

Guiding Questions for panels: External quality assurance of activities in development

Register Committee
13-14 March 2025

The Guiding Questions are intended for external panels reviewing activities (i.e. standards, guidelines, methodologies) within the scope of the ESG, that at the time of the site visit have not been launched yet, but are in a planning or in a pilot phase. The guiding questions are not obligatory for the panels, but could serve as an aiding tool in the review process.

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Why cover activities that are not yet launched?

The standard registration procedure requires that EQAR registered agencies undergo an external review by a panel once every five years. In between these cyclical reviews, registered agencies often introduce new activities and revise the existing ones. EQAR already asks registered agencies to report on these changes as they occur. In order to ensure that the agency is continuously compliant with the ESG. Assessing compliance of a newly introduced or revised activity, however, can be challenging for EQAR's Register Committee, in absence of in-depth external review conducted by a peer review panel. The external reviews of the QA agencies are an exceptional opportunity for EQAR's Register Committee to gain panel insight regarding an activity before listing it on the Register.

Following this, the Register Committee finds it beneficial to include activities that are in a sufficiently advanced stage of development in the external reviews, even if they have not been launched in their final form yet.

In addition, based on experience so far, external feedback on pilot activities can be very useful for QA agencies too – the panel's reflections can aid the agency with the further development of the methodologies.

Implications for the registration process

If the activities in question have not yet been launched at the time of the site visit, the reflections of the panel will not impact the judgement of compliance by the Register Committee. The use of the guiding questions will, however, aid EQAR's decision-making process in being more efficient (e.g. by reducing the need for further clarification from the panel and/or the QA agency after the external review report is submitted to EQAR and the agency submits a Substantive Change Report once the activity is implemented).

Should there be an update of the pilot activity after the external review report is published, QA agencies are strongly advised to explain the novelties in a statement to the report. The statement should be attached with the rest of the documents for registration on EQAR¹.

After registration, once the activity is launched and the first full review cycle is completed, the agency is expected to describe the implementation and present evidence on the ESG compliance via a substantive change report².

The Guiding Questions follow the Use and Interpretation of the ESG by the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR)³.

How to read the table?

The table describes five developmental stages of creating a new activity: (a) brainstorming, (b) design, (c) implementation, (d) piloting, (e) post – piloting. The order is not prescriptive and EQAR understands that QA agencies can have different approaches to developing a new activity (for e.g. the pilot phase is not applied and the activity is launched instantly), and that activities that are still in development may not necessarily be launched, but can rather serve as a learning opportunity for the agency in question. Depending on the stage of development, panels are advised to cover the guiding questions on that level and the previous ones. Since the practice shows that stages are not always rigorously applied, panels are advised to look into the guiding questions in the next levels too and apply them whenever appropriate.

Should the panel not be able to collect information on the questions, it is recommended that this is explained in the external review report.

¹ Procedures for Applications (2022), EQAR, available at:

https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2022/07/RC_01_1_ProceduresForApplications_v5_0.pdf

² See: Reporting Substantive Changes at <https://www.eqar.eu/register/guide-for-agencies/reporting-and-renewal/>

³ Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies (2020), EQAR, available at:

<https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2025/01/EQAR-UseInterpretation-v4.0.pdf>

No.	Development phase	Description	Guiding questions for panels
I	Brainstorming	<p>A clear idea has been crafted and the agency plans to take concrete steps into materializing it.</p> <p>The guiding questions in this phase serve to help the EQAR Register Committee in better understanding the context, rather than the ESG compliance.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why is the QA agency considering introducing a new activity? 2. Does the new activity resemble already existing ESG activity of the QA agency? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1. If yes, which activity? 2.2. What elements are similar (e.g. same standards)? 2.3. What will be different? 3. Will the QA agency discontinue an activity due to the new one? 4. What is the timeline of the pilot? When is the activity planned to be launched? 5. Does the agency have sufficient resources for implementing the new activity (ESG 3.5)?
II	Design	<p>The agency started a process of developing the activity (e.g. is currently drafting standards, consults stakeholders and/or agency's staff etc.).</p>	<p>See questions in the previous stage</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Has the agency consulted stakeholders in the process? (ESG 2.2) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6.1 If yes, how are stakeholders involved in the design of the methodology? 6.2. If not (yet), is this planned prior to launching the activity?

			<p>6.3. If there are no plans to include stakeholders in the design of the methodologies, what is the rationale behind it?</p> <p>7. Does the new external QA activity tackle providers that are not officially recognised as HE institutions by the national authorities where the providers are based? If so, how does the agency confirm that this educational provision is at higher education level?</p>
III	Formulation	First version of the standards has been developed. The document is in draft version.	<p>See questions in previous stages</p> <p>8. Are the standards 1.1 – 1.10 (Part 1) of the ESG, prima facie, effectively translated into the criteria? (ESG 2.1)</p> <p>8.1 If not, is there a reason for omitting some standards?</p> <p>9. Are the methodologies, prima facie, fit for purpose set by the framework? (ESG 2.2)</p> <p>10. Does the new activity include the process elements as described in ESG 2.3 (i.e. a self-assessment or equivalent, an external assessment, a report resulting from the external assessment and a follow-up)?</p> <p>10.1. If any of the elements are not included, what is the reason for omitting them?</p> <p>11. Will the review(s) of the new activity include groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s)?</p>

			<p>(ESG 2.4)</p> <p>12. Will the QA agency use the already existing methods for ensuring consistency of outcomes or introduced new approaches? (ESG 2.5)</p> <p>13. Does the agency plan to publish the reports on their website once the activity is officially launched and the first reviews have taken place? (ESG 2.6)</p> <p>14. Will the QA agency use the already existing means for complaints and appeals? (ESG 2.7)</p> <p>14.1. Are any changes in the complaints and appeals procedures envisioned due to the new activity?</p>
IV	Testing	The first pilots are currently run.	<p>See questions in previous stages</p> <p>15. Are the standards 1.1 – 1.10 (Part 1) of the ESG covered in practice? (ESG 2.1)</p> <p>16. If no site visits are used, how does the agency validate the evidence provided by higher education institutions? (ESG 2.3)</p> <p>17. Does the agency use the already existing methods for ensuring consistency of outcomes or introduced new approaches? (ESG 2.5)</p>
V	Post – pilot	First pilots have been implemented,	See questions in previous stages

	<p>the agency is now incorporating the feedback and, potentially, altering the activity.</p> <p>Question 19 serves to help the Register Committee understand the general context, rather than the ESG compliance</p>	<p>18. Are reports published on the website? (ESG 2.6)</p> <p>19. What are the next steps? Are further changes expected to take place? (e.g. after the first full cycle of reviews)?</p>
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Good practices

The table below presents some good practices from external review reports of evaluated EQAR-registered agencies. The selected examples should serve as guidance rather than a prescription. The table will be updated periodically with other commendable practices.

Information on the pilot activity and/or applicable standard	Report	Agency	Analysis
Overview of the activity	ENQA Agency Review (2019)	ACSUG	ACSUG will launch a pilot programme of institutional monitoring in 2019. This process will enable centres to monitor their degrees jointly by centre rather than having to issue an individual report for each degree. Only accredited centres will undergo this process. The processes used will be similar to the programme evaluation processes as earlier described in this report. The aim is to simplify the evaluation procedures and administrative burden, and to take advantage of the information that the centres are already generating by having an internal quality assurance system in place. (p18)
Overview of the activity	ENQA Agency Review (2021)	FIBAA	As a response to the pandemic situation and the need for HEIs to adapt to online learning instead of on-campus teaching, FIBAA is now in a process of looking at the opportunities of this digital transformation and is, therefore, developing a new seal on digital education. An on-going pilot study is now considering taking aspects such as university-wide strategy for the digitalisation of teaching, number and competencies of staff, technical equipment for the digitalisation of teaching, didactic design of digitised teaching, quality assurance and aspects of "learning analytics". The assessment criteria for the new seal will be set by FIBAA and accreditation decision made by the F-ACC. A concept paper

			FIBAA Seal on Excellent digital teaching or digitalization of teaching, from 12 November 2020, gives further information about the new seal. The pilot study is still on going, and seals in digital teaching has been awarded by the time this report was written. (p14)
Overview of the activity	ENQA Agency Review (2022)	ANQA	ANQA conducted a number of so-called 'pilot programme reviews' within the framework of Erasmus+ projects. As those procedures were specifically designed as project activity and used only for project implementation purposes, did not entirely follow the programme accreditation methodology of ANQA but were ad-hoc, did not conclude with external review reports published on the agency's website, and no accreditation decisions resulted, the review panel is not able to consider them as pilot programme reviews in the sense of the programme accreditation methodology developed by ANQA (p4)
Overview of the activity	ENQA Agency Review (2022)	AEQES	It should be noted that although 16 institutions had participated in the pilot phase, no reports had been published at the time of the site visit and the format of the summative judgements arising from the evaluations had not yet been agreed (pg3)
Overview of the activity ESG 2.1 ESG 2.4	ENQA Agency Review (2017)	NVAO	According to the document 'Update on developments in Dutch higher education and in the structure of NVAO' (17 March 2017) one element in the changes to the system introduced with the new framework in 2016 concerns a pilot with a lighter form of programme assessment that is planned to start in September 2017. For programmes in this pilot only intended and achieved learning outcomes (Standards 1 and 4) will have to be assessed by an external panel, while the quality of the learning environment and the system of assessment (Standards 2 and 3) will be assessed using peer review under the umbrella of the internal quality assurance of the institution. During the pilot programmes can opt to join the regular programme assessment clusters for the assessments

			<p>of the intended and achieved learning outcomes, or have these assessed in a separate process. The institutions in the pilot will still undergo the regular institutional audits.</p> <p>The pilot will run for six years from 2017 to 2023 and is to be evaluated in the fifth year. NVAO will be involved in the monitoring of the pilot. Institutions eligible for the pilot need to have a good track record in recent assessments. A very small number of institutions have expressed interest in taking part in the pilot. The Ministry of Education submitted a proposal for the implementation of the pilot to NVAO for consultation. (p12)</p>
ESG 2.1	ENQA Agency Review (2021)	ACPUA	See table on p29 and analysis per standard on p.30-p33
ESG 2.2	ENQA Agency Review (2021)	FIBAA	Further stakeholder involvement was apparent through the role of experts and students on the various committees and accreditation processes (although the review panel noted that there is no student representative on the Foundation Council) and also through institutional involvement in pilots for new seals and through feedback on review activities, although many of the stakeholders that the review panel spoke to played multiple roles – for example, the employers were also members of F-ACC (p18).
ESG 2.3	ENQA Agency Review (2022)	AEQES	<p>1. The programmatic evaluations and the pilot institutional evaluations are composed of three phases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-evaluation; • the external evaluation carried out with the input of a committee of independent experts selected by the agency. <p>This phase includes a site visit and the publication of the reports, drawn</p>

			<p>up by these experts, on the AEQES website;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the publication of an action plan drawn up by the establishment and implementation of the action plan as well as a mid-term progress record (1st edition in 2023-2024). (p11) <p>For the pilot phase of institutional review, there is a proposal for a series of summative graded judgements in relation to the internal quality assurance system of the institution but at the time of the site visit, a final decision had not yet been taken on this outcome (p12)</p>
<p>Overview of the activity</p> <p>ESG 2.3</p>	ENQA Agency Review (2021)	ACPUA	<p>ALCAEUS is a voluntary scheme designed to provide visibility to institutions or centres that demonstrate commitment and contribute to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) / Agenda 2030. The pilot run of the Programme is scheduled for December 2020. ALCAEUS will be open to institutions and centres which have successfully undergone an IQAS certification review. It will be based on a SAR and a site visit and will end with an evaluation report. ACPUA will take final decisions and award a quality label for five years. Institutions will submit annual follow-up reports (p13)</p>
ESG 2.3	ENQA Agency Review (2021)	ACPUA	See table pg37-38
ESG 2.5	ENQA Agency Review (2022)	AEQES	<p>For the pilot phase of institutional review, there is a proposal for a series of summative graded judgements in relation to the internal quality assurance system of the institution but at the time of the site visit, a final decision had not yet been taken on this outcome. (p12)</p> <p>The Executive Unit, in the case of programmatic evaluations and the Methodological Council for the pilot phase of the institutional evaluation procedure is responsible for checking the draft external evaluation report, but only to ensure that the evaluation guidelines are considered,</p>

			the analysis and recommendations are respected and that the guidelines for publication are followed (p19)
ESG 2.7	ENQA Targeted review report (2024)	A3ES	According to the SAR and confirmed during the site visit, the complaints and appeals processes remain in place and are applied in full to new external quality assurance activities (p33)