


PROCEDURES FOR EQUASS EXCELLENCE CERTIFICATION



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Introduction

EQUASS Excellence is awarded to any service provider that can demonstrate achievements and continuous improvement against the Voluntary European Quality Framework for Social Services from three different perspectives: approach, deployment and results.

EQUASS Excellence is a second level and more demanding than EQUASS Assurance, but based on the same [10 Principles for Quality and their 50 criteria](#).

The major differences with EQUASS Assurance are following:

EQUASS Excellence is *non-prescriptive*, which means that applicants have to explain and describe how they comply with each criterion.

The auditors use a *scoring system* to assess how well applicants comply with each criterion (so it is not just 'yes' or 'no').

EQUASS Excellence has a more *international orientation* which means that the working language is English, the audit team consists of two auditors of which at least one is from another country than the applicant, and the entire application/audit process is operated by the EQUASS Unit in Brussels.

The EQUASS Excellence certification process is also based on a self-evaluation by the applicant, followed by an external on-site audit to verify the reliability of the evidence referred to in the self-evaluation report (including the annexes). The audit will also evaluate in what way the applicant implements continuous improvement.

To apply for an EQUASS Excellence audit, the organisation must be a social service provider that provides the service to persons. It can be a public institution, a not-for profit service provider, a charitable foundation or a commercial organisation, as long as the mission and core activities are in line with the provision of social services or a social purpose as explained above.

The scope for the EQUASS Excellence application can be the entire organisation as well a department or a number of social services. The scope needs to be clearly defined in the application and will also be mentioned on the certificate.

1. Registration for EQUASS Excellence

The process begins when the applicant fills in the registration form and sends it to the EQUASS Secretariat.

The EQUASS secretariat acknowledges receipt of the registration form and presents the applicant with a contract, and a set of application documents:

- Application Form
- Self-evaluation report format
- The criteria for EQUASS Excellence certification.

The Customer is also directed to a series of documents for their information:

- [The rights and duties of the EQUASS Customers](#)
- [Complaints](#) procedure and [Appeal procedures](#):

The price of the EQUASS certification process is established based on the standard rates and guidelines found in the pricing document.

• Selection of the Auditors - Roles and responsibilities

An international team of auditors which carries out the audit, is selected by the EQUASS Secretariat. The EQUASS Secretariat supports the team of auditors.

The international team of auditors is composed of two qualified auditors:

- One auditor is a qualified lead auditor. He/she is trained in the EQUASS approach of quality and in how to understand the Principles for Quality and the criteria for EQUASS Excellence certification. He/she is an expert in audit methods and has at least 2 experiences in doing audits in the framework of the EQUASS Excellence in Social Services. The lead auditor is responsible for all phases of the audit including the process of processing the audit report.
- The co-auditor is an expert in audit methods as well. He/she is full member of the auditor team and facilitates the interfaces between the applicant and the lead auditor. The co-auditor is also trained in the EQUASS approach on quality and in how to understand the Principles for Quality and the criteria for EQUASS Excellence. The co-auditor will NOT have the same nationality as the lead auditor.

• Contracting

The EQUASS Secretariat drafts and signs a contract between EQUASS and the applicant.

2. Application for EQUASS Excellence audit

The applicant must send the following documents to the EQUASS Secretariat **at least 6 weeks** (30 working days) before the intended audit date:

1. The completed EQUASS Excellence Application form and all its annexes and attachments (see below)
2. The completed EQUASS Excellence Self-evaluation report

Annexes:

- A. Overview of all sites involved in Multiple Site application
- B. List of professional functions of the full scope of staff (max 2 x A4)
- C. Quality Management System of the organisation (max 2 x A4)
- D. Vision and Mission Statement (max 1 x A4)
- E. Applicant's history overview (max 2 x A4)
- F. Organisational functional structure and an organisational chart (max 1 x A4)
- G. Executive summary of Current Strategic Plan (max 2 x A4)
- H. Evidence of internal and external programme approval by national authority
- I. Summary record of outcomes and results obtained in the past year
- J. List of staff qualifications
- K. Overview of results (Annexes on performance on the KPIs).

The EQUASS Secretariat will check if the dossier is complete and the documentation complies with what is expected.

3. Preparation of the Audit

- **Preparing the site visit**

A site visit will be carried out if the total score of the consensus scores are 40 points or more. If the score is below 40 points a written feedback report based on the provided information will be given to the applicant. This feedback report will be written by the lead auditor and it contains the results of desk scoring for each criterion for EQUASS Excellence and recommendations for improvements.

If the scoring is 40 points or more the auditors elaborate an audit plan and a site visit programme. This plan takes into account:

- Dates and time needed for collective and individual meetings of the site visit
- Date and time to review the documentation
- Time for the feedback of the site visit to the applicant and its staff
- Time to do the synthesis

The standard number of days for a site visit (single site) is two days.

Large organisations (> 250 FTE Staff) and multi-site organisations (> 1 site) will require more days for a site visit. If more sites are included in the scope of the self-evaluation, additional days for site visit will be added to the standard number of days for a site visit. The number additional days for site visit will be determined according the following scheme:

- The services included in the scope of the audit have **more than 250 staff**.
 - 251 – 500 FTE¹ staff → 1 extra audit day
 - More than 500 FTE staff → 2 extra days (4 audit days in total)

Number of sites	Total number of audit days	Number of sites to be visited
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

¹ Full Time Equivalentents

The number of sites in a multi-site application is determined by the travel time for auditors to visit the sites. If the travel distance between sites is more than 30 minutes the site will be identified as additional site. The maximum number of sites, included in an EQUASS Excellence application, is 10 sites.

The sites to be visited will be appointed by the auditors.

The auditors will agree on a proposal for the planning and the programme of the site visit to the applicant *at least 2 weeks* (10 working days) before the proposed and agreed dates of the site visit. The planning and the programme must be agreed by the applicant and communicated to the EQUASS Excellence auditors and staff of the applicant’s organisation. A copy of the agreed programme will be sent to the EQUASS secretariat. The auditors will use the site visit preparation form for communicating the planned site visit. The auditors will meet a number of staff, person served and other relevant stakeholders who belong to the scope of the audit. A meeting with the Chief Executive Officer is mandatory and must take place at the end of the site visit.

The site visit plan should be flexible and permit changes based on collected information during the site visit.

Steps for preparing the site visit	Lead auditor	Co-auditor	EQUASS Secretariat	Applicant
Defining the time schedule	X	X		
Defining role and responsibilities of the Auditors			X	
Contacting the applicant to confirm the programme	X			X
Preparing the site visit (Filling in the Site Visit Preparation Form)	X			X

• **Scoring system**

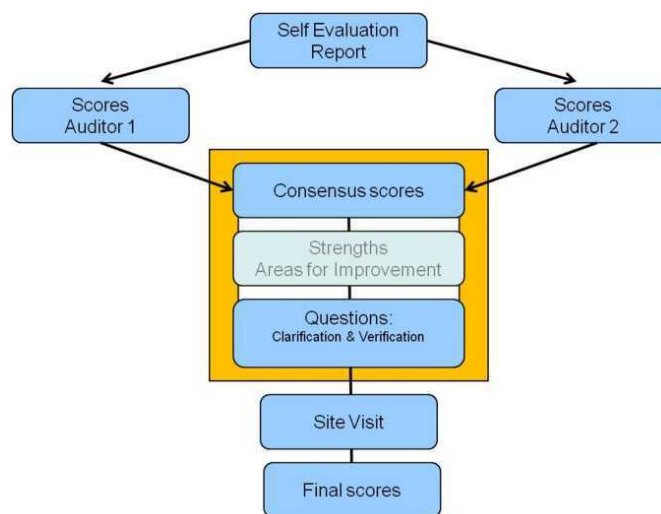
The scoring of the EQUASS Excellence refers to the content of EQUASS Excellence Self-evaluation report.

The following four steps will make the scoring of the EQUASS Excellence:

- Individual desk scoring of the Self-evaluation report by the auditors
- Consensus scoring by two auditors

- Identification of strengths and areas for improvement for each Principle for Quality
- Preparing the site visit: Identifying priority topics for the site visit (See: site visit preparation form).

The process of scoring is expressed in the figure hereafter:



The auditors will receive a digital copy of the applicant’s EQUASS Excellence Self-evaluation report. The EQUASS Auditors will complete the desk scoring individually. This desk scoring is based on the information provided in the EQUASS Excellence Self-evaluation report. The desk scoring is carried out from the perspectives of: approach, deployment and results.

The scoring for each criterion may be 0 points, 2 points, 4 points, 6 points, 8 points or 10 points. For each score a description of performance is given in the Guidelines for scoring.

The auditor will use the 6-point-score as a point of reference. This means that the results of the self-evaluation of the applicant will be reviewed with the 6 points-score as reference. While reading the text written in the self-evaluation form the auditor may decide if the score will be above or below 6 points.

Each auditor will also identify the strengths and the areas for improvement in meeting each criterion for Excellence.

If an essential element of the core business is not fully integrated in the Quality Programme of the applicant, it is up to the EQUASS Excellence auditors to decide if this might be a great risk for business management. If that’s the case, the score of a Principle for Quality cannot exceed 5,0 points.

Compensation of score is **NOT** allowed between the scores of the Principles for Quality. Compensation of scores is allowed between the criteria of a Principle for Quality if the applicant meets the requirements mentioned above. Compensation is limited between Approach, Deployment and Results for a Principle for Quality.



4. The Audit

- **Consensus meeting**

After the individual desk scoring, the lead auditor will contact the co-auditor to organise a consensus meeting. The consensus meeting is a one-day meeting in which the two auditors will meet face to face. The lead auditor also collects the individual desks scores and the identified strengths and areas for improvement from the co-auditor.

During the consensus meeting:

Consensus scores will be drawn up.

The consensus scores are determined by applying the guidelines below:

- If the difference between an individual desk score is 2 points or less: the mean (mathematic average) of the individual scores will be identified and will be determined as consensus score.
- If the difference between the individual scoring is more than 2 points: a consensus score has to be discusses and determined. The argument for the consensus score will be administrated in an internal report.

Priority issues for the site visit will be identified:

The priority issues are identified as strengths and areas for improvement. Strengths must be confirmed by evidence-based information. Areas for improvement may be confirmed through presentation of documents and meetings with staff, person served and other stakeholders of the applicant during the site visit.

For the identification of strengths the flowing checklist must be kept in mind:

- Is there a systematic approach?
- Are procedures and / or processes identified?
- Are procedures and / or processes administrated (documented)?
- Are person served, staff and relevant stakeholders identified and involved?
- Has the service provider identified relevant Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
- Are there concrete results (quantified / qualified) for the KPIs?
- Does the organisation identify 3 years trends / tendencies?
- Is there a system of review (Continuous Improvement)?
- Is there a systematic approach on benchmarking?

The results of the consensus meeting will be:

- A consensus scores for each criteria from the perspectives: Approach, Deployment and Results.
- A consensus scores for each Principle for Quality.
- A provisional final score for the approach, deployment and results for EQUASS Excellence (This provisional final score will be used as frame of reference for carrying out the site visit).
- A list of documented arguments on which consensus scores have been determined.
- A filled in site visit preparation form in which priority issues for the site visit have been identified.

- **Site visit**

During the site visit five steps are scheduled:

A. The opening meeting

The purpose of the opening meeting is to:

- Introduce the EQUASS Excellence auditors' team to the applicant.
- Review the scope and the objectives of the audit.
- Provide a short summary of the methods and procedures to be used to conduct the audit.
- To establish the official communication links between the EQUASS Excellence auditors' team and the applicant.
- To confirm that the resources and facilities needed by the EQUASS Excellence auditors' team are available.
- To confirm the time schedule for the site visit.
- To clarify answers and possible unclear areas.

B. Management and quality system of the applicant organisation

It is important to understand how quality management is organised and carried out by the applicant, what kind of structure is implemented and how quality activities are deployed in the organisation. These different aspects will give a good overview of how the concept of continuous improvement is disseminated in the organisation. The staff member who is responsible for Quality Management and the auditors meet to clarify and verify the quality management structure of the organisation. If the applicant has been recognised and certified by national and/or international body for Quality accreditation, this part of the audit will be minimised in time so the auditors will have the opportunity to verify the scoring of the Self-evaluation report.

C. Assessing strengths and areas for improvement

The EQUASS Excellence auditors have identified strengths and areas for improvement while the preparing the site visit. These strengths and areas for improvement have to be confirmed through interviews with staff, person served and other stakeholders, examination of documents and observations of activities in the areas of concern.

D. Gathering evidence

The EQUASS Excellence auditors will collect evidence for verification through interviews, examination of documents and observation of activities and conditions in the areas of concern. Acquiring the same information from other independent sources, such as physical observation, measurements and records, should test information gathered through interviews.

All site visit observations must be documented. After all the needed activities have been executed, the auditors must review their observations in order to prepare the feedback. The auditors must ensure that the strengths and the areas for improvement are documented in a clear, concise manner and are supported by evidence for each Principle for Quality. The applicant acknowledges all these observations before the verbal feedback.

The auditors will then jointly prepare the verbal feedback to provide to the applicant, in anticipation of the closing meeting.

E. The closing meeting

At the end of the site visit, prior to the audit report, the EQUASS Excellence auditors' team will hold a meeting with the relevant staff of the applicant in the scope of the audit. The purpose of this meeting is to present the site visit observations in such a manner as to ensure that they have clearly understood the results of the audit. The EQUASS Excellence auditors' team presents observations, non-compliance taking into account their perceived significance. They will NOT communicate the findings of the site visit and final result of the audit.

Steps during the site visit	Lead Auditor	Co-Auditor	Applicant (Quality Officer)	Director of the applicant
A. Opening meeting	X	X	X	X
B. Understanding management and quality system	X	X	X	X
C. Verification of strengths and areas for	X	X		

improvement				
D. Gathering evidence & Preparing verbal feedback	X	X		
E. Closing meeting	X	X	X	X

- **Reviewing the site visit and final scoring**

After the site visit the EQUASS Excellence auditors will review the consensus scores for each criterion and the identified strengths and areas for improvement. Based on the information and evidence collected at the site, the results for each Principle for Quality may be adapted in accordance to the findings. The auditors will calculate the final score for each Principle for Quality.

The EQUASS Excellence auditors must keep in mind the *Guidelines for Scoring*, also partially set out in the present document in §4. Preparation of the Audit / Section: *Scoring System*.

For scores lower than the threshold described above, please refer to §7. Awarding EQUASS Excellence



5. Reporting

• Audit Report

The EQUASS Excellence lead auditor prepares and writes the audit report. Both auditors must agree on the content of this audit report. The lead auditor is responsible for its accuracy and completeness. The audit findings will be reported in accordance with a standardised format (Audit Report) and sent to the EQUASS Secretariat. The EQUASS Key Expert will review the report and will approve the content of the report for further communication. The EQUASS Secretariat communicates the content of the report to the applicant and the EQUASS Awarding Committee. The report contains the following items divided into 3 parts:

Objectives

- The scope and objectives of the audit, the organisation assessed with some figures (activities, employees, persons served and other relevant stakeholders ...)

The Audit

- The audit plan, the identification of the persons (functions) met and a list of documentation reviewed
- A list of strengths and areas for improvement for each Principle of Excellence
- A sheet with an overview of the final scoring
- EQUASS Excellence profile on performance (spider diagram)

Conclusions

- Conclusions of the EQUASS Excellence auditors
- General comments
- Encouraging remarks

The audit report must be sent to the EQUASS Secretariat within **5 working days** after the site visit took place. The EQUASS Secretariat will report to the applicant and will send a summary of the report to the members of the EQUASS Awarding Committee.

Steps of generating the audit report	Lead Auditor	Co-auditor	EQUASS Secretariat
1. Determination of the content of the report	X	X	
2. Writing the audit report	X		
3. Distributing the audit report to the applicant			X
4. Executive summary for members of EQUASS Awarding Committee			X
5. Distribution to the EQUASS Awarding Committee			X



6. Awarding EQUASS Excellence

- **Awarding Committee decision**

The EQUASS Awarding Committee is composed of key European stakeholders in the sector such as service users, social partners, service providers, policymakers and funders.

As of 2012, the Committee is composed of the following representatives:

1. Council of Europe
2. Employer's Forum on Disability
3. European Association of Service Providers for People with Disabilities
4. European Disability Forum
5. European Network of Social Authorities
6. European Platform for Rehabilitation
7. European Social Insurance Platform
8. European Federation of Older People
9. RI Europe (Rehabilitation International - Europe)

The EQUASS Secretariat compiles a summary document that is sent to the member of the Awarding Committee.

The Committee meets at least twice per year, and a quorum of 4 out of 9 representatives is required to reach a quorum. The EQUASS Secretariat may decide to send the executive summary and letter by e-mail, and request a decision to be taken before the next meeting. For email-based Awarding, consensus must be reached on the same basis as for the face-to-face Awarding Committee meetings

- **Awarding of the EQUASS Excellence Mark**

To be awarded the EQUASS Excellence Quality mark without further argument, an applicant must meet the following criteria:

- The final score must be 65.0 points or more.
- The score for each of the 10 Principles for Quality must be 6.0 points or more.
- The minimum overall score for approach, deployment and results must be 55.0 points for each perspective.

For those applicants whose score is set *between 63.0 and 65.0 points*, the EQUASS Awarding Committee will apply four additional criteria for awarding the Excellence in Social Services.

The criteria will be collected by the auditors during the original audit, and will apply to:

- Proven positive results of review by person served of individual approach (Person centred approach)
- Proven positive results and positive satisfaction of persons served as active participants in service planning, in the management of the service, in the evaluation of quality. (Participation)
- Proven evidence of improvement of quality of life of person served (Comprehensiveness)
- Proven positive results of satisfaction and benefits for person served and other stakeholders (Result orientation)

The Awarding Committee may require further documentation from the applicant, to be provided within 4 weeks, in order to make a decision to award or decline the award of the EQUASS Excellence Quality Mark to the applicant.

• **Awarding of “Stairway to Excellence” recognition**

For the Applicants whose total score **is comprised between 55 and 65 and who respond to the minimum scores set below**, the Committee has the possibility to Award a Recognition called “Stairway to Excellence”

	Approach	Deployment	Results	Minimum score per principle:
Leadership				5,0
Staff				5,0
Rights				5,0
Ethics				5,0
Partnership				5,0
Participation				5,0
Person Centred Approach				5,0
Comprehensiveness				5,0
Result orientation				5,0
Continuous Improvement				5,0
Minimum	Minimum Approach score: 55,0	Minimum Deployment score: 50,0	Minimum Results score: 40,0	Total Overall Score: between 55,0 and 65,0

Stairway to Excellence is *not an EQUASS certification level within EQUASS, but a formal recognition* of efforts done and partial results achieved on the way to Excellence. This temporary recognition is given to organisations that have applied for EQUASS Excellence, but they do not meet all EQUASS Excellence requirements yet.

The Stairway to Excellence recognises the service providers that have a promising approach in meeting the EQUASS Excellence criteria, but have not had enough time to deploy these approaches successfully and therefore cannot show 3 years trends in results and the beginning of systematic bench marking.

The recognition Stairway to Excellence is given once to an EQUASS Excellence applicant. The applicant may **not** use the EQUASS logo or EQUASS Excellence Quality Mark on their website, letterhead or correspondence during the time of its recognition for *Stairway to Excellence*, or otherwise mislead its clients and partners into believing that it was awarded with EQUASS Excellence.

The recognition is only available once to the organisations that comply with **the following requirements:**

- The social service provider meets *all criteria for EQUASS Assurance certification*
- The social service provider is applying for EQUASS Excellence *for the first time*.
- The applicant shall provide a *plan for implementing improvements* based on the recommendation given in the audit report.

This recognition has a **validity of 18 months**, during which the Applicant shall make the necessary improvements, and submit itself to a new paying audit.

As result of meeting the criteria for Stairway to Excellence as described above, the applicant will receive:

- *EQUASS Assurance certification (valid for 2 years)*
- *The recognition 'Stairway to Excellence (valid for 18 months)*

The applicant may prepare a new attempt to apply for EQUASS Excellence. The application for EQUASS Excellence within the next 18 months will be for a full EQUASS Excellence audit.

- **Dispatch of a certificate**

When a positive award decision is reached, the EQUASS Secretariat shall inform the applicant of its success and dispatch a certificate by post within the 10 working days that follow the awarding day.

If the Key expert of the Secretariat is satisfied with the quality of the audit report, a sample of that report is sent by e-mail to the successful applicant within 10 working days of the production of a satisfying Audit Report.

If the quality of the report is not satisfying, the EQUASS Secretariat asks the Lead Auditor to improve on the report, and the successful edition of the report is sent to the applicant within 10 working days after the lead auditor has corrected the new version.

The successful applicant receives the following package:

- An awarding letter with a printed annex: "Policy governing the use of the EQUASS Quality marks"

- Two printed A3 copies of the certificate per site audited

A USB containing:

- The .PDF version of the certificate

- A set of image documents with the quality mark to be used by the applicant, and the

EQUASS Graphical Charter (A graphic guideline explaining the instructions for use of the Quality marks).

- Policy use of logo and quality marks

- Rights and Duties of the EQUASS Customers

- Audit evaluation form (An evaluation form, to return to the EQUASS Secretariat)

The successful applicants will also find that some of their information (see §17) will be used in EQUASS Secretariat promotional material, on the EQUASS website, in a list of awarded organisations that is updated on a regular basis, and in its communications material, both online and its paper materials.

• **Unsuccessful EQUASS Excellence audit**

The applicants that do not meet the EQUASS Excellence criteria, and do not meet the standards for the Stairway to Excellence recognition, will receive a letter informing them of the failure of their application, within ten working days of the production of a satisfying Audit Report.

They shall also receive the evaluation form allowing them to register their feedback, and a copy of their Audit report, with the improvement suggestions.

The applicants that are not successful in their audit are not displayed on the EQUASS website and communication materials.

• **The right to appeal / complain**

The EQUASS Customers have the right to appeal the content of the Audit report, and they have the right to complain about various aspects of EQUASS, at various stages of their interaction with EQUASS and its representatives.

Complaints Procedure

Regardless the outcome of an application process, any applicant for 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 the person that signed the application within 30 days after receipt of the letter with feedback on the audit. The complaint needs to be addressed to the EQUASS Secretariat.

The EQUASS Secretariat has to confirm receipt of the complaint within 10 working days, and will submit the complaint for discussion to the Awarding Committee. In case of a complaint about an auditor, the EQUASS Secretariat will first seek explanation from the auditor, and adds this information to the complaint that is passed on to the Awarding Committee. The EQUASS Secretariat will send a response to the applicant within 30 working days after receipt of the complaint.

The procedures for complaints are described in detail in the [EQUASS complaints procedure](#).

Appeal Procedure

In case an applicant for EQUASS Excellence does not agree with the decision for certification with EQUASS Excellence, it can submit 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 needs to be addressed to the EQUASS Secretariat.

The EQUASS Secretariat has to confirm receipt of the appeal within 10 working days, and will organise a re-audit by another auditor team. 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.

The procedures for appeal are described in detail in the [EQUASS appeal procedure](#).

Rights and duties of the EQUASS Customers

Another comprehensive document about the relationship between EQUASS customers and the EQUASS Unit is the document titled: [Rights and duties of the EQUASS Customers](#). The document sets out mutual expectations of EQUASS customers and the EQUASS Unit in Brussels (EQUASS Europe) in the context of the EQUASS Certification process.

- **Documentation Filing**

The following documents will be filed in electronically form by the EQUASS Secretariat, and will be kept confidential:

Application Form (including the Annexes)

Self-evaluation report format (including the Annexes)

Site Visit Preparation Form

Audit Report

Executive Summary

Scoring Book

Applicant Contract

Auditor Contract

Code of Ethics

Communication with the Auditors: Individual desk scores of auditors, results of consensus meeting: consensus scores and arguments for decisions

Detailed Minutes of the Awarding Committee decisions / meeting.

The Application authorises the EQUASS Secretariat to use the information found in the Application for dissemination purposes, as well as the general scores and spider graph found in the Executive Summary of EQUASS Excellence applicant.

