evaluation in Education and Work, Lancaster University, UK.
- Roberto Moscati, Professor of Dipartimento di Scienze Umane per la Formazione “Ricardo Massa”, Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy.

## **4.2. Financing**

The independence of the Agency is also clearly reflected in the financing rules. The Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education transferred to the Agency in 2009, as initial funding, the sum of one million Euros, as a set-up subsidy, and a financial contribution of three million Euros for installation. Following this initial funding, the State shall no longer be responsible for providing any further regular funds to the Agency, except for the payment of any rendered services commissioned by the State.

The services provided by the Agency are paid for by the respective recipients, although the prices charged by the Agency are limited, both in terms of the amount of the actual cost of the service and in terms of practices in this field registered at the level of the European system of quality assurance in higher education.

Assets of the Agency consist of the above mentioned initial set-up provision granted by the State and of own revenues, as well as any other assets, rights and obligations or economic content which it comes to own. The Agency's own revenues include the fees due for assessments and accreditations; contributions or grants awarded by any entities, as well as gifts, inheritances or bequests; the revenue from services rendered to third parties and from the sale of its publications and studies.

After the initial financial contribution from the State for establishing the Agency, no further transfers of public funds were made, as foreseen, so its revenues are the result of services provided by the Agency and paid for by the respective recipients, which has made the Agency financially independent from the public budget.

## **4.3. The operational strategy of the Agency**

Under the legal framework established in 2007, the Agency is responsible for the assessment and accreditation of all higher education institutions and their degree awarding study programmes, taking into account the contribution of internal quality assurance systems.

The legislation also committed the Agency to complete an initial accreditation of the study programmes that were already in operation, in view of removing those identified as of the poorest quality.

The Agency initiated its activities in January 2009. In order to respect legal requirements, it adopted a strategy based on the following essential points:

- a) To computerise the whole process;
- b) To implement a system of prior-accreditation of all proposals for new study programmes to begin in 2010/2011 and onwards;
- c) To implement a system of preliminary accreditation of all study programmes in operation at the time the Agency started its activities, checking that they complied with the minimum legal requirements – by the end of the academic year 2010/2011;
- d) To develop a five-year first cycle of assessment/accreditation of study programmes, implemented experimentally in October 2010 and running smoothly as from 2011/2012;
- e) To implement a process of institutional assessment in 2017, as a round-up of the five-year cycle of programme accreditation;
- f) To discuss with the institutions the standards and procedures regarding accreditation;
- g) To foster the implementation of internal quality assurance systems;
- h) To internationalise the Agency.

A brief account of the actions undertaken to implement the outlined strategy in relation to quality assurance processes is presented next.

#### ***4.3.1. The preliminary accreditation process***

The preliminary accreditation process started by asking institutions to assume responsibility for adjusting their educational provision to their development strategy and available resources, allowing for the discontinuation of study programmes which were no longer viable or were already being discontinued.

The study programmes with performance indicators above a given threshold were exempt from a full assessment/accreditation process at that stage, being considered as pre-accredited until the regular operation of the accreditation system started in the academic year 2011/2012. Whenever institutions were unable to produce sufficient evidence that the study programmes they wished to maintain complied with minimum quality standards, these went through the 2010 experimental assessment/accreditation process by external assessment teams that included foreign experts.

This allowed the testing of the assessment procedures using a limited number of cases. It also gave a clear sign to institutions and society that the Agency could act in an efficient and effective way by removing study programmes with evident quality problems.

The preliminary accreditation proved to be quite useful to start cleaning up the higher education system. From the 5,262 study programmes that were officially recognised, 3,384 received preliminary accreditation, 307 were accredited and 114 had a negative decision after a site-visit in the scope of the experimental assessment process, and 1,457 were discontinued by the institutions themselves.

So, as a consequence of preliminary accreditation, a total of 1,571 study programmes (30%) were removed, but mostly as result of initiatives taken by the institutions themselves (28%), rather than the direct intervention of the Agency (2%). This development confirms that

the A3ES's strategy has been effective, while at the same time promoting change in permanent dialogue with institutions.

#### **4.3.2. Prior accreditation of new study programmes**

New study programmes that institutions propose to run must undergo a process of prior accreditation. This process is based on analysis, by an external assessment team, of the report presented by the institution. Site-visits from the team only occur in exceptional circumstances, e.g. medical study programmes or those associated to the creation of a new institution.

Every year, from 1<sup>st</sup> September to 15<sup>th</sup> October, the Agency's electronic platform is available for submission of new study programme proposals to initiate operation in the following academic year. A total of 2,357 proposals were submitted until 2017, of which 1,137 (48%) were accredited, 381 (16%) were accredited with conditions (for a shorter period) and 839 (36%) were not accredited. Figure 3 shows the evolution of results since 2010.

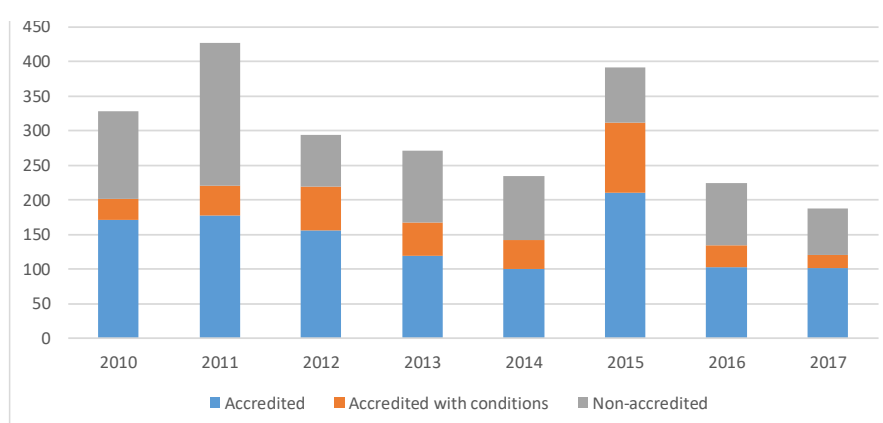


Figure 3 – Evolution of results of prior accreditation of new study programmes

#### **4.3.3. The regular assessment/accreditation cycle**

As foreseen, the first cycle of regular assessments of all study programmes with preliminary accreditation was undertaken from 2012 to 2016. This was done by area of education and training in order to include all the study programmes belonging to a particular area in the same visit to each institution, which made it possible to reduce the costs of the operation and also give the external assessment teams a global vision of the situation of each area or department.

The same concern applies to the accreditation renewal of study programmes with prior accreditation or other programmes non-aligned with the regular accreditation cycle. A special procedure ([PERA](#)) was adopted to guarantee its alignment with the regular cycle and, consequently, the integrated assessment of study programmes by area of education and training.

Figure 4 presents the results of this first regular assessment/accreditation cycle. It is interesting to notice that the percentage of negative decisions by the Agency is quite small, however a significant number of the 3,613 study programmes with preliminary accreditation were discontinued by the institutions (mainly before the assessment was due), and at present only 2,488 of those programmes remain. This shows that institutions have continued to



reorganise their educational provision after the preliminary accreditation, in order to correct the excesses resulting from the phase of adaptation to the Bologna Process, which in Portugal happened in a very short period of time, compelling the institutions to present proposals that in some cases were not very well thought out.

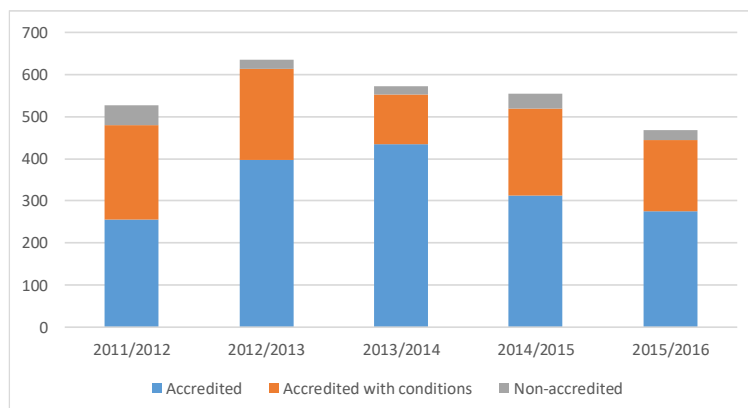


Figure 4 – Results of assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation

#### 4.3.4. Internal quality assurance systems

As has often been emphasised in its operational plans, the Agency upholds the principle that the ultimate responsibility for the quality of teaching lies, above all, with the institutions themselves, who should therefore create suitable internal structures and procedures to promote and assure quality. It is the responsibility of the Agency to carry out audits with a view to certification of the institutions' internal quality assurance procedures. This is a voluntary process.

Following widespread public discussion, the Agency adopted a [Reference Framework for Internal Quality Assurance Systems in Higher Education Institutions](#), as a set of reference points aiming to provide guidelines to aid institutions in the design and development of their internal quality assurance systems, preferably based on the structures and procedures they already have at their disposal and according to the profile and requirements of each institution.

Based on this, the structure of a model of audits for internal quality assurance systems was developed with a view to their certification.

In 2012 the Agency carried out an experimental exercise using the audit model with the voluntary participation of five higher education institutions. This experimental exercise was completed in January 2013, and the audit process became available to all institutions that, in November of each year, express their interest, thus allowing for the organisation of audits in the upcoming year (see also section 12.1).

#### 4.3.5. Institutional assessment

In compliance with the provisions of the framework law for quality assurance (Law 38/2007), A3ES launched in 2017 the process of institutional assessment and accreditation, including the state of development of internal quality assurance systems. This process works as a round-up exercise of the just-accomplished process of assessment/accreditation of all study

programmes in operation, covering the whole higher education system simultaneously. A total of 113 institutions are involved in the process.

The institutional assessment, which distinguishes between the missions of university institutions and polytechnic institutions, allows, in particular, to verify whether institutions comply with the operating conditions defined in the framework law for higher education institutions (Law 62/2007), and if the assumptions for the recognition of public interest (following the study promoted for this effect by the DGES) are maintained.

#### **4.4. The second regular assessment/accreditation cycle**

As a consequence of the strategy adopted by the Agency, the first regular cycle of assessment/accreditation has corresponded to a systematic and meticulous assessment of every study programme in operation, contributing to the removal of programmes that could not meet the minimum required conditions. Since this work is complete, the higher education system has been basically cleaned up and it would not make sense to maintain the same exhaustive and expensive procedures for the whole educational provision.

The institutional assessment, at the end of the regular cycle of programme accreditation, has permitted a global view on the institutions and, in particular, on their internal quality assurance systems, allowing for the identification of areas of excellence within institutions where more flexible accreditation procedures may be applied.

Having these concerns in mind, the Agency has designed a lighter-touch approach for the second regular assessment/accreditation cycle, taking place in the period 2018-2023, grounded on the principle of institutional responsibility for the quality of programmes. This new approach, which is further detailed in section 10.2, is based on a combination of institutional audits with a sampling system of programme accreditation. It will be a selective process, applying only for institutions with certified internal quality assurance systems and in areas where the institution shows high quality indicators in relation to the qualification of teaching staff, the quality of research<sup>1</sup> and its performance in the first accreditation cycle. For institutions and/or areas where these criteria are not met, the regular process of assessment/accreditation of all study programmes, including a site-visit, will proceed.

The Management Board is aware that this approach may have the perverse effect of putting the external assessment pressure and the corresponding financial burden mainly on the more fragile institutions. This concern is taken into consideration in the definition of fees for the services provided, by establishing also a fee for the simplified assessment processes aiming to cover basic personal and operational expenses (§2 of [Decision 925/2018](#) of the Management Board).

As in the previous round, after the five-year assessment/accreditation cycle of programme accreditation the second regular cycle will conclude in 2023 with a new exercise of institutional assessment.

In view of the fact that all the study programmes presently in operation have already been through at least one Agency's accreditation process, in which syllabus and contents were

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<sup>1</sup> The differences in the research profile of universities and polytechnics will be taken into account.

thoroughly examined, it was possible in the new cycle to shorten the guidelines for programme assessment/ accreditation, as explained in section 14, putting a greater emphasis on the improvements since the previous assessment, and on teaching staff qualifications and the outcomes of teaching and research. Consequently, the guidelines for internal and external programme assessment were revised and simplified.

#### **4.5. Office of Research and Analysis**

One important unit in the Agency's organisational structure is its Office of Research and Analysis, which allows the Agency's research staff to shift between more analytical and more hands-on work in the processes of assessment and accreditation. This unit is instrumental in strengthening the Agency's knowledge capital. This applies only to the Agency's staff hired as researchers, who also participate in visits to institutions as project coordinators. Other staff members are hired as project coordinators but, in general, do not have research activities on a regular basis, although they are encouraged to enrol in post-graduate programmes, namely at PhD level, and they participate in conferences and training sessions.

The Office of Research and Analysis is responsible for a large number of international scientific publications, including books and research papers, and it also produces reports on the Portuguese higher education system (see also section 9.4, on thematic analysis).

## 5. HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE ACTIVITIES

As seen in the previous section, the Agency conducts the following quality assurance processes on a regular basis:

- a) At programme level
  - **Prior accreditation** of new study programmes in Portugal (**NCE**) – All new degree awarding study programmes (bachelor, master, integrated master and doctoral degrees) must undergo an *ex-ante* accreditation process before their implementation to ensure that they comply with the applicable legal requirements.
  - **Assessment/accreditation** of study programmes in operation (**ACEF**) – All degree awarding study programmes in operation (bachelor, master, integrated master and doctoral degrees) are periodically submitted to an *ex-post* assessment/reaccreditation process to check whether the assumptions which led to the prior or previous accreditation are being met.
- b) At institutional level
  - **Institutional Assessment (AINST)** – A compulsory process carried out at the end of a complete cycle of assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation, which focuses on the performance of the higher education institution considered as a whole, as well as on each of its organisational units, with a view to provide a general and integrated overview of the Institution and each of its autonomous organisational structures. Institutional Assessment leads to a decision on the accreditation of the institution and its organisational units.
  - **Audit/certification of internal quality assurance systems (ASIGQ)** – A voluntary process with the purpose of auditing the institutional strategy for quality and how it translates into an effective and well-documented system of quality assurance, focusing on the processes and procedures for the promotion and assurance of quality within the institution. The audit process may lead to the certification of the internal quality assurance system.

The aforementioned processes apply to all institutions offering degree awarding higher education study programmes in Portugal.

Some Portuguese higher education institutions offer a (limited) number of study programmes in Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa and in Macau. If the degrees are Portuguese, the institution must apply to A3ES to submit the study programmes to the assessment/accreditation process. All the usual procedures and criteria are applied in this process, including the site-visit. So far, eight programmes under such conditions were submitted, operating in Macau (4 programmes, 2 accredited and 2 under way), Angola (one programme, accredited) and São Tomé e Príncipe (3 programmes, under way).

## 6. PROCESSES AND METHODOLOGIES

The assessment processes (*Assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation*, *Institutional Assessment* and *Audit/certification of internal quality assurance systems*) include the usual phases of: self-assessment; external peer-review assessment with a site-visit and the drafting of a report containing a proposal for decision and recommendations for improvement; decision by the Management Board on the accreditation or certification request; publication of the assessment report, together with the decision taken and, if available, the response from the institution; follow-up of recommendations. In case of appeal, the decision from the Appeals Council is also published.

The process of *Prior accreditation of new study programmes* follows the same methodology but, as a rule, it does not include a site-visit, except in particularly complex programmes (e.g., in programmes of Medicine or when associated to the creation of a new institution). The external assessment team may, however, ask for further documentation on the programme or clarify unclear aspects with the institution.

The same applies to the special procedure [PERA](#) referred to in section 4.3.3, which follows the same methodologies and guidelines as process ACEF, except that it may not include a site-visit and leads to a shorter renewal period as necessary to promote the alignment with the regular assessment/accreditation cycle.

The normal validity period for an accreditation or certification decision is six years and its renewal implies a new assessment/accreditation procedure. The same applies to the certification of internal quality assurance systems.

Formal follow-up procedures are defined for the case of conditional accreditation of a study programme or an institution and for the audit process.

The applications for all processes are submitted on an electronic platform, by filling in the appropriate pre-determined form/guidelines, which include, as an appendix, detailed instructions regarding the required information. Each year the platform is open, at predetermined publicised periods, for the submission of applications (1<sup>st</sup> September to 15<sup>th</sup> October for requesting prior accreditation of new study programmes; 16<sup>th</sup> October to 28<sup>th</sup> December for assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation; 1<sup>st</sup> February to 30<sup>th</sup> April for the Audit process).

As explained in section 4.3.5, the process of Institutional Assessment is run only every six years, as a round-up exercise at the end of each regular cycle of assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation. It was run in 2017, after the 1<sup>st</sup> regular cycle 2012-2016 of programme accreditation, and will, therefore, be run again in 2023 towards the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> regular cycle 2018-2023.

The following guidelines are publicly available on the Agency's site:

- [Guidelines for requesting prior accreditation of new study programmes;](#)
- [Guidelines for self-assessment of study programmes in operation;](#)
- [Guidelines for institutional self-assessment;](#)
- [Guidelines for self-assessment of internal quality assurance systems.](#)

Similarly, the reports from the external assessment team are also submitted online, on the corresponding form/guidelines:

- [Guidelines for prior accreditation of new study programmes;](#)
- [Guidelines for external assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation;](#)
- [Guidelines for external institutional assessment;](#)
- [Guidelines for auditing internal quality assurance systems.](#)

The selection of experts for the external assessment teams is based on the appropriateness of their curriculum and profile to the functions to be performed, their independence in relation to the institution or study programme to be assessed, and the balance of both gender and geographical origin taking into account the national higher education network, without prejudice of the previous requirements. A formal document on [Norms for the appointment and conduct of the external assessment team](#) was adopted, establishing the procedures and criteria for the selection and appointment of experts, the rules to prevent conflict of interests and the norms of conduct (see also section 9.6, item No-conflict-of-interest mechanisms).

Programme assessment/accreditation teams include one student and one expert recruited internationally from among recognised specialists in the relevant academic, scientific or professional area.

The preparation and training of experts, through a training programme, is sponsored by the Agency, as detailed in section 10.4. For foreign experts, a documentation kit is sent to them beforehand and there is a coaching session by the team's president prior to the visit.

A qualified staff member of the Agency, who acts as project coordinator and liaises with the Management Board, provides appropriate support to each team.

Further documentation on processes and methodologies applied for each QA activity includes, *inter alia*:

- The [Assessment Handbook](#), which deals in detail with the prevailing assessment and accreditation processes, namely the concepts, principles and norms for internal and external assessment of study programmes, including provisions for the composition and functioning of the external assessment teams, the visits, the drafting of external assessment reports and their publication.
- The [Simplified Assessment Handbook](#), which summarises the main concepts, mechanisms and criteria for assessment and accreditation of study programmes in operation thus facilitating its consultation by the experts in the external assessment teams or other interested stakeholders.
- The [Manual for Institutional Assessment](#), aiming to lay down the objectives, organisation and functioning of the institutional assessment process.
- The [Manual for the Audit Process](#), presenting the concepts, procedures and criteria underpinning the auditing and certification of internal quality assurance systems.

## 7. INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE AGENCY

A3ES has in place adequate procedures and mechanisms to assure and promote the quality and integrity of its processes and activities, which are properly documented in the Agency's [Quality Manual](#).

A detailed analysis of A3ES's internal quality assurance system is presented in section 9.6, with respect to ESG standard 3.6. Its main elements may be summarised as follows:

- A formal [Quality Policy Statement](#), which defines not only the core elements of its quality policy but also the main procedures and tools for promoting and improving quality and accountability;
- A [Code of Ethics](#) that applies to all the Agency's employees and collaborators, including the members of external assessment teams;
- [Norms for the appointment and conduct of the external assessment team](#), including no-conflict-of-interest mechanisms;
- Regular collection of external feedback, namely through online surveys and the regular consultation of the [Advisory Council](#);
- An annual meeting of the international Scientific Council, whose reports ([Reports of the Scientific Council](#)) are published on the website;
- Formal and informal internal feedback, such as meetings with project coordinators and surveys;
- Internal reflection on the results of external and internal feedback and their incorporation in the decision-making processes. In particular, [Reports on the surveys' results and improvement measures](#) are circulated to stakeholders and published on the website (these reports are available only in Portuguese);
- Publication of annual [Activity Reports](#);
- Publication of the [Accreditation Process Results](#) (External Assessment Reports, accreditation decisions and response from higher education institutions if any);
- Supervision of accounting tools by the [Audit Committee](#) and their examination and approval by the [Board of Trustees](#).
- [Research Projects](#) on quality assurance trends and developments.

## 8. INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The Agency is member of a number of international organisations, such as ENQA (Full member), EQAR, and CHEA International Quality Group. The Agency participates in a number of international projects, such as:

- Project Erasmus+ (KA 3 Database of External Quality Assurance Reports (DEQAR)), coordinated by EQAR.
- Project Erasmus+ (KA 2 Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education), “MEHR – Modernity, Education and Human Rights”, coordinated by the Swedish Agency UKÄ (2016/18).

Participation in recently accomplished projects includes:

- “The Impact of Different Cost-Sharing Models on Effectiveness, Efficiency and Equity in Higher Education”, Project for the European Commission: Directorate-General for Education and Culture.
- EIQAS – ‘Enhancing Internal Quality Assurance Systems’ – ERASMUS + Project; Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education. Coordination by the Polish Agency PKA.
- Employability@QA – ECA European Consortium for Accreditation – Working Group 4.
- Projects led by ENQA (the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education):
  - Working Group on Quality Assurance and Excellence in Higher Education.
  - Working Group on Stakeholder Involvement in Quality Assurance Practices.
  - Working Group on Collecting Good Practices for Measuring the Impact of External Quality Assurance Processes.
- Projects led by ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation) – WG4 Innovation Through Mutual Learning and Best Practices
- Identifying Barriers in Promoting the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level and making recommendations as to how these might be addressed - IBAR. International Research Project supported by the Life Long Programme of the European Union (<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu>).

Researchers of the Agency are members of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER). The Agency’s Secretary-General integrates the Accreditation Council of the German QAA ZEVA as a foreign academic expert since 2015.

The Agency has supported the implementation of QA activities in countries such as Mozambique, S. Tomé e Príncipe and Macau. In the case of Macau, 6 study programmes (other than the 4 programmes mentioned in section 5) have been assessed, 4 under Portuguese criteria and 2 under Macau’s criteria, but in all cases the assessment exercise was not intended to (and did not) lead to an accreditation decision.

The Agency organises, since 2012, a biennial International Conference:

- *Recent Trends in Quality Assurance*, Porto, 11-13 October 2012.
- *Higher Education as Commerce: Cross Border Education and the Services Directive*, Porto, 9-11 October 2014.



- *The visible hand of the internal market in higher education: Tensions between European competence and national sovereignty*, Douro, 6-8 October 2016.
- *Doctoral Studies: recent developments, challenges and ways forward*, Douro, 7-9 October 2018.

A3ES's research staff participate in a large number of international conferences, publish regularly in international peer-reviewed journals and publish books with international editors such as Springer and Palgrave MacMillan (see section 9.4). In addition, the agency is frequently requested to present the Portuguese QA system in international *fora* and to receive delegations from foreign agencies.

Additional elements of the Agency's internationalisation policy are the international Scientific Council, the presence of foreign experts in the Appeals Council and the presence of at least a foreign member in programme assessment/accreditation teams. It is possible that some visits are conducted in English.

## 9. COMPLIANCE WITH EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES (Part 3)

### 9.1. ESG Standard 3.1 – Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

The core function of the Agency, as stated in article 3 of [Decree-Law 369/2007](#), is “the assessment and accreditation of higher education institutions and their study programmes, and also with carrying out the functions inherent in Portugal joining the European system of quality assurance in higher education”.

For this effect, the Agency conducts four main quality assurance processes on a regular basis, already presented in Section 5:

- NCE – Prior accreditation of new study programmes in Portugal;
- ACEF – Assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation;
- AINST – Institutional Assessment;
- ASIGQ – Audit/certification of internal quality assurance systems.

The [mission](#), [objectives](#) and [functions](#) of the Agency are well defined and publicly available on the A3ES website, as well as in the introductory sections of the [Quality Manual](#).

The Agency has also established and adopted a [Strategic Plan](#), defining the main action lines and priorities to be developed during the next six-year cycle of assessment and accreditation of study programmes starting in 2018, building upon the experience and results from the 2012-2017 assessment/accreditation cycle and outlining strategies for the adoption of simplified procedures for assessment/accreditation of study programmes for institutions with better quality indicators, based on a sampling system of programme accreditation combined with institutional audits.

The Agency’s strategy emphasises the principle that the main responsibility for the quality of education lies first of all with every institution. Consequently, the Agency supports the implementation and promotes the certification of the institutional internal quality assurance systems as a means to encourage a quality enhancement approach and to provide the basis to the simplified procedures referred to in the previous paragraph (see section 12.1).

In addition to the activities most directly associated with the processes of assessment, accreditation and audit, the strategic plan also stresses the strand of research and tracking of new developments in quality assurance, as well as the strand of internationalisation.

A proper [Normative Framework](#) for the external quality assurance activities was developed, comprising the [Regulations on the assessment and accreditation procedures](#) as well as other resolutions relating to appeals, fees, deadlines for the accreditation and audit processes, the effects of non-accreditation of a study programme in operation or the alignment of the renewal of new study programmes accreditation with the regular assessment/accreditation cycle .

The strategic plan, translated into annual [Activity Plans](#), together with the normative framework and the [Activity Reports](#), demonstrate how the A3ES mission is translated into clear policies and management plans and into the daily work of the Agency.

All the above-mentioned documents are published on the Agency's website. All activities are conducted in accordance with and respecting the [Code of Ethics](#).

As regards the involvement of stakeholders, the Agency favours, from its beginning, the collaboration with different partners, namely to discuss the development of assessment processes and correlated procedures, as already mentioned in section 9.6 in relation to external feedback. For example, an initial structured consultation was organised by the Agency during its installation phase, on the basis of a questionnaire about the implementation of assessment and accreditation procedures, addressing all external stakeholders. Survey responses were analysed by the Office of Research and Analysis, whose conclusions were published and also presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> EQAF<sup>2</sup>.

The [Advisory Council](#) provides a statutory mechanism for systematic consultation of representatives of a wide range of stakeholders, including two students' representatives, on such matters as activity plans, activity reports, strategic orientations or developmental documents on the processes carried out by the Agency, as documented in sections 9.6 and 11.

Article 6 of the [Regulations on the assessment and accreditation procedures](#) establishes the principle that the contributions of all relevant stakeholders will be taken into consideration in the assessment procedures.

Besides the participation in the governance of the Agency and in the discussion of its developments, stakeholders are also directly involved in the quality assurance work, for example:

- As established in number 7 of article 7 of [Decree-Law 369/2007](#) (which created A3ES), the relevant representative entities of the professions ("Ordens" or Professional Associations) are mandatorily consulted for an opinion on the creation of new study programmes (e.g., Physicians, Engineers, Economists, Pharmacists, Nurses ...).
- The programme for site-visits includes a mandatory meeting of the external assessment team with external stakeholders.

The participation of students in assessment activities is highly valued by the Agency. As explained in section 12.3, a study on the participation of students in quality assurance at European and national level was conducted in 2010 aiming to foster participation both in internal and external quality assurance processes. As a result, a guide for the participation of students in external assessment teams was produced and recommendations were issued to higher education institutions for the inclusion of students in internal quality assurance work. In summary, the participation of students in assessment/accreditation processes includes, *inter alia*:

- Contribution to the preparation of self-assessment reports and as active stakeholders in the internal quality assurance systems;

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<sup>2</sup> [Rosa et al. \(2009\) The Portuguese System of Quality Assurance – new developments and expectations](#). (Paper presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> European Quality Assurance Forum, Copenhagen, November 2009).

- Participation in mandatory meetings with the external assessment teams during the site-visits;
- Part of external assessment teams for the assessment/accreditation of study programmes (one student per team);
- Part of external assessment teams for the audit process (one student per team);
- Part of the Agency's Advisory Council (two students' representatives).

In another dimension, it is also worth mentioning that the President of A3ES is a member of the *Conselho Coordenador do Ensino Superior* (Coordination Council for Higher Education), liaising with the main actors for higher education policies.

On a more informal basis, frequent meetings are held with representatives of higher education institutions, student unions and individual higher education institutions whenever demanded.

## 9.2. ESG Standard 3.2 – Official status

Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

The Agency has a well-established official status. It is a private law foundation, established for an indeterminate period of time, with legal status and recognised as being of public utility. It was created by the Portuguese State by [Decree-Law 369/2007](#), of 5 November, aiming at promoting and ensuring the quality of higher education.

The Agency has exclusive responsibility for the accreditation of Portuguese higher education institutions and their study programmes (articles 3.1, 3.2 and 7.8 of Decree-Law 369/2007).

## 9.3. ESG Standard 3.3 – Independence

Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

The independence of A3ES in relation to higher education institutions, government and other stakeholders is soundly established in [Decree-Law 369/2007](#), which created the Agency, and in the A3ES's Statutes published as annex to this legal document. The following elements guarantee the Agency's independence (relevant articles of the Decree-Law are indicated in brackets):

- The Agency is a private law foundation, established for an indeterminate period of time, with legal status and recognised as being of public utility (article 2.1);
- The Agency is independent in carrying out its functions, within the framework of the law and its Statutes, notwithstanding the guiding principles set by the State through its own bodies (article 5);
- The members of the Management Board, who are appointed by the Board of Trustees for a term of four years, renewable, are independent in the exercise of their duties (Statutes, 10.1, 10.4);
- Cessation of the mandate of the members of the Management Board may only occur following a decision by a majority of four fifths of the total number of members of the

Board of Trustees, based on: a) permanent disability; b) supervening incompatibility; c) serious violation of the duties entrusted to them; d) obvious incapacity regarding the normal performance of the respective duties (Statutes, 10.8);

- The rules concerning the accreditation procedures and their relationship to the assessment procedures are approved by the Management Board (article 7.5); particularly, the selection of experts and decision on the composition of the external assessment teams is the sole responsibility of the Management Board;
- In order to achieve its aims, the Agency may issue rules to its recipients that are compulsory and binding in nature, namely regarding procedures, technical criteria, and others (Statutes, 4.3);
- The accreditation decisions are of the exclusive authority of the Management Board, without prejudice to the powers of the Appeals Council, in case of appeal (articles 7.2, 7.8), and cannot be reversed or changed by government entities;
- The Agency has no regular income from the State budget (article 4.4) and since the set-up endowment in 2009 there was no further public income. Its revenues are generated through the services provided, which guarantees its financial independence.

In summary, the Agency has extensive *operational independence*, since the Management Board has full authority to run the Agency's operations, to define the rules for assessment and accreditation and to select and nominate the experts who integrate the external assessment teams, including exclusive authority to make decisions on the accreditation processes, which cannot be changed by public authorities, thus guaranteeing the *independence of formal outcomes*. It has also broad *organisational independence*, expressed in its legal nature (as public law foundation), in the independence of the members of the Management Board in the exercise of their duties, who cannot be removed from office by decision of government authorities, and in the fact of not depending from the State budget for financing. As a matter of fact, no circumstances are known, or foreseeable in the near future, that could endanger or challenge the Agency's independence.

#### 9.4. ESG Standard 3.4 – Thematic analyses

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

As mentioned in Section 4.4, the Agency has an Office of Research and Analysis with four full-time researchers, through which collected information is analysed and prospective reflection is carried out, including the participation in national and international studies and research projects on quality assurance in higher education. The results from the studies and analysis performed, available on the website, include [publications in journals](#), [books](#) and book chapters, [PhD thesis](#) and other [documents](#) relevant to the development of the assessment, accreditation and audit processes, and to the higher education system in general.

The annual activity plans define the projects and studies to be carried out in the following year (see for example sections 13 and 14 of the [Activity Plan 2018](#)).

Under the specific scope of system-wide analysis, the following documents have been published in the [A3ES Readings Series](#) (translated titles – these publications are available in Portuguese only):

- Employability and Higher Education in Portugal (122 p.);
- The Portuguese Higher Education System in Maps and Numbers (142 p.);
- Higher Education System – Institutional Profiles: Public Universities (298 p.);
- Higher Education System – Institutional Profiles: Public Polytechnics (184 p.);
- Recent Trends in Portuguese Higher Education (252 p.);
- Educational Efficiency and Employability in Portuguese Higher Education (228 p.);
- Portuguese Higher Education System: Sectorial Analysis Vol.I (179 p.);
- Portuguese Higher Education System: Sectorial Analysis Vol.II (164 p.);
- Portuguese Higher Education System: Sectorial Analysis Vol.III (182 p.);
- Academics in the Portuguese Higher Education System (110 p.);
- Importance and Degree of Implementation of A3ES Reference Points in Portuguese Higher Education Institutions (209 p.);
- Jurisprudence of the A3ES (102 p.);
- Characterisation of the Teaching Staff of the Portuguese Higher Education System by Faculties and Fields of Education and Training (272 p.).

The Agency also has a set of databases containing very relevant information about the higher education system. This information comes from data collected by the Agency from the assessment/accreditation processes and was completed by adding data from other databases available through agreements and protocols with the General Directorate for Higher Education, the General Directorate for Education and Science Statistics and the Foundation for Science and Technology.

Making use of such information, and as foreseen in the [Strategic Plan](#), the Agency is promoting, since 2015, the regular publication of the general findings of the external assessment of study programmes, through a set of synthetic documents, for each of the scientific areas once its assessment is concluded, which are disclosed to the higher education institutions and the media and are published on the Agency's website. These documents provide a panorama of each area of education and training and of its evolution over the last years (as detailed in section 12.2). So far, 36 [summary thematic studies](#) have been published. Having in mind to reach not only the stakeholders but also society at large, a press conference was organised and there were frequent meetings with journalists to present and explain the importance of these reports.

## 9.5. ESG Standard 3.5 – Resources

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

As mentioned in section 4.2, A3ES was provided in 2009 with an initial endowment of four million Euros from the State (one million Euros as endowment and three million Euros as a set-up subsidy). As the Management Board has decided to rent the necessary facilities instead of buying them, a substantial part of the endowment (3.1 million Euros) is still available as a reserve fund.

Current financial resources are obtained through the collection of fees for services provided, which are established by the Management Board on the basis of the average costs of these services. The fees for assessment and accreditation procedures are fixed by the

Management Board, after consultation with the representative bodies of higher education institutions. The current fees were fixed by [Decision 925/2018](#).

The experience so far shows that the Agency's resources have been sufficient for the development of its activities:

- The Management Board established the Agency's map of staff, taking into consideration the activities to be undertaken. The project coordinators<sup>3</sup>, the majority holding a PhD, were selected through a public competition and, despite their high academic qualifications and professional experience in quality assurance and/or higher education systems, they undertook an initial 5-month in-house intensive training, at post-graduate level, including contents such as policy, law, economics and quality assurance in higher education. Further staff development activities are provided as necessary.
- Adequate IT, legal and accounting support are available through outsourcing. The subcontractors are recognised professionals in their fields.
- The resources available allowed for the establishment of an Office of Research and Analysis, composed of very qualified research staff (four full-time researchers, all with PhD qualifications).
- The Agency's activity programmes have been regularly fulfilled.

The permanent staff of the A3ES includes:

- 4 executive members of the Management Board;
- 1 Secretary-General;
- 9 project coordinators and 4 researchers, all of them holding a higher education degree and 70% holding a PhD degree;
- A jurist, two accountants and an IT technician;
- 4 technical and administrative staff.

A considerable number of experts and of students is cooperating with the Agency as members of external assessment teams, as shown in Table 4 (section 10.4) and Table 6 (section 12.3). Their remuneration is calculated on the basis of attendance fees, depending on the number of study programmes and site-visits involved in their assessment work.

An important asset of A3ES is the internet-based electronic platform developed through an IT specialised subcontractor. All applications, reports, responses and decisions are submitted into the platform, by means of available online guidelines/forms, and communication with institutions is also performed electronically. This provides not only a paper-free working environment, but also a worthy database on higher education performance data and indicators. One in-house IT specialist and the specialised IT subcontractor support the database and the electronic platform. Data protection is guaranteed by a safe connection and user-password authentication. As mentioned in section 14, work is in progress for the regular updating of the platform, namely to better its user-friendliness and interoperability.

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<sup>3</sup> The responsibilities of project coordinators are defined in pages 48-49 of the [Assessment Handbook](#).

Table 2 presents the budget of A3ES for the current year, as approved by the Board of Trustees. It shows a balance of income and expenditure.

Table 2 – Budget of A3ES for fiscal year 2018

	2018 budget
<b>Income</b>	<b>4.573.839,00 €</b>
Fees from services	4.564.839,00 €
Other income	9.000,00 €
<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>4.375.975,95 €</b>
Personnel expenses	1.641.674,12 €
Experts' fees	1.954.122,19 €
Other costs with experts	506.601,84 €
Operational expenses	273.577,80 €

In terms of the evolution of assets and liabilities since the start of operation in 2009, Figure 5 shows that A3ES's financial liquidity is quite positive. The financial reserves would keep the basic operation of the Agency (staff salaries and operational expenses) for about two years without further income.

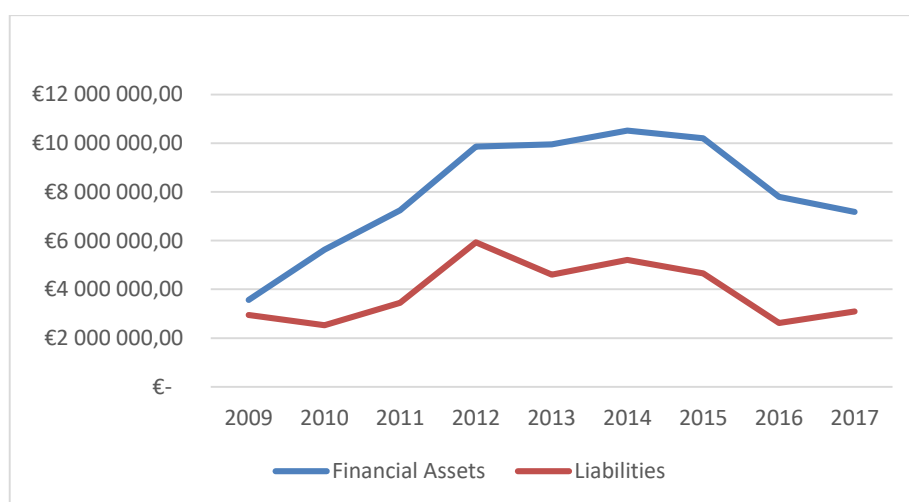


Figure 5 – Evolution of A3ES financial assets and liabilities

## 9.6. ESG Standard 3.6 – Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

As mentioned in section 7, A3ES has in place the elements to assure and promote the quality of its processes and activities, which are systematised and discussed next.



### **Quality policy**

The Agency has adopted a formal [Quality Policy Statement](#), publicly available at its website, where it expresses its permanent commitment to quality, defines the fundamental elements of its quality policy and identifies the main internal quality assurance procedures and mechanisms for promoting and improving quality and accountability.

A formal [Quality Manual](#) assembles in a single document the information available on the Agency's organisation and on its quality policy, bringing together (mainly through hyperlinks) the most relevant information relating to its strategy and organisational structure, as well as on the rules and regulations applicable to the regular operation of its activities, the procedures, criteria and instruments used in the development of the assessment, accreditation and audit processes, and the policies, procedures and mechanisms for internal quality assurance. In practice, this manual documents how the Agency's quality policy is translated into procedures and mechanisms that embody an internal quality assurance system.

### ***Fulfilment of mission and goals of quality assurance***

The clear definition of the quality assurance processes conducted by the Agency and of the corresponding timelines, as well as the care and detail placed on the contents and consistency of the guidelines, together with the systematic disclosure of results in the annual activity reports, highlight the permanent concern to ensure that the Agency's processes and results reflect its mission and goals of quality assurance.

### ***No-conflict-of-interest mechanisms***

The Agency adopted a [Code of Ethics](#) to regulate and govern the conduct and actions of its staff members. The Code establishes a number of principles, values and norms of conduct, under the headings of neutrality and impartiality, integrity, confidentiality, transparency, responsibility, sobriety, no-conflict-of-interest, cooperation and team-work, professionalism and intellectual property rights.

The provisions of the Code of Ethics apply to permanent employees of the Agency and, *mutatis mutandis*, to temporary employees, including the members of the external assessment teams. Additionally, the [Norms for the appointment and conduct of the external assessment team](#) define specific rules relating to no-conflict-of-interest and personal conduct applicable to the teams' experts. These norms are quite comprehensive, covering not only the expert's institutional affiliation (the expert must not have had any paid or contractual relationship with the institution of higher education in the two years prior to its assessment), but also relevant norms of conduct, such as: to look for the Agency's advice on any particular situation that may constitute a conflict of interest; to keep adequate detachment towards the higher education institution, in order to safeguard the independence, neutrality and impartiality of the assessment process; to assume, before the institution, a constructive attitude, so that the assessment process is developed with the confidence and openness necessary for promoting a real improvement opportunity; to consider the higher education institution and its interlocutors as responsible partners, thus promoting their openness and commitment, without attempting to impose other programmes or institutions as models, which could undermine the diversity of improvement actions adopted by institutions. In particular, it is

strictly forbidden for experts to use examples from their own programme or institution as a model to be followed by those being assessed.

As an additional mechanism of transparency and early prevention of possible conflicts of interest, the institution is given notice of the external team's composition and may decide to question it prior to the visit, by declaring its opposition to some of its members, in case of demonstrable conflict of interest. The Agency examines the reasons that support the claim and, if substantiated, replaces the experts on whom a grounded conflict of interest incident had been raised (section 4 of the aforementioned Norms).

### ***Subcontracted services***

The Agency does not subcontract to other parties any elements of its quality assurance procedures. There are some technical services subcontracted, related to IT, legal advice and accounting, which are however, in all cases, accompanied by a member of the Agency qualified in the field, under the supervision of a member of the Management Board.

### ***External feedback***

The Agency has a statutory mechanism for regular consultation of representatives of external stakeholders, via the [Advisory Council](#), which includes representatives from a wide range of stakeholders (see also sections 4.1 and 11). The Advisory Council meets at least twice a year to issue opinions about the Agency's annual activity plan, its general activity lines and strategic orientations, as well as on the annual activity reports and other documents relevant to the development of the assessment, accreditation or audit procedures.

The Agency also promotes the collection of feedback from higher education institutions and members of the external assessment teams through on-line surveys after the completion of the assessment processes (see also section 11).

Notwithstanding these mechanisms for systematic collection of formal feedback on its activities and results, the Agency, when designing the assessment processes and associated procedures, promotes the direct contact with different partners, through, *inter alia*, frequent meetings with the representative bodies of higher education institutions, student associations and, on request, individual higher education institutions.

Another important tool for external critical reflection lies in the work of the Scientific Council, composed of six renowned international experts who annually visit the Agency and issue a critical and prospective opinion on the most relevant aspects of organisation and operation, including recommendations for developing and improving processes. The [Reports of the Scientific Council](#) are published on the website.

### ***Internal feedback and reflection***

The relatively small number of permanent employees of the Agency and the type of the facilities favours a frequent and close contact between the project coordinators and the members of the Management Board, to monitor the progress in processes and the fulfilment of procedures. The continuous collection of informal internal feedback is, therefore, an important asset for internal quality assurance. The identified difficulties are either immediately

resolved or discussed at Management Board meetings, according to their degree of complexity.

In addition, structured internal feedback is also collected. The project coordinators also complete the surveys on accreditation processes mentioned above. Additionally, the Management Board meets once a year with the project coordinators in order to identify and discuss problematic issues as well as suggestions for their resolution.

The internal reflection on the results of external and internal feedback is essentially made at the level of the Management Board, which systematically analyses comments and suggestions and incorporates them in the decision-making process and enhancement-led initiatives. [Reports on the surveys' results and improvement measures](#) are produced, circulated to stakeholders and published on the website<sup>4</sup> (see section 11 for results from the most recent survey reports).

As for the impact of its work, the Agency collects and analyses some indicators related to the effects of accreditation processes in the self-regulation of the educational provision by higher education institutions, including the evolution of the number of new study programmes submitted to prior accreditation and the number of study programmes discontinued on the initiative of the institutions themselves (see, for example, section 2 of the 2017 Activity Report and the thematic analyses, namely the summary thematic studies, mentioned in section 9.4).

### ***Other accountability mechanisms***

In the scope of the provision of public information on its activities and results, the following documents are regularly published on the Agency's website:

- Annual [Activity Reports](#);
- Ongoing [Projects](#) carried out by the Office of Research and Analysis;
- [Publications](#) produced in the scope of these projects;
- [Accreditation Process Results](#), including, for each assessed study programme or institution, the external assessment report, the decision of the Management Board and the response of the institution if any.

As regards finances and assets, the Agency's accounting tools are monitored and supervised by the [Audit Committee](#), and the annual management reports and accounts are examined by the [Board of Trustees](#).

As for the system's effectiveness, the results from external and internal feedback indicate a high level of regard and acceptance of the Agency's processes, procedures and instruments by stakeholders and have provided a basis for comprehensive enhancement action plans for their progressive refinement, as shown in section 11.

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<sup>4</sup> These reports are available in Portuguese only.

### **9.7. ESG Standard 3.7 – Cyclical external review of agencies**

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

The framework law for quality assurance in higher education, in item a) of article 25, establishes the periodical international assessment of the Agency. The Agency's quality policy statement also determines the submission of A3ES to a periodic external assessment, in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines. The [Quality Manual](#) (section 3.2.10) establishes that the frequency of the external reviews will be five years, as provided in the Statutes of ENQA.

## 10. COMPLIANCE WITH EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES (Part 2)

### 10.1. ESG Standard 2.1 – Consideration of internal quality assurance

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

As emphasised in section 9.1, A3ES's strategy recognises and supports institutional responsibility for quality assurance, namely by supporting the implementation and promoting the certification of internal quality assurance systems (IQAS) in HEIs as a way to foster quality enhancement approaches. Section 12.1 deals in detail with the initiatives that were taken in this direction.

An important element in supporting the development of IQAS was the adoption, in 2012, of a [Reference Framework for Internal Quality Assurance Systems in Higher Education Institutions](#), consisting of a set of reference points formulated in terms of statements which characterise a sound and well developed IQAS, consonant with the ESG and the applicable legal requirements, aiming both at providing a framework to assist HEIs in designing and implementing their quality systems and constituting a reference in the application of the criteria for the certification of IQAS.

The reference points follow closely and cover all aspects of Part 1 of the ESG, but embrace also the areas of research and development, interaction with society and internationalisation, in order to encompass the whole institutional mission. In 2016 they were reviewed, to take into consideration the new ESG 2015. So, they include 13 articles, 10 emulating the ESG and 3 for the additional areas.

The criteria for the audit/certification of internal quality assurance systems (process ASIGQ) are fully aligned with the reference points, thus covering all the standards of Part 1 of the ESG ([Manual for the Audit Process](#), Appendices I and II). Usually the audit applies to the whole institution, but it is possible to audit/certify the IQAS of a particular organisational unit. The Audit process is voluntary for higher education institutions, however it is an essential element of the "lighter-touch" based approach that the Agency is considering in the recently initiated accreditation cycle, aiming to alleviate the burden placed on institutions by the processes of programme accreditation.

Institutional Assessment (process AINST) includes the assessment of the state of development of the internal quality assurance system at institutional level and/or at organisational unit level, making use of the reference points as a framework. The [Guidelines for institutional self-assessment](#) include the assessment of the following items (section numbers in the guidelines are indicated in brackets):

- State of development of the internal quality assurance system against the reference points (A.7.3.2; C.11.2), when it is not yet certified by A3ES. The institution is required to present its Quality Manual or an equivalent document presenting the organisation and operation of the quality system.
- Follow-up on the developments since the certification of the system, when already certified by A3ES (A.7.3.1; C.11.1).

- Contribution of each organisational unit to the proper operation of IQAS in the case of a system certified at institutional level (C.11.3).

The [Guidelines for external institutional assessment](#) specify the analysis required by the external assessment team in relation to the above mentioned items (sections A.4.4 and B.8 of the guidelines).

The [Guidelines for requesting prior accreditation of new study programmes](#) (process NCE) are directly related to the design and approval of programmes, as follows (section numbers in the guidelines are indicated in brackets):

- They ensure that study programmes applying for accreditation (ESG 1.2):
  - are designed with overall programme objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy (3.1, 3.3) and have explicit intended learning outcomes (3.2);
  - are designed involving students and other stakeholders in the work (2.1, 4.6.2);
  - benefit from external expertise and comparison with reference programmes (10.1, 10.2, 9.1, 9.2);
  - are designed so that they enable smooth student progression (4.5.1, 4.5.3, 4.5.4);
  - define the expected student workload (4.3, 4.4, 4.5.2, 4.6);
  - include well-structured placement opportunities where appropriate (11.1 – 11.4);
  - are subject to a formal institutional approval process (2.1);
  - specify clearly the qualification resulting from the programme (1.4, 1.6).
- Other elements of internal quality assurance included in the guidelines are:
  - Mechanisms to ensure the quality of the students' in-service training, if applicable (11.4.1 – ESG 1.2);
  - Methodologies for learning and teaching (4.5.1) and for ensuring that students' assessment is aligned with the intended learning outcomes (4.5.3 – ESG 1.3);
  - Definition of specific entry requirements (1.10 – ESG 1.4);
  - Norms for recognition and crediting of prior learning and professional experience (1.13 – ESG 1.4);
  - Analysis of the adequacy of teaching staff lecturing in the study programme, in terms of number, qualifications, specialisation and stability (5.4), and of scientific, technologic or artistic production (8.2, 8.3 – ESG 1.5);
  - Procedures for the assessment of the teaching staff performance and measures for their permanent updating and professional development (5.5 – ESG 1.5);
  - Analysis of the adequacy of non-academic staff, in terms of number and qualifications (6.1, 6.2 – ESG 1.6);
  - Procedures for the assessment of the non-academic staff performance and measures for their permanent updating and professional development (6.3 – ESG 1.6);
  - Adequacy of facilities, libraries, laboratories and scientific and pedagogic equipment (7.1, 7.2 – ESG 1.6).

The [Guidelines for self-assessment of study programmes in operation](#) (process ACEF) include the assessment of the following internal quality assurance elements in relation to the study programme:

- Mechanisms for quality assurance of the study programme and the activities promoted by the Services or support structures to the teaching and learning processes, namely regarding the procedures for collecting information (including the results of student surveys and the results of academic success monitoring), the monitoring and periodic assessment of the study programme, the discussion and use of the results of the assessments to define improvement measures, and monitoring their implementation (7.2.1 – ESG 1.1, 1.4, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9).
- Methodologies for ensuring student-centred learning and teaching and the alignment of students' assessment with the intended learning outcomes (2.3 – ESG 1.3);
- Definition of specific entry requirements (1.11 – ESG 1.4);
- Norms for recognition and crediting of prior learning and professional experience (1.14 – ESG 1.4);
- Analysis of the adequacy of teaching staff lecturing in the study programme, in terms of number, qualifications, specialisation and stability (3.4), and of scientific, technologic or artistic production (6.2.2 and 6.2.4 – ESG 1.5).
- Procedures for the assessment of the teaching staff performance and measures for their permanent updating and professional development (7.2.3 – ESG 1.5).
- Analysis of the adequacy of non-academic staff, in terms of number and qualifications (4.1 and 4.2 – ESG 1.6).
- Procedures for the assessment of the non-academic staff performance and measures for their permanent updating and professional development (7.2.4 – ESG 1.6).
- Means of providing public information on the study programme (7.2.5 – ESG 1.8).

In summary, all internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions have already been assessed, either through the ASIGQ or the AINST process. Additionally, every time a study programme is assessed, the proper implementation of the quality system in relation to the programme under assessment is checked. In the case of study programmes in operation (process ACEF), the external assessment team is required to produce an analysis of the effectiveness of the quality assurance mechanisms, based on the appropriateness of the last self-assessment report of the programme drawn up under the quality assurance system (section 8.7.1 of the [Guidelines for external assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation](#)).

Table 3 presents an overview of how the above mentioned aspects relate to each of the standards in Part 1 of the ESG.

Table 3 – Compliance of each quality assurance process with Part 1 of the ESG.

Assessment processes	Institutional level		Programme level	
	ASIGQ	AINST	ACEF	NCE
ESG 1.1	Target areas 1, 3, 4, 7 Reference Point 1 (*1)	Sections A.7.3.2/C.11.2 Reference Point 1	Section 7.2.1	
ESG 1.2	Target area 2.1 Reference Point 2	Sections A.7.3.2/C.11.2 Reference Point 2		The whole guidelines (*2)
ESG 1.3	Target area 2.1 Reference Point 3	Sections A.7.3.2/C.11.2 Reference Point 3	Sections 2.3.1, 2.3.2, 2.3.3	Sections 4.5.1, 4.5.3
ESG 1.4	Target area 2.1 Reference Point 4	Sections A.7.3.2/C.11.2 Reference Point 4	Sections 7.2.1, 1.11, 1.14 (*4)	Sections 1.10, 1.13 (*4)
ESG 1.5	Target area 2.4 Reference Point 9	Sections A.7.3.2/C.11.2 Reference Point 9	Guidelines 7.2.3, 3.4, 6.2.2, 6.2.4	Sections 5.5, 5.4, 8.2, 8.3
ESG 1.6	Target area 2.5 Reference Point 10	Sections A.7.3.2/C.11.2 Reference Point 10	Sections 7.2.1, 7.2.4, 4.1, 4.2	Sections 6.3, 6.1, 6.2, 7.1, 7.2
ESG 1.7	Target area 5 Reference Point 11	Sections A.7.3.2/C.11.2 Reference Point 11	Section 7.2.1	
ESG 1.8	Target area 6 Reference Point 12 (*5)	Sections A.7.3.2/C.11.2 Reference Point 12 (*5)	Section 7.2.5 (*5)	(5*)
ESG 1.9	Target area 2.1 Reference Point 5	Sections A.7.3.2/C.11.2 Reference Point 5	Section 7.2.1	
ESG 1.10	Target area 8 Reference Point 13 (*3)	Sections A.7.3.2/C.11.2 Reference Point 1 (*3)	(*3)	(*3)
<i>Supporting document</i>	<i>Manual for the Audit Process – Appendices I and II</i>	<i>Guidelines for institutional self-assessment</i>	<i>Guidelines for self-assessment of study programmes</i>	<i>Guidelines for requesting prior accreditation</i>

(\*1) – Target areas 2.2, 2.3 and 2.6, and reference points 6, 7 and 8, relating to research and development, interaction with society and internationalisation, are also relevant to standard ESG 1.1.

(\*2) – The design and approval of new programmes is the object of whole process NCE.

(\*3) – Programme accreditation, institutional assessment and audit/certification are cyclical processes that require renewal every six years.

(\*4) – 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).

(\*5) – The legal framework for higher education institutions 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.

## 10.2. ESG Standard 2.2 – Designing methodologies fit for purpose

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.

The Agency has taken considerable care in the design of the quality assurance processes to ensure their fitness for purpose, in consultancy with the main stakeholders as seen in section 9.1.

The objectives set for each of the four current QA processes (NCE, ACEF, AINST and ASIGQ, as defined in section 5) were clearly set in advance, after consultation with higher education institutions, through their representative bodies (CRUP, CCISP and APESP), and with the Advisory Council. The aims of the QA processes are properly aligned with the [mission](#) and [objectives](#) of the Agency and are publicly available on the Agency's website, as follows:



- The [Assessment Handbook](#) and the [Simplified Assessment Handbook](#), for programme assessment and accreditation (ACEF and NCE);
- The [Manual for Institutional Assessment](#) for process AINST;
- The [Manual for the Audit Process](#) for process ASIGQ.

The guidelines for online submission of self-assessment reports in all four processes (proposal of new study programmes, the self-assessment of study programmes in operation, the institutional self-assessment and the self-assessment of the internal quality assurance systems) are very detailed in order to ensure that sufficient evidence is produced to support the conclusions reached by the external assessment teams. The electronic forms include detailed instructions on the information required in the different sections of the guidelines (see also section 6).

Great emphasis is placed on the importance of institutional enhancement policies as a central element in quality assurance. All guidelines for self-assessment reports (NCE, ACEF, AINST and ASIGQ) include an important analytical dimension of SWOT analysis. In the latter three processes, the HEI is required to propose improvement measures for identified weak points. The instructions for the preparation of the external reports contained in section 4.3.7 of the [Assessment Handbook](#) include the following guidance, in the same direction: “The aim of the assessment in progress should be borne in mind during the different phases of the drafting of the External Assessment Reports: accreditation, according to the law, of the study programmes being assessed and consequent enhancement of the conditions of its functioning and its quality”. As a consequence, each section of the form for the external assessment report includes a field for improvement recommendations.

On the same line of reasoning, the Agency has been discussing with HEIs some ways to alleviate external assessment mechanisms when institutions are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance. For example, synergies were set up among processes ASIGQ, ACEF and AINST to alleviate the workload by exempting institutions from giving evidence on the organisation of their internal quality assurance systems when filling up the ACEF or AINST self-assessment reports in case the system is certified under the ASIGQ process.

As described in sections 4.4 and 14, the transition to the second regular assessment/accreditation cycle has also allowed the simplification of the guidelines for internal and external assessment of study programmes in operation (process ACEF).

The Agency is now pushing this lighter-touch approach further in programme assessment/accreditation (process ACEF), taking advantage of the information gathered in the institutional assessment and also the fact that the first regular assessment/accreditation cycle is finished and, consequently, all degree-awarding higher education provision in the country have already undergone an accreditation process by the Agency. The idea, as explained in section 4.4, is to adopt a more flexible assessment/ accreditation regime in areas of excellence in which consistent indications of above-average quality were identified in the previous cycle and in the institutional assessment, by means of replacing the exhaustive assessment of all study programmes by a sampling methodology, together with an annual monitoring process based on a set of performance indicators previously agreed with institutions. This new

methodology began to be applied in the current year 2018, in areas for which the following combination of factors has been verified:

- A good accreditation record in the first assessment cycle completed in 2017;
- Qualification level of teaching staff above the national average level;
- Internationally reviewed research, with at least a classification of Very Good in the international assessments conducted by the Foundation for Science and Technology (for university education);
- Significantly relevant activities of applied research and/or technological or artistic development, or of advanced training and services to the community, in the core scientific areas of the study programmes (for polytechnic education);
- The existence of an internal quality assurance system, which has been duly certified by the Agency through the audit process.

A3ES collaborated with the Consortium of the Erasmus Mundus project “*Joint Programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of Degrees Awarded – JOQAR*” (2010-2013), whose objective was to promote single accreditation procedures for joint programmes. The Agency accepted the procedures (which included an expert appointed by A3ES) and results of the accreditation of two programmes from the project pilot processes: the *Erasmus Mundus Master of Science in Marine Biodiversity and Conservation (EMBC)* and the *European Master in Quality in Analytical Laboratories (EMQAL)* offered by two university consortia that included the University of Algarve, in Portugal.

### 10.3. ESG Standard 2.3 – Implementing processes

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 visit;
- A report resulting from the external assessment;
- A consistent follow-up.

The procedures for the assessment/accreditation of study programmes were defined in advance, including an extensive consultation with stakeholders, namely the Advisory Council. A formal document on the [Regulations on the assessment and accreditation procedures](#) was adopted and published in the Portuguese Official Journal (*Diário da República*).

The assessment/accreditation processes (ACEF, AINST and ASIGQ) include the following phases (articles 13, 15-18, 20, 36 and 44 of the Regulations):

- Submission of a self-assessment report by the HEI;
- External peer-review assessment, including a site-visit;
- Drafting of a preliminary report, response by the institution and drafting of a final report (when applicable), containing a proposal for decision;
- Decision on the accreditation/certification by the Management Board;
- Publication of the assessment report, together with the decision taken and the response from the institution, when available;
- Follow-up of recommendations.

The prior accreditation of new study programmes (process NCE) follows the same phases, except the site-visit. The guidelines for the proposal require very detailed information on

objectives and expected learning outcomes, curricular development and learning and teaching methodologies, human and material resources available, supportive research environment and the programme's adjustment within the national educational provision network. If necessary, the external assessment team may solicit any additional information or clarification on the programme, or even request a visit (as referred in section 6).

The [Assessment Handbook](#) deals in detail with the prevailing assessment and accreditation procedures, namely the concepts, principles and norms for internal and external assessment of study programmes, including provisions for the composition and functioning of the external assessment teams, the visits, the drafting of the external assessment reports and their publication.

Similarly, the [Manual for the Audit Process](#) presents the concepts, procedures and criteria underpinning the auditing and certification of internal quality assurance systems, and the [Manual for Institutional Assessment](#) deals with the equivalent elements for process AINST.

As seen in section 6, comprehensive [guidelines](#) were developed for self-assessment and external assessment reports concerning all the QA processes in operation.

To ease the administrative burden on institutions, an electronic platform was developed enabling the online submission and processing of all applications.

All the regulations, manuals and guidelines were adopted after public consultation, are publicly available on the Agency's website and are periodically reviewed for improvement.

As regards the follow-up of accreditation of study programmes (processes NCE and ACEF), the accreditation decision is valid for six years and its renewal implies a new assessment/accreditation procedure. However, when mandatory recommendations are issued, the decision on accreditation is conditioned to the adoption of given improvement measures, within reasonable period(s) of time. At the end of each period of conditional accreditation, the institution submits a progress report under predetermined specifications and a final decision is taken either to fully accredit the study programme or to refuse its accreditation. When substantial improvement is verified but there are still some recommendations to accomplish, an extension of the accreditation for one or two years is granted. These procedures are also valid for institutional assessment (process AINST).

Figure 6 illustrates the number and results of follow-up assessments performed since 2013. A total of 1,493 study programmes were assessed under the follow-up procedures in this period, of which 63% became fully accredited, 30% had the conditional accreditation extended for a further period and 7% were discontinued (in most cases, by decision of the institution).

The [Guidelines for self-assessment of study programmes in operation](#) in the new assessment/ accreditation cycle starting now (process ACEF for the period 2018-2023) pay special attention to the follow-up of recommendations made in ACEF or NCE assessments. Part I of the guidelines deals exclusively with the evolution of the study programme since the previous assessment, requiring the institution to present a synthesis of improvement measures implemented since the previous assessment, namely in response to recommendations issued in the external assessment report or to conditions determined by a conditional accreditation decision.



Figure 6 - Results of follow-up assessments

In the case of process ASIGQ, the [Manual for the Audit Process](#) establishes follow-up procedures for the certification of internal quality assurance systems. The certification, if awarded, is valid for six years. A year and a half after the completion of the audit, the institution must submit a brief follow-up report, indicating the results of meta-evaluations and progress achieved, including information on the measures that were planned and implemented as a result of recommendations in the audit report. In the case of a decision of "conditional certification", the institution shall submit annual progress reports during the validity of the conditional certification and a final follow-up report at the end of the specified period.

Another element of follow-up regards the regular disclosure of information by the higher education institutions. The legal framework for higher education establishes a detailed list of information items that the institution must disclose regularly on its website ([Law 62/2007](#) (RJIES), article 162). If there are indications (*e.g.*, complaints from stakeholders, namely students, or reports from the Inspectorate) that the assumptions that supported an accreditation decision were altered, the Management Board may, at any time, decide to open a re-appreciation of the accreditation procedure (article 19.1 of the [Regulations on the assessment and accreditation procedures](#)). This instrument has already been used in the launching of 21 re-appreciation processes (3 led to a reaccreditation and 5 to a non-accreditation decision and consequent cancellation of the study programme; in the remaining 13, the assessment is in progress).

#### 10.4. ESG Standard 2.4 – Peer-review experts

External quality assurance processes should be conducted by groups of external experts that include (a) student(s) members.

All quality assurance processes carried out by A3ES are based on a peer-review approach. As explained in section 6, the Agency exerts a careful selection of experts to integrate the external assessment teams, primarily based on the pertinence of their scientific curriculum, experience and skills to the functions to be performed and their independence in relation to the institution or study programme to be assessed. Whenever possible, balance of gender and geographical origin within the national higher education network are also considered as selection criteria.

In the case of programme assessment (processes NCE and ACEF), the members of the external assessment teams are experts in the main scientific areas of the study programmes under assessment. For institutional assessment and for auditing internal quality assurance systems (processes AINST and ASIGQ), experts are mainly selected among former rectors or vice-rectors of universities and presidents or vice-presidents of polytechnic institutions, but may include other academics with a vast experience of higher education governance or experts on quality assurance.

The main elements used by the Agency to guarantee the appropriateness, competence, independence and adequate functioning of external assessment teams are:

- The adoption of a formal document on [Norms for the appointment and conduct of the external assessment team](#), establishing the procedures and criteria for the selection and appointment of experts, the rules to prevent conflict of interests and the norms of conduct (see also section 6).
- The preparation and training of experts, through training programmes sponsored by the Agency.
- The inclusion of experts recruited internationally from among recognised specialists in the relevant academic, scientific or professional area.
- The support provided to each team by a highly qualified staff member of the Agency, who acts as project coordinator and liaises with the Management Board.

The training programme for experts includes, namely: a presentation and discussion on the concepts, principles and norms underpinning quality assurance processes; the new focus of the 2<sup>nd</sup> assessment cycle (more focused on evolution, quality enhancement and the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures); the new guidelines and the organisation of the on-site visit; the attitude and norms of conduct of peer-review experts; the use of the electronic platform. The part of the programme concerning practical aspects of guidelines, criteria and organisation is adapted according to the programme or institutional nature of the quality assurance process in question.

Foreign experts receive a documentation kit in English and have a coaching session with the team's president. As mentioned in section 14 in the scope of its enhancement action plans, the Agency is working on the improvement of the information kit concerning namely the use of the platform and the interpretation of criteria.

With regard to the participation of students, the Agency started to include students in the external assessment teams for the assessment/accreditation of study programmes in 2011, as explained in detail in section 12.3. The students selected to integrate the teams are provided with basic information on the Agency's assessment/accreditation procedures before undergoing a one-day training programme and are required to submit a short essay (around 10 pages) on a theme on quality assurance. The programme includes: an introduction to quality assurance in Europe and in Portugal; A3ES and its normative framework; guidelines and criteria for accreditation; norms of conduct; challenges and difficulties in the team's work; using the electronic platform; the visit and drafting of the report; group work, simulating a visit to assess a study programme; final discussion on the conclusions of the work groups. The training is supported by A3ES's researchers and project coordinators and also by students who have integrated external assessment teams in former years.

Presently, all visits concerning programme assessment/accreditation include a student. The external assessment teams for auditing internal quality assurance systems have always integrated one student with large experience on the assessment of higher education institutions.

A large number of experts, both national and international, are involved in the ongoing quality assurance processes, as shown in Table 4. This fact, associated to the need to renew the composition of the external assessment teams every year, since the education and training areas under assessment change from one year to the next, raises some difficulties in the recruitment and training of experts. However, in the new regular assessment/accreditation cycle just initiated many of the selected experts have already worked with the Agency in the previous cycle, bringing increased experience and proficiency to the pool of experts.

Table 4 – Number of experts in external assessment teams (experts from abroad in brackets)

Process	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Prior accreditation of new study programmes	170 (37)	248 (50)	258 (38)	310 (86)	287 (96)	357 (118)	306 (111)	297 (104)
Assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation	-	358 (122)	191 (55)	281 (77)	387 (75)	383 (101)	315 (71)	-
Audit of internal quality assurance systems	-	-	7 (1)	5 (1)	7 (1)	7 (1)	-	8 (1)
Institutional Assessment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	38 (4)

A similar difficulty is found in the recruitment of students. With the purpose of guaranteeing participation of a student in all programme assessment visits, the Agency has recently taken measures to expand the pool of student-assessors, namely by recruiting former students until two years after graduation and allowing the participation of students of a related area whenever necessary, as explained in section 14.

### 10.5. ESG Standard 2.5 – Criteria for outcomes

Any outcomes or judgements made as a 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.

The criteria for the assessment and accreditation of study programmes are defined by law in article 57 of [Decree-Law 74/2006](#), amended and republished by [Decree-law 65/2018](#). These criteria are explicitly indicated as an appendix to the [guidelines](#) for drafting external assessment reports (listed in section 6), publicly available on the Agency's website, together with instructions on how the external assessment teams should express their judgements when verifying the fulfilment of criteria. Complementarily, the Assessment Handbook includes, as an appendix, the document [Qualification Criteria for Teaching Staff](#), which defines the minimum criteria on the key issues of qualifications of the teaching staff and the organisation and practice of research activities for the accreditation of study programmes (processes NCE and ACEF).

The criteria for institutional assessment (process AINST) are defined by law in article 4 of Law 38/2007 (Legal Framework for the Assessment of Higher Education), which establishes the parameters for quality assessment. The [Guidelines for institutional self-assessment](#) explicitly indicate in all relevant fields of information the sub-article of the law where the corresponding

criteria are defined. The instructions included as appendix to the [Guidelines for external institutional assessment](#) provide more detailed indications on how each parameter should be assessed by the external assessment team. Law 62/2007 (Legal Framework for Higher Education Institutions) also establishes some specific binding quantitative requirements for the creation and operation of a higher education institution. These are explicitly indicated in sections A13 (educational provision) and A14 (teaching staff) of the guidelines.

The [Manual for the Audit Process](#) establishes the criteria for certification of the audited internal quality assurance system, including a matrix “criteria versus target area” (Appendix II) which defines, for each of the areas under assessment, the criteria for assigning the different levels of the assessment scale (process ASIGQ).

The Agency has in place some mechanisms to ensure the consistency of decisions and conclusions, namely:

- Each external assessment team is supported by a qualified staff member of the Agency (a project coordinator);
- The forms for writing the assessment reports ensure that every external assessment team considers every item of the guidelines;
- The final decisions on accreditation or certification are taken by the Management Board, which may, or may not, follow, under grounded reasons, the recommendations from the external assessment team, which acts as a moderation factor, contributing to greater consistency in criteria application;
- The Agency's strategies for staff training and for the preparation of experts, mentioned in sections 9.5 and 10.4, respectively, take these aspects into consideration.

## **10.6 ESG Standard 2.6 – Reporting**

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.

The [Assessment Handbook](#) establishes, in sections 4.3.6 to 4.3.8 and 4.4.3, the rules for the preparation of the preliminary version of the external assessment report, its delivery to the higher education institution for appreciation and possible presentation of a response, the preparation of the final version and its publication in full on the Agency's and the institution's websites, along with the response from the institution, if any. These rules apply to all the on-going quality assurance processes (NCE, ACEF, AINST and ASIGQ).

Reports are prepared online with the help of an appropriate password-protected electronic form, which ensures uniform formatting, encourages clear and concise answers and facilitates the comparability among reports. The rules for the drafting of the report are precise and sufficiently detailed on the elements to be covered. Additionally, as referred in the previous section, the guidelines for the online preparation of the reports include, as an appendix, detailed instructions for the drafting of each section.

All experts are appropriately involved in the drafting and approval of the report.



The measures adopted to guarantee the concision and clarity of the reports and the adequacy of their formulation to a broad audience are discussed in detail in section 12.2. These themes are specifically discussed in the preparation of the team members.

The teams' reports are positively assessed by higher education institutions. The recent report on the [ACEF survey's results and improvement measures](#) (section 3.2.1.1 of the report) shows that the quality of the external assessment reports was rated 3,53 in the scale 1-5 and only 7 out of 66 institutions (9%) have assessed the reports negatively.

## 10.7 ESG Standard 2.7 – Complaints and appeals

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

A3ES has defined a [procedure for complaints and suggestions](#). The process is monitored by the Secretary-General, who guarantees an appropriate and timely answer to all complaints or suggestions lodged through the predefined channel and is responsible for preparing a report, at the end of each year, summarising the types of complaints submitted and solutions adopted.

The organic structure of the Agency includes an [Appeals Council](#), as the body for appeals against the assessment and accreditation decisions of the Management Board.

The organisation and operation of this Council, its membership, as well as the procedures for reviewing decisions relating to the assessment and accreditation of higher education institutions and their study programmes are defined in the document [Regulations of the Appeals Council and appeals procedures](#), published on the website.

The Appeals Council is composed of five members, appointed by the Board of Trustees from among personalities with relevant professional experience, without a permanent connection with any Portuguese higher education institution, and some of its members must have experience in similar foreign bodies. Presently, as mentioned in section 4.1, the Council is chaired by a former President of the Portuguese Supreme Administrative Court and comprises a former Rector of a private university and a former Dean of a public university school, both retired, and two internationally renowned specialists on quality assurance.

The number of appeals submitted to the Appeals Council by higher education institutions is relatively low as compared with the number of decisions taken, as shown in Table 5, and the vast majority of the decisions on the appeals were negative.

A recent publication in the *A3ES Readings Series* ([Jurisprudência do Conselho de Revisão da A3ES](#)) summarises the jurisprudence underpinning the decisions of the Appeals Council, presenting some of its most representative decisions. This book, disseminated to stakeholders and society, aims to enable both institutions and A3ES to better adapt their performance to the applicable generic and specific legal principles and also as a demonstration of the consistency of the Agency's decisions.

As a further complaints mechanism, and as explained in section 9.6, the [Norms for the appointment and conduct of the external assessment team](#) include a procedure for consultation of the higher education institution on the team's composition. The institution



may raise an incident of a potential conflict-of-interest, thus eliminating cases of potential conflict.

Table 5 – Results of appeals submitted to the Appeals Council

QA Process	Number of decisions	Appeals to Appeal Council			
		Submitted	Granted	Dismissed	Decision reviewed*
NCE 2009	328	13		13	
NCE 2010	427	22	1	21	
ACEF 2009/2010	419	23		23	
NCE 2011	294	8		7	1
NCE 2012	271	6	1	5	
ACEF 2011/2012	526	10		10	
NCE 2013	234	7	1	5	1
ACEF 2012/2013	636	7		7	
NCE 2014	391	4		3	1
ACEF 2013/2014	573	3		3	
NCE 2015	224	7		6	1
ACEF 2014/2015	554	11	1	10	
NCE 2016	188	10		9	1
ACEF 2015/2016	467	7		7	
NCE 2017	183	6		4	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>5 715</b>	<b>144 (2,5%)</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>7</b>

\* - Decisions reviewed by the Management Board.

## 11. STAKEHOLDERS INFORMATION AND OPINIONS

The Agency has a statutory body (the [Advisory Council](#), whose functions are indicated in sections 4.1 and 9.6) with an important role in accompanying the Agency's processes and activities, where all the main external stakeholders are represented. These include:

- Two representatives from the Council of Rectors of Portuguese (public) Universities;
- Two representatives from the Coordinating Council of (public) Polytechnic Institutes;
- Two representatives from the Portuguese Association of Private Higher Education Institutions;
- Two members to be appointed by the students' unions for higher education, one of them representing university higher education and the other representing polytechnic higher education;
- One representative from each of the existing "Ordens" or public professional associations (at present, 16 "Ordens" are represented);
- One representative from the Council of Associated (Research) Laboratories;
- One member to be indicated by the most representative entrepreneurial association representing industry;
- One member to be indicated by the most representative entrepreneurial association representing commerce and services;
- One member to be indicated by the most representative entrepreneurial association representing agriculture;
- One member to be appointed by each of the two trade union confederations which are most representative of the workers;
- Representatives of the interested ministries (at present, only the Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of Internal Affairs);
- Up to five specialists co-opted by the Council itself.

The President of the Advisory Council, elected by the body itself among its members, is a former rector and represents the "Ordem" of Economists. Currently, the Council has 32 members.

Regular external feedback on the Agency's quality assurance processes is collected from higher education institutions and members of external assessment teams through surveys, and [Reports on the surveys' results and improvement measures](#) are published, as an important element of A3ES's internal quality assurance procedures (see also section 9.6). That is the case, for example, of the most recently published reports:

- [Survey on the process of assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation – Analysis of results and improvement measures](#) (May 2018);
- [Survey on the process of audits of internal quality assurance systems – Analysis of results and improvement measures](#) (May 2018).

The reports include a comprehensive analysis of the collected data. The questionnaires used in the surveys contain both closed-answer questions (using a 1-5 Likert scale) and open questions enquiring about strong and weak points and asking for improvement suggestions. The results from these surveys indicate a high level of regard and acceptance of the Agency's processes, procedures and instruments by HEIs, with an overall grading of 3,73 for the ACEF

process and 4,10 for the ASIGQ process (in a scale of 1-5) and a negligible number of negative assessments. The appraisal from the experts in the external assessment teams are even more positive, with an overall grading of 4,28 and 4,49, respectively.

The quantitative and qualitative data collected in this way, together with formal and informal feedback from other internal and external actors, have provided the basis for a progressive refinement of procedures and instruments, which also takes into account the specific changes that have occurred in the applicable legal framework. For example, the following improvement measures, incorporating comments and suggestions from stakeholders, were already adopted:

- Preparation and publication of a [\*Simplified Assessment Handbook\*](#), which summarises the main concepts, mechanisms and criteria related to assessment and accreditation of study programmes, thus facilitating their consultation by the members of the external assessment teams and other stakeholders. This document includes, as an appendix, a summary of the autonomous document [\*Norms for the appointment and conduct of the external assessment team\*](#), which systematises the norms contained in the full-text version of the [\*Assessment Handbook\*](#) (which continues to be available on the website).
- Updating of the document [\*Qualification Criteria for Teaching Staff\*](#), in view of the changes introduced by Decree-Law no. 115/2013. This document defines the minimum qualification criteria for teaching staff and for the organisation and practice of research and development activities for the purpose of accreditation of study programmes.
- Updating of the document [\*Reference Framework for Internal Quality Assurance Systems in Higher Education Institutions\*](#), considering the 2015 version of the ESG.
- Preparation of instructions for the drafting of self-assessment reports and external assessment reports, included as appendices to the guidelines.
- Improvements in the electronic platform, concerning the uploading of data from the higher education institutions' platforms.
- Implementation of a more practice-oriented training programme for student-assessors, including sessions presented by students with large experience on external assessments in higher education.

## 12. RECOMMENDATIONS AND MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE PREVIOUS REVIEW AND A3ES'S RESULTING FOLLOW-UP

A3ES was the subject of an ENQA review in 2014, which was necessary to apply for ENQA full membership and to register in EQAR. The review panel considered that A3ES was fully compliant with the ESG, except in relation to three standards where compliance was substantial, and concluded as follows:

“The team commends the agency for its analytical and self-critical SER and endorses the presented SWOT analysis. The team encourages A3ES to progress the issues it has identified and in particular recommends it to:

- 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 assessment teams.

A3ES is well aware of the issues described and has already taken the initiative to ameliorate them. The review team's comments are intended to encourage the agency to do so in order to ensure that the progress the agency has undergone in its short existence is sustainable in the future.”

The Management Board of A3ES has taken the panel's recommendations seriously, namely by discussing them with the Advisory Council and with the international Scientific Council. As mentioned by the panel, the Agency was already working on the issues raised in the report and continued to do so, in order to reach a high level of fulfilment of all recommendations, as shown in the next sections.

### 12.1 Developing internal quality assurance systems within higher education institutions

The legal framework for the assessment of higher education in Portugal requires that higher education institutions develop their own internal quality assurance systems, capable of being certified.

In order to support the institutions in implementing their internal quality assurance systems and, thereby, contributing to the promotion and dissemination of a quality culture within institutions, the Agency developed a comparative study at European level, aiming to analyse the main trends in the specification and certification of internal systems, identifying and characterising cases of good practices, and to collect elements that could be used as orientations by the institutions [1].

Following an extensive public consultation process based on this study, in 2011 the Agency adopted a [\*Reference Framework for Internal Quality Assurance Systems in Higher Education Institutions\*](#) in line with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and the legal requirements applicable, as indicated in section 10.1. The reference points are based on Part 1 of the ESG, including also three additional points to incorporate the activities of research and development, interaction with society and internationalisation, thus covering the whole institutional mission.

The reference points were not designed with a prescriptive character. They were presented as factors (open standards) for the development and encouragement of innovative

approaches to quality assurance that may arise in the context of institutional autonomy, rather than merely seeking to respond and adapt to external requirements and criteria. However, when they were adapted to the 2015 version of the ESG, their formulation became inevitably more prescriptive.

As referred to in section 4.3.4, an audit model was then developed leading to the possibility of certification of internal quality assurance systems in higher education institutions, as one of the essential tools of the national quality assurance system and as a precondition for further simplification of procedures for external assessment and accreditation of institutions and degree programmes [2]. Within the overall objective of helping the development of quality assurance systems in institutions and to identify and develop best practices in quality assurance, the specific aims of the institutional audit are:

- Reviewing the institutional policy for quality and assess whether its implementation includes, in a clear and objective way, the definition and documentation of the objectives, functions and actors of the internal quality assurance system, as well as the establishment and organisation of the levels of responsibilities associated with it;
- Assessing the processes and procedures used by the institution to maintain and improve the quality of teaching and other activities;
- Assessing the extent to which the quality assurance system operates in accordance with the established procedures, produces useful and relevant information for the improvement of the institution, and uses this information to generate effective measures for continuous quality improvement of the activities and results.

The audit process was run on an experimental basis in the academic year 2011/2012 and is available since then, on a voluntary basis, for interested higher education institutions. So far, 21 institutions were audited and 19 had their internal quality assurance systems certified by A3ES, with a good mix of the higher education sectors (university and polytechnic; public and private; larger and smaller institutions). Each year a new call for candidate institutions is open.

Combined with the audit model, the Agency exercises a supportive role by running workshops with interested institutions and also local seminars on internal quality assurance whenever invited by an institution, providing fruitful opportunities for interaction and clarification with the academic communities. Tens of such seminars were already run, as mentioned in the annual activity reports published on the website.

Besides the voluntary ASIGQ process, the Agency has meanwhile run the institutional assessment process on a compulsory basis, as seen in section 4.3.5, in which an assessment of the institution's internal quality assurance system is performed. Consequently, the IQAS of all higher education institutions have already been evaluated, and corrective or enhancement measures were recommended whenever necessary.

The Agency, through its Office of Research and Analysis, has carried out a research-based study on the importance and degree of implementation of the reference points proposed by A3ES for internal QA in Portuguese higher education institutions [3]. This study had the objective of persuading institutions of their importance, as a framework model for their internal quality assurance systems, and to assess their degree of implementation within institutions. The results from the study show a reasonable knowledge of the ESG and of the reference points within the academic communities (median of 4 and 5, respectively, in a scale

of 1-7), and a good perception of the importance of the reference points for QA in HEIs (medians between 6 and 7 for the different points). As for the degree of implementation, the respondents' perceptions are very positive (medians around 6).

The participation of A3ES in the ERASMUS+ project "*Enhancing Internal Quality Assurance Systems*" – *EIQAS* (2014-2016) also provided a useful opportunity for deepening the understanding of the ESG Part 1. EIQAS was a joint initiative of national quality assurance agencies, rectors' conferences and higher education institutions of Poland (coordinator), Portugal, Bulgaria and Slovenia, aiming, *inter alias*, to enhance HEIs' awareness and understanding of Part 1 of the ESG (2015 version) and to identify, develop and disseminate good innovative practices in internal quality assurance. A training event and a dissemination seminar were organised in Lisbon within the scope of the project, allowing for the participation of Portuguese HEIs in the discussions. The project outputs encompassed, namely, a [Guide to IQA](#) [4] including more detailed practical guidelines on Part 1 of the ESG 2015 and examples of good practice, as well as a [Students' Guide on Part 1 of the ESG](#) [5].

In summary, the Agency is monitoring and assessing the development of internal quality assurance systems in higher education institutions under predefined standards and criteria, while exercising a supportive role in the design, implementation and improvement of those systems. The perceptions gained from the assessments, the follow-up of assessments and the contacts with institutions, as well as from the research study, are that there is a steady progress in the implementation and effectiveness of internal QA systems.

## **12.2 Structure and accessibility of reports**

A3ES publishes around one thousand assessment reports each year. The rules for the preparation of the preliminary version of the external assessment report, its delivery to the higher education institution for appreciation and possible presentation of a response, the preparation of the final version and its publication on the Agency's, the Ministry's and the institution's websites, along with the response from the institution, if any, are clearly established in the Assessment Handbook adopted by the Agency and published on its website.

Reports are prepared online with the help of an appropriate password-protected electronic form, which ensures uniform formatting, encourages clear and concise answers and facilitates the comparability among reports. At the same time, it facilitates ensuring compliance with standard 2.6 of the ESG. The rules for the drafting of the report are precise and sufficiently detailed on the elements to be covered. The concision and clarity of the reports are themes specifically discussed during the preparation of team members, bearing in mind that one crucial objective is to provide the basis for the team's proposal regarding the decision on accreditation to be made by the Management Board. Another essential objective is to offer recommendations for improvement to the assessed institution.

The higher education institutions regard the teams' reports quite positively, as shown in section 10.6. However, the Agency is very much aware that the reports must also provide other stakeholders and society with reliable and intelligible information on the quality of study programmes and that, although they are published, the previously mentioned objectives may sometimes make them a bit too technical. To help overcome this potential shortcoming, the Agency started in 2015 to publish [summary thematic studies](#) by scientific area as soon as the

assessment of study programmes in each area was finished, as stated in section 9.4. These reports contain information on all accredited programmes, trends in the number of programmes, vacancies and candidates, results of student placements and the minimum required classification to access each programme, pedagogic efficiency and employment data.

The Agency is currently in a process of transition to a second cycle of programme accreditation, as explained in section 4.4. Using this opportunity, renewed electronic forms for the assessment reports were adopted, building upon the experience collected in the first cycle and the advice of stakeholders, *inter alia* the contributions from the Scientific Council. For this effect, the [Guidelines for external assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation](#) and the [Guidelines for prior accreditation of new study programmes](#) require that the external assessment team, at the end of each section, submits a global appreciation of the study programme in relation to the specific area, aiming at a broader audience. In the final section of the report the team must provide a global appreciation of the study programme (summary of the main findings, commendations, recommendations and proposal for decision). Additionally, in the case of conditional accreditation, the report must explicitly indicate the conditions to be fulfilled and the implementation period.

The instructions regarding the aforementioned global appreciations call attention to the need of using a not too technical formulation, in order to be easily understandable by the public in general.

### **12.3 Engagement of students in external assessment teams**

Although it was not foreseen in the Portuguese legislation, the Agency decided in 2010 to undertake an experimental exercise to include students in external assessment teams based on voluntary participation of institutions. The first initiative was to conduct a study on the participation of students in quality assurance at European and national level [6]. Following consultation with students and higher education institution representatives, a guide was produced for the preparation of the experimental exercise of participation of students in the teams for the assessment/accreditation of study programmes [7].

Consequently, the Agency started in 2011 a process to recruit students for the external assessment committees. Applicants who had tuition in the areas of the study programmes being assessed/accredited in 2011/2012 were invited to undergo a training programme and to present a short essay on a theme related to quality assurance in higher education. Eighteen students were selected and became part of the external assessment teams, which began their work in May 2012. The results of this experimental exercise were very positive (*cf.* [report on the survey results](#)) and it was decided to extend participation ensuring the presence of a student in each site-visit.

Since then, every year a new call has been opened for candidates who have tuition in the areas of the study programmes being assessed in the following year. Indeed, it is necessary to renew the pool of students every year, in order to deal with the new areas to be accredited in successive years of the regular accreditation cycle.

Table 6 shows the evolution of the number of candidates, presences in the training sessions, essays submitted and students accepted to enter the pool. The last line shows the percentage of site-visits that included a student in the visiting external assessment team.

Table 6 – Recruitment of students for study programme external assessment teams.

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2017/18	Total*
<b>Valid candidates</b>	58	148	409	292	350	163	1 257
<b>Presence in training sessions</b>	39	93	212	162	187	56	693
<b>Essays submitted</b>	25	60	200	127	127	43	539
<b>Accepted into the pool</b>	18	48	174	113	112	43	465
<b>% of visits with a student</b>	8%	12%	67%	67%	65%	100%**	-

\* The ACEF process was not open in 2016/17, so there was no call for students.

\*\* From 2017/18 onwards, all visits include a student.

As emerges from the table, the Agency is dealing with a very significant number of candidates each year, but a large number does not attend the training sessions or does not submit the essay. In practice, only around one third of the candidates enter the pool of assessors. A major difficulty is the need to rotate the pool every year, with a few exceptions of students with tuition on two or more different areas. Nevertheless, a high percentage of visits have already integrated a student and in the new regular assessment/accreditation cycle starting in 2017/18 all visits will include a student in the external assessment team, in line with the 2015 version of the ESG. Strategies to increase the recruitment of students are being developed, as explained in section 14.

As regards the auditing of internal quality assurance systems, the external audit teams have always integrated one student per team from among a pool of four students with large experience of assessment of higher education at European level.

It is also worth mentioning the active participation of Portuguese students, members of A3ES's student-assessors pool, in the project EIQAS, particularly in the preparation of the [IQAS Students' Guide](#) [5].

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### 13. SWOT ANALYSIS

<b>Strengths</b>	Full operational autonomy and total independence from government and higher education institutions.
	Clear strategic vision and strong commitment of the Management Board.
	Well-built and documented assessment/accreditation/certification processes, based on clear regulations, guidelines, norms and information system.
	Close (informal and formal) interaction with stakeholders.
	Academic qualifications and expertise of researchers and project coordinators, as well as the internationalisation of the external assessment teams.
	Research activities on quality assurance and integration of their results into on-going processes.
	Membership of the Appeals Council, integrating 40% of foreign experts.
	Added value of the recommendations of the Scientific Council composed of international experts with worldwide reputation.
	Promotion of an internal quality assurance policy and enhancement-led feedback and analysis mechanisms, combined with commitment towards accountability.
	Main focus of external quality assurance processes on quality enhancement.
	Use of an electronic platform in all phases of the quality assurance processes.
<b>Weaknesses</b>	Need to update the electronic platform to take better advantage of the IT technological advancements and improve interoperability with the platforms of higher education institutions.
	Impossibility of selecting a fixed pool of experts to assess study programmes, since the areas being assessed are grouped in a six-year cycle, changing every year. Consequent need to select and train a high number of experts every year.
	Difficulties in the training/coaching of foreign members of the external assessment teams.
	Difficulties in recruiting qualified experts in some less common scientific areas and still insufficient experience of some experts on external quality assurance procedures.
	Some problems in recruiting students to act as team members in the external quality assurance processes, since the scientific areas under assessment change every year.

<b>Opportunities</b>	Legal framework enabling a strong independence of the Agency.
	Commitment of higher education institutions towards the development of internal quality assurance systems and the assessment/accreditation processes conducted by the Agency, and an improved awareness of their relevance.
	Building upon accumulated experience in the first regular assessment/accreditation cycle and on in-house research on quality assurance to improve practices and instruments.
	Tracking of international trends and sharing of best practices in quality assurance, namely within the European Higher Education Area.
	Impact of the Audit Process on the simplification of the accreditation procedures in the second assessment/accreditation cycle through a lighter-touch approach.
<b>Threats</b>	Assessment/accreditation processes may cause fatigue and be seen as bureaucratic exercises, not contributing effectively to quality enhancement. This could lead to some degeneration of quality culture into bureaucratic formalism, undermining the relationships between academics, the administrative estate and the Agency.
	Notwithstanding the progresses achieved, the concept and use of learning outcomes, as well as the new teaching/learning paradigm, are not yet fully integrated in the academics' culture.
	The new lighter-touch approach of the Agency may concentrate pressure on the more fragile institutions.

#### 14. CURRENT CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

As mentioned in sections 7, 9.1 and 9.6, the Agency pays careful attention to the interaction with stakeholders, collecting frequent formal and informal (internal and external) feedback, which the Management Board systematically analyses and incorporates in the decision-making processes. Examples of measures for the continuous improvement of procedures and instruments, which integrate results from feedback, were given in section 11.

The transition to a new assessment/accreditation cycle, coupled with the experience gathered in the cycle completed in 2017, also provided the opportunity to revisit some procedures (see section 4.4), in particular the revision of the guidelines for self-assessment and for external assessment of study programmes, incorporating several suggestions gathered in a collaborative work that involved the Agency, representatives of institutions and members of external assessment teams. A restructured version of the [\*Guidelines for self-assessment of study programmes in operation\*](#) (Guidelines ACEF 2018-2023) was therefore adopted and implemented, which simplified the previous guidelines in a significant way by taking advantage of the fact that the entire higher education provision in the country had already undergone an accreditation process by the Agency, and consequently more emphasis might be placed on the evolution and continuous improvement of the study programmes and on the core aspects of the qualification and specialisation of the teaching staff and the outcomes of teaching and research activities. The guidelines for external assessment were, consequently, also restructured to keep in line with the self-assessment guidelines and to include a global appreciation (summary of the main findings) at the end of the report to increase its clarity and accessibility to external partners and other interested individuals, as seen in section 12.2.

Further enhancement-led initiatives, meant, namely, to tackle the identified weaknesses, include:

- Further work on the updating of the electronic platform, to increase its user-friendliness and interoperability with the institutions' platforms taking advantage of IT developments. This work is being done in interaction with representatives from higher education institutions and members of external assessment teams.
- Deepening the discussions on guidelines, procedures and criteria in the preparation sessions for experts and student-assessors, since it is necessary to prepare new persons every year as a fixed pool of evaluators is not viable.
- Considering ways to expand the pool of student-assessors in order to guarantee participation of a student in all visits, *e.g.* by allowing the recruitment of former students until two years after graduation, as well as the participation of students of a related area if needed.
- Broaden the collaboration with other European quality assurance agencies for the exchange of experts, with a view to select foreign experts with sounder experience of quality assurance procedures and to facilitate recruiting experts in less common scientific areas.
- Improving the information kit in English, for foreign members of external assessment teams, *e.g.* by producing a video on the use of the electronic platform and the interpretation of criteria.

- Organising regional meetings with higher education institutions, for further clarification and reflection on quality assurance processes (as suggested by some institutions), aiming also to continuously improve the focus of processes on quality enhancement.

Even though the accreditation processes have been running rather smoothly throughout the first assessment/accreditation cycle and have achieved a good degree of acceptance by stakeholders, besides the above mentioned improvement action plans the Agency has been active in the preparation of the new phase of the quality assurance system.

As a matter of fact, A3ES is aware that assessment/accreditation systems are dynamic processes and international experience shows that they are in permanent evolution, with regard not only to aims, procedures and used methodologies, but also to their legal framework and international influences. The Agency is also conscious that it is highly recommended that the same processes and methods should not be exactly repeated in the next assessment cycles, since they may become routine to both institutions and quality assurance agencies, leading to loss of efficacy.

Additionally, one must recognise that a system which performs an exhaustive analysis of the complete educational provision at programme level is too demanding, both in terms of work and costs, especially when it is combined with a process of institutional assessment.

Having these issues in mind, and after discussions with higher education institutions, the Agency is starting to adopt a more flexible assessment/accreditation regime in areas of above-average quality, as was explained in section 10.2. The idea is to replace the assessment of the whole educational provision by a sampling methodology and an appropriate monitoring process in areas that meet certain pre-determined conditions (a good performance in the former accreditation cycle, high level of teaching staff qualification, internationally recognised research and a certified internal quality assurance system).

This move to a lighter-touch approach based on the principles of risk assessment, initiated in the current year, will be closely monitored to safeguard the efficacy of and the public trust in the quality assurance processes carried out by the Agency.

Meanwhile, the Agency will continue to follow developments in assessment processes both by participating regularly in international scientific events on higher education policy and quality assurance and by conducting its own research on quality assurance subjects through the Office of Research and Analysis. The fact that the Agency is a member of the CIQG (CHEA International Quality Group) will also allow to observe developments in the U.S., where there is a large experience in this field.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ACEF	Processo de Avaliação/acreditação de Ciclos de Estudos em Funcionamento ( <i>Process for Assessment/accreditation of Study Programmes in Operation</i> )
AINST	Processo de Avaliação Institucional ( <i>Process for Institutional Assessment</i> )
ASIGQ	Processo de Auditoria/certificação de Sistemas Internos de Garantia da Qualidade ( <i>Process for Audit/certification of Internal Quality Assurance Systems</i> )
A3ES	Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior ( <i>Agency for the Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education</i> )
ADISPOR	Associação dos Institutos Superiores Politécnicos Portugueses ( <i>Association of Portuguese Polytechnic Institutions</i> )
APESP	Associação Portuguesa dos Estabelecimentos de Ensino Superior Privado ( <i>Portuguese Association of Private Higher Education Institutions</i> )
CHEA	Council for Higher Education Accreditation (US)
CIQG	CHEA International Quality Group
CNAVES	Conselho Nacional de Avaliação do Ensino Superior ( <i>National Council for the Evaluation of Higher Education</i> )
CRUP	Conselho de Reitores das Universidades Portuguesas ( <i>Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities</i> )
CTeSP	Cursos Técnicos Superiores Profissionais ( <i>Short-cycle HE programmes</i> )
DGES	Direção-Geral do Ensino Superior General Directorate for Higher Education
ECA	European Consortium for Accreditation
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAF	European Quality Assurance Forum
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
EUA	European University Association
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
IQAS	Internal quality assurance systems
NCE	Processo de Acreditação Prévia de Novos Ciclos de Estudos ( <i>Process for Prior Accreditation of New Study Programmes</i> )
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
QA	Quality assurance
RJIES	Regime Jurídico das Instituições de Ensino Superior ( <i>Legal framework for higher education institutions</i> )
SAR	Self-assessment report

## LIST OF DOCUMENTS

This appendix indicates, in a systematised way, the documents mentioned in the self-assessment report to provide evidence on the analysis performed, all of which were made available through hyperlinks to A3ES's website.

### Main legal diplomas

- [Law 38/2007](#), of 16 August (Legal framework for the assessment of higher education)
- [Law 62/2007](#), of 10 September (RJIES – Legal framework for higher education institutions)
- [Decree-Law 369/2007](#), of 5 November (Creates A3ES and endorses its Statutes)
- [Decree-Law 74/2006](#), amended and republished by [Decree-Law 65/2018](#), of 16 August (Regulates the organisation of degrees and its adaptation to the Bologna process)

### Norms and regulations

- [Regulations on the assessment and accreditation procedures](#)
- [Regulations of the Appeals Council and appeals procedures](#)
- [Norms for the appointment and conduct of the external assessment team](#)
- [Code of Ethics](#)

### Manuals and criteria

- [Assessment Handbook](#)
- [Simplified Assessment Handbook](#)
- [Manual for the Audit Process](#)
- [Manual for Institutional Assessment](#)
- [Quality Manual](#)
- [Qualification Criteria for Teaching Staff](#)

### Plans and reports

- [Strategic Plan](#)
- [Quality Policy Statement](#)
- [Activity Plan 2018](#)
- [Activity Report 2017](#)
- [Reports of the Scientific Council](#)
  - [Report of Scientific Council – June 2017](#)
  - [Report of Scientific Council – October 2015](#)
  - [Report of Scientific Council – October 2014](#)
  - [Report of Scientific Council – November 2013](#)

- [Report of Scientific Council – October 2012](#)
- [Report of Scientific Council – February 2011](#)
- [Report of Scientific Council – December 2009](#)

#### **Guidelines for prior accreditation of new study programmes**

- [Guidelines for requesting prior accreditation of new study programmes](#)
- [Guidelines for prior accreditation of new study programmes](#)

#### **Guidelines for assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation**

- [Guidelines for self-assessment of study programmes in operation](#)
- [Guidelines for external assessment/accreditation of study programmes in operation](#)

#### **Guidelines for institutional assessment**

- [Guidelines for institutional self-assessment \(Polytechnic Education\)](#)
- [Guidelines for institutional self-assessment \(University Education\)](#)
- [Guidelines for external institutional assessment \(Polytechnic Education\)](#)
- [Guidelines for external institutional assessment \(University Education\)](#)

#### **Guidelines for auditing internal quality assurance systems**

- [Guidelines for self-assessment of internal quality assurance systems](#)
- [Guidelines for auditing internal quality assurance systems](#)

#### **Results**

- [Accreditation Process Results](#) (available in Portuguese only)
- [Reports on the surveys' results and improvement measures](#) (available in Portuguese only)