



# A3ES

Agência de Avaliação  
e Acreditação  
do Ensino Superior

## ENQA TARGETED REVIEW

## A3ES SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

OCTOBER 2023

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## Glossary of terms

A3ES – Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education

ACEF – Accreditation of Study Programmes in Operation

AINST – Institutional Assessment

APESP – Portuguese Association of Private Higher Education

ARES – CPLP – Regulatory Agencies of Higher Education of the Community of the Portuguese Speaking Countries

CCISP – Portuguese Polytechnics Coordinating Council

CHEA – Council for Higher Education Accreditation

CRUP – Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities

DGEEC – Directorate General for Statistics in Education and Science

DGES – Directorate General for Higher Education

EAT – External Assessment Team

EQAR – European Quality Assurance Register

ENQA – European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

FCT – Foundation for Science and the Technology

HEI – Higher Education Institution

NCE – New Study Programmes

NCE EaD – Distance Learning New Study Programmes

PERA – Special Request for Renewal of Accreditation of Non-Aligned Study Programme

SAR – Self Assessment Report

SIACES –Ibero-American System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

SIGQ – Internal Quality Assurance System

TAC – Thematic Assessment Committee

TOR – Terms of Reference

Via Verde – Fast Track Assessment Procedure

## PART I. BACKGROUND

### 1. A3ES' Targeted Review

A3ES' targeted review is being carried during a crucial moment: the institutional assessment of the Portuguese higher education system. The first cycle of the institutional assessment started in 2016 and six years past, A3ES launched a new cycle. The last first cycle of institutional assessment had a major concern with assessing whether institutions met Portuguese legal context for higher education, and expectably the majority of the conditions for institutional accreditation was based on the unconformity with the legal requirements. This new cycle aims to be comprehensive, rigorous, and transparent, to foster an environment of trust, transparency, and institutional responsibility and to contribute, with its results, to new assessment and accreditation procedures by A3ES.

The Portuguese higher education system is under a process of self-reflexion about its future. The new legal framework about the funding of higher education is being prepared and the new legal regime for higher education institutions (HEIs), dating from 2007 is under revision. The main aspects of this reflexion are: the internal structure of HEIs, a better definition of the characteristics of the two subsystems (universities and polytechnics), internationalization, pedagogical innovation and the openness to society.

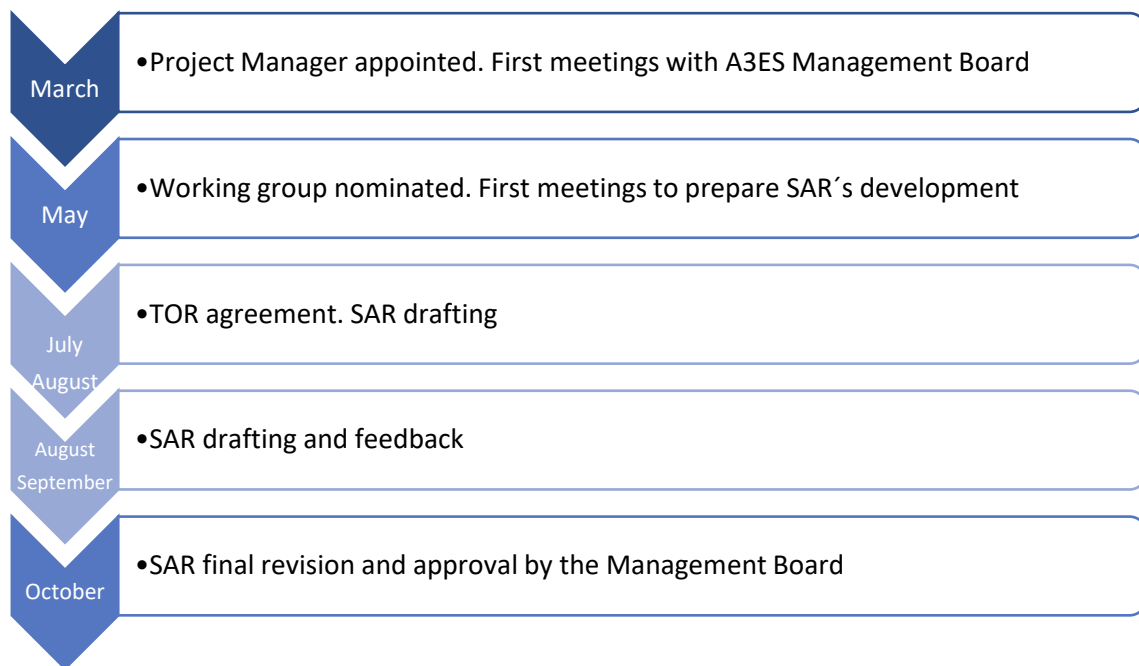
The ongoing institutional assessment aims to clarify some of these aspects, being especially focused on the institutional strategy; on the ability to include students in learning, research and cooperation; on scientific research; and on national and international cooperation.

The institutional assessment is also aimed at giving A3ES directions which promote the dialogue and trust between HEIs and A3ES.

### 2. Development of the Self-Assessment Report

In March 2023, A3ES began preparing for the 2024 assessment by ENQA. The head of the studies and analysis office was assigned project manager and two months afterwards a team with two other staff members was appointed to work on the development of the Self-Assessment Report (SAR).

The team developed a timeline for the SAR (Figure 1), and once the terms of reference were agreed upon, the team started drafting the SAR and organizing activities to involve colleagues in different parts of the process. The team together with the Management Board of A3ES prepared the initial report based on an analysis of the evidence and an assessment of the progress made since the previous review. A3ES staff supported the working team with documents and served as an informal sounding board providing feedback. All A3ES staff and Management Board members, as well as external stakeholders, mainly higher education system representatives: the Portuguese Association of Privat Higher Education (APESP), the Portuguese Polytechnics Coordinating Council (CCISP) and the Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities (CRUP) and Students Unions, were offered the opportunity to comment on the SAR's draft. Following revisions, A3ES Management Board approved the SAR before being submitted.



**Figure 1. SAR Timeline**

## 3. Introduction

### 3.1. The country

The Portuguese higher education system is a binary system comprised of 97 higher education institutions (HEIs), universities and polytechnic institutes, and divided into two sectors: private and public institutions.

**Table 1. Portuguese Higher Education System (numbers)**

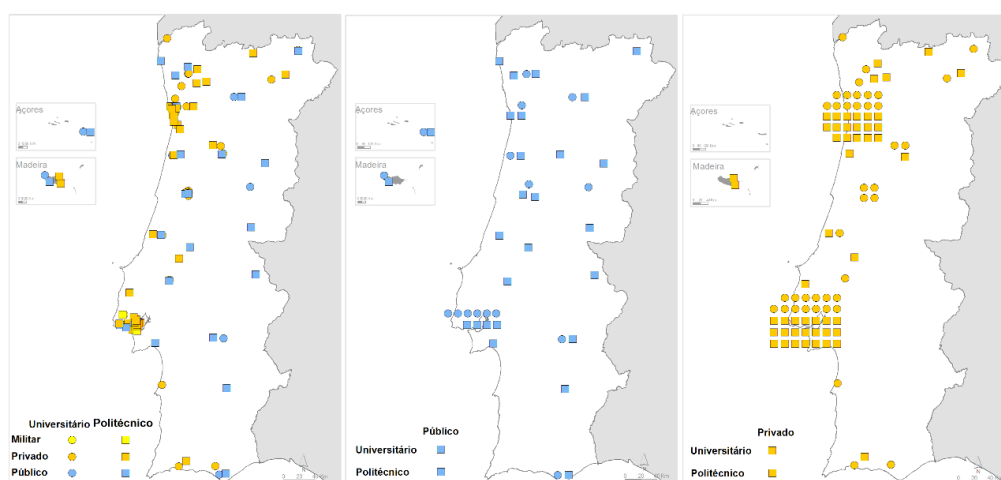
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS	PUBLIC	PRIVATE
UNIVERSITIES	16	20
POLYTECHNIC	20	41
TOTAL	36	61

Source: A3ES IT System

At the time of the first institutional assessment carried out by A3ES in 2017, there were 111 HEIs. As a result of that same assessment, 9 were non-accredited, and some of them merged. As a consequence, the second cycle of institution assessment comprises 97 HEIs.

Although there is a high concentration of HEIs in the most populated metropolitan areas (Lisbon and Porto), there is a broad regional coverage (Figure 2). Each HEI has its own organisational structure, strategy, and unique mission, normally adjusted to the geographical area where it is located and to the needs and characteristics of its surrounding areas.

In the figures below, one can see the concentration of HEIs (public, in blue, and private, in yellow) in the larger metropolitan areas, and the broad regional coverage, mostly of public HEIs.



**Figure 2. Regional coverage of Portuguese higher education institutions (Source: DGES)**

The 97 Portuguese HEIs offer circa 4 400 study programmes, 38% of which are bachelor's, 48% are master's and 14% are PhDs programmes. The Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) is the only quality assurance agency in the country and, therefore responsible for the regular assessment and accreditation of all HEIs and study programmes, plus the yearly submission of New Study Programmes.

The number of students attending the higher education system has registered, in recent years, a positive evolution, despite a negative characteristic that affects the Portuguese population: demographic imbalance due to a low birth rate.

**Table 2. Number of students enrolled in higher education**

YEARS	UNIVERSITIES	POLYTECHNICS	TOTAL
<b>2018</b>	241 235	131 518	372 753
<b>2019</b>	247 867	137 380	385 247
<b>2020</b>	253 460	143 449	396 909
<b>2021</b>	261 299	150 696	411 995
<b>2022</b>	274 594	158 623	433 217
<b>2023</b>	282 581	163 447	446 028

Source: DGEEC, 2023

Another characteristic that can be presented reveals the size of the teaching staff and its evolution in recent years.

**Table 3. Teaching Staff in Higher Education (numbers)**

YEARS	UNIVERSITIES	POLYTECHNICS	TOTAL
<b>2018</b>	21 595	13 688	35 283
<b>2019</b>	21 812	13 737	35 549
<b>2020</b>	22 434	14 039	36 473
<b>2021</b>	23 564	15 103	38 667
<b>2022</b>	24 677	15 506	40 183

Source: DGEEC, 2023

In its relations with higher education institutions, A3ES has also made explicit the four arching principles of the Council of Europe. The responsibility of public authorities extends to all purposes of higher education and research. While much recent debate has focused on the importance of higher education and research in economic and employment terms, it is important to underline that higher education and research serve multiple purposes, and that these are complementary rather than contradictory. Coherent higher education and research policies should therefore address the multiple concomitant purposes of higher education, which include:



preparation for sustainable employment; preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies; personal development; development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

These characteristics have a significant expression in the information collected in the context of institutional assessment, namely through the Strategic Plans presented by higher education institutions.

### 3.2. A3ES

A3ES was established in 2007, under the Portuguese government's Decree-Law 369/2007<sup>1</sup>. The members of the Management Board were appointed in December 2008, and the A3ES started operations in 2009.

A3ES is a private law foundation recognised as being of public utility. A3ES is independent in its decisions, although it must consider the Portuguese law and its guidelines on Higher Education. The law approved by the Portuguese Parliament<sup>2</sup> defined the assessment and accreditation regime for the higher education system, to be developed by A3ES.

The mission of A3ES is to assure the quality of higher education in Portugal through assessment and accreditation of HEIs and their study programmes, and to perform functions inherent to Portugal's inclusion in the European Quality Assurance System for Higher Education. The primary aim of A3ES is to ensure enhanced performance of HEIs and their study programmes and assure the fulfilment of basic requirements for their official recognition. The aims of the A3ES are pursued through the assessment and accreditation of HEIs and their study programmes, thus promoting an internal culture of quality assurance within institutions.

A3ES's external quality assurance entails several types of activities regarding the assessment and accreditation of higher education. One of A3ES's activities is institutional accreditation, a mandatory process both for private and public institutions operating in Portugal, which occurs every six years. The accreditation of Study Programmes in Operation (ACEF) is also periodical, every six years (each year corresponding to the assessment of a scientific area), and any new study programme needs to undergo accreditation before it can start operations (NCE). A3ES is

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<sup>1</sup> [Decree-Law 369/2007](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Law 38/2007](#)

also responsible for the accreditation and assessment of joint study programmes using the European Approach.

A brief explanation of the assessment processes and their results can be presented in Tables 4 and 5, respectively.

**Table 4. Type of assessment processes**

Abbreviation	Full name	Description	Length of Accreditation	Type of process	Possible outcome
<b>NCE<sup>3</sup></b>	New Study Programmes	Accreditation of New Study Programmes in Portugal	6 years maximum	Mandatory	Accredited/ Accredited with conditions/ Not accredited
<b>NCE EaD<sup>4</sup></b>	Distance Learning New Study Programmes	Prior accreditation of distance learning study programme	6 years maximum	Mandatory	Accredited/ Accredited with conditions/ Not accredited
<b>ACEF<sup>5</sup></b>	Assessment/ accreditation of Study Programmes in Operation		6 years maximum	Mandatory	Accredited/ Accredited with conditions/ Not accredited
<b>PERA<sup>6</sup></b>	Special Request for Renewal of Accreditation	Special Request for Renewal of Accreditation of Non-Aligned Study Programme	2-4 years	Mandatory	Accredited/ Submit the study programme to a new assessment
<b>AINST<sup>7</sup></b>	Institutional Assessment		6 years maximum	Mandatory	Accredited/ Accredited with conditions/ Not accredited
<b>SIGQ<sup>8</sup></b>	Internal Quality Assurance Systems	Certification of Internal Quality assurance Systems	6 years maximum	Mandatory	Certify/ Certify with condition/ Not certified

<sup>3</sup> 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 standards and the applicable legal requirements.

<sup>4</sup> 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 standards and the applicable legal requirements.

<sup>5</sup> 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 previous accreditation are being met. Every year there are a few scientific areas that are selected for assessment.

<sup>6</sup> Study programmes in operation which are not, temporarily, aligned with the assessment of its scientific area undergo a documental assessment.

<sup>7</sup> A 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

**Table 5. Results of assessment/accreditation of study programmes and internal quality assurance systems.**

<b>2023(*)</b>	<b>Submitted</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Non-accredited</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>Accredited with conditions</b>
NCE	286	92	8	60	24
NCE EaD	29	6	1	3	2
ACEF	0	395	7	332	56
PERA	115	108	5	103	0
SIGQ	6	6	2	0	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>436</b>	<b>607</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>2022</b>	<b>Submitted</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Non-accredited</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>Accredited with conditions</b>
NCE	313	299	71	158	70
NCE EaD	34	37	18	11	8
ACEF	469	812	6	650	156
PERA	85	168	8	160	0
SIGQ	9	6	1	4	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>910</b>	<b>1322</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>983</b>	<b>235</b>
<b>2021</b>	<b>Submitted</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Non-accredited</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>Accredited with conditions</b>
NCE	232	359	67	239	53
NCE EaD	59	55	45	3	7
ACEF	657	496	5	411	80
PERA	147	11	0	11	0
SIGQ	11	9	0	0	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>1106</b>	<b>930</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>664</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>2020</b>	<b>Submitted</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Non-accredited</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>Accredited with conditions</b>
NCE	402	269	58	147	64
NCE EaD	0	0	0	0	0
ACEF	658	718	26	572	120
PERA	30	54	7	47	0
SIGQ	10	9	0	1	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>1100</b>	<b>1050</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>767</b>	<b>192</b>
<b>2019</b>	<b>Submitted</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Non-accredited</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>Accredited with conditions</b>
NCE	153	148	56	62	30
NCE EaD	0	0	0	0	0
ACEF	783	405	43	253	109
PERA	33	124	25	99	0
SIGQ	3	2	0	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>972</b>	<b>679</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>2018</b>	<b>Submitted</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Non-accredited</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>Accredited with conditions</b>
NCE	186	176	47	95	34
NCE EaD	0	0	0	0	0
ACEF	435	169	3	73	93
PERA	190	98	13	85	0
SIGQ	5	2	0	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>816</b>	<b>445</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>129</b>

(\*) Until the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2023 / Source: A3ES IT System

Some study programmes are accredited with conditions, for periods of less than six years. In these cases, the institutions must present a follow-up report in which they state the procedures followed to overcome the conditions defined by the external assessment. Additionally, there is also a special procedure of accreditation (PERA) if/when a study programme is not temporarily aligned with the assessment of its scientific area. Lastly, HEIs can voluntarily submit their internal quality assurance system to be audited by A3ES.

Apart from the study programme assessment activity in the national higher education context, A3ES develops study programme reviews in Macau (China). The guidelines and procedures are defined by the external quality system of Macau, which means that these processes are not integrated with the assessment processes carried out by A3ES in the national higher education context (study programme assessment, institutional assessment, and certification of quality assurance systems of Portuguese HEIs). These are different processes, that have, however, been influenced by the ESG (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education) and the A3ES guidelines. The guidelines, the results, and the national and international pool of experts of the assessment processes are published in the A3ES's website<sup>9</sup>.

A3ES is a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), since 2014. It is also a member of the CHEA International Quality Group, the Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior (SIACES) and the Forum ARES-CPLP, which integrates the quality assurance agencies from the Community of the Portuguese-Speaking Countries, namely: Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Portugal, São Tomé e Príncipe and Timor.

It is also worth highlighting that A3ES continues to have strong international cooperation, particularly with European quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, participating in several European research projects related to its strategic areas:

- “REMOTE – Assessing and evaluating learning practices in STEM” (Erasmus + KA220-HED – ongoing)
- “EDLab – European Degree Label Institutional” (participation as non-beneficiary – ongoing)
- “Smart-Qual – Structured Indicators to Manage Higher Education Institutions Quality Systems” (Erasmus+ KA2 – concluded)

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<sup>9</sup> [Assessment in Macau](#)

- “Ge-HEI - Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions” (promoted by the Directorate General for Higher Education in Portugal and funded by EAAgrants – concluded)
- “Access of national and International students to higher education” (EDULOG, 2020-2021 – concluded)
- “S4F – Skills for the future? The value and effectiveness and competency-based higher education” (FCT Project 2018-2021 – concluded)
- “What do we talk about when we talk about doctoral education” (EDULOG, 2020-2021 – concluded).

Finally, A3ES participated as a partner of ENQA’s working group on microcredentials (particularly in the development of the final report) and often participating in assessments, meetings and seminars especially devoted to discussing quality assurance in higher education. And, recently, A3ES also integrates the Working Group on Quality Assurance for Research of ENQA.

### 3. Changes since the last full review from ENQA

#### 3.1. A3ES management, governance, and organisation

**Management Board:** Since ENQA’s last review in 2019, the A3ES **Management Board** has been replaced. In December 2020, the previous Management Board ended their mandate, and a new Management Board took office. Since then, the President of A3ES is Professor João Guerreiro, and the two executive Management Board members are Professors João Queiroz and Helena Avelino. The Management Board includes three other non-executive members: Professors Anália Torres, Miguel Faria, and Teresa Restivo. The adjustment of the new Management Board was challenging because it occurred during the covid-19 pandemic, when the A3ES staff was working remotely. Fortunately, A3ES managed to overcome most challenges, recovered its working dynamics, and has since implemented a few changes for advancing its assessment and accreditation activities, as described in this SAR.

**Organisational Structure:** A3ES has also reformed its **organisational structure** (Figure 3). In June 2021, a new Board of Trustees took office at A3ES. The **Board of Trustees** integrates five members, appointed by the Council of Ministers, from among personalities of recognised merit and experience. Their mandate is non-renewable and lasts five years; its competencies are to appoint the members of both the Management Board and the **Appeals Council** of A3ES. The Board of Trustees oversees A3ES's work and reviews its annual activities, management, and accounting reports. The current members of the Board of Trustees are Professor António Bensabat Rendas (President), Professor António Augusto Magalhães da Cunha, Professor Cristina Robalo Cordeiro, Professor Maria Manuel Leitão Marques, and Dr. Paulo Moita Macedo.

Since May 2021, the mandate of the **Audit Committee** was renovated. The Audit Committee is responsible for checking the legality of the Agency's finances. Its composition is of three members, and its appointment is the responsibility of the member of the Government with responsibility for Finances.

The A3ES Management Board is supported by an **Advisory Council** and by a **Scientific Council**. The last one is not a statutory body. After a period of operation corresponding to the mandate of the previous Management Board, the Scientific Council was redesigned by the current Management Board with a different composition, by integrating six members, three international and three nationals.

The remaining structure is divided into two areas: **the assessment area**, and **the support area**. The assessment area includes A3ES's eleven project coordinators, and the support area includes the Human and Financial Resources, the Studies and Analysis Office, and the IT department. Additionally, A3ES has two secretaries and two legal consultants. Below is, the new organisational structure, as established in 2023<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>10</sup> [A3ES Organisational Structure](#)

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW: A3ES SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

**Strategic Plan:** The A3ES developed and published its **Strategic Plan 2021-2024**<sup>11</sup>, where it emphasised its main activities, challenges and development axes and the main strategic objectives:

1. Assessment for quality improvement;
2. Institutional assessment adequate to the diversity of the system;
3. Simplification of assessment procedures;
4. Internationalisation;
5. European cooperation;
6. Internal quality;
7. Prospective partnerships.

The Strategic Plan (2021-2024) highlights that the Agency's intervention, throughout the period of this Plan, aims at influencing the evolution of the Portuguese higher education system and to ensure that the different ways of organising the training offer can be accepted. Significant relevance should be given to the integration of non-traditional publics, namely through the offers inserted in the lifelong learning, the qualified incorporation of the instruments allowed by digitalisation and, as stated, the commitment of the institutions with the challenges of environmental, technological and digital transition.

The Strategic Plan also integrates two axes related to cooperation and internationalization. A3ES acknowledges that joint initiatives, the good practices and the analysis of the evolution of other higher education systems brings benefits to A3ES' activity. Promoting the contact with stakeholders throughout the Advisory Council and other stakeholders are partners is being extremely important and has fostered the new awareness and openness in A3ES' assessment strategies.

The first final note of the Strategic Plan aims to highlight the **diversity** that must exist among institutions, their missions, operating models, strategies, and results. The higher education system, at national and international level, integrates institutions with different profiles, diverse strategies, specific operating rules, their own levels of autonomy and, therefore, naturally different results. It is a global system, which requires that the different assessment axes integrate this diversity and combine the characteristics and resources with the results achieved.

The final note underlined the growing level of **trust** that should be established among institutions and with the institutions, each one assuming its vocations, competences, and attributions, in a

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<sup>11</sup> [Strategic Plan 2021-2024](#)



transparent and demanding framework. In this environment, the simplification of many procedures can be deepened, lending an increasing credibility to the system, and contributing for a clear public affirmation of higher education.

### Legal framework

There were several changes in the national legislation within the framework of the higher education system, which impact (direct or indirectly) A3ES's activity, namely, a Decree-Law published in 2018 clarified the qualification of academic staff of higher education institutions (with more demanding requirements), makes doctoral programs more challenging (and necessarily linked to highly qualified research units) and creates the professional masters<sup>12</sup>.

New legislation related to distance education also has directly influenced A3ES's assessment activity. Until 2019, there was no Portuguese legislation applicable to distance education, and study programmes were only accredited to be taught face-to-face. It was only after the publication of a decree in 2019<sup>13</sup> that quality assessment criteria were defined (on human resources, material and technological resources, pedagogical model, and curriculum design) and the drafting of regulations was left to A3ES that defined the accreditation procedures for these study programmes.

Another change, which has directly affected A3ES's activity, is the obligation of A3ES to present an annual report about the quality assurance in Portugal to the Portuguese Parliament and to the National Council for Education, which has resulted in the presentation of four reports (2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023).

### Procedures and guidelines developed during the pandemic

The pandemic promoted a paradigm shift within A3ES. Due to the public health rules in place in Portugal in 2020, A3ES started hosting the visits of the assessment procedures virtually, via ZOOM. The Management Board introduced guiding documents and procedures, including basic guidelines and instructions, for the preparation, organisation, and implementation of these distance visits, and use of the associated software<sup>14</sup>. Distance visits were implemented smoothly and both the A3ES staff and HEIs have easily adapted to the new assessment context.

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<sup>12</sup> [Decree-Law 65/2018](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Decree-Law 133/2019](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Virtual Visits Guidelines](#)

## External Assessment Teams and Thematic Assessment Committees

Important progress, which directly influenced the assessment procedures developed by A3ES and its compliance with the ESG, was also made in the external assessment teams (EATs), related to gender balance, student participation and members turnover and in the involvement of the thematic assessment committee (TAC<sup>15</sup>) in the study programme and in the institutional assessment.

These changes will be addressed and deeply discussed below.

### 3.2. New External Quality Assurance Activities

Since the last review, A3ES introduced some changes in its assessment procedures. These changes are globally based on the idea of trust, responsibility, and accountability. HEIs have been increasingly embedding a culture of quality, by integrating quality management in their overall management and governance context, which has improved the relationship between institutions and A3ES. In this context, A3ES has been making efforts to turn the conditions of the assessment processes into recommendations. This environment of trust and responsibility has led to the simplification of some assessment procedures, which aims not only to make them simpler and easier for institutions, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, to increase the overall assessment and accreditation context and to improve quality assurance. The changes in the assessment processes are also a result of the assessment and analysis made by A3ES, through opinion surveys made to EAT members and school directors/deans/presidents integrated in the different assessment processes, in order to understand how A3ES can continuously improve their procedures and activities<sup>16</sup>.

The changes in the assessment guidelines, particularly in the assessment of study programmes, were also fostered by discussions around a very important topic for A3ES: pedagogical innovation. A group of academics from several Portuguese higher education institutions were tasked with producing a text analysing pedagogical innovation, evoking good practices, and proposing models for structuring study programmes.<sup>17</sup> This reflection admitted changes in the

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<sup>15</sup> We will address the role of this committee in chapter 4.2.

<sup>16</sup> The last survey was implemented in 2021 with very positive results about the functioning of external assessment processes. These results were published in the Management Report of 2022 (only in Portuguese).

<sup>17</sup> Two seminars were held (in Porto and Lisbon) and a book has been published by A3ES: Almeida, L. *et al* (2022) – *Inovação Pedagógica no Ensino Superior. Cenários e Caminhos de Transformação*, Lisboa, A3ES: [Pedagogical Innovation in Higher Education - Book](#)

assessment guidelines for different study programmes to be improved in the section on pedagogical methodologies, stimulating the debate on these issues within higher education institutions.

It is also worth emphasising that these changes were discussed with key external stakeholders, like APESP, CCISP, CRUP, and other institutions which are recognized for their quality performance. All the revised assessment procedures were open for public consultation before being adopted.

### [Simplification of the assessment procedures of Study Programmes in Operation \(ACEF\)](#)

Starting in the academic year 2017/2018, A3ES has adopted simplified and flexible procedures for the assessment of Study Programmes in Operation, through what is called *Via Verde* (meaning a fast-track procedure). This allows the accreditation of study programmes without the need to form an EAT. These procedures will be deeply explored in section 4.1.2.

In August of 2023, new and improved guides for the assessment of Study Programmes in Operation and of non-aligned study programmes were also implemented<sup>18</sup>. Since a new cycle of assessment (2023-2028) just started, the new guides had to be implemented and published beforehand.

### [Simplification of the assessment procedures for non-aligned study programmes \(PERA\)](#)

Starting in the academic year 2022/2023, A3ES has adopted simplified procedures for the assessment of non-aligned study programmes. The deliberation was published on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023 (Order 1/2023)<sup>19</sup> and from then onwards it is possible to apply the *Via Verde* to all processes of assessment of non-aligned study programmes of institutions whose internal quality management systems has not been certified by A3ES but who meet all the other requirements to be accredited according to the *Via Verde* procedures, namely, without nominating an EAT. The nomination of an EAT will still be mandatory whenever the requirements for the *Via Verde* assessment have not been met.

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<sup>18</sup> [Guide/Guidelines ACEF PERA 2023 2028](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Simplification of study programme assessment procedures](#)

### Adjustments in the assessment of New Study Programmes (NCE)

The assessment procedures for the New Study Programmes (NCE) benefitted from previous experience and only a few adjustments were made, namely:

- Curricular design constituted a request that traditionally was not part of the characteristics that defined study programmes;
- After 2021, EAT has an international expert, a situation that in the previous period was not considered;
- Following a set of initiatives promoted by A3ES around pedagogical innovation, the NCE guidelines expanded the information collected related to the teaching model, pedagogical issues, and student mobilization methods.

### Assessment procedures for distance learning New Study Programmes (NCE EaD)

The Portuguese legal framework for distance education was introduced in 2019<sup>20</sup> and A3ES lawfully adapted their procedures for the assessment of distance learning study programmes and implementing a specific guide for the assessment of distance learning study programmes in the academic year 2020/21.

The new Management Board has issued an order<sup>21</sup> to create a TAC, whose functions were to support the Management Board in matters related to distance education. The order was subsequently released defining the criteria for assessing proposals for study programmes with distance learning components. These criteria served as the basis for preparing the guidelines for assessing New Study Programmes, applicable to face-to-face and distance learning study programmes (version reviewed in September 2022). This change will be further discussed in section 4 of the SAR.

A3ES published on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022 (Order 16/2022)<sup>22</sup> a deliberation with an explanation of the implementation of the criteria regarding distance education:

1. the teaching and learning methodologies for distance or mixed learning should be different from the ones used in face-to-face teaching;

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<sup>20</sup> [Decree-Law 133/2019](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Order - TAC for Distance Learning](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Normative framework distance learning](#)

2. the teaching staff for distance learning should have theoretical and practical training in distance teaching, experience teaching using active learning approaches, and a portfolio of recent scientific publications, scientific activities, and/or pedagogical activities on themes directly related to distance learning;

3. the coordinator of the study programme should fulfil the same legal requirements than those of in-person education and there can be an expert in distance learning co-coordinating;

4. the institutions should have specialized technical staff that can help students learn and teachers prepare classes;

5. the institutions must have adequate material and technological means and infrastructure to make distance learning possible, namely to develop experimental, laboratorial, and performative activities at a distance;

6. students should be subject to continuous assessment and the use of surveillance systems for remote examinations shall comply with the existing data protection guidelines.

Related to the topic of distance education, in 2021 A3ES promoted the conference ‘The Challenges of Distance Education in Higher Education’ and its proceedings have been published in A3ES website<sup>23</sup>. The guide for the assessment of distance learning study programmes were then merged with non-distance programmes (in the academic year 2022/2023). There is now one set of guides (and the same self-assessment script) for both face-to-face and distance education. In this guide, we find specific parameters related to distance education, which are only filled in whenever the study programmes being assessed are distance learning study programmes.

### [Assessment of joint study programmes using the European Approach](#)

Since May 2023, A3ES has been assessing joint study programmes according to the European Approach. In May 2023, A3ES has published the ‘Procedure for the accreditation of academic degrees in association promoted by European HEIs’ (Resolution no. 474/2023)<sup>24</sup> which defines the steps to be taken in the event of a new study programme organised in association with several European HEIs. This procedure was applied for the New Study Programmes submitted in October 2022 (See Table 8).

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<sup>23</sup> [Conference Proceedings Distance Education](#)

<sup>24</sup> [Resolution 474/2023](#)

## PART II. FOCUS AREAS

### 4. Design and Implementation of the A3ES's External Quality Assurance Activities related to the Focus Areas of Part 2 of the ESG

#### 4.1. ESG Standard 2.1

In the last ENQA's review, standard 2.1 was considered fully compliant. Since then, A3ES has gone through some changes, namely at the procedural level, mainly due to the publication of new legislation on distance education<sup>25</sup>, which led to a revision and then the merge of the guides for New Study Programmes (NCE), to the simplification of assessment procedures for Study Programmes in Operation (ACEF) and non-aligned study programmes (PERA), and also to the revision and adoption of new guidelines for the institutional assessment. The processes of assessment of New Study Programmes (NCE) deal with the study programmes about to be offered in the upcoming academic year, while processes of Study Programmes in Operation (ACEF) refer to the mandatory periodical assessment of every study programme (maximum of 6 years). When the end of the period of accreditation of a study programme does not match the periodical assessment of that scientific area, the programme has to be subjected to an assessment of a Non-Aligned Study Programme (PERA). The PERA processes are then always study programmes already in operation that were accredited but need to prolong the accreditation for a few years until they align with the assessment of study programs in operation of their specific scientific area. This is why the PERA processes have the most simplified assessment procedures: they do not need accreditation for the next 6 years, but usually only for 2 to 4 years until they align.

##### 4.1.1. New Study Programmes and distance education (NCE and NCE-EaD)

As emphasized above, the Portuguese legal framework for distance education changed in 2019<sup>26</sup> and A3ES lawfully adapted its procedures for the assessment of distance learning programmes, implementing a specific guide for these assessments. As referred to in the Strategic Plan (2021-

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<sup>25</sup> [Decree-Law 133/2019](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Decree-Law 133/2019](#)

2024), distance education became one of the priorities of A3ES, thus implementing the new legislation on the assessment of New Study Programmes was urgent.

In 2022/2023 A3ES merged the guides for the assessment of distance learning study programmes with face-to-face programmes, as previously explained.

In 2020, A3ES created a committee for distance learning study programmes. Its members are experts in this teaching approach and are responsible for:

1. Supporting the Management Board on all the issues related to Distance Education.
2. Assessing the proposals for New Study Programmes, along with experts from different scientific areas.
3. Proposing the revision of the guide for distance learning study programmes, whenever it is considered necessary.
4. Other competencies that the Management Board decides to delegate.

The composition of the committee was later changed, although its mandate has been maintained<sup>27</sup>. It has also included two international advisers.

The Management Board published a Memorandum with criteria to be used in the assessment and accreditation of study programmes with distance learning components<sup>28</sup>.

A3ES is using now, for the merged guides, the same procedure as before:

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

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<sup>27</sup> [Committee for Distance Learning](#)

<sup>28</sup> [Normative framework distance learning](#)

- appeal to the Appeals Council (when applicable).

During this implementation period, A3ES worked closely to the HEIs, in order to monitor their problems. During this period, internal training was organized for Project Coordinators on “Distance programme design” (March 2021) and a conference open to HEIs covering “The Challenges of Distance Education” (September 2021).

The evolution of submission and assessment of New Study Programmes, as well as the results of assessment processes, including distance learning study programmes are shown on the Table 6 demonstrates that approved distance learning study programmes represent about 10% of the total of submissions.

**Table 6. Evolution of the submission of New Study Programmes (both face-to-face and distance learning) and results of the assessment/accreditation processes**

FACE-TO-FACE					
	Accredit	Accredit with conditions	Non-accredit	Under appreciation	Total
NCE/18	63	32	55	3	153
NCE/19	268	69	59	6	402
NCE/20	119	46	66	1	232
NCE/21	158	73	74	8	313
NCE/22	129	56	52	49	286
EAD					
	Accredit	Accredit with conditions	Non-accredit	Under appreciation	Total
NCE/18	0	0	0	0	0
NCE/19	0	0	0	0	0
NCE/20	3	7	48	1	59
NCE/21	11	8	15	0	34
NCE/22	5	11	13	0	29
NEW STUDY PROGRAMMES (GLOBAL NUMBERS)					
	Face-to-face	EAD	Total		
NCE/18	153	0	153		
NCE/19	402	0	402		
NCE/20	232	59	291		
NCE/21	313	34	347		
NCE/22	286	29	315		

Source: A3ES IT System



#### 4.1.2. Assessment procedures of Study Programmes in Operation (ACEF), Non-Aligned Study Programmes (PERA) and revision of the guidelines for the 3rd cycle of assessment

*ACEF*: Starting in the academic year 2017/2018, A3ES has adopted simplified and flexible procedures for the assessment of Study Programmes in Operation (ACEF), through what is called *Via Verde*. This *Via Verde* allows the accreditation of study programmes without the need to form an EAT. The conditions for the *Via Verde* are the following<sup>29</sup>:

1. the institution has an internal quality assurance system certified by A3ES;
2. the study programmes of the same scientific area have been accredited without conditions;
3. R&D units of universities were rated by FCT at least as 'Very Good' or, in polytechnic institutions, R&D activities in the scientific areas of the study programme are scientifically relevant.

In the academic year 2022/23 A3ES has defined new simplification procedures, with the publication of a new Order <sup>30</sup>. The main changes were:

1. continue with distance meetings (introduced in November 2020 with the pandemic) instead of site visits;
2. simplify the assessment of study programmes when the EAT has sufficient information to prepare the reports and does not need clarification meetings. Moreover, the EAT can request additional information and/or if needed, can ask for only some meetings (instead of the full "visit") limited to half a day per process;
3. extend the *Via Verde* to institutions whose internal quality assurance system has not been certified by A3ES but who have implemented another quality system, not requiring the appointment of the EAT. Only in cases where the institution's proposal includes a curricular restructuring, the Agency must appoint an EAT.

This simplification of assessment procedures for study programmes, which were preliminarily adopted in an experimental stage, demands an increase in institutional responsibility for quality assurance.

The transfer of these processes to the new electronica platform, the need for simplification, to avoid duplication of previously provided information and to reduce the workload of the HEIs,

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<sup>29</sup> [Requirements for simplified assessment regime](#)

<sup>30</sup> [Simplification of assessment procedures - Study Programmes in Operation](#)

showed to be the right time to revise the guide. The simplification of the accreditation processes follows the strategic goals defined in the A3ES Strategic Plan.

The procedure for the process analysis will remain unchanged, with the application of the simplification process described above.

*PERA*: Following the positive results experienced on the application of simplified processes on the assessment of Study Programmes in Operation, starting in the academic year 2022/2023, A3ES has adopted a similar procedure for the assessment of Non-Aligned Study Programmes (PERA). The deliberation was published on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023 (Order 1/2023) and from then onwards the *Via Verde* has been applied to all processes of assessment of Non-Aligned Study Programmes of institutions whose internal quality management systems have not been certified by A3ES but meet all the other requirements to be accredited according to the *Via Verde* procedures, namely, without nominating an EAT. The nomination of an EAT will still be mandatory whenever the requirements for the *Via Verde* assessment have not been met.<sup>31</sup>

The changes that have occurred since ENQA's last review in the ACEF and PERA processes essentially simplify the assessment methodology of the guides that will be used in the 3rd assessment cycle (2023-2028). This simplification is based on the experience gained in previous assessment cycles and the results obtained in the assessment of internal quality assurance systems. One of the objectives of simplifying the guide (ACEF/PERA) was to lighten the effort of HEIs, avoiding having to ask for information that had previously been made available and assessed.

As a result of this new simplification procedure, it was possible to adjust the work of HEIs, without compromising the quality of the assessment and continuing to address all the points required by ESG part 1.

In the last few years, several processes were assessed using this methodology, as shown in Table 7.

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<sup>31</sup> [Simplification of study programme assessment procedures](#)

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

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

\*Until the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2023 / Source: A3ES IT System

All the new guides are published on the A3ES website<sup>32</sup>. There, the HEI have all the orientations to write the self-assessment report, including the criteria and related legislation.

With the new simplified guide, A3ES is giving more importance to institutional responsibility for quality assurance.

#### 4.1.3. Internal Quality Assurance Systems

In recent years, A3ES has developed the assessment and certification of internal quality assurance systems. They correspond to institutional initiatives aimed at a participatory internally structuring quality assurance models covering all the areas of the institution.

In the assessment, what is highlighted with great insistence are the results of the assessment and the improvement mechanisms associated with the system.

The certification of these systems has allowed the assessment of study programmes to be simplified if the verification of other criteria is jointly verified.

The assessment of internal quality assurance systems has been, at this stage, included in the institutional assessment.

<sup>32</sup> [Guidelines ACEF-PERA - 2023-2028](#)

#### 4.1.4. Institutional Assessment

The institutional assessment is one of the competencies of A3ES included in the Portuguese law and carried on in the strategic plan. In the Portuguese HE system, it is launched at the end of each cycle of assessment of study programmes, that is every six years.

After the last Institutional assessment (AINST/16) it was necessary to plan a cycle, that aims to be exhaustive, rigorous and transparent, designed to strengthen an environment of trust and institutional responsibility. One of the novelties of this assessment is the integration of quality assurance in the new guidelines.

The goal of the institutional assessment is to obtain a snapshot of the higher education system and characterize the various strategic lines that govern the evolution of higher education institutions. A3ES wants its results to be used to simplify the accreditation of Study Programmes in Operation (ACEF and PERA) in the future.

The following steps were taken in preparation of the new institutional assessment:

- A commission to analyse the EAT reports from the last institutional assessment (2016) was created (Deliberation 2/2021)<sup>33</sup>;
- A TAC<sup>34</sup> was created, composed by four experts (former rectors and former presidents of polytechnic institutes), who were consulted during the elaboration of the new Institutional Assessment guidelines and supported the Management Board about the orientations that should be given to the experts invited to participate in the assessment (February 2023);
- A model for the External Assessment Team (EAT) was defined. Their composition always integrated an international expert, one or two national experts, a student and another member with experience on internal quality assurance system;
- A new manual and guidelines were developed (starting on the 1<sup>st</sup> semester 2022) and opened to public consultation<sup>35</sup>;
- An international conference on Institutional Accreditation of Higher Education was organized (October 2022)<sup>36</sup>;
- Submission of the self-assessment reports on the new platform opened (between March and June 2023).

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<sup>33</sup> [Analysis of Processes in the Context of the Institutional Assessment](#)

<sup>34</sup> We will address the role of this Committee in chapter 4.2

<sup>35</sup> [Manual for Institutional Assessment 2022](#)

<sup>36</sup> [Conference Proceedings - A3ES Edições 3](#)

As we prepare this SAR, A3ES is organizing the site visits which extend from the last week of September until the end of November.

EATs have between 4-6 members and at this moment there are:

- 94 Experts (35 international), not including students;
- 48 EAT;
- 39 Students.

The visits will last, typically, between one and three days, depending on the size of the HEI. On this institutional assessment cycle, the distribution of HEIs between the two systems is as follows (See Table 1).

In summary, the internal quality assurance systems of HEIs have been assessed, through the various assessments that covered all institutions, particularly through the assessment of the internal quality assurance systems. And A3ES will continue to assess them during the next cycle of institutional assessment.

During this institutional assessment, internal quality assurance systems will be assessed by having a specific member of the EAT who is an expert in quality assurance in higher education. A3ES believes that quality assurance is an integrative part of institutions' management and organisation and, consequently, it is a very important dimension of the institutional assessment. Additionally, A3ES has been through two cycles of assessment of study programmes (2012-2017 and 2018-2023), which led to an increase in quality culture in HEIs. Every time a study programme is assessed, the proper implementation of the quality system in relation to the study programme under assessment is checked. In the future it is expected the HEIs continue to have a key role on the implementation and control of their quality.

#### 4.1.5. European Approach

Since April 2023, A3ES has decided (Resolution 474/2023)<sup>37</sup> that:

1. The European approach to quality assurance is adopted whenever possible for New Study Programmes organized in association by several European educational institutions;
2. The conditions for accreditation of study programmes in association are those established in Decree-Law No. 65/2018;

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<sup>37</sup> [Resolution 474/2023](#)

3. Requests for prior accreditation of these study programmes must be submitted within the annual submission deadlines for New Study Programmes (NCE);
4. The assessment procedure must correspond to the European approach to quality assurance, with this procedure being carried out by an Agency accredited by ENQA and registered at EQAR and who has responsibilities in the process of accreditation of study programmes or, in alternative, of institutions;
5. In the event that the assessment of the study programme is conducted by another Quality Assurance Agency, A3ES will monitor the procedure through a collaboration agreement between agencies, but also a verification of the legal conditions imposed by the Portuguese legislation.

Throughout the year of 2023, there were 7 assessments of New Study Programmes (NCE/22) in association, where the European approach was applied (Table 8).

**Table 8. Joint degrees assessment processes (submitted processes)**

Study Programme	Portuguese HEI	Foreign HEIs	Degree	Subsector	Subsystem	Decision
<b>Risk Analysis and Management of Civil Infrastructures</b>	Universidade Do Minho	La Rochelle Université / Università di Padova / Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya	Master	Public	University	Accreditation
<b>Architecture And Land Building</b>	Universidade Do Minho	École Nationale des Travaux Publics de l'État / Università degli Studi di Firenze / Universitat Politècnica de València	Master	Public	University	Accreditation
<b>Cyberspace, Digital Behaviour and Therapy</b>	Universidade Lusófona	Universitat de Barcelona / Université Paris Cité	Master	Private	University	Accreditation
<b>Erasmus Mundus Master in Environment And Maritime Resources (MER2030 EMJMD)</b>	Universidade Dos Açores	L'Université de Bordeaux / L'Université de Liège / L'Universitas del País Vasco / Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea / University of Southampton	Master	Public	University	Accreditation
<b>Urban Cultures</b>	Universidade De Coimbra	Universidade de Santiago de Compostela / Universität Augsburg	Master	Public	University	Accreditation
<b>European Language, Cultures and Societies</b>	Universidade De Coimbra	Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena / Turun yliopisto - University of Turku / Universidad de Salamanca / Università degli Studi di Pavia / Universitatea Alexandru Ioan Cuza din Iasi / Université de Poitiers	Master	Public	University	Accreditation
<b>Health, Well-Being and Healthy Ageing</b>	Universidade De Coimbra	Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena / Turun yliopisto - University of Turku / Universidad de Salamanca / Università degli Studi di Pavia / Universitatea Alexandru Ioan Cuza din Iasi / Université de Poitiers	Master	Public	University	Accreditation

\*Source: A3ES IT System

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

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

<sup>38</sup> [Guide/Guidelines Institutional Assessment 2022](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Guidelines for prior accreditation of a New Study Programme](#)

<sup>40</sup> [Guidelines ACEF PERA - 2023-2028](#)

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

To conclude section 4.1 and to systematise how A3ES' external assessment processes address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes of HEIs, described in Part 1 of the ESG, we present a table where we analyse our main assessment/accreditation activities and how they address each of the standards of Part 1 of the ESG (Table 9).

The system for the assessment and accreditation of study programmes has become routine and at times a bit burdensome. Since the beginning of the assessment activities, and during the two complete periods (2012-2017 and 2018-2023), A3ES has assessed all study programmes (about 4400) and has also launched two institutional assessments. These assessments allowed A3ES to build up a large volume of information on HEIs. The parameters used covered the strategy of the institution, the rate of study programme accreditation, the mechanisms used to diversify the demand and student characterization, the levels of integration of teaching staff and other employees, the relations with the environment, and the level of internationalization and scientific research. Inherent to all of these are the effects of the interrelationship between these activities and the impact of the quality management system.

In the period starting in 2024, the intention is to insist on valuing the internal quality management system, according to the results of the Institutional Assessment.

The relationship between A3ES and the institutions will be enhanced, making it possible for A3ES to increasingly focus on the assessment of the HEI's functioning, namely on the results of its operation. At the same time, an extension of the institutions' autonomy will be encouraged, within the framework of increasing their accountability and clarifying procedures. The steady and periodic monitoring of the HEIs carried out by the Agency will be an axis of its action and will require a reconversion of A3ES's structure.



## 4.2. ESG Standard 2.2

Standard 2.2 was the selected enhancement area, with which A3ES was considered fully compliant in the last review.

A3ES has followed the Portuguese legal framework on higher education since its beginning and developed its assessment procedures considering the objectives and aims of the HE assessment and accreditation. Besides designing its quality assurance methodologies fit for purpose, A3ES frequently adjusts its quality assurance strategy to the dynamics of HEIs and their evolution, with the help of various stakeholders: Professional Orders, the A3ES Advisory Board, HEIs representatives, students' representatives, the Administration, and the Government.

Professional Orders are relevant stakeholders for the quality assurance activities of A3ES, and they regularly collaborate with A3ES in the assessment of study programmes. This collaboration is particularly important in the assessment of study programmes in the field of health and medicine, engineering, psychology, economy, and some natural sciences. While assessing study programmes in these (and other) fields, A3ES' Project Coordinators contact the relevant Professional Order asking for an opinion and involving them in the assessment process. Professional orders have access to the assessment documents, namely, the self-assessment report, and submit their opinion. Similarly, opinions are also requested from public administration entities that regulate certain professions (professors of basic and secondary level, nurses and health technicians). The final A3ES decision regarding a study programme considers the opinion of the Professional Order and/or other stakeholders involved.

Another relevant stakeholder is the A3ES Advisory Board, which includes representatives of all Professional Orders and other entities representing the HEIs: APESP, CCISP, CRUP, students' unions, workers' unions, employers' associations and partnered laboratories. The Management Board periodically submits A3ES's official documents, such as the Strategic Plan and its Annual Plan of Activities to the Advisory Board, subject to discussion. Normally an interesting debate takes place at advisory board meetings confronting the academic training and the requirements for carrying out professional activities.

Furthermore, A3ES communicates closely with the Administration (Directorate General for Higher Education, DGES), which has the responsibility to register the study programmes and the institutions of higher education, after undergoing A3ES's assessment procedures.

It is also worth mentioning the large number of bilateral meetings promoted by the executive Management Board with HEIs' representatives about many topics related to the functioning of

Portuguese higher education and guidance documents, such as the Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan 2021-2024, the four-year plan that corresponds to the mandate of the current Management Board, was presented in 2021 shortly after the replacement of A3ES's governing bodies. When developing its Strategic Plan A3ES dialogued with HEIs and student associations' representatives, the A3ES Advisory Board and its Board of Trustees. While it was being discussed, A3ES's Strategic Plan received numerous comments and suggestions, most of which were incorporated into the final version. In the end, the plan was approved by all heard entities.

There has always been a concern to promote a debate between A3ES and various stakeholders around A3ES's key activity areas - such as distance learning and institutional assessment.

Distance learning corresponds to a new area in the activity of A3ES. Initially, as mentioned before, a committee was set up to advise the Management Board. Its role was to define the main parameters that the study programmes for distance learning should meet. The committee has since been recast and turned into a TAC.<sup>41</sup>

It is noted that many HEIs have now created distance learning offices and technical teams to support the production of pedagogical materials and organized multiple training activities for their staff teaching. There are also new proposals for study programmes organized in accordance with the principles of distance learning but benefiting from the association between institutions.

Regarding the institutional assessment, A3ES promoted the public consultation of the main documents produced in this context: the Institutional Assessment Manual<sup>42</sup>, the Guide for the preparation of Self-Assessment Report<sup>43</sup> and the Guide for the preparation of Assessment Reports (including guidelines for evaluators)<sup>44</sup>. The public consultation began with the publication of the documents on the A3ES website and with requests to the representative entities of HEIs to comment those documents and to present recommendations to improve them. During the public consultation period, A3ES received documents and comments submitted by APESP, CCISP and CRUP.

It seems clear that A3ES actively involves and engages stakeholders in the design and continuous improvement of the assessment procedures (namely the changed procedures discussed above).

The described changes in the assessment procedures also show that A3ES develops, reviews, and updates its processes and criteria, continuously aiming to improve those processes and

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<sup>41</sup> For more explanation on the TAC, please see 4.4.

<sup>42</sup> [Manual for Institutional Assessment 2022](#)

<sup>43</sup> [Guidelines for the Institutional Self-Assessment Report](#)

<sup>44</sup> [Guidelines for the Institutional Assessment Report](#)

criteria, and promoting an open and constant dialogue with HEIs and all the important stakeholders.

Following the amendment of Law no. 28/2007, A3ES sends an Annual Report on the Monitoring of the Assessment of Higher Education in Portugal to the Portuguese Parliament and the National Education Council. This report has been sent since 2020. The Management Board, after sending this report, has been called upon to provide additional clarifications to the Parliamentary Committee on Education and Science.

The Parliamentary Committee on Education and Science has also called the Management Board to debate topics related to the development of the Portuguese HE system. These sessions took place regarding the Legal Regime of Higher Education Institutions (a Law under revision) and the proposal to organise doctorates in the polytechnic institutes.

In addition to these relations with the Parliament, the Management Board has organized various meetings with stakeholders (HEIs, professional associations, unions, etc.), many of them at the request of the entities themselves, aimed at clarifying various aspects of the procedures for study programme assessment and quality assurance.

A3ES follows the European quality guidelines as well as the national legal requirements. Moreover, EAT are advised to follow the scientific, technological and territorial dynamics, at a national and at a European level, when developing their assessment. The assessment results are aimed at giving to the different economic and social agents the information about the quality of HEIs and their study programmes and for that reason, the dissemination of the assessment results in HEIs' and A3ES' webpages. Furthermore, the relationship with different internal and external stakeholders, represented in the Advisory Council or frequently consulted by the Management Board, are essential and will continue to be reinforced in the future.

The relationship between A3ES and stakeholders is one of the aspects that deserves to be expanded. The stakeholders with whom A3ES regularly discusses its proposals for action are the representative entities of Higher Education Institutions (APESP, CCISP and CRUP). The Advisory Board, where students also have a seat, has received limited attention due to its size and the diversity of members. However, the Agency has multiplied its contacts with institutions, including interactions within the TACs and EATs.

The expansion of these relations will prove to be essential in the future. The assessment of study programmes must be committed not only to quality parameters, but also to the pace and problems of societal development. Far beyond a utilitarian perspective, study programmes must reflect the dynamics of societies. The support that A3ES has obtained from the EATs and, above all, from the TACs, will be fundamental for this openness to societal problems.

#### 4.3. ESG Standard 2.3

The assessment of study programmes is individually described in the guides and handbooks published by A3ES, which detail the procedures and criteria that are applied to each process<sup>45</sup>. These documents were object of extensive consultation with stakeholders, both through APESP, CCISP and CRUP, public consultation and through the Advisory Council. They are publicly available on the A3ES website and are periodically reviewed for improvement.

The assessment processes (NCE, ACEF, and AINST) include the following phases that occur on A3ES electronic platform:

- Submission of a self-assessment report by the HEI;
- Preliminary analysis by A3ES;
- EAT nomination, with prior agreement from the higher education institution;
- External peer-review assessment, including a site visit (except on NCE, PERA and *Via Verde* ACEF);
- 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 by the Management Board;

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<sup>45</sup> [Guides of the Assessment Processes](#)

- Publication of the assessment report, together with the decision and the response from the HEI;
- Follow-up of conditions and recommendations;
- Appeal to the Appeals Council (when applicable).

The prior accreditation of New Study Programmes (NCE), either for face-to-face and distance learning programmes, follows the same phases, except for the site visit. The guide for the proposal of study programmes requires 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 study programme's adjustment within the national educational provision network. If necessary, the EAT may request any additional information or clarification on the study programme, or even request a visit if that is considered relevant.

In case of assessments where no site visits are required, such as is the case for NCE, “Via Verde” ACEF and PERA, the process is described below.

For NCE and PERA, the assessment is based on document analysis, so if any questions are raised by the EAT, they can be clarified by asking for additional information through an information request.

*Via Verde* assessments are carried out internally by the assigned Project Coordinator, who verifies some selected indicators (described in 4.1.2). Then the Management Board makes decision and can ask the EAT President from the previous assessment for a formal appraisal on the assessment.

All the procedures previously described have been used consistently over the last two cycles of assessment<sup>46</sup>, and all the steps are well defined and implemented on the electronic platform. Recently, the development of a new electronic platform (2023), and all the experience acquired before, allowed the incorporation of follow-up procedures. The new platform, which is fully functioning, enables the management of all the procedures of the assessment processes and the development of all the necessary reports related to those processes. It has also enabled the dematerialization of all accounting and financial procedures. Finally, the new platform is automatically linked with the General Directorate for Higher Education (for the study programme register) and with the HEIs which are interested in establishing those links.

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<sup>46</sup> Cycles of assessment: 2012-2017 and 2018-2023.

A3ES insists on having HEI publishing all documentation produced within the scope of the self-assessment process on their website. This is a central issue to promote adequate public information.

Sometimes, study programmes are accredited with conditions. In these cases, A3ES requires the submission of follow-up reports (Table 10). The conditions established by A3ES are of two types:

- conditions of internal organization and/or curricular structure, and the quality of the teaching staff;
- conditions relating to scientific research.

In the first case, a period, normally one or two years, is given for the HEI to meet the identified conditions. In these cases, A3ES sends a request for a follow-up report in advance, after which the study programme can be fully accredited.

The second case normally corresponds to deficiencies detected in the level of scientific production of teachers and their distance in relation to research units that have obtained a good classification in external assessments promoted by FCT. A3ES also needs a follow-up report to fully accredit those study programmes.

When it is simple to assess if the conditions have been met, an assigned Project Coordinator analyses the report and proposes a decision to A3ES' Management Board. When the conditions to verify are a bit more complex (for example, curricular structure, changes in subjects and/or scientific areas), A3ES consults with the EAT president of the assessment that established the conditions to confirm that the conditions have been met.

The A3ES statute allows, at any time and depending on critical situations, to launch an assessment procedure to restore quality in the functioning of a given HEI.

**Table 10. Follow-up by type of assessment process**

<b>2023*</b>	<b>ACCREDITED</b>	<b>NON-ACCREDITED</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
NCE	46	0	46
ACEF	118	0	118
ASIGQ	1	0	1
AINST	0	0	0
<b>2022</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>Non-accredited</b>	<b>Total</b>
NCE	23	0	23
ACEF	113	0	113
ASIGQ	21	0	21
AINST	35	0	35
<b>2021</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>Non-accredited</b>	<b>Total</b>
NCE	26	1	27
ACEF	117	0	117
ASIGQ	8	0	8
AINST	46	0	46
<b>2020</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>Non-accredited</b>	<b>Total</b>
NCE	22	2	24
ACEF	95	6	101
ASIGQ	1	0	1
AINST	20	2	22
<b>2019</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>Non-accredited</b>	<b>Total</b>
NCE	29	3	32
ACEF	143	19	162
ASIGQ	0	0	0
AINST	0	0	0
<b>2018</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>Non-accredited</b>	<b>Total</b>
NCE	85	12	97
ACEF	190	14	204
ASIGQ	0	0	0
AINST	0	0	0

\*Until the 31<sup>st</sup> of July of 2023 / Source: A3ES IT System

Public information on the results of assessment and accreditation has been one of the strong components of A3ES's action. The Agency has insisted on the disclosure of the documentation prepared for the self-assessment (on the HEIs websites) and the results of the accreditation are made public, after completion of the assessment, on the A3ES website. In addition, there has been increased care in the decisions for accreditation of study programmes, especially in accreditations that require conditions. A3ES has tried to reduce conditional accreditations, prioritizing accreditations with recommendations whenever possible.

A3ES has not publicly disclosed documentation on study programmes that have had a non-accreditation decision. This issue will be discussed with HEIs to reach an understanding on the best way to disseminate these decisions.

On the new platform, access to the accreditation results has been included, as well as the list of experts (with their CVs) who are part of the EATs and TACs.

An additional effort will be made to give the public access to all information relating to

#### 4.4. ESG Standard 2.4.

In the last review by ENQA, A3ES was considered partially compliant with ESG 2.4. Following panel recommendations, A3ES has made changes and improvements in order to achieve a full compliance with this standard (some of them have already been mentioned in the Follow-Up Report delivered to ENQA in 2021<sup>47</sup>).

Groups of external experts that include professors and student members conduct the quality assessment procedure carried out by A3ES. Each procedure has its own External Assessment Team (EAT), which can be comprised of two to five elements, depending on the type of assessment, one of whom is appointed President. The members of each EAT are selected and appointed by A3ES, through a transparent and objective procedure, based on the relevance of the expert's CV and suitability of their profile to perform the required functions. They must not have professional ties with the institution and/or study programme under assessment, and they will ideally live and work in a different part of the country. A3ES tries to guarantee gender balance in each EAT, as well as include people from different geographies and institutions. All EATs have an international expert. Among each EAT the national expert with a higher academic rank and/or

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<sup>47</sup> [A3ES Follow-up report ENQA 2021](#)



more experience in assessment is appointed President. The only exception regarding the EAT is the European Approach when A3ES is not the leading agency. In this situation, the rules for the EAT are defined by the leading agency.

For the assessment of study programmes, EAT members must be experts in the main scientific area of the study programmes under assessment. A3ES understands that only this scientifically informed point of view guarantees that the appropriateness of the courses offered and their syllabi, and the expertise of the teaching staff are thoroughly embedded in the quality assessment of each study programme.

For the institutional assessment, EAT members are selected among former rectors, vice-rectors, presidents and vice-presidents of universities and polytechnic institutions, academics with vast experience in higher education governance, and experts on higher education quality assurance. Each EAT for the ongoing institutional assessment includes one student, at least one international expert, and one expert on quality assurance. 75% of the EAT of institutional assessment have an international expert acting as its President.

To guarantee the proper functioning of the EAT, A3ES has created a document, “Norms for the appointment and conduct of the EAT”, establishing the criteria and norms to select experts for EAT as well as rules to prevent conflicts of interest.<sup>48</sup>

Each EAT has an assigned highly qualified A3ES staff member who acts as project coordinator and liaises with the Management Board. A3ES project coordinators are not members of the EAT. They follow up the administrative side of the procedures and provide the EAT with all the support documentation and tutorials, helping the EAT with any questions they might have or challenges they might face. These might include: concepts and principles underpinning quality assurance processes and the institutional assessment process; guidelines and procedures; organisation of visits; norms of conduct; and the electronic platform. All the members of the EAT have briefings with the project coordinators and preparatory sessions with all the members of the EAT. They all have access to different support documentation about the institutional assessment processes and procedures and to explanatory videos about the process and about the functioning of the IT platform. Furthermore, all ‘new’ members are integrated in EAT with experienced members who were already involved in previous A3ES assessment processes.

A3ES recruits students through an annual open call. Student members undergo a thorough selection process, during which they must attend a one-day training programme, and after which

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<sup>48</sup> [Norms for the appointment and conduct of EAT](#)

they are required to submit an essay (c. 10 pages) on a theme on quality assurance or to answer a quiz about the training programme (provided by the project coordinators), depending on the selected method for each year. Once approved, students join a pool from which project coordinators select members for the EAT they are responsible for, based on the following criteria: level of education completed (bachelor students can only assess bachelor study programmes, master students can assess bachelor and master study programmes, and PhD students can assess bachelor, master and PhD), field of study (same or similar to the study programme under assessment), geographical origin (not the same as the institution under assessment), and type of institution(s) they attend (eg. university students should preferably assess university study programmes and polytechnic students can only assess polytechnic study programmes).

Due to the need to renovate and expand the pool of EATs, as well as the need to find experts for specific scientific fields, in 2022, A3ES created the already mentioned several TACs. These are specialized committees comprised of independent external experts in a particular scientific field, who advise the A3ES Management Board in the process of selecting experts for each EAT. In addition to suggesting members for the EAT of their scientific field based on recognized curricula, while ensuring geographical and gender balance, the role of the TAC includes providing advice on the assessment schedule of the study programmes in their scientific field and identifying guidelines and criteria for the EATs to follow in the assessment procedures. These guidelines and criteria should consider current legislation and are aimed at future improvement and reformulation of the assessment guidelines in their specific areas, following approval by the Management Board. In 2023, A3ES has used a TAC to select EAT members for the ongoing institutional assessment.

A3ES, with the help of the TACs, added 1379 members of EAT since 2021 until now (August 2023), 658 men and 721 women. In Table 11, one can find the new EAT members for assessment of study programmes, per year and divided by sex. The 2023 numbers already include some of the EAT members for the ongoing institutional assessment.

**Table 11. Composition of external assessment teams for study programmes - gender distribution**

YEAR	NOMINATED EAT	TOTAL NUMBER OF EXPERTS	NUMBER OF NEW EXPERTS	NEW FEMALE EXPERTS	NEW MALE EXPERTS
2018	564	465	154	64	90
2019	605	574	191	93	98
2020	635	564	168	55	113
2021	990	931	416	205	211
2022	1068	1128	592	327	265
2023*	474	712	371	189	182
<b>TOTAL</b>	4336	4374	1892	933	959

\*Until the 31<sup>st</sup> of July of 2023 / Source: A3ES IT System

We consider the number of women and men to be rather balanced, although there is room for improvement. We predict, based on the numbers of study programmes to be assessed in the following months, and on the ongoing institutional assessment, we will surpass the number of new EAT members of 2022 by the end of 2023.

It is the understanding of the A3ES Management Board that the current method of selection and appointment of EAT members has proven successful, namely with the help of the TAC. Not only does A3ES gain a pool of very specialized and reputable experts, but the pool is also not fixed in time, because there is an ongoing effort to add new experts.

Regarding the institutional assessment, A3ES mobilized a significant group of international evaluators, some of whom, as stated, perform the functions of presidents of the EAT (Table 12).

**Table 12. Characterization of the members of external assessment teams for institutional assessment**

EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT TEAM		NUMBER
PORTUGUESE MEMBERS		98
INTERNATIONAL MEMBERS	Europe	28
	Africa	5
	America	2
TOTAL		133

Source: A3ES IT System

The constitution of the EATs has received the attention of the Management Board, namely in the imposition of criteria for their formation. These structures, created to carry out a specific task (the assessment of one or more study programmes), within a defined timeline (analysis of documentation, completion of the visit and preparation of the final report), constitute one of the most frequent vehicles of the relationship between A3ES and HEIs. Within this framework, the training of experts is one of the decisive aspects that will have to be clearly explained in the Agency's initiatives. Standards have been published to support the work of experts; TACs are prepared for this function, placing great care in the proposals they make of experts to integrate the EATs. In the institutional assessment, A3ES produced a video that has been viewed by all experts.

Also worth mentioning is the procedure for selecting students, described in the report, which guarantees the selection of the best elements.

Acknowledging that the selection of experts (national and international teachers and students) is one of the most sensitive points in the assessment process, in the future the emphasis will be placed on TACs' proposals and the scope of their competences will be defined.

#### 4.5. ESG Standard 2.5

As already pointed out in the A3ES/ENQA Follow-Up Report in 2021, A3ES has been insisting on the clarification of the assessment criteria, not only of the study programme assessment processes but also of the most recent institutional assessment process. Consequently, the new guide for the assessment of study programmes and the guide for the new cycle of institutional assessment include a set of criteria followed by guidelines and instructions aiming at the clarification of the criteria, which simplify the development of the self-assessment reports by the institutions, as well as the development of the assessment report by the EAT.

Furthermore, as mentioned before, the Management Board also promoted the collaboration of the TAC in the development of the guidelines for all the assessment processes. This collaboration was crucial to make the guidelines clearer, more explicit, and unambiguous.

Following the recommendations of the ENQA's external review panel of A3ES, for the institutional assessment process, A3ES has set up a range of supporting documents (the manual, the guidelines for the self-assessment report, the guidelines for the development of the assessment report, the orientation video supporting EAT members<sup>49</sup>) which assume that the

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<sup>49</sup> [Institutional assessment tutorial](#)

assessment process must be based on a set of overarching criteria and consistent standards which split into guidelines, adding substantial and valuable information.

Regarding the distance learning study programmes, the Management Board in collaboration with the respective TAC has published a set of clarifications<sup>50</sup>, aiming at understanding the mandatory legal requirements regarding distance education. Such clarifications were extremely helpful for the institutions, since they substantially reduced the questions raised by the institutions to A3ES.

This explanation was also fundamental to clarify the criteria used in mixed study programmes, who have a distance-learning component. In these cases, the assessment uses mixed criteria, seeking to value the assessment instruments of the distance component.

Specifically, regarding doctoral study programmes submitted for prior accreditation as New Study Programmes, the legislation requires an additional set of criteria. In order to facilitate the consistent interpretation and understanding of such criteria, the A3ES not only has published a Memorandum but also has promoted a set of meetings with representatives of Portuguese HEIs (public and private, polytechnics and universities)<sup>51</sup>.

For the assessment of joint study programmes according to the European approach, A3ES developed and published a deliberation clarifying the conditions and the procedures for the assessment<sup>52</sup>.

The new electronic platform has also helped the management of the assessment procedures. Once the platform incorporated all the new assessment procedures (including some procedures which were not incorporated before such as the follow-up processes), it helped institutions to understand the different steps of the assessment processes and its requirements, and, overall, it has facilitated the relationship between A3ES and the institutions.

As stated in ESG 2.5, the A3ES assessment processes are developed on the principle that external quality assurance is based on pre-defined, explicit, and publicly available criteria, which are interpreted consistently and are evidence-based. A3ES believes that the set of designed and published documentation supporting the different assessment processes (from study programmes to institutional assessment) have helped institutions to interpret the criteria and the guidelines of the self-assessment reports and have supported EATs to make informed and

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<sup>50</sup> [Normative framework - Distance learning](#)

<sup>51</sup> [Doctoral Programmes](#)

<sup>52</sup> [Normative framework Joint Degrees](#)

useful judgements. Moreover, the range of mechanisms employed in the different assessment processes continues to ensure consistency.

In the case of institutional assessment, the guidelines intended to support the assessment were explicit, to help evaluators and to clarify with the institutions the specific objectives intended to be achieved with this assessment.

In several meetings, some HEIs asked what typical standards they should validate to characterize their performance. A3ES has always emphasized that it did not intend to standardize the functioning of the institutions but rather to explain its work axes and validate them against the respective strategic plans. Institutional diversity is a valuable asset that we intend to maintain and develop within the Portuguese higher education system.

The need to include the justification and meaning of the assessment criteria has been a concern of A3ES. This is also a constant concern in the day-to-day contact with HEIs. The Guides for the institutional assessment have always included more or less in-depth explanations, clarifying the objectives of each of the parameters used. Experts benefit from explicit guidelines for completing the Assessment Reports.

A3ES will continue to develop its tools with clear guidelines, building on the work already done on distance learning.

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

In the immediate future, it is expected that the clarification of the procedures may cover the doctoral programmes, for which A3ES has recently begun an in-depth reflection on the characteristics of this line of training, with an expected effect on what the assessment criteria of these study programmes should be in the future.

#### 4.6. ESG Standard 2.6

In the last review, A3ES was fully compliant with this standard. The principles of transparency and accessibility to the outcomes of the assessment processes continue to be very important for A3ES's activity and all the reports of all the assessment processes (including the new reported activities part of the terms of reference) are published and accessible to the academic community and to society.

The new electronic platform also promotes the accessibility and consistency of the dissemination and communication of the results. In the new electronic platform, the main information related to the assessment of study programmes (EAT report, level of complaint, Management Board decision), the comments from stakeholders and the decisions from the Appeals Council (when applicable) are publicly available.

A3ES also continues to develop efforts to incorporate more qualitative assessment and to provide more useful feedback to institutions in all their assessment processes, which can help them to continuously improve and enhance their study programmes, their internal quality assurance systems and all their activities. The outcomes of the assessment of study programmes (in operation, new, distance learning and joint study programmes) and the audit of internal quality assurance systems clearly demonstrate such effort. The new cycle of institutional assessment will also continue this effort.

The assessment and certification of internal quality assurance systems is one of the areas of assessment of the HEIs. Under Portuguese legislation, this certification with A3ES is recommended but voluntary. Institutions that have their own internal quality assurance systems may have simplified study program assessment procedures.

In the ongoing institutional assessment, A3ES decided to include the topic of organization and results of the internal quality assurance system in one of the chapters of the self-assessment and the external assessment guide. All EATs of the institutional assessment have a member specially dedicated to this area. A small additional guide was distributed to all EATs, which is expected to accurately capture the situation of each HEI.

The results of the institutional assessment, concerning internal quality assurance systems, will make it possible in the future to define the follow-up initiatives that should be launched by A3ES.

All institutions must publish on their websites all documentation prepared within the scope of the self-assessment. This is one of the points that the various assessments try to confirm.

Apart from the assessment reports, A3ES also publishes in its website all the orders, information, publications, and news about its activity.

The dissemination of the reports and the clarity of their content has also been one of the aspects in which A3ES has invested. It is not easy to introduce a high level of homogeneity in the preparation of the reports, given the diversity of EATs. The segmentation of the themes has contributed, however, to better explain the assessments prepared by the EATs.

The disclosure of the reports on HEIs websites and the A3ES website is part of this strategy of public dissemination of the reports.

The new information platform will help to clarify all procedures. It should be noted that some of the procedures were not included in the former platform, namely follow-up reports.

Without wishing to reduce the autonomy of the EATs, instructions for the preparation of the reports will be kept up to date, and the various functionalities provided by the new platform will be exploited. This will ensure the flow of information with the Directorate-General for Higher Education (for the registration of study programmes) and with the HEIs that are available to join our platform.

#### 4.7. ESG Standard 2.7

In the last review, A3ES was fully compliant with ESG Standard 2.7 since the panel acknowledged that A3ES had robust and active complaints and appeals processes in place. Both processes continue, from our point of view, to be robust, clearly defined and communicated to the institutions and are applied to all assessment processes (including to the new reported activities). The table below shows that the number of appeals arriving to the Appeals Council has been decreasing, showing the effort of the A3ES properly communicate and clarify the criteria for appeals (Table 13).



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

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

\*Until the 31<sup>st</sup> of July of 2023 / Source: A3ES IT System

This situation also shows the greater care that institutions have put into the submission of their proposals for study programme assessments.

The constitution of the Appeals Council is the responsibility of the Board of Trustees. Presently, it is chaired by a former judge of the Supreme Administrative Court and includes three former full professors, one of whom is international. Its decisions are made public through the A3ES website.

The Agency has an Appeals Council (created by the Board of Trustees) which analyses, at the request of Higher Education Institutions, the content of the Management Board's decisions. As stated in the report, the number of requests for revision has been decreasing over the past few years.

Institutions also have the possibility to raise issues on the composition of the EATs, stating the reasons on the basis of which they have reservations about one or more members appointed to participate in those teams.

It is relatively common, after the preparation of the Management Board's decision, which usually includes the suggestions, recommendations or conditions proposed by the EAT, that HEIs propose, in their responses, changes to the study programme being analysed. The Agency's position, on a case-by-case basis, has been to accept these proposals when they improve the study programme, their implementation is adequate and respond appropriately to the criticisms of the EAT.

When these proposals seek to fundamentally alter the structure of the study programme, even if incorporating the profound criticisms of the EAT and readjusting its orientation, the Management Board finds it difficult to accept these study programmes with these amendments. In such cases, A3ES suggests that the Institution submit a new study programme. The line between reasonable changes and those that may correspond to a new study programme is not always clear. Dialogue with the institutions has, on many occasions, resolved this contradiction.

## PART III. SWOT ANALYSIS

The SWOT analysis that follows was done during the months of July and August by the team responsible for the SAR. During the month of September, the Management Board met with the team to discuss the SWOT, and afterwards the SWOT draft circulated within A3ES's staff, who were then invited to share their feedback.

### Identified Strengths

- Full autonomy and independence from the Portuguese government and HEIs.
- The A3ES is financially stable.
- A3ES's official status in Portugal as the (only) quality assurance A3ES, covering the scope of all HEIs.

- Academic qualifications, international experience, and varied expertise of A3ES's project coordinators and technicians.
- Internationalisation of the EATs.
- Inclusion of student reviewers as equal partners in the EATs.
- A3ES's international activities, including participation in networks, membership in international groups, working groups and international projects.
- (Ongoing) Implementation of a new information system that supports the integrated management of assessment/accreditation, including the administrative and financial aspects, and is connected to entities that interact with the A3ES such as the General Directorate of Higher Education (DGES), which has the competence to register study programmes.
- Good working relationship with the Portuguese HEIS and other stakeholders.
- Well established assessment and accreditation procedures that are fit for purpose and lead to a clear and effective report.
- Committed leadership, professional infrastructure, and a professional secretariat.
- Good working conditions (training and professional development of employees, flexible working hours, good premises and well equipped).

### Identified Weaknesses

- Delays in the implementation of the new information system, together with the high volume of operational tests that the A3ES staff must take part in.
- Difficulties in the training of foreign members of the EATs.
- Portugal's HE panorama: due to the large number of study programmes for the country's size, the HE landscape is not easy to monitor.
- Annual uneven workload, due to the cyclical nature of the assessment procedures: some scientific areas have a very large number of study programmes and others a much smaller number; when A3ES carries out the institutional assessment, there is a heavier workload for everyone because all the other assessment procedures run simultaneously. This poses challenges to A3ES's HR capacity.
- Annual uneven workload among A3ES project coordinators.
- A3ES is a small organisation which makes it vulnerable to staff-turnover and leaves of absence of staff members;
- Inflexibility of the Portuguese legal framework (hindering A3ES's possibilities of action)

### Identified Opportunities

- The adoption of simplified accreditation procedures (also referred to as *Via Verde*), simultaneously with the adoption of greater responsibility on the part of HEIs;
- The outcome of the Institutional Assessment will further simplify the assessment and accreditation of certain study programmes.
- Build upon reviewer training processes, including making more explicit references to the ESG.
- Simplification of the communication between A3ES, institutions, and EATs through the new information system.
- In process certification of A3ES by the World Federation of Medical Education (WFME-Certificate of Recognition).
- Establishing strategic synergies with other quality assurance stakeholders nationally and globally.
- Opportunity to network and exchange good practices with international organizations (ENQA, EQAR, WFME) and also others national agencies, due to the already established international profile of A3ES.
- The growing importance of the higher education internationalisation in Portugal and A3ES's experienced role.
- A3ES is in the process of developing a new website that will improve its detached presence and public image

### Identified Threats

- Assessment and accreditation fatigue (both HEIs and experts)
- Lack of public awareness of the value generated by quality assurance.
- Limited recognition of A3ES outside the higher education system.
- Very low recognition of A3ES and its work among HEIs candidates, students and employers.
- Additional workload within a limited HR team

## PART IV. CONCLUSIONS

A3ES was reviewed by ENQA in 2014 (with a Follow-Up in 2016) and in 2019 (with a Follow-Up and a site-visit in 2021). Over the years, A3ES has been improving its strategy and activity, as well as its level of compliance with the ESG. Particularly since the last ENQA review, A3ES made efforts to follow the panel's recommendations and suggestions, as they clearly contribute to enhance the quality and the performance of A3ES, as well as help A3ES to improve its role, as a key player in the national higher education context.

By working on the challenges raised by the review panel, A3ES believes that it has reached a high level of fulfilment of its recommendations and that its activities (existing and new) globally comply with the ESG, as this SAR has tried to demonstrate.

A3ES acknowledges its main weaknesses and threats, but also understands its strengths and opportunities and believes that it has been exploring and implementing such strengths and opportunities to continuously improve its processes and procedures.

Furthermore, when we analyse the execution of the Strategic Plan covering the period from 2021 to 2024, the strategic objectives have a high execution rate.

Regarding the objective "Assessment to improve activity", the annual reports indicate higher levels of assessment than planned. This same finding can be verified by consulting Table 5, reflecting an effort by A3ES to respond to the proposals presented by Higher Education Institutions. It is hoped that after the institutional assessment another mechanism can be found that, although simplified, responds satisfactorily to the level of quality that A3ES requires.

The second strategic objective pointed to the launch of the Institutional Assessment. Regarding this initiative, this Report circumstantially addresses the entire process that is underway and will end in the first months of 2024.

The third objective encompassed the various mechanisms that were successively adopted by A3ES to reduce administrative procedures and focus attention on processes and results. This line has been followed with caution, with the hope that the conclusions of the institutional assessment can further simplify those procedures.

"Internationalization" appears as the fourth objective. In this field, the multiplication of relationships with Agencies in Portuguese-speaking countries (Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Portugal, São Tomé and Príncipe and Timor) reflects this line of action. The

assessments that A3ES develops in Macau and the insertion in international projects, normally with European funding (ERASMUS), constitute new components of internationalization.

Another strategic objective encompasses "European Cooperation". In this chapter, participation in ENQA Working Groups, bilateral and multilateral cooperation protocols to carry out the assessment of study programmes in accordance with the European approach, as well as the internships that, in both directions, project coordinators and other technicians have carried out in cooperations between several European Agencies and A3ES, reflect the reinforcement of this guideline.

The sixth objective addressed the "Internal quality" of A3ES. In this area, an organic restructuring of the Agency's services was launched, an internal training programme began, a new platform was installed and progress is being made in this phase in the redesign of the website. Relations with the General Directorate of Higher Education (DGES), responsible for registering study programmes (after assessment by A3ES) have already made possible an automatic register, optimized between the two entities' platforms.

Finally, the last objective, identified as the "Prospective Partnership", has made it possible to launch studies that improve the Agency's performance, creating new parameters and encouraging debate within HEIs. The analysis of the issue of distance education was one of the areas covered, responding to the challenge of having defined in 2019 (through legal diploma) the method of organizing and evaluating distance learning study programmes. A3ES organized an international conference on this topic and hosted a wide range of meetings to clarify and consolidate the assessment mechanisms of these study programmes<sup>53</sup>. The preparation of the institutional assessment was another of the initiatives that aimed to define more clearly the procedures to be used, the parameters to be addressed to better characterize the functioning of higher education institutions and, above all, what effects the results could have on consolidating quality of the Portuguese higher education system. Still in this chapter, it is worth mentioning the debate launched on pedagogical innovation and doctoral models. In the case of pedagogical innovation, a volume of reflections was published and made available to higher education institutions<sup>54</sup>. The doctorate model is a reflection that is ongoing and will involve the organization of an international conference in 2024.

It is also worth highlighting that over the last years, A3ES's activity and its different assessment axes have been aiming at, on the one hand, integrating the diversity of the Portuguese HEIs (their

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<sup>53</sup> [Conference Proceedings Distance Education](#)

<sup>54</sup> [Pedagogical Innovation in Higher Education - Book](#)

missions, operating models, strategies and results), and on the other hand, fostering an environment of trust among institutions and with the institutions, where the simplification of many procedures can be deepened, lending increasing credibility to the system and contributing to a clear public affirmation of higher education.

## List of Sources

A3ES IT System: A3ES Information and Technology System

A3ES Website: Information published in A3ES website

DGES: General Directorate for Higher Education

DGEEC: General Directorate for Statistics of Education and Science



## ANNEX I: Terms of Reference – Targeted review of Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) against the ESG

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

## Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

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

### 1. Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

Should anything change between the time of application and the review i.e. any type of changes that may affect the registered agency's substantial compliance with the ESG, the agency is expected to inform EQAR at the earliest convenience<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Purpose and scope of the targeted review

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

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

### 2.1 Focus areas

A) Standards with a partial compliance conclusion in [the Register Committee's last renewal decision](#)<sup>2</sup>:

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

B) Standards 2.1 to 2.7 for the following activities<sup>3</sup>:

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

C) Standards affected by other types of substantive changes, namely the *simplification of the assessment procedures of study programmes in operation*, and *simplification of the assessment procedures of non-aligned study programmes* (see substantive change report of 2023-07-31)<sup>4</sup>,

- ESG 2.2: how does the agency develop, review and update its processes and criteria, whether the methodologies are fit for the purpose, if stakeholders involved in the design and continuous improvement;
- ESG 2.3: how are the key features in the standard implemented by the quality assurance agency in each of these activities and where no site visits are used, how does the agency validate the evidence provided by institutions and whether the processes implemented consistently.

D) ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance;

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

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<sup>1</sup> See EQAR's policy on reporting changes <https://www.eqar.eu/register/guide-for-agencies/reporting-and-renewal/>

<sup>2</sup> See A3ES's profile on EQAR's website: <https://data.deqar.eu/agency/1>

<sup>3</sup> See Change Report of 2023-06-30 on the agency's profile: <https://data.deqar.eu/agency/1>

<sup>4</sup> See Change Report of 2023-07-31 on the agency's profile: <https://data.deqar.eu/agency/1>

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

### **3. The review process**

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

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

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

#### **3.1 Independence of the review coordinator**

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

#### **3.2 Nomination and appointment of the review team members**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The self-assessment report is expected to contain:

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

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

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

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

### **3.4 A site visit by the review panel**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3.5 Preparation and completion of the final review report

The review report will be drafted in consultation with all review panel members and correspond to the purpose and scope of the review as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. In particular, it will provide a clear rationale for its findings concerning each ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG* to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR<sup>5</sup>.

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

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

Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the statement by A3ES and submit the document for scrutiny to ENQA's Agency Review Committee and then to EQAR along with the remaining application documents (self-evaluation report, Declaration of Honour, statement to review report-if applicable). The report is to be finalised normally within 2-4 months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 30 pages in length. All panel will sign off on the final version of the external review report. The coordinator will provide to A3ES the [Declaration of Honour](#) together with the final report.

### 4. Publication and use of the report

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

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

### 5. Decision-making on EQAR registration and ENQA membership

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

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

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

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

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which the agency expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be considered by the Board together with the confirmation of EQAR listing when deciding on the agency's membership. Should the agency not be granted the registration in EQAR or the registration is not renewed, the decision on ENQA membership will be taken based on the final review report, the application letter, and the statement from the Agency Review Committee. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

## 6. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	August 2023
Appointment of review panel members	September 2023
Self-assessment report (SAR) completed by A3ES	30 September 2023
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	October 2023
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	November 2023
Briefing of review panel members	November 2023
Review panel site visit	January 2024
Submission of the draft review report to ENQA Review Coordinator	Early March 2024
Factual check of the review report by the A3ES	End March 2024
Statement of A3ES to review panel (if applicable)	April 2024
Submission of review report to ENQA	End-April 2024
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	May/June 2024
EQAR Register Committee meeting and decision on the application by A3ES	Autumn 2024
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	Autumn 2024