

A Flexible European Quality Assurance Framework for a Diverse Higher Education Landscape

EQAR Statement to the EHEA Rome Ministerial Conference, 19 November 2020

1. Achievements and Remaining Challenges

Quality assurance in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) is one of the three Key Commitments identified at the Paris Ministerial Conference 2018.

28 EHEA countries now fully realised this Key Commitment; five countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Hungary and Latvia) have joined that group since 2018 with their national quality assurance agencies becoming registered on EQAR, thus officially demonstrating that they work in line with the ESG. This reflects the effectiveness of the new structured peer-support approach, initiated by the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) following the Paris Conference.

EQAR-registered agencies implement a highly diverse portfolio of external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG. This diversity illustrates that the ESG are able to accommodate the diversity of higher education systems and institutions that characterises the EHEA.

The use of the ESG already now reaches beyond traditional full degree programmes: while less widespread and thus less well-known so far, the ESG have successfully been used as a framework for quality assurance of various new modes of higher education, e.g. small units of learning such as micro-credentials, offered by higher education institutions as well as other providers.

About 50% of the EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies carry out cross-border quality assurance regularly, another 20% work across borders occasionally. Moreover, there is a growing demand from higher education institutions outside the EHEA for cross-border evaluation or accreditation by EQAR-registered agencies (see **Policy Brief 2020: External Quality Assurance Activities within and beyond the EHEA** <<https://www.eqar.eu/kb/external-ga-activities/>>).

The increase of cross-border activities over the recent years is testament to the ESG serving as a solid basis for trust and cross-border cooperation. However, many obstacles remain in national legislation as to the recognition of cross-border quality assurance, especially for joint programmes.

Despite the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes having been adopted already in 2015, less than one third of EHEA countries fully allow its use. A scaled-up offer of joint programmes being a cornerstone of many European Universities and other innovative cooperation formats, the remaining obstacles in national regulations risk obstructing such initiatives from reaching their ambitious goals.

2. Recommendations to Ministers

The diverse economic, social and environmental challenges of our time require Europe to act together and in unity; the Covid-19 pandemic has underlined that recently. To facilitate cooperation and exchange, the EHEA thus needs to consolidate the robust European framework for quality assurance and pave the way for further integration.

EQAR therefore recommends that ministers:

- Continue the successful structured peer-support system in order to facilitate the exchange of good practice and support the remaining EHEA countries in implementing the agreed key commitments;
- 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 and new initiatives such as the European Universities;
- Reaffirm the automatic recognition of qualifications, based on the robust European quality assurance infrastructure established by the ESG, EQAR and DEQAR, as a key aim of the Bologna Process to boost mobility of students and staff;
- Encourage higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies to develop and implement fit-for-purpose approaches to quality assurance of digital education, micro-credentials and other non-traditional forms of higher education, using the flexibility of the ESG and exploring the room for innovation.

3. EQAR's Future Contribution

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

- Contributing to the EHEA working structures, in particular to monitoring the implementation and supporting EHEA governments in creating quality assurance systems in line with the ESG;
- Continuing our efforts to make external quality assurance results accessible and understandable for everyone, with the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) being the centre of these efforts;
- Promoting the connectivity of DEQAR in order for data to be used by and with other European tools, databases and initiatives, e.g. in relation to digital credentials or automatic recognition;
- Contributing to the conversation about the different ways quality assurance can contribute to the steady improvement of the quality of education and teaching in line with the ESG's student-centred approach, based on specific information and data that EQAR can contribute;
- Examining whether EQAR's own processes are well-equipped to respond to the growing diversity of quality assurance arrangements catering for the increasingly diverse higher education provision across Europe;
- Undertaking a self-evaluation and external evaluation of EQAR's processes and activities in 2021 with a view to better serving the goals and objectives EQAR has been founded to achieve.

EQAR invites its Governmental Members to take an active role in shaping its contribution through the regular EQAR Members' Dialogues, 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.