

Agency Reviews and Current Developments in Quality Assurance

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Views from two ex-Presidents of ENQA



Achim Hopbach,
ENQA President,
2009-13

Padraig Walsh,
ENQA President,
2013-17

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Agency reviews against ESG

- Implementation of the ESG is widely seen as a success story of the Bologna Process
- External evaluation of Quality Assurance agencies has become one of the most powerful triggers for the implementation of the ESG at national level
- It is of concern that an inconsistent approach to the agency reviews by ENQA and EQAR is a recurring theme of a 2019 external report

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Agency reviews against ESG

- “The fact that two different decisions can be made based on the results of the same review is problematic”

NISIRE report

- “The interpretation (of the ESG and its individual standards) is often too restrictive and the scope for going beyond the standards is not exploited”

E4 report

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A closer look at the 'problem'

- The A3ES survey on the consistency between ENQA and EQAR judgements shows the consequence may not be as severe as statements from some agencies seem to indicate
- The use of two different rating scales could be the issue
- In 85 cases of difference in judgements of compliance between individual standards, 5 relate to 'full v substantial compliance' and 61 to 'substantial v partial compliance'
- The more significant difference between 'full v partial compliance', 'partial v non-compliance' and 'substantial v non-compliance' only occurred in 13 cases

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A closer look at the 'problem'

Perhaps the 'problem' results from different use of /approaches to agency reviews:

- Key words of ENQA's vision and mission are 'development of quality assurance, 'representation of agencies, 'development of quality culture'
- Key words of EQAR's vision and mission are 'coherent quality assurance framework', 'freedom of choice of agency by the HEI', 'transparency' and 'information'

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A closer look at the 'problem'

- ENQA is focused on the development of quality assurance and its member agencies
- EQAR is focused on transparency and particularly on quality assurance decisions that should be mutually acceptable
- ENQA, as a membership organisation, focuses on the agency as a whole
- EQAR understandably focuses on the procedures and decisions

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Moving away from the 'double decision'

- Q. 'Why do we have to sit the examination twice?'
- A. 'You are not sitting the examination twice. You are sitting the examination once, but it is being marked twice.'

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Moving away from the 'double decision'

- Origins of EQAR
- When the idea of agency reviews first surfaced in the ESG 2005 document, there was some scepticism from both EUA and ESU about vesting this review process solely with ENQA
- This ultimately led to EQAR being established in 2008 with 4 founding members - EUA, EURASHE, ESU and ENQA

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Moving away from the 'double decision'

- Over time, as the number of EQAR-registered agencies increased, many agencies had relationships with both ENQA and EQAR
- 'Rapprochement' between ENQA and EQAR developed with:
 - Development of ESG 2015 moving from E4 to E4+EI+BE+EQAR
 - Regular E4+EQAR meetings
 - Meetings between EQAR and ENQA 'presidencies'
 - Agreed ToR for reviews being conducted with the double purpose of ENQA membership and EQAR registration
 - Briefing of ENQA reviews panels including EQAR Register Committee expectations

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Towards the 'targeted review' process

- In 2021, ENQA has 56 members agencies and there are 50 agencies registered on EQAR
- 48 of the 56 ENQA members agencies are also registered on EQAR
- With 56 members, there are close to 11 ENQA co-ordinated reviews required per year – a significant amount of work for the ENQA Board, leaving less time for membership development matters

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Towards the 'targeted review' process

- Many ENQA members have by now undergone two or more reviews
- Evidence of 'evaluation fatigue' and 'diminishing returns'
- Desire from mature agencies to have an evaluation process that goes beyond the threshold standard and to focus more on enhancement or innovation in quality assurance

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Towards the 'targeted review' process

- In October 2020, ENQA moved to accepting a positive decision of the EQAR Register Committee as fulfilling ENQA membership criteria
- ENQA also moved from a 4-point to 3-point compliance scale (dropping the 'substantial compliance' judgement)
- EQAR Members' Forum agreed in April 2021 to permit agencies that have undergone 2 successful reviews against ESG 2015 to undertake a 'targeted review' five years in between 'full reviews'
- 'Enhancement-led' component as part of 'targeted review'
- 'Targeted review' process was also endorsed by the ENQA General Assembly in April 2021

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Denouement?

- Removal of the double-decision
- Or has decision-making just become more opaque?
- ENQA still organises most reviews, trains and briefs panels, pre-screens self-evaluation reports and final reports

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Denouement?

- If agencies now see 'review fatigue' and 'diminishing returns', should we still be requiring mature higher education institutions to continuing undergoing the same type of cyclical review?
- Enhancement and innovation in agency reviews should surely be mirrored in reviews of institutions
- ESG 2025?