

STATEMENT ON INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT

SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL OF A3ES

22 FEBRUARY 2024

Introduction

In the Strategic Plan of A3ES (2021-2024) the second cycle of Institutional Assessments in 2023-2024 is rightly considered as a strategic action focussing on the strategic dimension as well as Internal Quality Assurance systems and management (IQA) of the institutions. The new Institutional Assessments have thus incorporated the certification of IQA of the institutions. The Strategic Plan also links this new cycle of Institutional Assessment with the simplification of the programme evaluation as well as with the further building of trust.

In its meeting of 22 February 2024 the Scientific Council of A3ES considered both aspects as crucial for A3ES, its stakeholders and indeed Portuguese Higher Education as a whole. The Council thus examined the question how to develop institutional evaluation to simplify programme evaluation and to improve relations with HEIs. Underlying questions to structure the discussion in the Scientific Council were, among others: Which requirements to IQA can be used to shift to a simplified programme evaluation? Which level of maturity of quality culture and quality management can be used? What about the scale of scores and the scope of items? Which simplifications could be introduced? Which elements and (underlying) data of the external institutional assessment reports can be used? How to build mutual trust? Which good practices could be inspiring?

Analysis of a good practice

- In order to answer this double question the council has analysed the shift from programme evaluation to institutional review in Flanders. This shift has been organised by the NVAO in a pilot phase (2016-17) and a first round (2023-24). From this analysis, it is clear that, although each national context is specific, some general observations with pros and cons can be made as well as some lessons drawn.
- It is clear that the shift to institutional level after some cycles of programme evaluations is at stake since institutions who have proved to run a robust IQA should be rewarded. The main reasons for the shift are that the evaluation of each programme by the national agency is burdensome, expensive and created much window-dressing rather than critical self-reflection in the self-evaluations.
- The evaluation of the pilot phase in Flanders has shown clearly that the burden and cost of programme evaluation by the institution itself is still quite burdensome and expensive. Yet, the institutions are happy to invest in it, because they feel owner of their own IQA on

programme level. The rise of the ownership by the institution is important in the development of a good quality culture, which is the ultimate organisational drive for quality and continuous quality improvement.

- The standards and criteria of an institutional review are to be in compliance with the ESG and should be discussed and agreed by all stakeholders. In Flanders the 8 so-called quality features are inscribed in the legal decree of higher education.
- The essential standards are easy to follow the line: What does the university want? (strategy), How does the university proposes to realise this? (policies and processes) What are the results? (output and impact) and How does the university guarantee the quality of the result? (IQA system)
- The institutional review has a horizontal view starting from the strategy of the institution and a vertical view in a second visit that is a combination of a view in depth of some programmes together with the review of a theme, such as internationalisation, diversity, sustainability, etc., which are agreed upon by both the university and NVAO.
- The so-called appreciative approach may not do away with the standards and criteria. Otherwise the university does not know on what it is really being assessed and the decision based nor what it could improve on those standards. The review report should be well-structured following the standards instead of just being a daily report of the panel's activities.

Recommendations and suggestions

- It's time now after the second round of institutional evaluations to come to a system in which institutions with a robust IQA system should be able to enter a rewarding and simplified system of programme evaluations.
- A simplified system of programme evaluations is to the advantage of both the institutions, who are thus rewarded of their investment in a robust IQA system, as well as A3ES, for which the many programme evaluations cause too much burden on its workforce.
- The criteria to be allowed to switch to simplified programme evaluations should be clear and provide a good basis for simplification of programme evaluation to all stakeholders.
- The criteria for stepping into a simplified programme evaluation should be connected with the degree of maturity and robustness of the IQA and the management of the central processes of teaching and learning and research. Therefore, the Scientific Council recommends A3ES to take the following criteria into consideration: the state of affairs of the IQA system and management, the percentage of successful accreditation of new and existing programmes and possibly the result of the assessment of teaching and research.
- Along the lines above the following matrix could be drawn:

External IE & data			New programmes			data	Existing programmes		
IQA scores	Teach & research	% accredited	no	light	full	% accredited	no	light	full
Very good	Very good	80% & more	x			80% & more	x		
Good	Good	79% - 70%	x	x		79% - 70%	x	x	
Sufficient	Sufficient	69% - 50%		x		69% - 50%		x	
Insufficient	Insufficient	< 50%			x	< 50%			x

- The matrix above makes clear that there are several options to simplify the evaluations of new and existing programmes. Which criteria and how many, the scores themselves and their combinations, the percentages, the simplification of new programmes and/or existing ones and the consequences of the scores (no assessment, a light version or the existing full assessment) are important features of a simplified system that still need to be decided. Those systemic features should be decided by A3ES after an open consultation of and communication with all stakeholders, the HEIs in the first place.
- There is also the possibility of working with samples either cyclical within the cycles of 6 years of the institutional evaluations or not. The samples done by the institution could be different from those done by the agency, thus expanding its scope.
- In a system of simplified (new) programme evaluation the accreditation of programmes need not necessarily be abandoned. The accreditation of programmes can be prolonged (as in Flanders) until a new institutional evaluation or a next evaluation of a sample of new and/or existing programmes.
- In a system of prolonged accreditation, it is still possible to organised an assessment after the analysis by the agency of a complaint or a notification of a clear risk or actual decrease of quality of any programme or even field of study.
- The transversal analysis of the external institutional evaluation reports and its underlying data is crucial in the development and support of a new, simplified national EQA system. They show that the agency trusts the (very) good IQA and the evaluation results of the institutions. The institutions get rewarded for their good engagement and investment as such.

- It is important that each evaluation and external report contains added value for the assessed institution and programme. Using both the analysis and the recommendations the institution should be able to observe where it stands and how it can improve.
- An anonymized and focussed survey after the recent institutional evaluations is worth organising both for further analysis of the experiences and for the development of a future system with a new institutional assessment framework linked to simplified programme evaluations. Such a survey could also enhance the trust between the agency and the institutions.
- It is crucial to organise a pilot phase to test the move to a simplified programme evaluation as well as before applying a new QA system with a new institutional assessment framework (see below) and evaluate them.
- In the pilot phase all institutions that have a minimum score of (very) good on the first, two or three suggested criteria could be involved. The number of criteria that should be scored as (very) good as well as the height of the scores themselves are other subjects that still has to be decided on by A3ES after communicating and consulting the stakeholders.
- Communication before and after the institutional evaluations and the simplification of the programme evaluations is crucial. A3ES could provide a platform with and for the institutions to exchange their experiences and their good practices and lessons drawn.
- It could also be advisable to hold meetings, between A3ES and the HEI, to personally communicate the results of institutional assessment, as well as periodic meetings (every two years?) to support institutions in implementing the quality management process, discuss the results of assessments carried out, clarify doubts about quality management, etc. A thorough communication and cooperation are important for further building trust between the agency and the HEI.
- Next to the dissemination of the results and experiences of evaluations the agency could also provide thematic seminars or trainings in cooperation with international and national organisations and experts. The topic of good leadership for instance is of most importance in order to develop a good strategic plan. Building a good IQA system and/or developing a good quality culture are clearly topics the agency can gather expertise around. Another topic could be, in a system with many HEIs, to focus on HE as a collection of values for society, so that each HEI will be inspired to put itself in question as a value.