The Impacts of EQUASS Assurance on Social Service Providers: Results from a Survey

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Executive Summary:

This report presents the results of a questionnaire-based survey administered to 381 social service providers with the objective to examine the impacts of EQUASS Assurance. The survey achieved a 51.4% response rate, and respondents belong to eight different European countries. It shows that social service providers typically implement the certification for internal reasons, and internalise EQUASS principles and practices in daily usage. EQUASS Assurance produces benefits mainly at the operational and customer levels, whereas its main pitfalls include increased workload and bureaucracy. The majority of respondents (85.2%) are very satisfied or satisfied with the certification, suggesting that it meets their expectations. Certification renewal intentions are also high but some respondents report that the final decision depends on several factors. The insights gained through the qualitative data are also described.

About the author

Nuno Melão is a lecturer at the School of Technology and Management of Viseu of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu (Portugal), where he teaches several management related subjects to undergraduate and postgraduate students. He received a PhD in Management Science from Lancaster University (UK) in 2001. His research has appeared in journals, such as the Information Systems Journal, Journal of the Operational Research Society, European Journal of Operational Research, Total Quality Management & Business Excellence, International Journal of Quality and Reliability Management, International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management and International Journal of Management and Decision Making. He has previously lectured at the Polytechnic Institute of Guarda and the Catholic University of Portugal (Viseu). He is also an investigator of the Research Centre in Management and Economics of the Catholic University of Portugal (Porto).

1. Objectives

The main objective of this research is to examine the impacts of the EQUASS Assurance certification on social service providers. In particular, the following specific objectives are defined:

- To identify the certification motives;
- To evaluate the degree to which the certification is internalized in daily usage;
- To assess the certification impacts from several perspectives, including operational, people, customer, society, and economic impacts;
- To identify the main implementation pitfalls;
- To determine the degree of satisfaction with the certification;
- To assess the intentions of certification renewal.

2. Methodology

Given the research objectives above, this study uses a cross-sectional, questionnaire-based survey methodology. The population consists of all organisations with an EQUASS Assurance certification. The source of the sample frame was the online database of EQUASS Assurance certified organisations[1] at the closing date of January 14th, 2016. This database lists all social service providers that have a valid EQUASS Assurance certificate, including information about the organisation name, country, logo, postal and website addresses, certification and expiration dates, the contact person name and email. The contact person is a representative who can provide further information about the social service provider to the EQUASS certifying body. This representative is typically a person with a managerial position (i.e. director/president/CEO, quality manager or middle manager), and, therefore, is knowledgeable with the Quality Management System (QMS). Some organisations listed in the database are certified in multiple sites and have the same contact person listed across such sites. To avoid receiving multiple replies from the same person, these multiple copies of contact persons were eliminated, leaving 381 out of a total of 415 records.

This study was preceded by a literature review, which informed the survey design. The final instrument was a self-administered, web-based questionnaire and consisted of twelve sections: organisation profile; reasons for implementation; implementation process; operational impacts; people impacts; customer impacts; society impacts; economic impacts; pitfalls; satisfaction with the certification; certification renewal; and other comments.

The questions about the implementation process were adapted from Nair and Pajogo[2] so as to determine the internalisation of EQUASS Assurance. The study of Melão et al.[3] on EQUASS certification was used to inform the questions about the reasons for implementation, impacts and pitfalls. Five questions on certification renewal were adapted from Heras-Saizarbitoria et al.[4] so as to analyse certification renewal intentions. The majority of the questions were closed-ended and their responses had a 5 point Likert scale (for the implementation process, from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree; for the reasons for implementation, impacts and pitfalls, from 1 – none to 5 – very high; for the satisfaction with the certification, from 1 – very dissatisfied to 5 – very satisfied). However, a few open-ended questions were included to complement or shed light on the responses given by participants in closed-ended questions.

The questionnaire was first drafted in Portuguese, and then translated into English by the author of this report. From this version, two English lecturers back translated into the original language and comparisons were made. Small differences were identified but they had no impact on the

meaning of the original text. The instrument was pretested with one academic and one practitioner with expertise in the study area, and small improvements were made accordingly.

The questionnaire administration was carried out in groups of countries, and was followed-up twice to increase the response rate. Also with this aim in mind, a website link to the questionnaire form was sent along with a cover letter, confidentiality assurances, an offer of a report summarising the findings, and a monetary incentive. The first group of emails was sent in late January and the last one in early March. From the 381 organisations emailed, a total of 243 responses were submitted, of which 47 were deleted for being incomplete. The final response rate was 51.4%, as can be seen from Table 1, which is higher than is often the case.

Table 1. Distribution of responses per country and response rate. Source: Own data.

Country	Valid certifications	Valid responses	Response rate (%)
Estonia	38	28	73.7
Germany	8	6	75
Italy	1	1	100
Lithuania	2	2	100
Netherlands	1	1	100
Norway	256	99	38.7
Portugal	68	53	77.9
Slovenia	7	6	85.7
Total	381	196	51.4

Quantitative data was analysed in Excel and SPSS using simple descriptive statistical techniques. Content analysis was employed to analyse qualitative data in three stages: first, all replies to a given question were read several times and an initial set of categories were defined; second, pieces of text were assigned to categories; third, the categories and assigned text were refined until they were deemed appropriate.

3. Results

3.1 Sample profile

Table 2 summarises the main features of the sample. The majority of the sample consists of medium-sized (42.3%) and small (39.3%) social service providers, followed by micro (12.8%) and large (5.6%) social service providers. They are located in eight different European countries, including Norway (50.5%), Portugal (27%), Estonia (14.3%), Slovenia (3.1%), Germany (3.1%), Lithuania (1.0%), Italy (0.5%), and Netherlands (0.5%). Most of them obtained the first EQUASS Assurance certification between 2011 and 2013 (58.2%), whereas the remainder obtained it between 2009-2010 (26.5%) and 2014-2015 (15.3%). In addition to EQUASS Assurance, some social service providers also have ISO 9001 (7.7%), DGERT (4.1%), Eco-lighthouse (2.6%), HACCP (1.5%), ISO 14001 (1%) certifications, among others. The positions of respondents are mainly Director/CEO (48.0%) and Quality Manager (40.3%). A few respondents are middle managers (8.7%) and social workers (3.1%).

Table 2. Sample features. Source: Own data.

Characteristics	Number	%
Organisation size		
Large (>250 employees)	11	5.6
Medium-sized (50-250 employees)	83	42.3
Small (10-50 employees)	77	39.3
Micro (<10 employees)	25	12.8
Year of the first EQUASS certification		
2009-2010	52	26.5
2011-2013	114	58.2
2014-2015	30	15.3
Other certifications		
ISO 9001	15	7.7
DGERT	8	4.1
Eco-lighthouse	5	2.6
HACCP	3	1.5
ISO 14001	2	1
Other	9	4.6
Position of respondents		
Director/CEO	94	48.0
Quality manager	79	40.3
Middle manager	17	8.7
Social worker	6	3.1

3.2 Reasons for implementation

Figure 1 displays the mean score for each implementation reason. According to respondents, the motives with the highest degree of importance on the organisation's decision to implement EQUASS Assurance are improvement of service quality, focus on continuous improvement and improvement of processes and practices. On the other hand, the motives respond to pressures from customers and from other stakeholders obtained the lowest mean score. Overall, the results suggest that social service providers were mainly driven by a genuine interest to improve quality and processes (i.e. internal motives) in their effort to implement the certification rather than to address market and other external pressures (i.e. external motives).
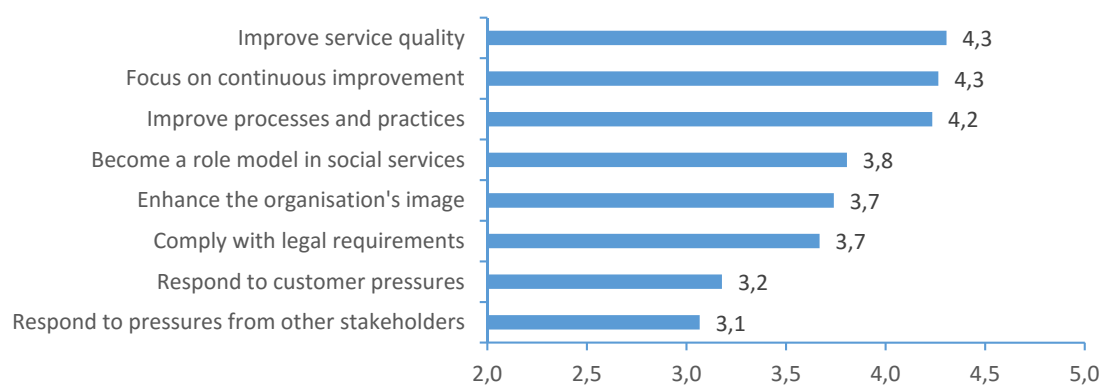

Figure 1. Reasons for implementing EQUASS Assurance (n=196). Source: Own data.

Respondents were also asked to indicate other relevant implementation reasons, and a summary of the results is shown in Table 3. Of the 33 additional reasons given, 18 are human or organisation related (internal motives), while 15 are related with social and environmental pressures (external motives).

Table 3. Other relevant implementation reasons. Source: Own data.

Reasons	Mentions
A requirement from our governmental customer	4
To strengthen the focus on quality in our organization	3
To standardize practices across different locations	2
Improve service performance	2
To innovate service delivery	2
To improve customer's quality of life	2
Other reasons	18
Total	33

3.3 Implementation process

To ascertain whether social service providers have adequately adopted EQUASS principles and practices in daily usage, the instrument included five questions about the internalisation of QMS. Figure 2 shows the mean score of agreement with the respective statements. Respondents indicate that they generally agree that their organisations internalised EQUASS principles and practices in daily usage. When compared with the other elements, the training of all employees in quality management/EQUASS, and the consistency between documented and daily practices are integrated in a more superficial way.

Figure 2. Internalisation of EQUASS Assurance in daily usage (n=196). Source: Own data.

3.4 Implementation impacts

Figure 3 displays the mean scores of certification impacts on several operational elements. The findings indicate that EQUASS Assurance has a high impact on structuring and standardizing processes, as well as on promoting internal reflection and continuous improvement. The impacts on the clarification of employee responsibilities, enhanced internal organisation, and eased

identification/analysis of service failures are also relatively high. The benefit of improved internal communication has the lowest mean score on the operational impacts category.

Figure 3. Operational impacts of EQUASSS Assurance (n=196). Source: Own data.

Figure 4 shows the mean scores of certification impacts on several employee aspects. Apart from a relatively high impact on improved employee knowledge and competencies, respondents rate the impacts on employee satisfaction, motivation, and productivity as rather moderate.
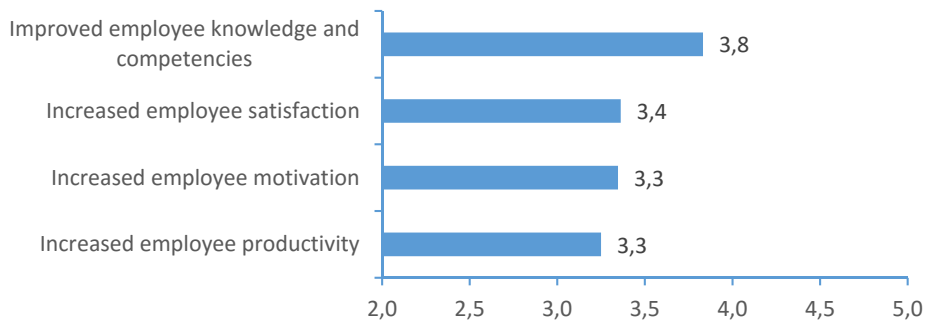

Figure 4. Employee impacts of EQUASS Assurance (n=196). Source: Own data.

The certification impacts on various customer related aspects along with their mean scores are shown in Figure 5. According to respondents, EQUASS Assurance has a high impact on dedicating greater attention to ethical and customers' rights issues and on improving service quality. This is followed by relatively high impacts on the involvement/participation of customers, improved quality of life of customers, and higher customer satisfaction. The impact on reduced number of complaints is only considered to be moderate.

Figure 5. Customer impacts of EQUASS Assurance (n=196). Source: Own data.

Figure 6 displays the mean scores of certification impacts on society related aspects. Respondents rate the impact on improved organisational image as relatively high, whereas the impacts on higher external recognition/prestige and improved trust from agencies/governmental authorities are rated in the midpoint between moderate and high. The mean score of the other aspects are slightly below the midpoint between moderate and high.
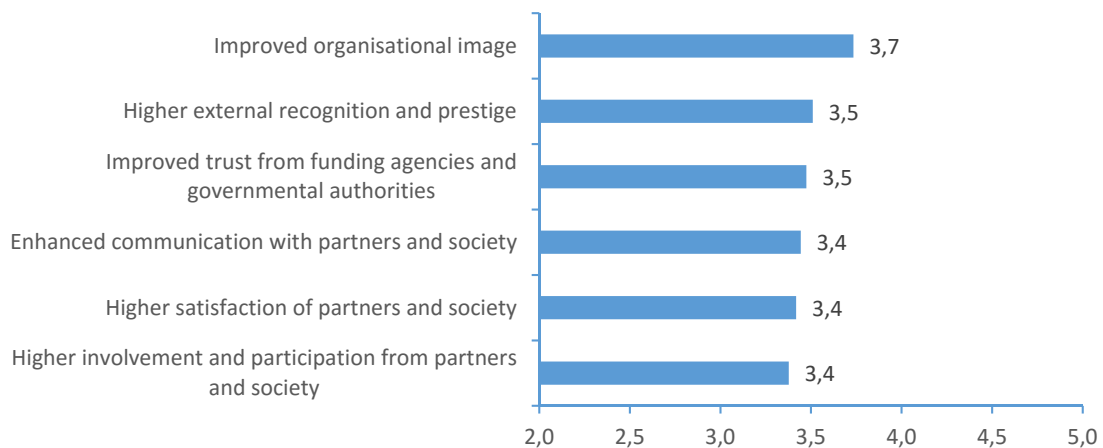

Figure 6. Society impacts of EQUASS Assurance (n=196). Source: Own data.

Figure 7 exhibits the mean scores of the economic impacts of EQUASS Assurance. Respondents score the impacts on increased customer acquisition and retention in the midpoint between low and moderate. The results also show that the impacts on increased revenues, cost reduction, and increased fundraising are low.
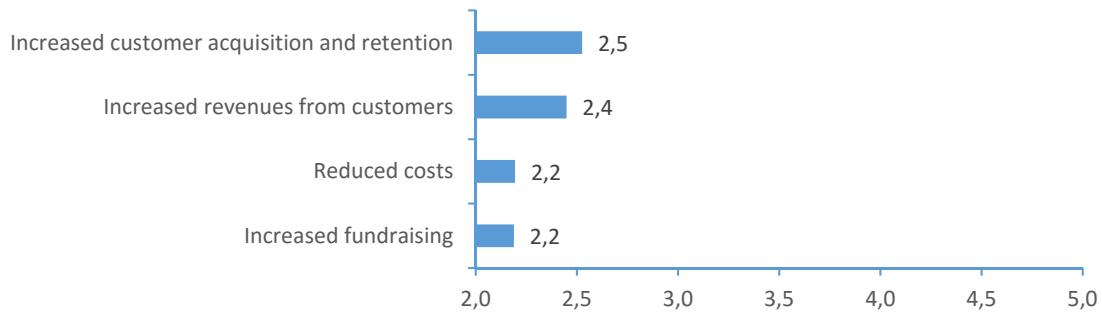
Figure 7. Economic impacts of EQUASS Assurance (n=196). Source: Own data.

If the different categories of impacts are compared by calculating their grand means, the results suggest that the implementation of EQUASS Assurance delivers relatively high benefits at the operational and customer levels, as it can be seen from Figure 8. The society and employee benefits are somewhat in the midpoint between moderate and high. On the other hand, the economic benefits are viewed as low.
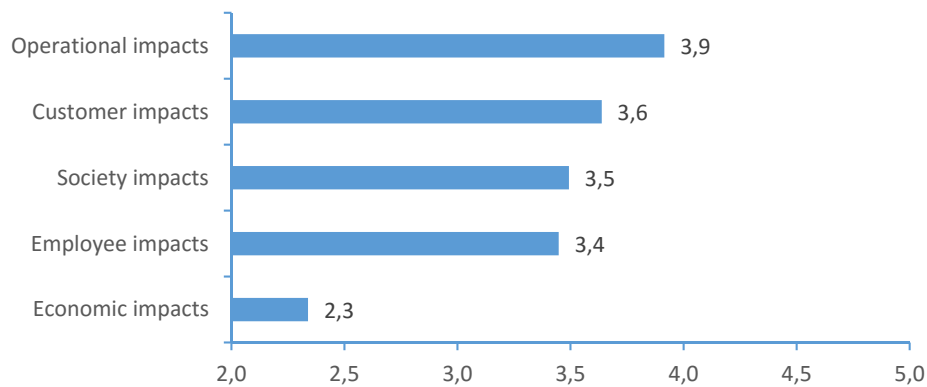

Figure 8. Comparison among categories of certification impacts (n=196). Source: Own data.

3.5 Implementation pitfalls

Figure 9 shows the mean scores of the implementation pitfalls. Respondents deem the pitfalls associated with increased top management workload and increased bureaucracy in the midpoint between moderate and high. The high costs with the initial implementation and maintenance of the certification, the higher workload of social workers, and the difficulties in defining measurable objectives are rated as rather moderate pitfalls. The lowest mean score pertains to the lack of external auditors from the social services area, which is in the midpoint between low and moderate.

Figure 9. Implementation pitfalls of EQUASS Assurance (n=196). Source: Own data.

Respondents were also asked to indicate other pitfalls than those previously listed and the results are summarised in Table 4. The number of additional pitfalls indicated by respondents was rather low, perhaps suggesting that the pitfalls previously listed already provide an ample coverage of all pitfalls potentially applicable to EQUASS Assurance. These include too many requirements for small organisations, time and cost related issues, increased staff responsibilities, lack of training and experience on quality management, and language difficulties with the standard.

Table 4. Other relevant implementation pitfalls. Source: Own data.

Pitfalls	Mentions
EQUASS is too comprehensive for small businesses	2
Considerable time taken to implement the standard	1
High training costs in quality management	1
Increased staff responsibilities	1
Lack of experience/training from management	1
Lack of internal auditors	1
The Norwegian translation of EQUASS does not cover the types of services we provide and, therefore, is difficult to understand and implement	1
The time dedicated to the aspects of certification, which sometimes have nothing to do with quality of life, is taken away from the work with users	1
Total	9

3.6 Satisfaction with the certification

Figure 10 shows the degree of satisfaction of respondents with EQUASS Assurance. 85.2% of respondents are very satisfied or satisfied, 11.2% have a neutral opinion, and only 3.6% are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.
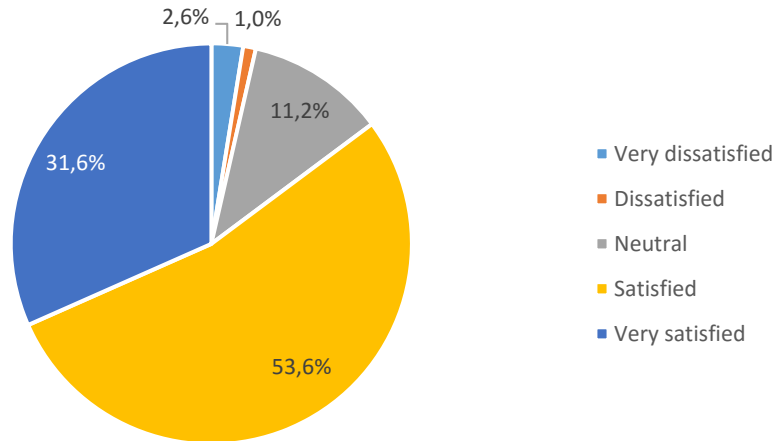
Figure 10. Degree of satisfaction with EQUASS Assurance (n=196). Source: Own data.

When asked to justify their degree of satisfaction, respondents contributed many insights, providing a rich dataset for further qualitative analysis, whose results are summarised in Table 5. Some respondents highlight and elaborate on the positive impacts mentioned earlier in section 3.4. Interestingly, the role of the certification on improving organisational learning, as well as the use of EQUASS practices as planning and management tools are also mentioned.

Other respondents comment on the increased costs as a result of the implementation and maintenance of EQUASS Assurance, increased staff workload, and bureaucracy. While these pitfalls were already identified in the preceding section, further detailed comments were provided. For instance, respondents from micro and small organisations reveal that EQUASS Assurance is too complex or has too many requirements and, accordingly, make calls for a simplified, cheaper version of the certification.

A small number of comments refer to general criticisms (e.g., no significant impacts on fundraising), improvement suggestions (e.g., the need to clarify further key concepts such as empowerment, self-determination and others), the dissatisfaction with the external auditor's work, and the lack of visibility of EQUASS Assurance.

Table 5. Reasons for the degree of satisfaction. Source: Own data.

Categories	Mentions
Benefits	27
Excessive requirements for small organisations	14
Increased costs, workload and bureaucracy	12
Criticisms and suggestions	8
Auditors and Audits	6
Low/lack of visibility of EQUASS	4
Total	71

3.7 Certification renewal

This section asked estimates about the initial implementation cost (including training, process change, consultant fees, documentation, certification, etc.) and the annual maintenance cost

(including the cost of internal and external audits) of the certification. Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics of the initial implementation cost per employee and the annual maintenance cost per employee.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of the costs of EQUASS Assurance. Source: Own data.

	Implementation cost per employee	Annual maintenance cost per employee
Mean	837.73€	292.74€
Standard deviation	1565.75€	479.04€
Minimum	2€	1€
Maximum	12500€	3846€
	(n=140)	(n=133)

The mean cost of the initial implementation is approximately 838€ per employee and the mean annual maintenance cost is nearly 293€ per employee. However, there is a considerable variation around these values. Not surprisingly, a more detailed analysis reveals that micro and small organisations support the highest mean implementation cost per employee. In addition to having a lower number of employees, they are also less likely to have human resources with the necessary expertise to implement and maintain the certification, and, thus, they may depend heavily on the assistance of external consultants, raising the implementation and maintenance costs.

This section also asked respondents about the percentages of the initial implementation cost and the annual maintenance cost that were directly funded by external entities. Figure 11 displays the histogram of the percentage of the initial implementation cost that was directly supported by a public grant, subsidy or European programme. From the 155 responses, 36 (23.2%) organisations implemented the certification with full external financial support, whereas 84 (54.2%) organisations did not obtain any kind of external direct support.
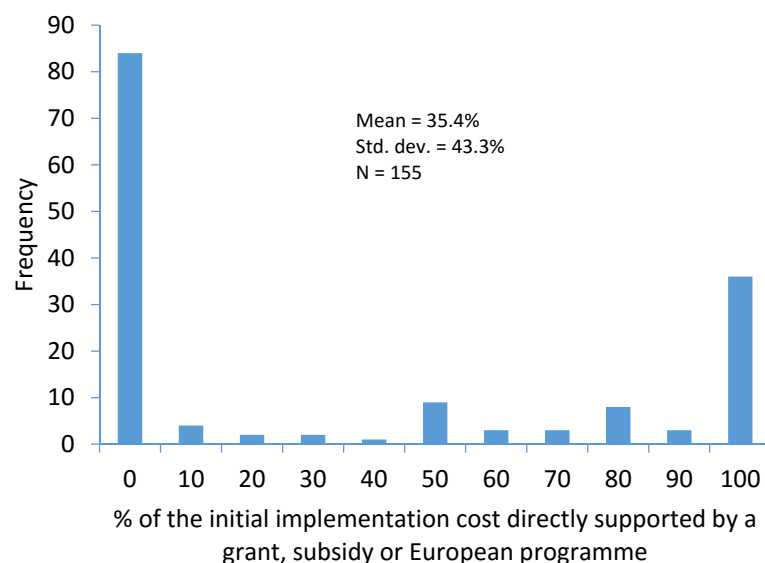

Figure 11. Histogram of the percentage of the initial implementation cost directly supported by external entities (n=155). Source: Own data.

Figure 12 depicts the histogram of the percentage of the annual maintenance cost that was directly supported by a public grant, subsidy or European programme. Clearly, the vast majority of social service providers (86.6%) does not receive any kind of external funding to cover the annual maintenance cost.

Mean = 9.9%
Std. dev. = 27.2%
N = 149

% of the annual maintenance cost directly supported by a grant, subsidy or European programme
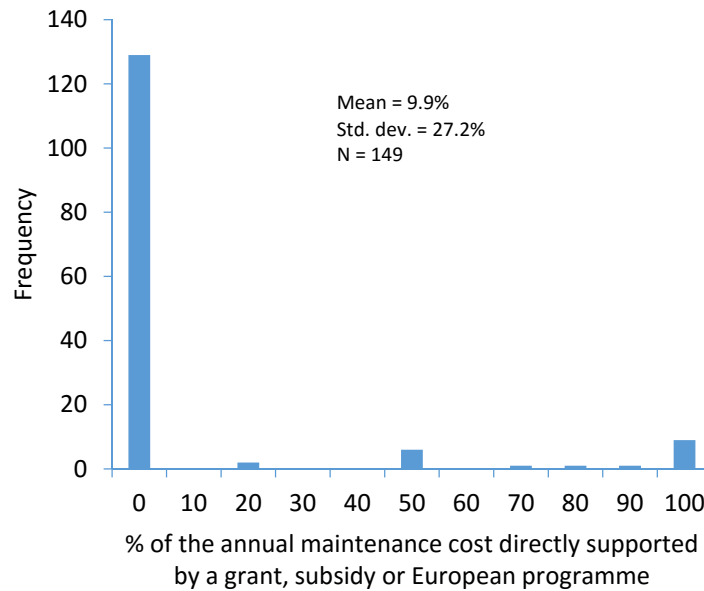
Figure 12. Histogram of the percentage of the annual maintenance cost directly supported by external entities (n=149). Source: Own data.

Another question asked respondents to provide an estimate of the certification renewal probability, whose results are presented in Figure 13. From a total of 162 responses, 133 (82.1%) respondents indicate that their organisations are likely to renew the certification (i.e. probability superior to 50%), 19 (11.7%) are undecided (i.e. probability equal to 50%), and 10 (6.2%) are unlikely to renew the certification (i.e. probability inferior to 50%).

Mean = 85.7%
Std. dev. = 23.3%
N = 162
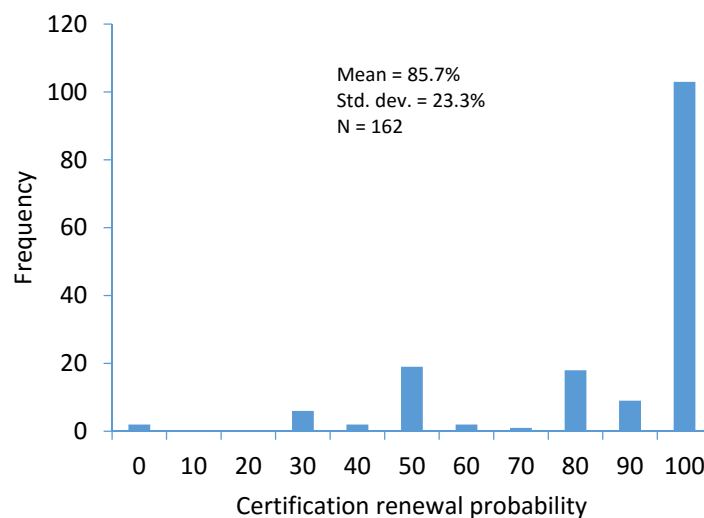
Certification renewal probability

Figure 13. Histogram of the certification renewal probability (n=162). Source: Own data.

Finally, this section requested respondents to justify their answer on the certification renewal probability. Again, the replies were very rich and insightful. To ease their interpretation, they are separated into three tables. Table 7 summarises the reasons for those organisations that are likely to renew the certification (i.e. probability superior to 50%). The highest cited reason is that it is required by governmental authorities. Other reasons are because the certification enables the organisation to continuously improve quality, it is best suited to social services, or because it is part of the organisation's philosophy, mission, strategy, among other reasons. In addition, respondents mention reasons based on several certification benefits (also included in "Other") identified in sections 3.4 and 3.6. Interestingly, they also took the opportunity to make their voices heard, emphasising once again some pitfalls (included in "Other") mentioned in sections 3.5 and 3.6.

Table 7. Reasons for organisations that are likely to renew the certification. Source: Own data.

Reasons	Mentions
It is a requirement from governmental authorities/customer	26
Keeps us in a process of continuous improvement of quality	13
EQUASS is best suited to our needs/social services	8
It is part of our philosophy/mission/strategy	8
It is important to keep the levels of knowledge acquired	7
Renewal already approved and scheduled	6
Pleased with results in quality improvement	4
Still undecided between EQUASS and ISO 9001	4
Depends on the costs/economic possibilities/management's decision	3
Renewal will be hopefully upgraded to EQUASS Excellence	3
Will renew if there is financial support	3
Because of image	2
EQUASS helps us to focus on client involvement and quality of life	2
EQUASS is an indispensable tool for daily management	2
We are considering the cost-benefit relationship	2
Other	24
Total	120

Table 8. Reasons for organisations that are undecided about certification renewal. Source: Own data.

Reasons	Mentions
We are looking for other certification possibilities	5
Renewal dependent on superior authorization	2
If does not lead to advantages, recertification certification is unlikely because costs are too high in relation to benefits	1
It depends on cost, subsidies	1
Depends on the requirements of the ministry of labour	1
We will renew if there is support from government or some project	1
It is costly and not recognized by state	1
Implementation costs are huge every time EQUASS changes their questions and seeks new answers	1
It took so much time… to put it all together	1
Total	15

Table 8 lists the reasons for organisations that are undecided whether to renew the certification (i.e. probability equal to 50%). Five respondents state that they are searching for other certification alternatives, while two respondents declare that recertification depends on authorisation from top management. The remaining reasons are cited only once and they explain that renewal is contingent on several factors, including, for example, its cost, availability of funding, cost-benefit relationship, and requirements from governmental authorities.

Table 9 reveals the reasons that respondents gave for unlikely to renew the certification. As can be seen, most reasons are related to cost or lack of funding issues, or to the low visibility of the certification.

Table 9. Reasons for organisations that are unlikely to renew. Source: Own data.

Reasons	Mentions
The decision depends on institution's policy and the motivation of key personnel	1
The weak influence of EQUASS Assurance certification in this area	1
Financial difficulties	1
There is no extra funding for QM, we see it as going concern	1
There should be a longer time between the audits to keep the costs lower	1
We are searching for a much smaller and cheaper quality system	1
Total	6

3.8 Other comments

The final question asked respondents to add other comments not previously mentioned. Table 10 shows the themes that emerged from the content analysis. As can be seen, no novel insights emerged on this stance. Nevertheless, it reinforces the importance that these themes have for some respondents.

Table 10. Other comments. Source: Own data.

Categories	Mentions
Benefits	5
Excessive requirements for small organisations	5
Increased costs	1
Lack of visibility of EQUASS	1
Recertification is too often	1
Other	2
Total	15

4. Summary and conclusions

Social service providers implement EQUASS Assurance for various reasons, but the results indicate that they are mostly motivated by internal reasons rather than external ones. This is consistent with other research[3,5].

Respondents largely agree that social service providers have internalised EQUASS principles and practices in daily usage, although some elements have been more superficially internalised than

others (notably, the training of all employees and consistency between daily practices and documented policies and procedures).

EQUASS Assurance generates benefits mainly at the operational (i.e. more systematic and standardised processes, and promotion of internal reflection and continuous improvement) and customer (greater attention to ethical and customer rights' issues, improved service quality) levels. This finding is in accordance with previous studies on EQUASS[3] and ISO 9001[5].

Respondents consider the economic impacts of EQUASS Assurance to be low. The study of the effects of the implementation of QMS on the economic performance of social service providers remains largely an unchartered territory. In the wider literature, the empirical results are mixed, suggesting that the effects of QMS on economic benefits are weaker than operational benefits and not always significant[6].

Increased workload and bureaucracy are two important implementation pitfalls for social service providers. Surprisingly, respondents perceive the high costs associated with the implementation and maintenance of the certification as rather modest pitfalls. This may be because the majority of social service providers received some kind of financial aid to implement the standard, as well as because EQUASS Assurance is a requirement in some countries (notably, in Norway). Respondents identify other relevant pitfalls, including too many requirements for small and micro organisations, long implementation time, short time interval between certification renewals, and lack of visibility of EQUASS. With the exception of the latter two, these are implementation pitfalls also found in the context of other QMS like ISO 9001[5,7].

Approximately 85% of respondents are very satisfied or satisfied with EQUASS Assurance, which suggests that the certification largely met their expectations of process, quality and continuous improvement. However, several respondents also identify some issues/difficulties that need to be addressed, some of which are specific to EQUASS Assurance.

Micro and small social service providers incur the highest initial implementation cost and annual maintenance cost per employee. Not surprisingly, various respondents commented on this, making calls for a simplified, less expensive version of EQUASS Assurance. Indeed, this may be a sensible option, especially if one considers that more than half of this sample refers to these type of organisations, that social service providers often operate in resource constrained environments, and that the availability of financial assistance (notably, through the European Social Fund) may has been an enabling factor for implementing EQUASS Assurance in the first place.

Around 82% (n=162) of respondents indicate that their organisation is likely to renew EQUASS Assurance. This figure should be interpreted with some caution, though, since 17.3% (n=196) are non-respondents and because the final renewal decision depends, as respondents pointed out, on the availability of funding, government requirements, and other factors. It is also clear from this study that many social service providers incorporated successfully EQUASS Assurance in their daily work, gained significant benefits, and, consequently, remain loyal users. Like any other QMS, EQUASS Assurance should be seen as a tool for continuous improvement rather than merely a vehicle for securing funds.

One limitation of this empirical study is that it reports mainly the perspectives of top management and quality managers. In order to obtain a fuller picture of the impacts of EQUASS Assurance on social service providers it would be important to study the perspectives of other employees, customers and other stakeholders.

Acknowledgement

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