Committing to and advancing the European Quality Assurance Framework

EQAR Statement to the EHEA Tirana Ministerial Conference, May 2024

1. Achievements and remaining challenges

Celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Bologna Process also means celebrating EQAR, the only official organisation to be established directly as a result of the Bologna Process.

Since its foundation in 2008, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) has been instrumental in promoting transparency, trust and the recognition of the work of registered quality assurance agencies across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

With the launch of DEQAR in 2018, EQAR took its strategic goals of transparency, trust and recognition to a next level. DEQAR is the Database of External Quality Assurance Results of activities performed by EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies. DEQAR not only contains the reports and decisions but also provides information about the national quality assurance frameworks of the EHEA countries, thus enabling users to understanding the reports in their local context. To date, DEQAR includes almost 100.000 reports, with almost all EQAR-registered agencies regularly uploading their external quality assurance reports. Among other uses, DEQAR has proven to be a useful and reliable transparency tool for facilitating automatic recognition, issuing digital credentials to learners and supporting evidence-based policy making.

Although the Bologna Process has been hugely successful in many ways, there are key areas where commitments have not been fully realised by all EHEA systems.

At the Paris Ministerial Conference in 2018, ministers identified, "Quality assurance in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG)", as one of the three Key Commitments.

Two years later, at the Rome Ministerial Conference, ministers acknowledged the progress made in the development of quality assurance systems aligned with the ESG and committed to remove the remaining obstacles, including those related to the cross-border operation of EQAR-registered agencies and the application of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. Furthermore, ministers committed to ensure that external quality assurance arrangements cover transnational higher education in the EHEA with equal standards as for domestic provision.

Within the EHEA 33 systems have now fully realised this Key Commitment; four countries (Sweden, Greece, Turkey and Slovakia) have joined that group

since 2020 with their national quality assurance agencies becoming registered on EQAR, thus officially demonstrating that they work in line with the ESG.

The use of the ESG was designed to be applicable to all forms of higher education. For some time now, the ESG have been applied successfully as a framework for quality assurance of various new provisions and modes of higher education, e.g. small units of learning such as micro-credentials, offered by higher education institutions as well as other providers. DEQAR has been expanded recently to enable registered agencies to publish the results of quality assurance of micro-credentials and other providers.

Although there is still work to be done, the increase of cross-border activities in recent years is a testament of progress made by countries in opening their systems for EQAR-registered agencies. Nearly half of the EHEA systems allow higher education institutions and programmes to freely choose a suitable EQAR-registered agency to fulfil their obligations for external quality assurance, while complying with their national requirements.

Since being adopted at the Yerevan Ministerial Conference in 2015, only 20 EHEA systems have fully embraced the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes for all higher education institutions. There are many ongoing and emerging initiatives and cooperation formats for joint programmes, however the current (national) obstacles and lack of openness of the systems to the European Approach risk jeopardising the success of these initiatives.

EQAR-registered agencies implement a highly diverse portfolio of external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG. The upcoming revision of the ESG will need to continue to safeguard this diversity, which is key to accommodate the variety of higher education systems and institutions that characterises the EHEA.

2. Recommendations to Ministers

The diverse societal, political and technological developments of our time require Europe to act together.

To facilitate cooperation and exchange in higher education, the EHEA thus needs to push forward the robust European framework for quality assurance and pave the way for further integration while keeping a flexible and forward-looking approach.

EQAR recommends to ministers to:

- Call upon those countries that have not yet fulfilled the Key Commitment on quality assurance to take urgent steps to do so, in particular where their legal frameworks prevent full alignment with the ESG.

- Remove the remaining obstacles to the cross-border recognition of quality assurance results and decisions, especially with regard to joint programmes.

- Reaffirm the automatic recognition of qualifications as a key aim of the Bologna Process to boost the mobility of students and staff, based on the robust European quality assurance infrastructure established by the ESG, EQAR and DEQAR.

- Promote the use of DEQAR as well as encourage the publication of external quality assurance reports in DEQAR. This will improve and further contribute to the transparency of the quality assurance of higher education provision in the EHEA, facilitate automatic recognition and foster staff and student mobility.

3. EQAR's Future Contribution

In line with its public interest mission to support the development of the EHEA, EQAR commits to:

- Contribute to the planned revision of the ESG jointly with the authors, using the wealth of evidence and experience that EQAR has about the use of the current ESG.

- Encourage EHEA governments to use EQAR registration as a basis for the recognition of external quality assurance results, thus reducing the duplication of efforts that different (national) quality assurance processes (requirement) might generate.

- Continue our active contribution to the EHEA working structures, in particular to monitoring the implementation of quality assurance commitments and supporting EHEA governments in creating quality assurance systems in line with the ESG.

- Continue providing expertise and support in the domain of cross-border quality assurance and the use of the European Approach for quality assurance of Joint Programmes.

- Continuing our endeavours to make external quality assurance results accessible and understandable for everyone, with the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) being the forefront of these efforts.

- Support the connectivity of DEQAR with other initiatives, databases and tools in order to achieve more efficient interoperable workflows in the EHEA that facilitate automatic recognition and the issuing of digital credentials.

EQAR invites its Governmental Members to take an active role in shaping its contribution through the annual EQAR Members' Dialogue, and to use the opportunities for networking and exchange that it provides.

EQAR invites the remaining EHEA countries to become members and thus to further their engagement within the EHEA quality assurance framework.