

Report on the first two application rounds

This report by the Register Committee gives an account of the first two rounds of applications. It highlights some observations by the Register Committee and addresses the general nature of some difficulties and challenges it had encountered.

It was presented by the Register Committee to the 3rd EQAR General Assembly on 29 September 2009 in Stockholm and has subsequently been edited for publication. The overview of applications received (section 4) has been updated in the light of the third application round and the decisions made by the Register Committee on 30 September 2009.

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1. Background and introduction

The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) was founded in March 2008 by the E4 Group (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, ENQA; European Students' Union, ESU; European University Association, EUA and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, EURASHE) following the mandate received from European ministers of higher education at their London summit in May 2007.

The decision making on applications for inclusion on the Register was entrusted to the Register Committee, an independent body comprising of quality assurance experts who have been nominated by the E4 organisations, BUSINESSEUROPE and Education International, and who serve in their personal capacity.

EQAR was established to operate and manage the Register as a "white list" of quality assurance agencies that have proven, through an external review, their substantial compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG). Its objective is limited to identifying applicants who comply substantially with the ESG and does not extend to supporting agencies in achieving substantial compliance.

Decisions made by the Register Committee are based on the factors prevailing when an application is made (more precisely, when the external review was undertaken), and not on anticipated or planned future developments. As there is no possibility for an applicant's "conditional inclusion", the Register Committee must have full confidence in an agency's substantial compliance with the ESG when accepting it on the Register.

Inclusion on EQAR is voluntary for quality assurance agencies. When developing the Procedures for Applications (see below), it was decided that, for now, EQAR would guarantee confidentiality to unsuccessful applicants. Applicants may, themselves, choose to waive this confidentiality at their discretion.

This also avoids misleading information: a comparably new agency that is developing its processes and that is not (yet) substantially compliant with the ESG might be branded as "rejected by EQAR", while a clearly dubious establishment or "accreditation mill" would be better off not applying for inclusion at all.

Furthermore, EQAR must be mindful of the legal consequences that might follow the publication of information on rejected applications.

In preparing this report, the Register Committee aimed at striking an adequate balance between the need for accountability, the confidentiality guaranteed to applicants and the need to safeguard the Committee's independence.

2. Criteria for inclusion on the Register

a) European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG)

The Statutes stipulate that substantial compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) is the decisive requirement for inclusion on the Register.

In order to demonstrate their substantial compliance with the ESG, applicants are required to undergo an external review of their activities prior to making an application for inclusion on the Register. This external review is organised by a coordinating organisation, or review coordinator, which can be freely chosen by the applicant provided that it is an organisation with the necessary professional capacity and fully independent of the applicant. The review coordinator appoints a review panel of independent experts, who set out their findings in an external review report.

b) Procedures for Applications and requirements for external reviews

The Procedures for Applications define the application process in detail. They serve as a tool for the Register Committee, stipulating reliable and consistent procedures which allow the Register Committee to identify applicants who comply substantially with the ESG.

These Procedures have been adopted by the Register Committee in consultation with the General Assembly. The Register Committee prepared draft Procedures in May 2008 and the General Assembly was consulted at its meeting on 25 June 2008 in Sarajevo. Following consideration of the comments and proposals made by the General Assembly, the Register Committee adopted the Procedures on 6 August 2008.

The Register Committee followed some guiding principles when drafting the Procedures for Applications: clarity and transparency of the application process to applicants; fairness and consistency of the decision making, including that each application is considered on its own merits; ensuring that decisions are made on clear grounds, of which applicants are informed.

The Procedures for Applications stipulate requirements for external reviews of quality assurance agencies, which form the basis of the Register Committee's judgement on compliance with the ESG. Given that the Register Committee has to decide on the basis of an external review that has been conducted outside of EQAR's direct control, these requirements are crucial to ensure that decisions are made on a reliable and consistent basis. The requirements address, inter alia, the independence of the review process, the involvement of different stakeholder perspectives in the review panel, and the reference of the review process to the ESG.

c) Two-step procedure

Given that EQAR is not involved in the planning of external reviews and does not require any prior approval of planned reviews by itself, the robustness of

an external review can only be validated when an application is made for inclusion on the Register.

The decision making on applications follows a two-step procedure:

- 1) examination of an application's adherence to the Procedures for Applications, in particular regarding the external review process
- 2) consideration of the applicant's substantial compliance with the ESG

Only if all requirements for external reviews as set out in the Procedures are met, does the Register Committee go on to consider the applicant's substantial compliance with the ESG. Where the requirements of the Procedures are not fulfilled, the external review process is not considered to constitute a reliable basis for EQAR's decision making. The application is rejected, without, however, making any judgement on the applicant's compliance with the ESG.

The Register Committee has had to clarify that the requirements set out in the Procedures for Applications are obligatory in all respects. This does not seem to have been entirely clear in the beginning. Even though an individual case might justify making an exception (e.g. for legacy reviews carried out before EQAR's existence), the Register Committee considered it necessary to draw a clear line in the interest of not jeopardising the integrity of its decisions. If exceptions had been made in the beginning it would be very difficult to require stricter adherence to the Procedures at a later stage.

d) Inclusion on EQAR and membership of ENQA

Most European quality assurance agencies interested in inclusion on EQAR are also members of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), or are planning to join ENQA.

In the discussions leading to the establishment of EQAR, it was agreed among the E4 partners that full membership of ENQA would normally constitute satisfactory evidence of substantial compliance with the ESG, since ENQA requires its full members to provide evidence through an external review report that they comply substantially with the ESG.

Membership of ENQA is thus an important piece of information in the Register Committee's decision-making: the knowledge that ENQA's bodies have already scrutinised the same external review and concluded that the applicant substantially complied with the ESG establishes initial confidence. However, given that EQAR makes a clear and firm statement on an agency's compliance with the ESG, the reliability of which EQAR must itself be able to defend, if necessary, there is no "automatic admission" to the Register. The Register Committee considers every case individually and on its own merits in order to gain full confidence that each admitted agency complies substantially with the ESG.

3. Guide for Applicants

A Guide for Applicants has been produced as a practical information document. It describes the Procedures for Applications in plain, non-legal language and supplements them with additional explanations and information.

The first edition of the Guide was published together with the adopted Procedures on 8 August 2008. A minor update was published on 15 January 2009. After the second round of applications, applicants were surveyed as to whether the Guide was useful and presented all the necessary information in an unambiguous way. On the basis of the applicants' (overall positive) feedback and the experience of Register Committee members from the first two rounds of applications, a revised Guide for Applicants was published on 11 June 2009. The results of the feedback survey are presented in Annex 1.

4. Overview of applications received

Since August 2008, EQAR has been accepting applications from quality assurance agencies for inclusion on the Register. Applications have been dealt with in three rounds, with deadlines on 3 October 2008, 9 February 2009 and 26 July 2009, respectively.

The following table gives a statistical overview:

	1 st round	2 nd round	3 rd round	total
Applications	10	4	8	22
- accepted	7	3	7	17
- rejected	1	0	n/a	1
- withdrawn	2	1	n/a	3
- pending	0	0	1	1
EHEA / outside^a	9 / 1	4 / 0	8 / 0	21 / 1
General / sectoral^b	8 / 2	4 / 0	7 / 1	19 / 3
Operating in one / multiple countries	5 / 5	3 / 1	4 / 4	12 / 10

NB: "0" = there are no applications in the respective category, "n/a" = there cannot be any (example: an application from the 2nd round could not be rejected before the RC's 30/9/09 meeting).

a: Refers to whether the applicant has its registered office within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) or outside

b: "Sectoral" refers to applicants working in a limited number of professional sectors/academic disciplines, "General" refers to applicants working across all sectors/disciplines.

5. The application process

The Register Committee convenes twice a year to consider applications. A deadline is published for each of these two rounds, usually about 2 months before the Register Committee's meeting.

a) Rapporteurs

Each application is assigned two rapporteurs who have the responsibility of analysing the documentation and preparing recommendations which serve as the basis for deliberations at the Committee's meeting. Steps are taken to ensure that no rapporteur has a conflict of interest with an assigned application and that the two rapporteurs are not persons nominated by the same organisation.

The teams of rapporteurs analyse the application documents and set out their analysis on an Internal Assessment Sheet, which will also outline any potential problems identified. In some cases, rapporteurs refer a request for further information or clarification to applicants before the Register Committee's meeting. This happens where an issue can reasonably be answered within approximately 2 weeks.

For the third round of applications, an additional Register Committee member has been assigned to each application as 3rd rapporteur to comment on the two main rapporteurs' analysis. This is intended to provide a third perspective for the Register Committee's deliberations and helps to broaden their basis, and further increase the soundness and consistency of decision making.

b) Decision-making on applications

When considering an application, the Register Committee reaches one of the following three conclusions:

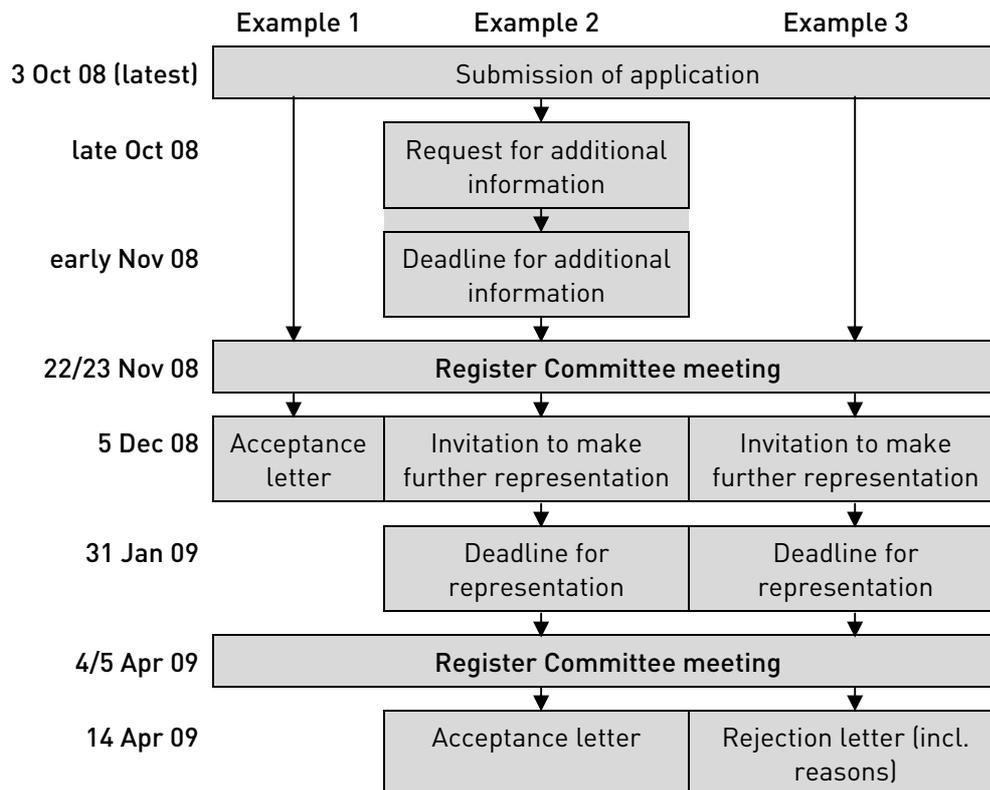
1. The application is accepted: The applicant is included on the Register for five years from the date of the external review report.
2. The Register Committee considers rejecting the application: The applicant is informed of the grounds for possible rejection and invited to make additional representation on the matters identified by the Register Committee. The application remains pending until the next meeting of the Register Committee, where it may be either rejected or accepted, taking into account the additional representation made.
3. The Committee requests further information from the applicant: The application remains pending until the following meeting.

However, the applicant can also withdraw the application instead of making additional representation (in case 2) or providing additional information (in case 3), see also Guide for Applicants, section 5.6, page 13.

It has proven helpful to invite applicants to make additional representation where rejection is considered. In some cases, applicants could make representations that added to the required information and helped to fulfil

all requirements for inclusion. In other cases, applicants made use of the possibility of withdrawal.

The following tables illustrate typical timelines for applications made in the first round. It is purely indicative and does not refer to any actual applications. The table is not exhaustive and other steps are possible in the application process.



6. General observations on the applications received

The following outlines some general observations of the Register Committee in considering applications for inclusion on the Register.

a) Methodology of external review

The idea that quality assurance agencies undergo a periodic external review of their activity is relatively new for the European Higher Education Area. Some external reviews were undertaken exclusively to analyse the level of compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), others focus on the functioning of an agency in accordance with the requirements applicable in the national context. Some reports did not relate to the ESG directly (see 7. below for further details).

The external review reports which the Register Committee has considered so far vary considerably in their scope, detail and readability in addressing the ESG and the terms of reference. Most external review reports considered by the Register Committee provide a clear and comprehensible analysis of the reviewed agency's compliance with the ESG and present a persuasive conclusion, allowing the Register Committee to make a confident decision fairly easily.

A few reports have been found to be too brief or overly simplistic in arriving at the conclusion that an agency complies substantially with the ESG.

Some reports make use of rather creative arguments in concluding that an agency complies with certain standards or consider national legislation in a fairly generous manner as a reason for not fulfilling the ESG.

In some cases, minor questions eventually remained unanswered. This is, however, unavoidable in an arrangement where the Register Committee decides mostly on the basis of an external review and is not supposed to re-do the external panel's work.

b) Using the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)

The concept of "substantial compliance" with the ESG was agreed on by the E4 Group when preparing an operational model for EQAR before the Bologna Ministerial Conference in London (2007). The concept underpins the understanding that the ESG are not a checklist, but a set of agreed principles and reference points for quality assurance. There are different ways in which an agency can adhere to the various principles, and even if an agency is not complying with every standard to the letter of the law, it may be considered substantially compliant with the ESG as a whole.

The judgement as to whether an agency complies substantially with the ESG is therefore not made in a mechanical process. The Register Committee does not apply any numerical rules, but a holistic view is sought on the application and the external review team's analysis of the applicant's compliance with the different ESG before reaching a comprehensive judgement.

Bearing in mind that the ESG are not a checklist and leave room for discretion of judgement in their interpretation and application, it is natural that different review teams and external review coordinators could put emphasis on different aspects of the ESG and come to judgements which are not entirely consistent across different external reviews.

This underlines the importance of the Register Committee's deliberations levelling out a range of different interpretations and thus enhancing consistency in applying the ESG. The Register Committee is aware that this requires careful consideration of every case with a view to precedents which might be set. It is probable that the Register Committee might reach a different conclusion from the one reached by the external review panel in some cases.

For virtually all applicants the Register Committee has identified some areas where substantial compliance with the ESG is less obvious than in others and/or its sustainability is considered fragile. Where such applications are accepted, the Register Committee has flagged these issues for particular attention when the agency is subsequently applying for renewal of its inclusion on the Register. These issues have been indicated in the acceptance letters to applicants.

In its work, the Register Committee naturally reflects on how the ESG work in practice as a set of principles guiding the work of quality assurance agencies. Should the competent parties – European ministers of higher education and the E4 Group – at some point decide to revise the ESG, the Register Committee would be glad to offer its feedback on the ESG as appropriate.

c) Applicability of the ESG to different types of organisations

The Register Committee addressed the general question as to the type of organisation to which the ESG are applicable. The Committee considers the ESG applicable to external quality assurance bodies, that is, organisations whose core activity is to review, evaluate, accredit or audit higher education institutions, organisational units or individual study programmes. The ESG indicate that parts 2 and 3 were written to be applicable to such bodies in the "Introduction to Parts 1 and 2" (p. 14) as well as in the guidelines to standards 3.1 and 3.3.

If an applicant does not perform (direct) external quality assurance of higher education institutions or programmes, it is normally not considered for inclusion on the Register. Nevertheless, given the complex realities of different systems and the sometimes difficult decision as to whether quality assurance-related functions are direct or situated at meta-level, each individual case is carefully considered on its own merits. If an application is not successful because of the above consideration, this is communicated clearly to the applicant and does not constitute any kind of judgement on the organisation's activities.

7. Specific observations from the applications processed

Of the 13 applications for inclusion that have been processed in the first two application rounds, 9 were accepted by the Register Committee. This reflects the overall high quality of applications received from a number of very motivated quality assurance agencies who demonstrate a clear intent in giving effect to the ESG.

Generally, the applications have demonstrated that the ESG enshrine widely accepted and used principles of good external quality assurance. About four years after their adoption, many quality assurance agencies have aligned their methodology and processes with the ESG and use them as a central reference point in their work. Most agencies are well aware of the areas where compliance with the ESG could be improved and are currently striving to take the necessary steps.

The following describes the nature of problems encountered with unsuccessful applications and also describes where one or more of the included agencies did not fully comply with the criteria.

a) Regarding EQAR's Procedures

The Register Committee has received applications where the composition of the external review panel did not fulfil the requirements of the Procedures for Applications. The Procedures specify that the external review panel shall consist of at least four persons who should “possess sufficient knowledge, experience and expertise to be able to understand, analyse and judge the applicant’s activities” (Art. 6 [1]). Its members “shall represent a range of expertise, covering the different perspectives of the key stakeholders and comprising of at least an academic staff member and a student from a higher education institution.” (Art. 6 [2])

The Procedures also specify, in Art.7 and Art. 8, that the self-evaluation report “shall reflect on the applicant’s compliance with the ESG” and the external review report “shall provide sufficient evidence of the applicant’s compliance with the ESG”. The Register Committee has concluded that this is not fulfilled where the reports do not actually relate to the ESG. Reports have, however, been accepted if the legacy reports were aligned to the ESG (by the respective authors) for the purpose of the application for inclusion on the Register.

b) Regarding the use of different sections of the ESG

In some external review and self-evaluation reports, the standards of ESG Part 2 were only dealt with under ESG 3.1 without referring to ESG 2.1 to 2.8 individually. This has sometimes rendered the process of identifying evidence for substantial compliance with ESG Part 2 more difficult for the Register Committee as compared to external review reports that address ESG Part 2 standard-by-standard.

Publishing of reports (ESG 2.5)

Not all quality assurance agencies publish full reports of their evaluations, accreditations or audits. Some agencies do not publish information in cases where accreditation is denied. Some agencies publish only summarised reports or reasons on their website. The ESG do, however, not stipulate details as to whether full or summarised reports are required.

Report drafting procedures (ESG 2.4, 2.5 and 3.6)

In a few cases, the robustness of report drafting procedures has been a matter of concern for the Register Committee. This related to other bodies possibly exercising undue influence on an expert team's analysis and report.

Independence (ESG 3.6)

The structural and operational independence of quality assurance agencies has usually been duly and carefully considered in the external reviews. While most agencies could prove that they are independent from other bodies (ministries, rectors' conferences, students' unions, etc.) in their operation and decision-making, this independence was in some cases considered potentially fragile or ambiguous.

In some cases, the Register Committee had questions regarding the independence of experts/reviewers recruited by quality assurance agencies and the effectiveness of mechanisms to rule out conflicts of interests.

Participation of student, professional and international experts (ESG 2.4 and 3.7)

The participation of students in external quality assurance is an area still under development in some cases. Most agencies involve students in one way or another, but there are different understandings of their role in detail (considered as full and equal partners, as observers or as members with different rights and responsibilities from others).

As far as professional experts (i.e. persons not working in a higher education institution) are concerned the situation is similar, sometimes their participation is even less developed than the participation of students.

Not all quality assurance agencies involve international experts in their expert teams and decision-making bodies. Language barriers are a prominent reason cited for not doing so.

Internal quality assurance of quality assurance agencies (ESG 3.8)

In many cases, internal quality assurance of quality assurance agencies is organised on an informal basis. However, many agencies have begun to develop clearly formalised and structured internal quality assurance systems.

8. Concluding remarks

The Register Committee considers it an important development in the European Higher Education Area that there is great interest among quality assurance agencies in being included on the Register. It has been impressed by the overall high quality of applications received.

Due to the improvement-oriented measures taken by quality assurance agencies themselves, it is anticipated that some of the above problems and challenges will be less frequent in the future. It is also expected that problems with the requirements for external reviews from EQAR's Procedures for Applications will diminish now that these are widely known. They can thus be taken into account from the outset when planning external reviews of quality assurance agencies.

The Register Committee sincerely hopes that, for EQAR and for the wider public, this report will be a useful account of its work and the challenges facing it.

9. References

Communiqués from the Chair of the Register Committee regarding the inclusion of agencies on the Register

5 December 2008: http://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/eqar/official/T_081202_EQAR_StatementRCChair_1stApplications.pdf

15 April 2009: http://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/eqar/official/T_090415_EQAR_CommuniqueRCChair.pdf

7 October 2009: http://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/eqar/official/T_091007_CommuniqueFromTheRCChair.pdf

Guide for Applicants, Version 2.0 of 11 June 2009

http://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/eqar/information/guide/EQAR_GuideForApplicants_v2_0.pdf

Statutes of EQAR, as of 4 March 2008

http://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/eqar/official/EQAR_Statutes_FINAL_v3_1_EN.pdf

Procedures for Applications, as of 6 August 2008

http://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/eqar/official/RC_01_1_ProceduresForApplications_v1_0.pdf

European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG)

<http://www.eqar.eu/application/requirements/european-standards-and-guidelines.html>

Annex 1: Feedback on the Guide for Applicants

Total replies received: | 10 (of 14 applicants in the first two round)

Q 1: Please rate on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (fully satisfied) the extent to which the Guide for Applicants provided you with all necessary information to enable you to make your application:

1 (not at all) 2 3 4 5 (fully)

-	-	-	5	5
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Q 2: Which other sources of information did you consult (if any)?

10	EQAR website
8	FAQs on the EQAR website
7	Procedures for Applications directly
4	Contacted the EQAR Secretariat
-	Member(s) of the Register Committee or other EQAR bodies
-	Information from peers and colleagues in the community
-	Other: <input type="text"/>

Q 3: Which issues did you find clear and well explained?

Respondents described the Guide as providing sufficient information, which is generally presented clearly and unambiguously. Some respondents also made reference to information available on the website and the application forms.

Q 4: Which issues were unclear, ambiguous or difficult to understand, and would benefit from more information, explanation or clarification?

“The payment instruction were not clear at all. After contact, the problem was solved.”

- F’up: the information on when the different fees have to be paid was revised to be clearer (5.8, p. 14)

“I was confused by the fact that the application could only be transferred by mail but that the signed documents (or all documents?) needed to be posted or faxed (as well). I contacted the secretariat for further information.”

- F’up: this was explained further, including the reasons (5.3, p. 13)

“The main source of uncertainties and doubts were related to the extra information that the Register could request to the applicant when we began the procedure. Nevertheless, when we received the request for extra information was completely clear.”

- F'up: new section (5.5, p. 13) was added to explain that additional information might be requested before the RC meeting

Q 5: Which issues, in your judgement, were missing and should be added to the Guide for Applicants?

“Clear deadlines for each level of procedure, not only for submitting the application”

- F'up: see last comment under Q4.

Q 6: Which issues, in your judgement, were repetitive or redundant and could easily be removed from the Guide?

Respondents did not mention any issue.

Q 7: Was the application process described clearly and understandably?

Generally answered affirmatively, notwithstanding the comments under Q4, Q5 and Q8.

Q 8: Any further comments on the Guide and/or the application process?

“Not on the guide as such but there could be more information and communication concerning the [procedure] once the application is accepted. The applicant does not know when the decision will be taken. It seems that there is too many time between the application moment and the final decision.”

- F'up: it was explained further how long the application process will normally take (5.4), see also Q4

“The different steps of the procedure after sending the application and once you received the formal letter with the result are not enough clear concerning the schedule. For instance, regarding the payment of the second invoice [= *annual listing fee - CT*] (we didn't exactly how much time we should receive the request). Nevertheless, it didn't deal with the core part of the review procedure.”

- F'up: see Q4 (1st and 3rd), Q5 and preceding comment.

Other comments:

“The application form itself was well structured, so that we didn't have to use the application guide intensively. All additional information, that can be standardised, is presented in the guide. For specific questions the members of the EQAR secretariat can be contacted quite freely and without any problems.”

“In order to fill in the documents I found it useful to look at the information of the listed members, available on the EQAR website.”