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**The notion of independence of quality  
assurance agencies**  
**A reflection from the viewpoint of the  
European Standards and Guidelines**

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## The concept of independence in the ESG 3.6

Agencies should be independent to the extent both that:

they have **autonomous** responsibility for their operations

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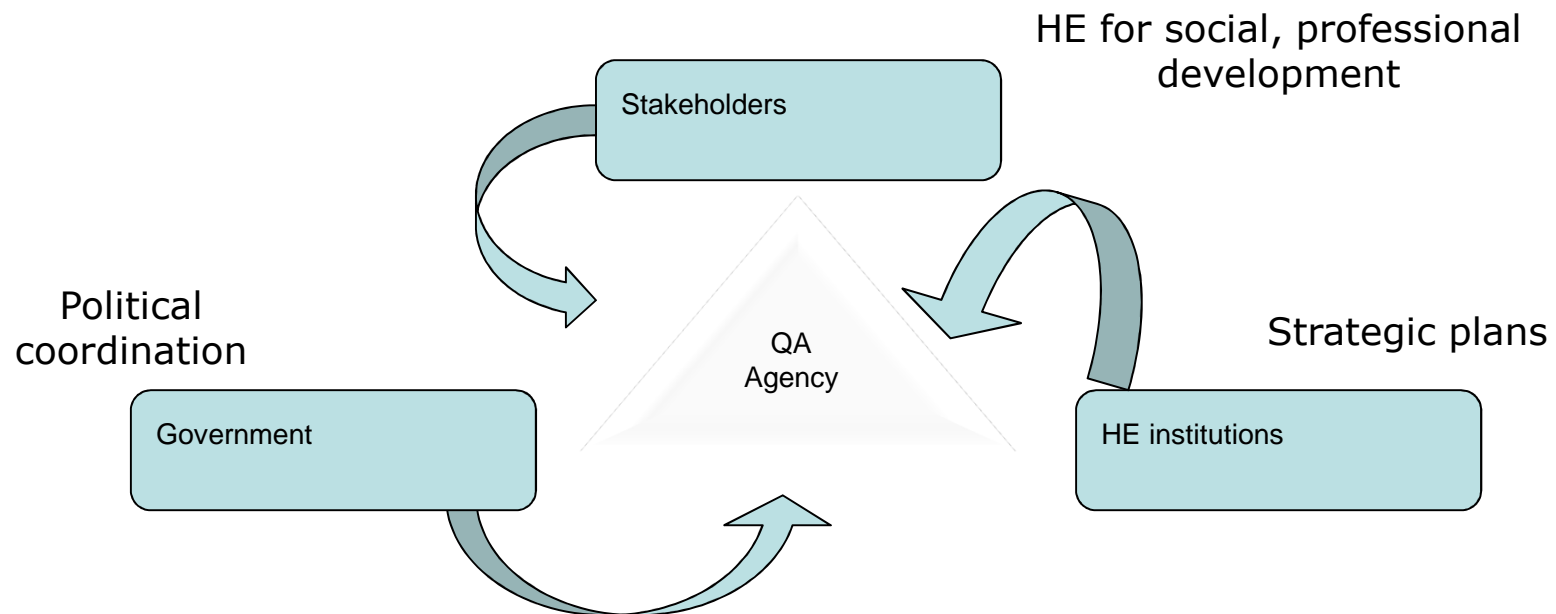
that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports **cannot be influenced** by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders

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**QA Agencies cannot be isolated: there are positive interactions.**

Democracy and social needs should be considered; national and international stakeholders contributions...

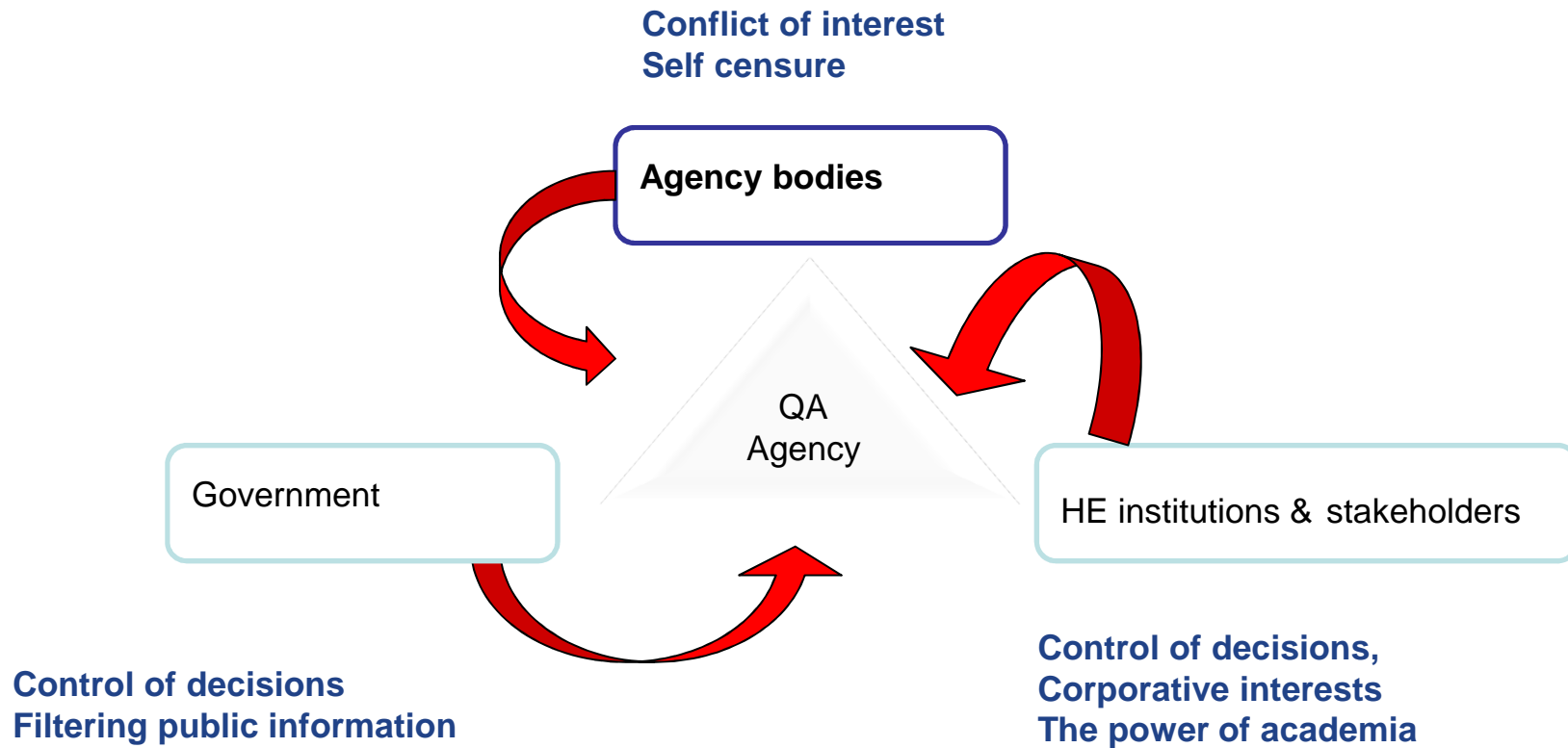


**Important:** The standard helps to strengthen the credibility and the strategic position of the agency, promoting and preserving independence in some critical points...

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## independence is threatened when...



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### 3.6 Standard guidelines:

its **operational independence** from HEI's & governments is guaranteed in official documentation (e.g. instruments of governance or legislative acts);

- Definition & operation of its procedures & methods,
- Nomination & appointment of external experts,
- Determination of the outcomes of its QA processes

They are undertaken **autonomously & independently** from governments, HEI's, & organs of political influence;

while relevant stakeholders in HE, particularly students/learners, **are consulted** in the course of QA processes, the final outcomes of the QA processes remain the responsibility of the agency

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## Autonomous responsibility of their operations and the governance in the agency decision-making bodies:

Independence is granted in official documents (yes) but....more precisely it's interesting to observe:

- The **balance** in the composition of the decision making bodies: Society representatives, students, international members, representatives from HEIs, representatives from the Ministry... **The representative roles**
  - The **expertise role** in the decision making bodies
  - The **selection** and **appointment** processes of the members for those decision-making bodies. Who selects and appoints? And how is it done for representative and expertise roles?
  - Mechanisms to **avoid the conflict of interest** at different levels of the organisation.
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## **Autonomous responsibility of their operations... other aspects:**

- 1) How QA agency makes requests for adequate resources to undertake its work?  
Is the funding system a potential source for the conflict of interests or a limitation for the QA functions development?
- 2) the process for appointing external experts?
- 3) Definition of QA procedures (methodology, criteria...) how is it done?
- 4) External QA methods should be able to demonstrate: a) positive impacts on HE and b) reliable information about the quality of HE to national and international stakeholders. (Std. 3.3 activities)

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**Final outcomes of the QA processes remain the responsibility of the agency. How to see that?**

What is the level of transparency of positive interactions?

How those opinions and views are integrated by the QA agency decision-making bodies?

Does the QA agency collect appeals, complaints? (if yes, see how QA agency deals with those issues)



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But at the end of the day...

**independence** is a **question of ethics**.

Ethics for the organisation (Board, panels, staff...)

and **commitment** of the agency and its decision-making bodies and staff (experts and officers) to enhance the quality of HE, and to facilitate the accountability of HE.