

Manual

For quality assurance aimed at Mutual Recognition of
Quality Assurance agencies

2002

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Prepared by a working group with members from the Network Norway Council,
the National Agency for Higher Education (Sweden), the Finnish Higher
Education Evaluation Council and the Danish Evaluation Institute

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This manual for the mutual recognition of quality assurance agencies is the result of a pilot project on mutual recognition of evaluation agencies. The Nordic Network on Quality Assurance initiated the project in order to gain experience with methods applicable to mutual recognition.

The manual consist of three parts:

1. A self-study protocol
2. Guidelines for the review panel
3. Recommendations on appointment of the review panel

The project has shown that, in addition to creating transparency, the method applied is suitable for quality improvement of quality assurance agencies. It is, therefore, an aspiration that this manual will inspire internal quality processes and/or mutual recognition review or similar international evaluation initiatives.

The protocol consists of the following five main sections:

- 2.1 Background information necessary to understand the context in which the agency is operating
- 2.2 Ownership and purpose of the agency
- 2.3 The evaluation method
- 2.4 The quality assurance procedures of the agency
- 2.5 Concluding analysis.

It is important that the self-study can be read independently without supplementary documentation to support the statements in the report. Supplementary documentation is an *opportunity* for the review team to validate the statements in the self-study report.

The self-study is expected to contain references to supplementary documentation to support the statements in the report. The documentation should preferably consist of material produced prior to the self-study. This is especially relevant to sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 of this manual.

The self-study is expected to be between 25 and 30 pages.

The self-study protocol is conceived as part of a methodological approach that also includes an external panel, a site-visit and a report.

The criteria used in this protocol are primarily based on the ENQA membership provisions. The criteria are marked with capital letters as well as ***italic and bold*** and they are followed by a reference to an endnote that specifies the background of the specific criterion.

2.1 Background and context

This section should provide the background information necessary to understand the context in which the agency is working. The section is expected to include:

- A brief outline of the national higher education system, including:
 - Degree structure
 - Institutional structure
 - Procedures and involved parties in establishing new subjects, programs and institutions
 - Other quality assurance procedures (e.g. external examiners)
 - Status of Higher Education institutions in relation to the government;
- A brief account of the history of the particular agency and of the evaluation of higher education in general (max. 2 pages);
- Description of the legal framework and other formal regulations concerning the agency (e.g. parliamentary laws, ministerial orders or decrees);
- Internal organisation of the agency;
- Other responsibilities of the agency than the evaluation of higher education;
- International activities of the agency, including formal agreements as well as other activities, e.g. participation in conferences, working groups and staff exchange.

A. Evidence that the agency has identified key stakeholders and maintains regular contact.¹

2.2 Ownership and purpose

This section should include an account of the ownership of the agency and of its purpose. It is expected to include:

B. An account of the agency's independence from individual higher education institutions as well as government.²

For an agency to be independent it is essential that judgments laid down in an evaluation report cannot be influenced by either institutions or ministries or any other stakeholder. Furthermore, the formal decision on the terms of reference, the methodological outline, the appointment of experts and the guidelines for self-evaluation must rest with the agency (council/board, secretariat or external expert group). The terms of reference/project plan, guidelines for self-evaluation and the experts must be approved by the agency.

This account should include:

- Ownership in terms of:
 - Who initiated and established the agency (government, higher education institutions, others)
 - How the agency is financed
 - The nomination and appointment of the board
 - The composition of the board;
- The right to initiate evaluations;
- The role of the agency in follow-up on evaluations: consequences and sanctions;
- Procedures related to establishing the terms of reference/project plan of the individual assessment;
- Procedures related to the identification and appointment of experts.

C. Evidence that the agency 1) undertakes external quality assessments (at institutional or discipline level) on a regular basis as a part of its core function,³ 2) is involved in external quality assurance in at least one subject/field⁴ and 3) has been operating for a minimum of two years.⁵

By "regular" it should be understood that evaluations are initiated on the basis of a systematic procedure and that several quality assessments have been conducted over the last two years. Quality assessments may involve review, evaluation, audit or accreditation.

This evidence should include:

- an account of the number of quality assessments conducted and the number of units evaluated during the last five years;
- a description of the purpose of the agency (if not stated above as a part of the description of the legal framework).

D. Evidence that the agency has been recognised as a national or regional quality assurance agency by the relevant public authorities.⁶

E. Evidence that the agency has not been constituted as a profit-making concern.⁷

2.3 Evaluation Method

This section concerns the methods and models used for evaluations and is divided into three subsections. The first is about the general planning of the evaluation, the second covers the procedures for collecting documentation, and the third and the final subsection is about the analysis of documentation and drafting of the report. The section must also contain an account of the compliance with the methodological provisions of ENQA.

2.3.1 General issues

This subsection should contain an account of the overall planning of an evaluation and other fundamental issues. It is expected to include:

F. Evidence that the agency is working on the basis of transparent methodological procedures.⁸

This evidence should include:

- Briefing of and communication with the evaluated institution;
- Reference(s) for evaluation (predefined criteria, legal documents, subject benchmarks, professional standards, the stated goals of the evaluated institution);
- The extent to which the methodological elements are modified to specific evaluations.

G. An account of the role of the external expert group.⁹

The external expert group must as a minimum include academic peers (collegial experts). Experts from society (e.g. employers of graduates), students, as well as others with special insight in the object being evaluated, might be included.

This account should include:

- Briefing/training of experts;
- Meetings between experts: number, scope and time schedule in relation to the overall evaluation process;
- Division of labour between agency and experts;
- The role of the agency's staff in the evaluations;
- Identification and appointment of the member(s) of staff at the agency to be responsible for the assessment.

2.3.2 Documentation

This subsection should contain an account of the procedures for collecting documentation. It is expected to include:

H. An account of the procedures related to self-evaluation.¹⁰

This account should include:

- The specification of content in the guidelines provided by the agency;
- The procedural advice provided by the agency;
- Training/information of self-evaluation teams;
- Time available for conducting the self-evaluation.

I. An account of the procedures related to the site-visit.¹¹

This account should include:

- Questionnaires/interviewing protocols;
- Principles for selection of participants/informants (categories and specific participants);
- Principles for the length of the visit;
- Number of meetings and average length;

- Documentation of the meetings (internal/external, minutes, transcriptions, etc.); Working methods of the external expert group (e.g. is it together during the visit or does it split up in separate meetings).

2.3.3 Other kinds of documentation

This subsection should contain an account of the use of surveys, statistical material or other kinds of documentation not mentioned elsewhere.

2.3.4 Reporting

This subsection should contain an account of the analysis of the documentation and drafting of the report. It is expected to include:

***J. Evidence that the reports are made available to the public.*¹²**

Furthermore it should include information on:

- Purpose of the report;
- The drafting of the report (agency staff or experts);
- Format of report (design and length);
- Content of report (documentation or only analysis/recommendations);
- Principles for feed-back from the evaluated parties on the draft report;
- Publication procedures and policy (e.g. handling of the media);
- Immediate follow-up (e.g. seminars, conferences);
- Long term follow-up activities (e.g. follow-up evaluation or visit).

2.4 Procedures for quality assurance of agency

2.4.1 Procedures and systems

This section should contain an account of the quality assurance procedures. It is expected to include:

***K. An account of the agency's internal quality assurance mechanisms.*¹³**

This account should include:

- The scope of the internal quality assurance mechanisms;
- Qualifications and skills of professional staff and management, including recruitment, training and qualification development;
- Continuous quality assurance systems in place (e.g. feed-back from institutions, experts and stakeholders and internal accumulation and dissemination of knowledge and experience);
- Evaluation of the agency
 - Self initiated or externally initiated
 - Internal or external evaluator responsibility
 - Scope of the agency's activities;
- General initiatives to keep the agency informed regarding the state of the art and new developments within the field of evaluation of higher education (membership of domestic and international organisations, partnerships and networks).

***L. If some or all of the elements in the evaluation procedure are subcontracted to other parties, the agency should have reliable mechanisms that ensure the quality of the material produced by subcontractors.*¹⁴**

2.4.2 Effect documented by quality assurance

This section should contain an account of the quality of the agencies' evaluations. It is expected to include:

M. Evidence for the quality of the agencies' evaluations.¹⁵

The agency should report on the results of its quality assurance systems and evaluations mentioned above and should consider the overall and indirect impact of the outputs of the agency (impact of the reports, formal status of these, follow-up, perception by different stakeholders, including public opinion).

2.5 Final reflections

This section should include a general reflection of the agencies' strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, in order to give an account of the capacity of the agency to adapt to new demands and trends and to permanently improve its actions while maintaining a solid and credible methodological framework and governance model.¹⁶

These guidelines describe the expectations to the review panel. They comprise guidance on:

- General organisation;
- The site-visit;
- The drafting of the report.

The guidelines should be seen as supplementary to the *Protocol for Self-study* that presents the internal process at the agencies involved.

The agency under review should provide a self-study drafted in correspondence with the *Protocol for Self-study*. The self-study should be sent to the review panel responsible for the mutual recognition review no later than a month before the visit.

3.1 The site-visit

The visit is recommended to have a duration of at least three days, including preparation and follow-up, depending on the review panel's prior knowledge of the agency under review and its context. The day before the visit the panel will meet and agree on relevant themes for the meetings. The Chair and the secretary are responsible for providing the other members with draft interview-guides for the site-visit no later than one week before the visit. The purpose of the site-visit is to validate the self-study. The interview-guides should be drafted with this perspective in mind.

The visit should include separate meetings with members from the agency board, management, staff, experts, owners/key stakeholders and representatives from evaluated institutions at management level as well as members from the internal self-evaluation committees. The meetings should be of approximately one hour. The agency under review submits a program for the visit, which has to be approved by the chair.

The chair will preside the meetings. All members of the expert group are invited to ask questions. The secretary takes minutes of the meetings.

3.2 The preparation of the report

The report is expected to be brief and to focus on compliance with the criteria specified in the self-study protocol, as well as with possibilities for future improvement.

The day after the visit, the expert panel should outline the general conclusions. On the basis hereof the secretary will provide the review panel with a tentative report. The other members will comment in a written form to the secretary and the chair. The chair and the secretary will incorporate the comments in a second draft to be approved by the panel. The approved version should thereafter be sent to the agency under review for comments on factual errors. The secretary will incorporate the comments in cooperation with the chair. The final report is sent to the agencies involved.

4

Appointment of the review panel

This section concerns the appointment of the experts that should conduct the mutual recognition review.

It is recommended that the review panel includes the following profiles:

- Staff from other agencies than those involved;
- If the purpose of the review is bilateral mutual recognition, it is important that staff are also represented from the recognising agency;
- A representative from the higher education institutions, who has, potentially, been evaluated by the agency;
- An expert with knowledge of evaluation both from a practical as well as theoretical perspective.

It is also recommended that the panel should consist of four persons, possibly with a supplementary person acting as a secretary. If the purpose is mutual recognition, it is recommended that a staff member from an agency that is not involved chairs the review panel.

In order to ensure that the review is trustworthy, it is recommended that the task of appointing the experts is given to a third party. This third party could be ENQA, EAU or an agency not involved in the process. The agencies involved should have the possibility to agree on the composition of panel.

¹ Criteria suggested by the working group in “A Method for Mutual Recognition: Experiences with a method for mutual recognition of quality assurance agencies”, ENQA Occasional Papers 4, 2002.

² Criteria formulated with regard to “REGULATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION”, (approved by the Third Network General Assembly on 27 May 2002) section 3.2: *‘the agency must be independent of individual higher education institutions. An organisation or entity inside a higher education institution is not considered an external quality assurance agency by the Network’* and *‘the agency must be adequately independent from government’*.

³ Criteria formulated with regard to “REGULATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION”, (approved by the Third Network General Assembly on 27 May 2002) section 3.2: *‘the agency undertakes external quality assessments (at institutional or discipline level) on a regular basis. These quality assessments may involve evaluation, review, audit, assessment or accreditation and they should be part of the core functions of the agency’*.

⁴ Criteria formulated with regard to “REGULATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION”, (approved by the Third Network General Assembly on 27 May 2002) section 3.2: *‘the agency should be involved in external quality assurance in at least one subject / field’*.

⁵ Criteria formulated with regard to “REGULATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION”, (approved by the Third Network General Assembly on 27 May 2002) section 3.2: *‘the agency must have been operating for a minimum of two years to be adopted as a full member’*.

⁶ Criteria formulated with regard to “REGULATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION”, (approved by the Third Network General Assembly on 27 May 2002) section 3.2: *‘the agency has been recognised as a national or regional quality assurance agency by the competent public authorities’*.

⁷ Criteria formulated with regard to “REGULATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION”, (approved by the Third Network General Assembly on 27 May 2002) section 3.2: *‘the agency or organisation must not be constituted as a profit-making concern’*.

⁸ Criteria formulated with regard to “REGULATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION”, (approved by the Third Network General Assembly on 27 May 2002) section 3.4: *‘the agency is working on the basis of transparent methodological procedures’*.

⁹ Criteria formulated with regard to “REGULATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION”, (approved by the Third Network General Assembly on 27 May 2002) section 3.4: *‘the agency’s procedures follow the recommendations made consequent to the European pilot project of 1995: Autonomy and independence in terms of procedures and methods concerning quality evaluation both from government and from higher education institutions; self-assessment; external assessment by a peer-review group (group of experts) and site visits; and publication of a report’*.

¹⁰ See note 9.

¹¹ See note 9.

¹² See note 9.

¹³Criteria formulated with regard to "REGULATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION", (approved by the Third Network General Assembly on 27 May 2002) section 3.2: *'the agency has established its own internal quality assurance mechanisms'*.

¹⁴ Criteria suggested by the working group in "A Method for Mutual Recognition: Experiences with a method for mutual recognition of quality assurance agencies", ENQA Occasional Papers 4, 2002.

¹⁵ Criteria formulated with regard to "REGULATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION", (approved by the Third Network General Assembly on 27 May 2002) section 3.2: *'the agency can provide documentation for the quality of its evaluations'*.

¹⁶ Criteria suggested by the working group in "A Method for Mutual Recognition: Experiences with a method for mutual recognition of quality assurance agencies", ENQA Occasional Papers 4, 2002 on the background of advice from Sami Kanna (external expert in the project).