

EQUASS Assurance Certification: The View of Pioneer Adopters

Melão, Nuno¹⁾, Amorim, Marlene²⁾, Marimon, Frederic³⁾ and Alegre, Inés³⁾

¹⁾ School of Management and Technology of Viseu and CEGE, Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, Viseu, Portugal,
email: nmelao@estgv.ipv.pt

²⁾ Department of Economics, Management, Industrial Engineering and Tourism, University of Aveiro, Aveiro,
Portugal, email: mamorim@ua.pt

³⁾ Department of Economy and Business Organization, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, Barcelona,
Spain, email: fmarimon@uic.es, ialgre@uic.es

ABSTRACT

Purpose – The paper examines from a practitioner’s perspective the European Quality in Social Services (EQUASS) Assurance standard, a certification programme for European social service organisations to implement a sector-specific Quality Management System. In particular, it analyses the adoption motives, the internalisation of the standard, the impacts, the satisfaction and the renew intentions.

Design/methodology/approach – This study uses a cross-sectional, questionnaire-based survey methodology. From the 381 organisations emailed, 196 responses coming from eight different European countries were considered valid (51.4%). Data from closed-ended questions were analysed using simple descriptive statistical techniques. Content analysis was employed to analyse practitioner’s comments to open-ended questions.

Findings – 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.

Practical implications – It can be helpful to managers, consultants and Local License Holders working (or planning to work) with this standard. It can inform the work of the EQUASS Technical Working Group in the forthcoming revision of the standard.

Originality/value – This is the largest survey conducted so far about EQUASS Assurance in terms of number of respondents, participating countries and topics covered.

Keywords: EQUASS Assurance, Quality Management System, Social Services.

Paper type: Research paper

INTRODUCTION

The ISO 9000 Quality Management (QM) standard was published in 1987 and since then, different modifications have been released. The diffusion of the standard among different countries and activity sectors vouched for its efficiency (Llach et al., 2011; Marimon et al., 2006 and 2009). Although it is applicable to any kind of organization, regardless it is focused in the manufacturing of a product or in providing a service, each actualization of the standard has added more focus on customer needs and at the same time, it is more suitable to both, manufacturing and service organizations.

Currently, the latest available version was released in 2015. The scope of the standard has not changed. However, the structure and core terms were modified to allow easy integration with other international management systems standards. It also brings many challenges for implementation, transition, and maintenance, as enhancement of the process approach and PDCA cycle, decentralization of the system and spread of responsibilities for the QM standard throughout the organization, greater involvement of the top management in the QM standard, introduction of risk-based thinking in the QM standard and higher emphasis on performance monitoring.

Nevertheless, there is an awareness of the need for a specific standard for the service sector. In this vein, the European Quality in Social Services (EQUASS) is an initiative of the European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR) that is concerned about to tailor a specific QM standard for social services organizations (SSO). Thus, EQUASS is a quality assessment system developed as a sector-specific approach (Melão et al., 2016) and “aims to enhance the personal services sector by engaging service providers in quality, continuous improvement and by guaranteeing quality of services to service-users throughout Europe” (EQUASS, 2016a).

The latest version of EQUASS was published in 2012, and as of April 2015 there were more than 650 certified organizations in Europe (Melão et al., 2016). These authors are pioneering the research in this standard, providing a case study of four SSO that adopted the standard in Portugal.

The objective of this paper is providing insights from the practitioner point of view, in order to give an assessment about the EQUASS Assurance certification. Particularly, the paper provides analysis about six points: 1 motives to adopt; 2 internalization of the standard; 3 impacts; 4 pitfalls; 5 satisfaction; and 6 renew intentions. It has to be noted that the results presented come from the analysis of the pioneer adopter organizations and some bias is embedded due to this fact. According to Rogers' theory, the innovators and early adopters take some risk in the adoption process and act as stimulators of other organizations. These innovators are especially motivated and have a specific profile that has to be taken into account in order to draw conclusions from their experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizations in the third sector have been facing increasing pressures to deliver excellent service levels and to pursue operational efficacy (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013, Herman and Renz, 2008). Such context has contributed to accelerate the adoption of quality management practices leading to the implementation of Quality Management (QM) and Excellence programmes in non-profits and SSO. This tendency is, to a great extent, a natural follow-up on the practices that have been observed in the private sector, and are backed up by research results, supporting, in a fairly consistent manner, the positive impacts of QM in operations performance and quality (Antunes et al., 2008).

Quality and Excellence practice in perspective: motives, impacts and consequences

Scholars and QM practitioners have been involved in an extensive debate about what are the effective long-term contributions of quality assurance standards for the improvement in quality and customer satisfaction levels (Martínez-Costa et al., 2009). The debate has been fairly polarized around two views: a positive

perspective, that stands for the positive influence of standards adoption for the implementation of Total Quality Management practices; and a contrary view that puts the tone on the aspects related to the burden that conformance practices, and the reverence to documentation requirements, may put on organizations, and the possible negative effects on the firms capabilities to innovate in order to meet the evolving customer requirements. Nevertheless, some consensus exists on the role that the adoption of standards can have on the initiation of systematic internal organization practices and on the contribution for substantial improvements in employees' awareness towards quality issues. Moreover, several research results have suggested that companies engaged in QM and Excellence programs exhibit superior communication practices, both internally and towards their external counterparts. For many organizations, standard QM Systems offer a first structured approach to initiate internal change, and to drive (through practice) the commitment of top management (and resources) in continuous improvement (Rubio-Andrada et al., 2011).

The generalized adoption of QM and Excellence programs across business sectors, together with the proliferation of dichotomous voices about its benefits, has motivated multiple research efforts to unveil with more detail the motives leading to implementation, as well as to explore the diversity of the impacts of certified quality systems. Overall, the motives for engaging processes of quality certification have been described in two strands: settings where certification efforts emerge from an aspiration for improvement that is inherently internal to the organization; contexts where it results from a response to market (external) pressures or demands (Zaramdini, 2007). Whereas research results indicate that organizations tend to be more driven by external reasons (Martinez-Costa et al., 2009), empirical evidence suggests that those that engage in QM practices for internal motives are more likely to achieve better results (Prajogo, 2011).

A variety of benefits have been associated with quality certification in large and small organizations, namely reduction in the volume of customer complaints, and associated benefits in terms of customer awareness, satisfaction and preference (Briscoe et al., 2005). Quality adoption has also been linked to improvements in productivity, notably by means of improvements in process monitoring and the opportunity to identify latent service problems (del Alonso-Almeida et al., 2015). Overall, although QM and Excellence programs are acknowledged to be lengthy and resource demanding endeavors, empirical evidence consistently brings forward its potential for inducing important internal benefits such as increased process efficiency, reduced costs, errors and defects, together with greater employee involvement and job satisfaction, and improved user orientation (Heras, 2006).

Quality and Excellence in context: the case of social services

The importance of QM and Excellence has extended across different private business sectors, gaining also increased attention in the third sector, and naturally, reinforcing the debates about their efficacy and the nature of their impacts (Chesteen et al., 2005). Moreover, the willingness of nonprofit organizations to engage in quality programs has further extended the debate to the investigation of the adequacy of the prevalent standard and programs to such context specific conditions (Baruch and Ramalho, 2006). Despite this scenario, most of the existing research is still focused on the private, for-profit sector (Liao et al., 2014), with some exceptions, including Melão and Guia (2015), Al-Tabbaa et al. (2013), or also Cairns et al. (2005), that have investigated the impacts of different quality approaches on the performance of third sector organizations.

The prospective scenario seems therefore to be one where new, and in many cases sector specific, approaches will to continue to emerge. As such, it is necessary to prompt the development of renewed research lenses to understand, and to put into perspective the different quality approaches, and their impacts.

The EQUASS certification is a particularly important sector-specific approach, developed by the European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR), as a quality standard for SSO. EQUASS enables both the implementation of a QM System and Excellence in SSO, and in April 2015 has more than 650 certifications across different European countries (Melão et al., 2016). It is therefore a two-level certification program that SSOs can adopt to certify their compliance with European quality requirements. The first level – EQUASS Assurance – certifies

that the provider meets the fundamental requirements of a QM system in social services, whereas the second level – EQUASS Excellence – is employed to certify the excellence on the European quality principles and criteria for social services. Level 1 requires the compliance with 50 criteria (built from 10 quality principles), and involves the conduction of an internal audit (supported by a questionnaire addressing key performance indicators), and an external audit. Level 2 builds also on the same 10 quality principles, but requires and evaluation to be conducted from three perspectives: approach, deployment and results; that needs to be accompanied by a self-evaluation report to evidence continuous improvements in two performance indicators for each criterion (in a period of the last three years), as well as a comparison between such results and those of other SSO, a defined policy for all quality principles, and an external audit.

The implementation of EQUASS is relatively less extensive, and resource demanding, journey than other prevalent QM and Excellence programs (e.g. ISO 9001, EFQM, etc.), in aspects such as the documentation requirements, something that is often referred as difficulty for the implementation of those programs in contexts such as services or small business. Managers also often point out as particularly appealing the fact that EQUASS addresses specific features of SSO, notably devoting key importance to the analysis of the competencies of staff and volunteers that have key responsibilities in quality, consistency and reliability in the specific context of service organizations. Likewise, it encompasses aspects specifically related to the protection of the rights of vulnerable users, to confidentiality, privacy and other ethical issues. This receptiveness toward EQUASS, and the scarcity of context specific research, makes it clear that there is a need for a deeper examination of the motives for its implementation, as well as of its impacts for the operations, users, social workers and other stakeholders of SSO.

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to investigate the implementation motives, internalization, impacts, pitfalls, degree of satisfaction, and renew intentions of EQUASS Assurance. To achieve this, a cross-sectional, questionnaire-based survey methodology was employed. The population consists of all organizations with an EQUASS Assurance certification. The source of the sample frame was the online database of EQUASS Assurance certified organizations (EQUASS, 2016b) at the closing date of January 14th, 2016. This database lists all SSO that have a valid EQUASS Assurance certificate, including information about the organization 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 SSO 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 QM system. Some organizations 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: organization 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 Prajogo (2009) so as to determine the internalization of EQUASS Assurance. The study of Melão et al. (2016) 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. (2015) so as to analyze 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. 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 summarizing 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 organizations 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.

Quantitative data was analyzed 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.

Table 1 – Distribution of responses per country and response rate.

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

RESULTS

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%) SSO, followed by micro (12.8%) and large (5.6%) SSO. 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 before 2011 (26.5%) and between 2014 and 2015 (15.3%). In addition to EQUASS Assurance, some SSO 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.

Characteristics	Number	%
<i>Organization size</i>		
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
<i>Year of the first EQUASS certification</i>		
-2010	52	26.5
2011-2013	114	58.2
2014-2015	30	15.3
<i>Other certifications</i>		
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
<i>Position of respondents</i>		
Director/CEO	94	48.0
Quality manager	79	40.3
Middle manager	17	8.7
Social worker	6	3.1

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 organization’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).

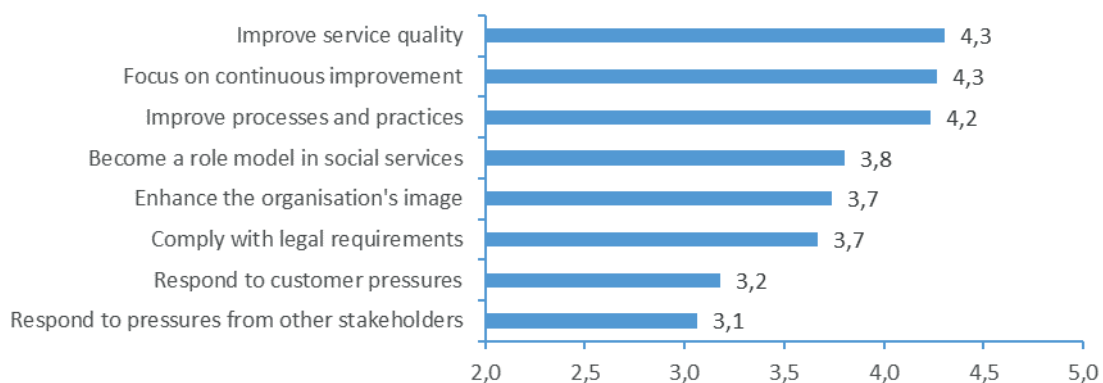


Figure 1 – Reasons for implementing EQUASS Assurance (n=196).

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 organization related (internal motives), while 15 are related with social and environmental pressures (external motives).

Table 3 – Other relevant implementation reasons.

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

Implementation process

To ascertain whether SSO have adequately adopted EQUASS principles and practices in daily usage, the instrument included five questions about the internalization of QM system. Figure 2 shows the mean score of agreement with the respective statements. Respondents indicate that they generally agree that their organizations internalized 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.

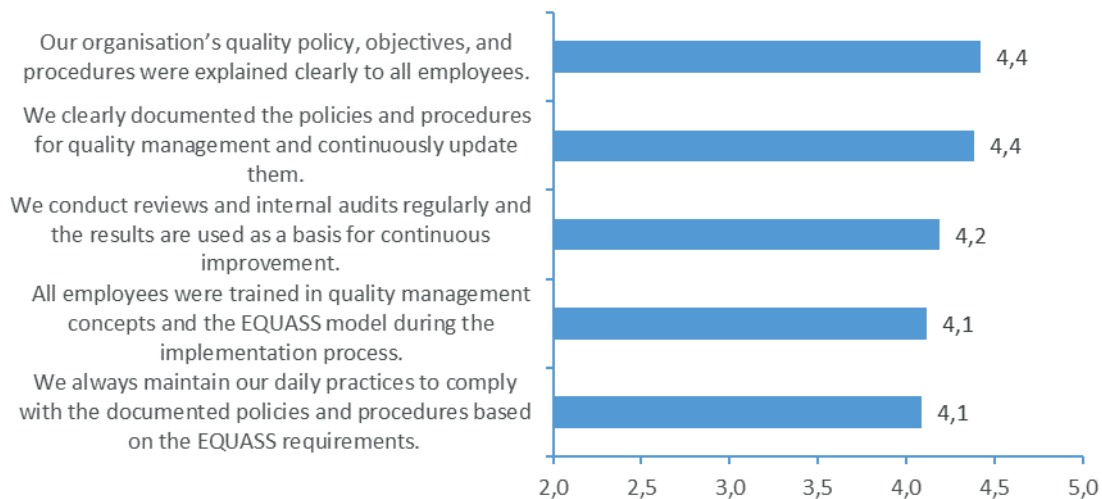


Figure 2 – Internalization of EQUASS Assurance in daily usage (n=196).

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 organization, 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 EQUASS Assurance (n=196).

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.

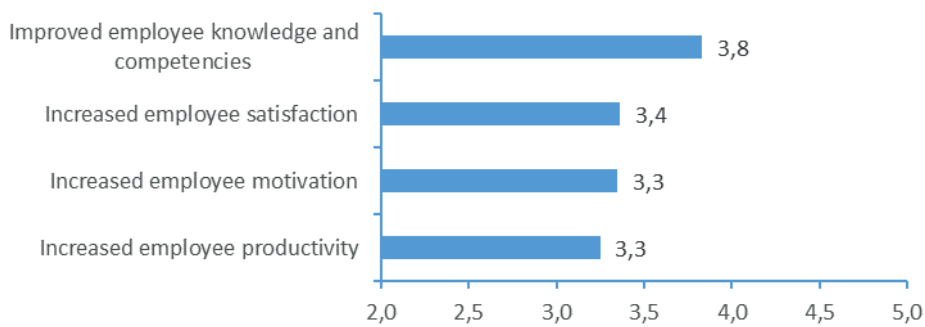


Figure 4 – Employee impacts of EQUASS Assurance (n=196).

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).

Figure 6 displays the mean scores of certification impacts on society related aspects. Respondents rate the impact on improved organizational 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.

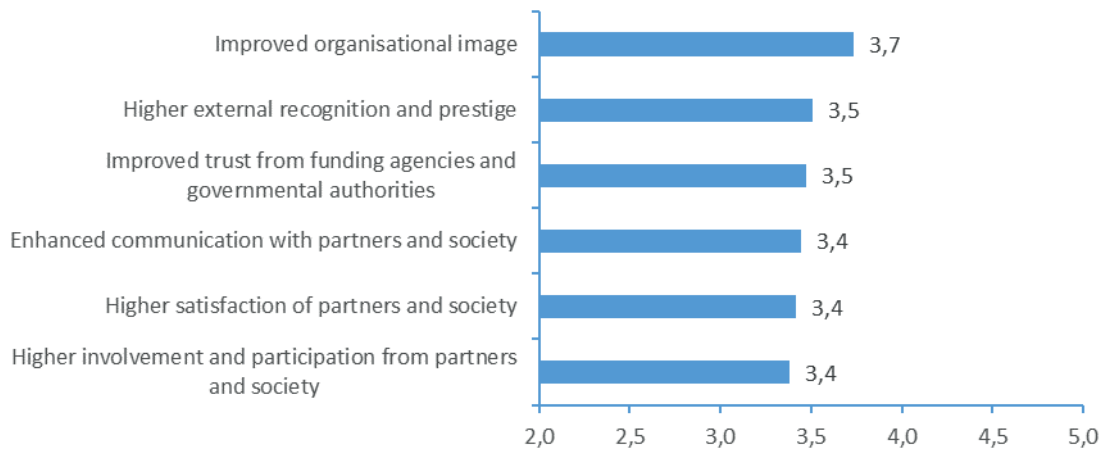


Figure 6 – Society impacts of EQUASS Assurance (n=196).

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.

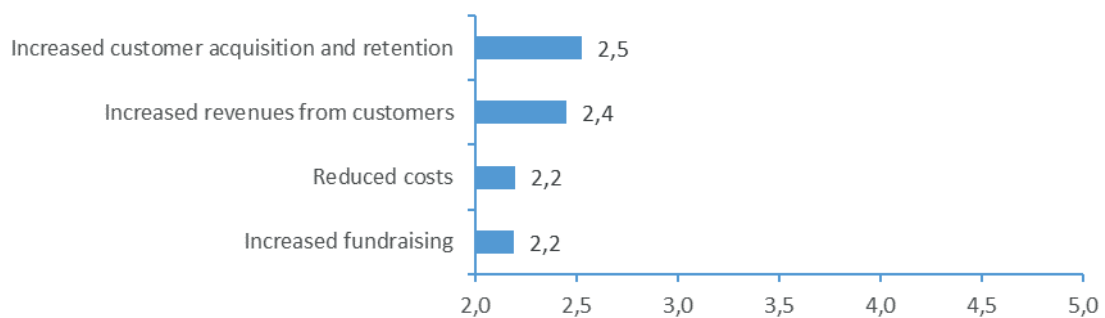


Figure 7 – Economic impacts of EQUASS Assurance (n=196).

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.

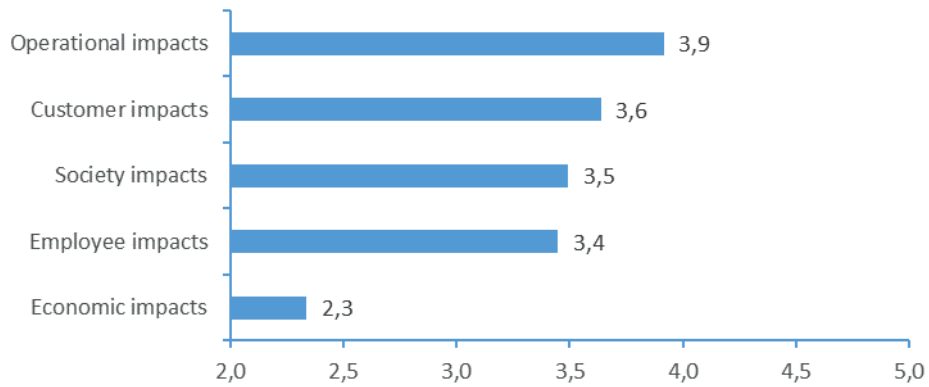


Figure 8 – Comparison among categories of certification impacts (n=196).

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).

Respondents were also asked to indicate other pitfalls than those previously listed and the results are summarized 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 organizations, time and cost related issues, increased staff responsibilities, lack of training and experience on QM, and language difficulties with the standard.

Table 4 – Other relevant implementation pitfalls.

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

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.

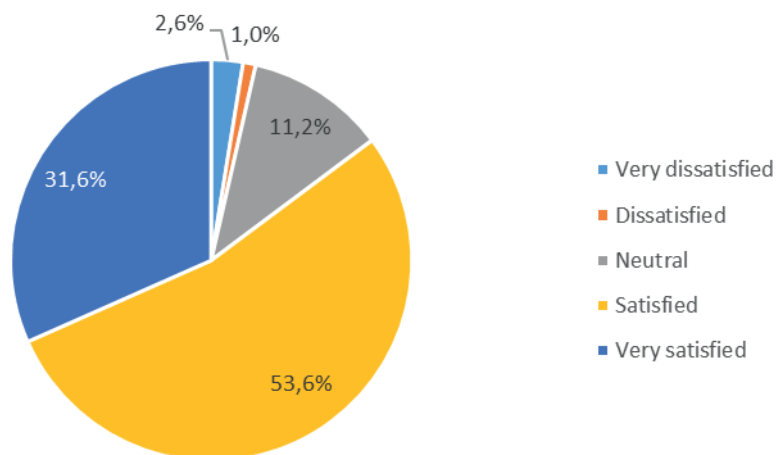


Figure 10 – Degree of satisfaction with EQUASS Assurance (n=196).

When asked to justify their degree of satisfaction, respondents contributed many insights, providing a rich dataset for further qualitative analysis, whose results are summarized in Table 5. Some respondents highlight and elaborate on the positive impacts mentioned earlier in the implementation impacts section. Interestingly, the role of the certification on improving organizational 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 organizations reveal that EQUASS Assurance is too time consuming, 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.

Table 5 – Reasons for the degree of satisfaction.

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

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 EQUASS Assurance costs.

	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 of the initial implementation cost and annual maintenance cost is approximately 838€ and 293€ per employee, respectively. However, there is a considerable variation around these values. Not surprisingly, a more detailed analysis reveals that micro and small SSO 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 program. From the 155 responses, 36 (23.2%) SSO implemented the certification with full external financial support, whereas 84 (54.2%) SSO did not obtain any kind of direct external support.

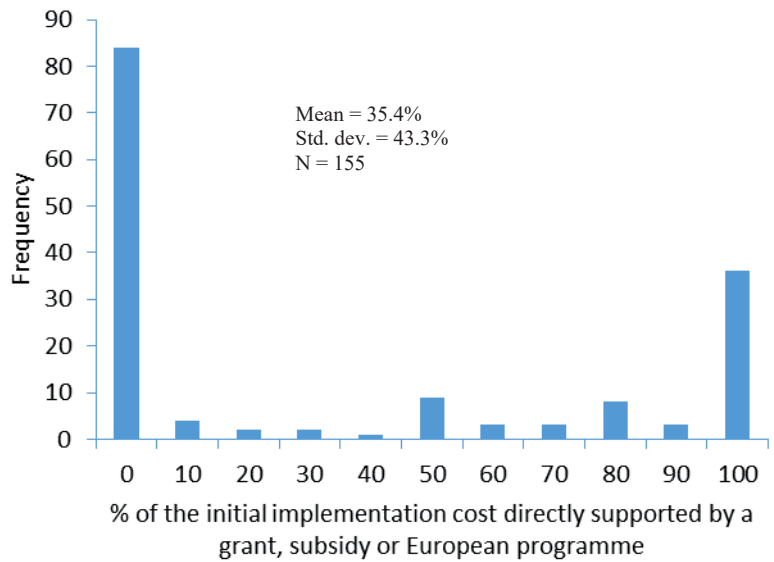


Figure 11 – Histogram of the percentage of the initial implementation cost directly supported by external entities (n=155).

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

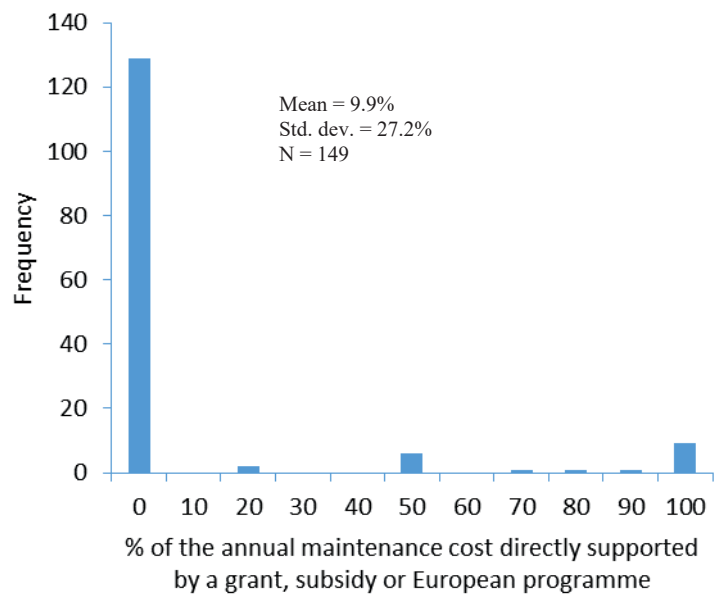


Figure 12 – Histogram of the percentage of the annual maintenance cost directly supported by external entities (n=149).

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 organizations 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%).

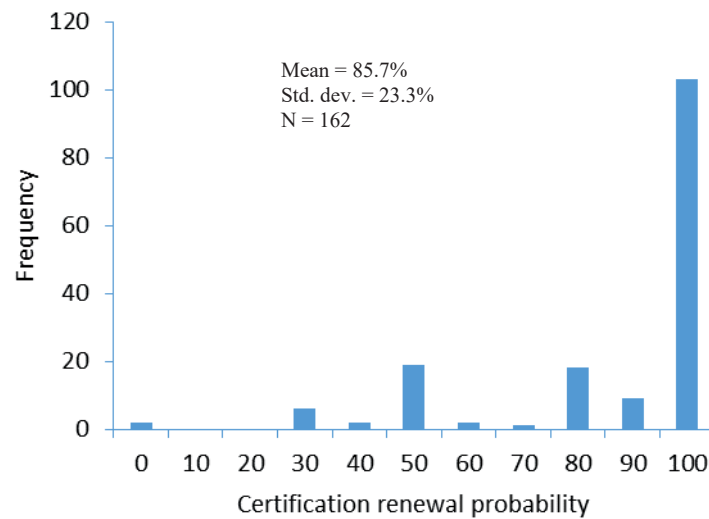


Figure 13 – Histogram of the certification renewal probability (n=162).

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 summarizes the reasons for those SSO 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 organization to continuously improve quality, it is best suited to social services, or because it is part of the organization’s philosophy, mission, strategy, among other reasons. In addition, respondents mention reasons based on several certification benefits (also included in “Other”) identified in earlier sections. Interestingly, they also took the opportunity to make their voices heard, emphasizing once again some pitfalls (included in “Other”) mentioned in the previous two sections.

Table 7 – Reasons for organizations that are likely to renew the certification.

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 organizations that are undecided about certification renewal.

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 labor	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	14

Table 8 lists the reasons for organizations 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 authorization 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 organizations that are unlikely to renew.

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

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.

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

Total	15
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CONCLUSIONS

SSO 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 (Melão and Guia, 2015; Melão et al., 2016).

Respondents largely agree that SSO have internalized EQUASS principles and practices in daily usage, although some elements have been more superficially internalized 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 standardized 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 (Melão et al., 2016) and ISO 9001 (Melão and Guia, 2015).

Respondents consider the economic impacts of EQUASS Assurance to be low. The study of the effects of the implementation of QM systems on the economic performance of SSO remains largely an uncharted territory. In the wider literature, the empirical results are mixed, suggesting that their effects on economic benefits are weaker than operational benefits and not always significant (Sousa and Voss, 2002).

Increased workload and bureaucracy are two important implementation pitfalls for SSO. 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 SSO 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 organizations, 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 (Heras et al., 2008; Melão and Guia, 2015).

Approximately 86% 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 SSO 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 organizations, that SSO often operate in resource constrained environments, and that the availability of financial assistance (notably, through the European Social Fund) may have been an enabling factor for implementing EQUASS Assurance in the first place.

Around 82% (n=162) of respondents indicate that their organization 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 SSO incorporated successfully EQUASS Assurance in their daily work, gained significant benefits, and, consequently, remain loyal users. Like any other QM system, 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 SSO it would be important to study the perspectives of other employees, customers and other stakeholders.

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