

The EQUASS process and procedures for certification

Introduction

The European Quality in Social Services (EQUASS) is a European and sector-specific quality system for organisations that provide social services and that are committed to comply with fundamental values and quality principles in the social sector. EQUASS aims to enhance the social services sector by engaging service providers in quality, continuous improvement, learning and development and by guaranteeing service users quality of services throughout Europe.

EQUASS operates on well-defined criteria, performance indicators and an external audit procedure. It is important to mention that all EQUASS processes and procedures are monitored and approved by a European Awarding Committee in which the sectoral stakeholders at European level are represented. Moreover, those processes and procedures are subject to permanent monitoring and continuous improvement on the basis of feedback from applicants and auditors.

This document gives a brief overview of the EQUASS process and procedures for certification at the EQUASS Assurance level and the EQUASS Excellence level. The processes and procedures for certification are relevant for the applicant, the auditors, the EQUASS Local License Holders and the EQUASS Secretariat. The description follows the chronological steps in the EQUASS certification process and refers to the underlying documentation for supporting this process.

This EQUASS certification process for the level of EQUASS Assurance and EQUASS Excellence are shown as a flow charts in figures. The supported documentation refers to separate annexes.

EQUASS Assurance certification process

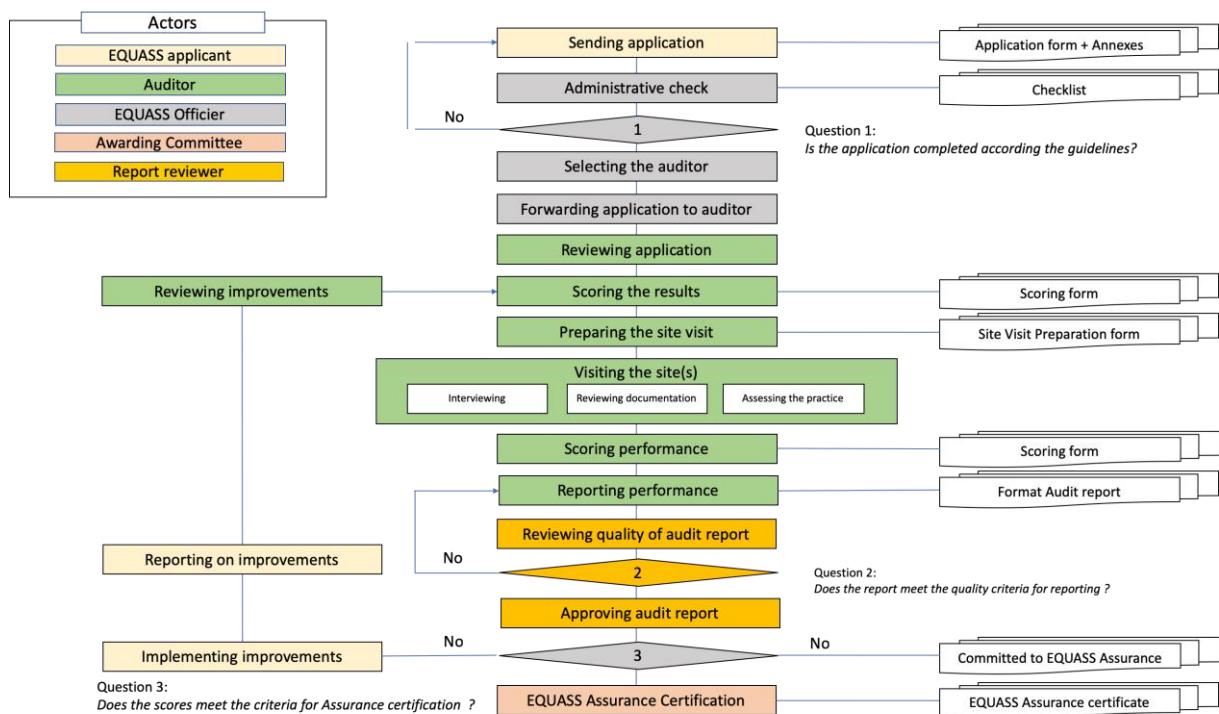


Figure 1

EQUASS Excellence certification process

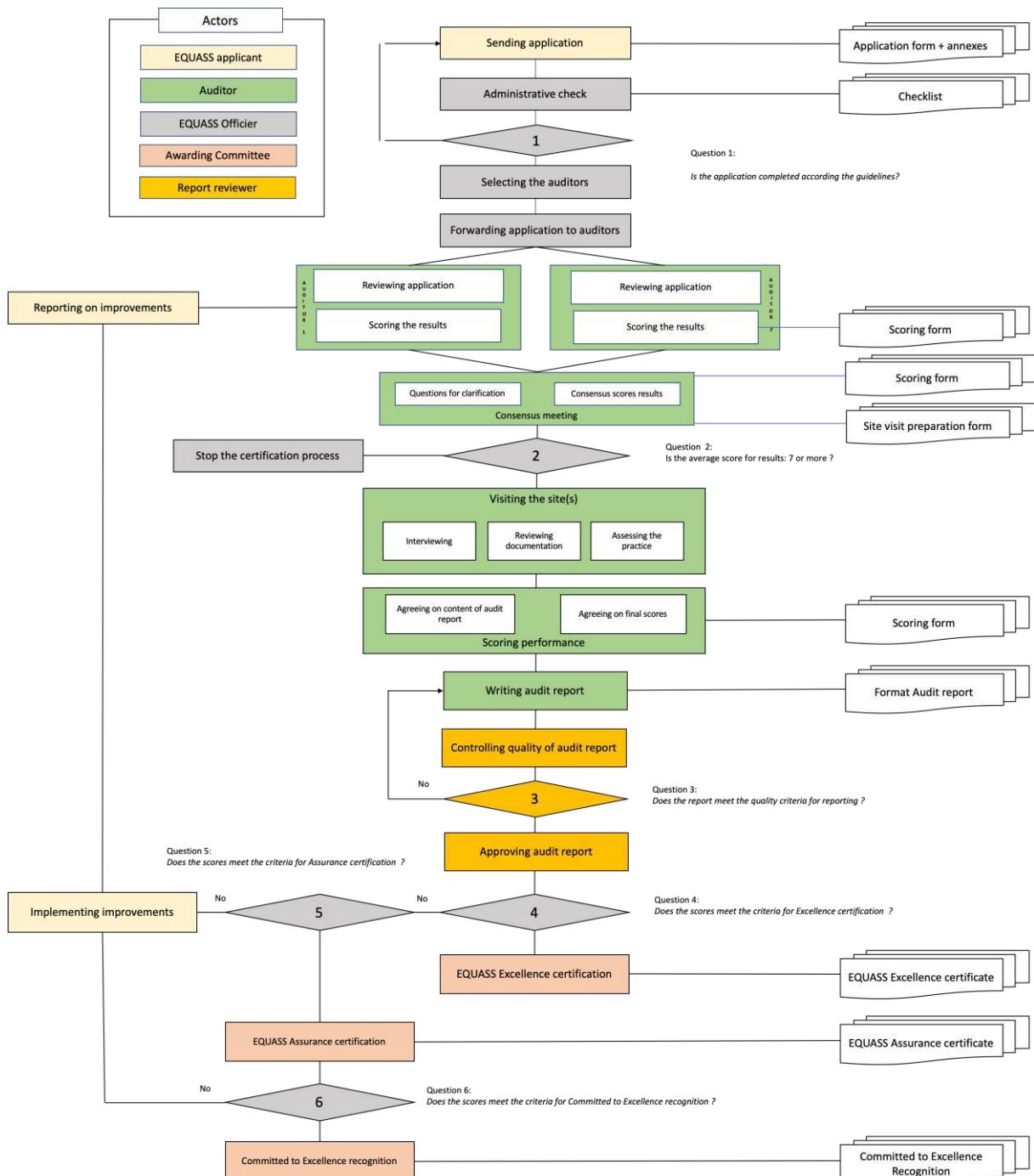


Figure 2

Application

The application dossier

The applicant is entitled to define the scope for the EQUASS application. This scope can be the entire organisation providing social services (or Vocational Education and Training (VET) services) as well as one single department or business unit within that organisation. An essential criterion is that the application relates to a number of services directly provided to persons and that it contributes to their inclusion and/or an improved quality of life. The scope of the application is expressed in the application form and the Assurance or Excellence certificate will also explicitly refer to this defined scope.

Supporting documents:

1. EQUASS Application form (including the annexes, the executive summaries for key approaches and the results)
 - a. EQUASS application form for EQUASS Assurance certification (see: Annex no 1)
 - b. EQUASS application form for EQUASS Excellence certification (see: Annex no 2)
 - c. Guidelines for EQUASS application and other supporting information (see: Annex no 3)

The administrative check

The relevant EQUASS coordinator (Local License Holder (LLH) or EQUASS coordinator in Brussels) will check the eligibility of the application and the services concerned, as well as the completeness of the application dossier. If some elements of information are missing or if the application form and the checklist are not properly completed, the applicant will be asked to do so by his/her coordinator. The audit process will only continue if the dossier is complete.

Supporting document:

EQUASS Administrative checklist (See: Annex no 4A for Assurance and 4B for Excellence)

Selection of the EQUASS auditor(s)

EQUASS Assurance certification

One EQUASS auditor, selected by the coordinator of the audit, will carry out the external audit. The auditor will be impartial (no potential conflicts of interest). He/she will be qualified, meaning that he/she has successfully completed a training for EQUASS auditors and that he/she has the knowledge, skills, competences and attitude requirements identified by the EQUASS Awarding Committee.

The auditor is trained in the EQUASS quality approach and in how to assess the performance of the applicant based on the EQUASS Principles for Quality and the EQUASS criteria. The EQUASS auditor is responsible for all phases of the audit including the writing of an audit report.

The EQUASS Audit coordinator (Local License Holder (LLH) or EQUASS coordinator in Brussels) supports and monitors the process of auditing.

EQUASS Excellence certification

Two EQUASS auditors, selected by the coordinator of the audit, will carry out the external audit. Both auditors will be impartial (no potential conflicts of interest). They will be qualified, meaning that they have successfully completed a training for EQUASS auditors and that they have the knowledge, skills, competences and attitude requirements identified by the EQUASS Awarding Committee. One auditor acts as lead auditor while the other auditor acts as co-auditor.

Both auditors are trained in the EQUASS quality approach and in how to assess the performance of the applicant based on the EQUASS Principles for Quality and the EQUASS criteria. The lead auditor is responsible for all phases of the audit including the writing of an audit report.

The EQUASS Audit coordinator (EQUASS coordinator in Brussels) supports and monitors the process of auditing.

Supporting documents:

1. EQUASS Auditor profile (See: Annex no 5)
2. Code of Ethics for auditors (See: Annex no 6)

The certification audit

Auditing an applicant on compliance with EQUASS principles and criteria is based on the information provided in the application process (the general information about the application - the executive summaries of key approaches and the overview of the results) and on the information assessed during a site visit (the practice of providing services, the review of some key documentation and interviews with service users – management - employees and other relevant stakeholders)

The audit process consists of four steps:

Step 1: The desk review

EQUASS Assurance certification

The auditor will receive a (digital) copy of the application form (including the executive summaries of the key approaches and an overview of the results). He/she will complete the desk review and desk scoring on the basis of the provided information.

Based on a review of the documentation, sent with the application form, the auditor will identify priorities for discussions, interviews and documentation to review during the site visit. He/she will select the required documentation in the checklist that needs to be made available during the site visit for a review.

EQUASS Excellence certification

The auditors will receive a (digital) copy of the application form (including the executive summaries of the key approaches and an overview of the results). Each auditor will carry out a desk review and desk scoring of the provided results. Each auditor will complete the desk review and desk scoring on the basis of the provided information. After the individual scoring of the results, the auditors will have a consensus meeting where the consensus scores for results are determined. Based on a score for results, that auditor will determine the probability of a successful audit. (Average score of results lower than 7 points may have less probability for a successful audit).

If the probability of a successful audit is low (average score of 5 points or lower), the lead auditor will send a proposal for postponing the site visit to the audit coordinator in Brussels. The audit coordinator will communicate the proposal with the applicant.

If the average consensus score of the results are 7 point or more, the auditors will identify the priorities for discussion, interviews and documentation to review during the site visit. The auditors will select the required documentation in the checklist that needs to be made available during the site visit for a review.

Supported documents:

EQUASS application form for Assurance level (see: Annex no 1)

EQUASS application form for Excellence level (see: Annex no 2)

EQUASS scoring form (See: Annex no 8A for Assurance and 8B for Excellence)

Step 2: Preparation of site visit

The auditor will send a proposal for the planning and the programme of the site visit to the applicant and the coordinator of the auditor at least two weeks (10 working days) before the proposed and agreed dates of the audit. The planning and the programme must be agreed by the applicant and communicated to the auditor and staff of the applicant's organisation. The auditor will use the 'Site visit preparation form' for communicating the planned site visit. The auditor will visit the premises where the services are practiced and meet a number of staff, service-users and other stakeholders who are relevant for the scope of the audit.

The audit plan contains the following elements:

1. Date and time to review the documentation and other information resources
2. Time for giving the feedback on the site visit to the applicant and the staff
3. Time to do the synthesis of scoring and information for the final audit report
4. Time for visiting the service operations
5. An interview with the Chief Executive Officer. This is obligatory, but limited in duration (max 1 hour) and must take place at the end of the site visit.

The audit plan should be flexible and permit changes, based on collected information during the site visit. The plan (site visit preparation form) must be communicated to and agreed with the applicant and be sent to the EQUASS Audit coordinator (Local License Holder (LLH) or EQUASS coordinator in Brussels) and to the applicant.

Supporting document

1. EQUASS Site visit preparation form (See: Annex 7)

Step 3: The site visit

The auditor(s) will collect evidence to verify the performance of the applicant on the EQUASS criteria and the required results through interviews, examination of documents and observation of service operations, situations and conditions. Site visit observations will be registered and reported. At the end of the site visit, prior to the audit report, the auditor(s) will hold a meeting with the relevant staff of the applicant and present to them his/her/their observations. This feedback aims to ensure an understanding of the audit findings and the recommendations planned to be given in the audit report. It should however be clear that the feedback does not constitute a formal outcome or decision on the audit.

Number of days for a site visit

The standard number of days for a site visit (single site) is two days of 8 hours a day. Large organisations (> 250 FTE Staff) and multi-site organisations (> 1 site) will require more days for a site visit. This number of additional days for multi-site applications is determined by the formula: $\sqrt{\#}$ (identified sites). The maximum number of sites included in a multi-site audit is 10 sites. The sites to be visited will be selected by the auditor (see: Figure no 3). Additionally, organisations with between 251 and 500 FTE staff require one additional audit day and with more than 500 FTE staff two additional days (see: Figure no 4).

Number of sites ¹		Total number of audit days	Number of sites to be visited
1		2	1
2		3	2
3		3	3
4		4	4
5		4	4
6		4	4
7		4	4
8		4	4
9		5	5
10		5	5

Figure no 3: The number of days for multi-site applications

¹ For calculating the number of sites the following criterion must be applied: If more locations are involved in the application and the travel (driving) distance between the individual locations is less than 30 minutes, these locations will be considered as one site. If the travel (driving) distance between the individual locations is more than 30 minutes, the locations will be considered as separate sites.

Number of employees in the scope	Additional audit days
0 – 250 FTE employees	Standard of 2 working days (see above)
251 – 500 FTE employees	1 extra day (so 3 days in total)
More than 500 FTE employees	2 extra days (so 4 days in total)

Figure no 4: The number of additional days based on number of employees in the scope of the application

Step 4: Reporting

EQUASS Assurance certification

After the site visit the auditor reviews the outcomes of the audit (scores, required documentation and the results). The auditor prepares and writes his/her comments (recommendations for improvement, additional learning and development) in the audit report and is responsible for the accuracy and completeness of this report. The report must be sent to the EQUASS secretariat within 5 working days after the site visit. If the auditor finds criteria that do not comply with the minimum requirements for EQUASS Assurance certification, he/she will provide the audit report with the areas for improvement. This feedback in the report will also include a short overview of recommendations, which may be the basis for the additional audit (see 6.).

The EQUASS coordinator (Local License Holder (LLH) or EQUASS coordinator in Brussels) will communicate the audit report to the applicant (after review and approval of the audit report) and will inform the applicant about the decision of the Awarding Committee for certifying

EQUASS Excellence certification

After the site visit the auditors review the individual outcomes and observations of the audit (scores, required documentation and the results). In a consensus meeting, both auditors decide on a consensus score for each criterium (including the results). The lead auditor prepares and writes the comments (recommendations for improvement and additional learning and development) in the audit report and is responsible for the accuracy and completeness of this report. The content of the report must be agreed by both auditors. The report must be sent to the EQUASS secretariat within 5 working days after the site visit.

If the auditor finds criteria that do not comply with the minimum requirements for EQUASS Excellence certification, he/she will provide the audit report with the areas for improvement. This feedback in the report will also include a short overview of recommendations, which may be the basis for the additional audit (see 6.)

The EQUASS coordinator in Brussels will communicate the audit report to the applicant after review and approval of the

the applicant with EQUASS Assurance certification.

audit report) and will inform the applicant about the decision of the Awarding Committee for certifying the applicant with EQUASS Excellence certification.

Supporting documents:

1. Format EQUASS Audit Report (See: Annex no 9)

Step 5: Reviewing the audit report

EQUASS Assurance certification

The EQUASS coordinator of the Local License Holder (LLH), or the auditor (for audits organized directly by the EQUASS office in Brussels), sends the audit report to the EQUASS coordinator in Brussels for review. The EQUASS coordinator in Brussels selects an expert for reviewing the audit report and forwards the report. The expert reviews the content of the audit report in order to check if the report meets the following criteria:

1. Is the report written in the right format?
2. Is the scoring consistent with the feedback on performance?
3. Does the feedback refer to the relevant and eligible type of evidence: documentation – information gathered by interviews (director / managers / staff / service users / other relevant stakeholders) – observations in the premises where the services are practiced?
4. Do the suggestions for improvement refer to improving the current performance practices and/or to learning and developing activities that are compliant with performance stages in the EQUASS assessment grid? (Next stage of performance)

EQUASS Excellence certification

The EQUASS coordinator in Brussels selects an expert for reviewing the audit report and forwards the report. The expert reviews the content of the audit report in order to check if the report meets the following criteria:

1. Is the report written in the right format?
2. Is the scoring consistent with the feedback on performance?
3. Does the feedback refer to the relevant and eligible type of evidence: documentation – information gathered by interviews (director / managers / staff / service users / other relevant stakeholders) – observations of the practice?
4. Do the suggestions for improvement refer to improving the current performance practices and/or to learning and developing activities that are compliant with performance stages in the EQUASS assessment grid? (Next stage of performance)

The expert formulates the results of the review and informs the lead auditor about these results. If needed the lead auditor will make the adjustments in the audit

EQUASS assessment grid? (Next stage of performance)

The expert formulates the results of the review and informs the auditor about these results. If needed the auditor will make the adjustments in the audit report based on the received feedback from the expert. The adjusted audit report will be checked by the expert and if all criteria are properly met, the expert sends the approved report to the EQUASS coordinator in Brussels.

The EQUASS coordinator in Brussels will send the approved audit report to the applicant and the coordinator of the Local License Holder (in case there is a LLH involved) and inform them about the decision of the Awarding Committee for certifying the applicant with EQUASS Assurance certification.

report based on the received feedback from the expert. The adjusted audit report will be checked by the expert and if all criteria are properly met, the expert sends the approved report to the EQUASS coordinator in Brussels.

The EQUASS coordinator in Brussels sends the approved audit report to the applicant and to the EQUASS Team Leader. The EQUASS Team Leader sends an executive summary (including conclusions and recommendations) to the members of EQUASS Awarding Committee. The members of the EQUASS Awarding Committee send their feedback to EQUASS Team Leader. The EQUASS coordinator informs the applicant about the decision of the Awarding Committee for certifying the applicant with EQUASS Excellence certification.

Supporting documents:

1. EQUASS criteria for approving Audit Report (See: Annex no 10)

Step 6: EQUASS certification

The EQUASS Awarding Committee certifies an applicant with EQUASS certification if all the minimum criteria for the EQUASS certification are met. The EQUASS secretariat in Brussels will communicate the decision of the EQUASS Awarding Committee to the applicant.

In case of a successful application, the Secretariat will send an EQUASS Certificate, that refers to the scope of the application and that has the period of the validity of the certification on it (3 years, starting from the date of approval of the certification). The successful applicants will receive guidelines on the use of the EQUASS Quality Mark logo. The name and information of the certified organisation (as provided in the application) will be disseminated on the EQUASS website and through its social media channels.

[Criteria for EQUASS assurance certification](#)

[Criteria for EQUASS Excellence certification](#)

The following criteria should have a minimum score of 2.0 points (Stage 1): criteria 1; criteria 2; criteria 10; criteria 13; criteria 15; criteria 19; criteria 20; criteria 23; criteria 27; criteria 29; criteria 31; criteria 32; criteria 33; criteria 35; criteria 43 and criteria 48.

Minimum average score per Principle: 04.0 points

Minimum score per criteria: 02.0 points

Minimum overall score: 40.0 points

Maximum overall score: 55.0 points

The following criteria should have a minimum score of 4.0 points (Stage 2): criteria 1; criteria 2; criteria 10; criteria 13; criteria 15; criteria 19; criteria 20; criteria 23; criteria 27; criteria 29; criteria 31; criteria 32; criteria 33; criteria 35; criteria 43 and criteria 48.

Minimum average score per Principle: 06.0 points

Minimum score per criteria: 04.0 points

Minimum overall score: 65.0 points

Maximum overall score: 100.0 points

Minimum average score for results: 07.0 points

Note:

1. Counter balancing between Principles is NOT allowed
2. Counter balancing between criteria in the principles are limited.

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An organisation that has shown satisfactory performance on the EQUASS standard and meets all the requirements above, can be considered as an organisation that has solid and clear approaches, and systems, in place that are well understood by staff and put into daily practice in all relevant parts of the organisation.

An organisation that meets the requirements for EQUASS Assurance certification has tangible results on the core concepts of the EQUASS standard. These results are based on valid indicators that are relevant in the national context.

An organisation that is meeting the requirements for EQUASS Excellence certification has tangible results on the core concepts of the EQUASS standard. These results are based on valid indicators that are relevant in the national and international context. Results are systematically benchmarked with results of other Social Service Providers.

An organisation that does not meet all requirements above will be rewarded with the recognition: "Committed to EQUASS Assurance"

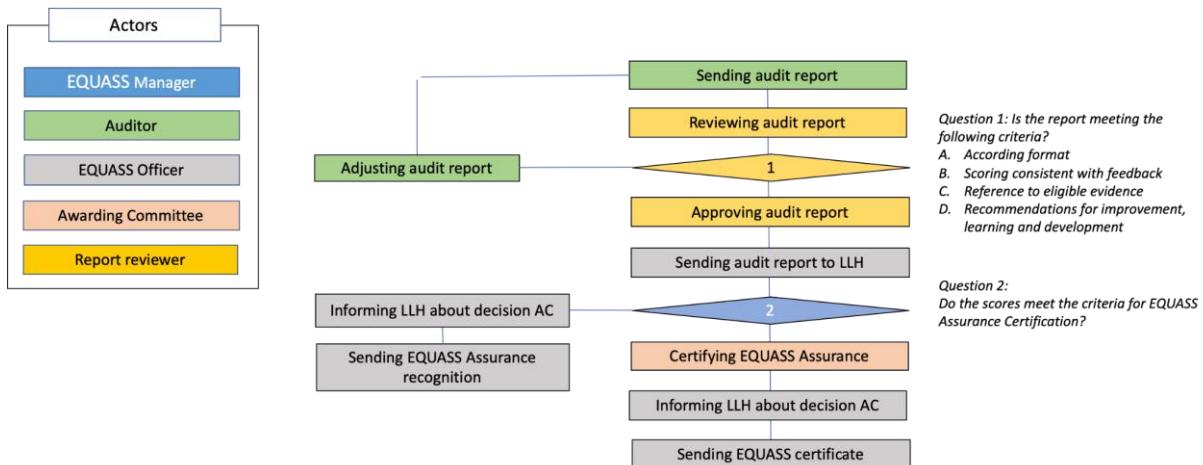


Figure 5: Process of audit report approval and EQUASS Assurance certification

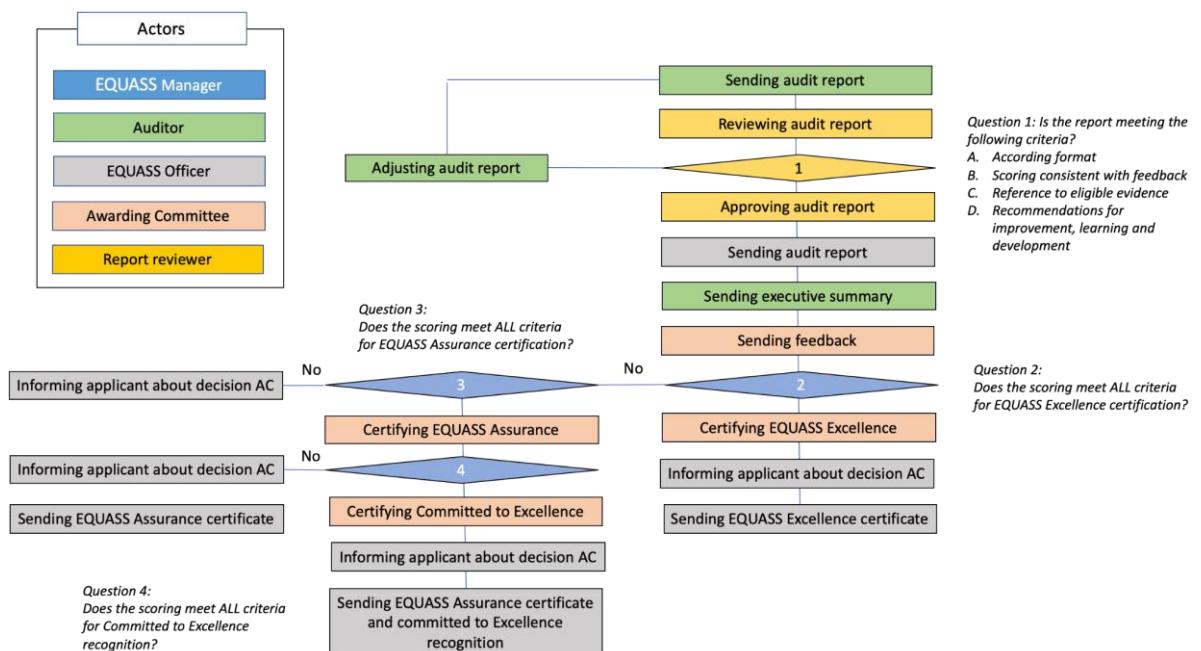


Figure 6: Process of audit report approval and EQUASS Assurance certification

Progress reports

The applicant will have the obligation to report on the progress and outcomes of the implementation of the recommendations on improvement and development and this on an annual basis (in the 12 months and 24th months after certification). This intermediary report will have to be written according to the format designed by EQUASS. The auditor will review the progress report of the certified Social Service Provider and provide feedback (recommendations and/or suggestions for improvement, learning and development). This progress report, including the feedback of the auditor, will be validated by EQUASS in Brussels and the validated report will be sent to the Social Service Provider.

Social service providers that do not send their progress report in the 12th and the 24th month after their certification date, do not fulfil the requirements for maintaining their formal EQUASS certification. In these cases, EQUASS may decide to withdraw the EQUASS certification.

Supporting documents:

1. Format EQUASS progress Report (See: Annex no 11)

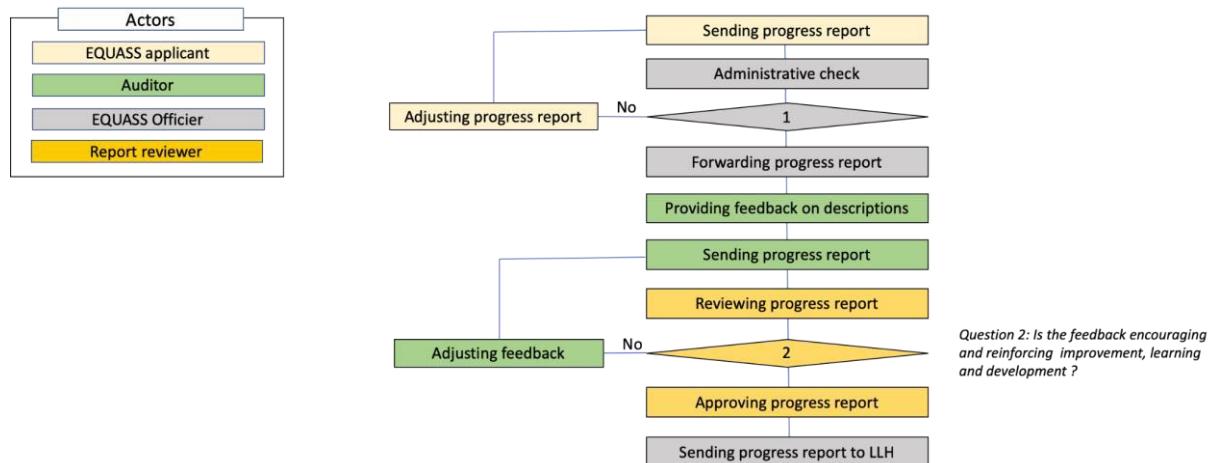


Figure 7: Process of progress report approval

Additional audit

In case the Social Service Provider does not meet the requirements for EQUASS certification, the applicant will receive a letter mention the possibility to go for an additional audit or to submit an appeal. (See: Appeal). This letter is sent by the EQUASS coordinator of the audit (Local License Holder (LLH) or EQUASS coordinator in Brussels).

An additional audit may take place if the applicant confirms that the recommendations for improvements that have been identified in the audit report are implemented within 6 months after the audit. The additional audit will be organised and carried out after receiving the applicant's report on improvements.

The applicant will provide evidence of its improvements during the additional audit. The additional audit will only assess those criteria which were not met and reported in the initial audit. The audit will follow the same procedures as a regular audit (see above) but with a limited focus on the criteria on which improvements have been made. Consequently, the duration of such an additional audit is shorter, and if visiting the site is needed to verify evidences of improvements and/or the number of days for the site visit will be determined by the EQUASS coordinator of the audit (Local License Holder (LLH) or EQUASS coordinator in Brussels).

The costs for additional verification of evidence of improvement and/or this additional site visit will be charged to the applicant.

Appeal and complaints

Appeal

In case an applicant for EQUASS certification does not agree with the conclusion that not all indicators are met, and with the related decision not to award that organisation with EQUASS certification, it can submit an appeal. The appeal must be submitted in written (letter or e-mail) by the director of the applicant or the person that signed the application within 30 days after receipt of the letter with feedback on the audit. The appeal must be written in English language. The appeal needs to be addressed to EQUASS Brussels or a Local License Holder who will pass it on to EQUASS Brussels. EQUASS Brussels has to confirm receipt of the appeal within 10 working days, and will organise a re-audit by another auditor with a large experience and high reputation. The re-audit will follow the same process and procedure of a regular audit and its result is final. The costs of this re-audit need to be borne by the applicant in case the second audit is also negative. In case of a positive re-audit, the costs will be borne by EQUASS Brussels.

Also, any interested party can dispute that a service provider deserves EQUASS certification, and this can be done as long as the EQUASS certification is valid. EQUASS Brussels will undertake an inquiry with the certified organisation, the auditor, and the LLH. Unless there are strong indications that there is an actual and clear violation of EQUASS criteria, EQUASS Brussels will rely on the work of its auditors and the reliability of its procedures, and consider such an appeal as insusceptible. In case of serious allegations and strong indications, EQUASS Brussels will organise a re-audit and potentially withdraw the certification. EQUASS Brussels will in any case send a formal reply to the complainant within 30 working days after having received the appeal, and re-assessment or further investigations should come to a conclusion in maximal 60 working days from receipt of the appeal from third parties.

Complaints

Regardless the outcome of an application process, any applicant for an EQUASS certification can submit a complaint about the auditor or the EQUASS process/procedure. The complaint must be submitted in written (letter or e-mail) by the director of the applicant or by the person that signed the application, within 30 days following the decision of the audit outcome. The complaint needs to be addressed to the EQUASS Office in Brussels or to a Local License Holder who will pass it on to EQUASS Brussels. The complaint must be written in English language.

EQUASS Brussels will confirm receipt of the complaint within 10 working days. In cases of complaints EQUASS will follow its complaint procedures, that can be summarised as follows:

- Registration of the complaint
- Investigation and discussions with all parties involved
- Proposal for a solution
- Inform all persons concerned on the solution
- Report annually on the complaint to the Awarding Committee

EQUASS Brussels will send a response to the applicant within 30 working days after receipt of the complaint.

Supporting documents:

AnneC no 12: EQUASS complaint procedure