



MESSAGE TO THE YEREVAN MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE

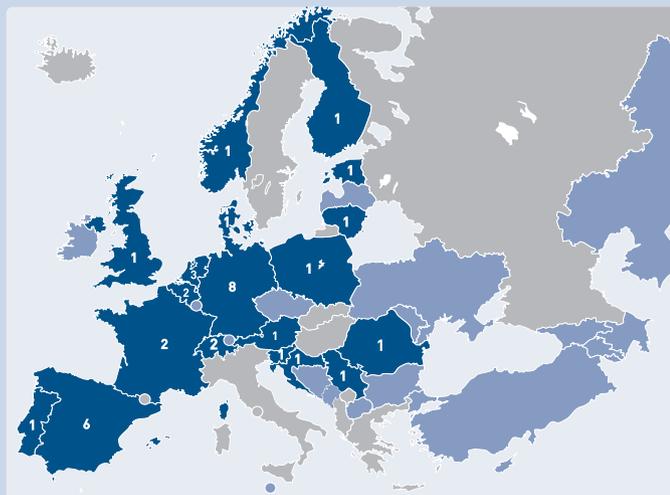
APRIL 2015

On the occasion of the European Higher Education Area's (EHEA) Ministers of Higher Education gathering in May 2015 in Yerevan, EQAR wishes to highlight its key activities and the main developments in cross-border quality assurance since the last ministerial meeting in Bucharest, as well as to offer a number of recommendations for the Yerevan Communiqué.

Main Developments Since Bucharest (2012)

1. The Register now includes **36 quality assurance agencies from 18 EHEA member countries**. These agencies demonstrated their substantial compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) through an independent external review.

2. **37 European governments** (representing 36 EHEA countries) are now members of EQAR, and participate in the overall strategic governance of EQAR as well as support its activities. Since the Bucharest ministerial conference, Azerbaijan, the Czech Republic,



Registered Agencies and Governmental Members

- Governmental Member countries where registered agencies are based
- Other countries where registered agencies are based
- Governmental Member countries without registered agency

Finland, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Moldova, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", the United Kingdom joined EQAR as governmental members. The annual **EQAR Members' Dialogue** has proven to be a successful platform for governmental members and stakeholders to discuss policy developments in quality assurance.

3. Thirteen EHEA countries (see map on opposite side) have set up a **regulatory framework to recognise the work of EQAR-registered agencies** within their national quality assurance system. They offer the possibility to (all or some) higher education institutions to choose a suitable EQAR-registered quality assurance agency for their regular external evaluation, accreditation or audit.

EQAR Contribution to Developing European Quality Assurance

4. EQAR actively participated in the work of the Steering Group for the **revision of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)**. The revised ESG take account of the developments since 2005, clarify their scope, include new modes of learning and higher education provisions, and link quality assurance more explicitly to other Bologna instruments, such as qualifications frameworks. They also reflect the specific challenges of cross-border.

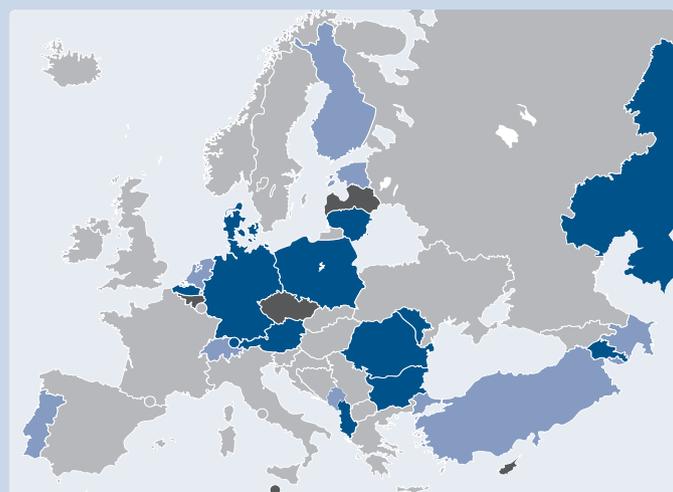
5. EQAR actively contributed to the development of the **European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes**. Trying to overcome fragmented quality assurance procedures, the approach is based on the agreed tools of EHEA, without applying additional national criteria. It follows through on the principle of recognising EQAR-registered agencies' decisions on joint programmes, as agreed in the Bucharest Communiqué.

6. The **Register Committee's full decisions** on all eligible applications as well as on registered QA agencies are now published. They can be consulted at: www.eqar.eu/decisions/.

7. To further increase the transparency of the Register Committee's decision-making practice and aid external review panels in understanding how the Committee has interpreted the ESG and used external review reports, the Register Committee's Practices and Interpretations in using the ESG have been published. A new policy document on the Use and Interpretation of the (revised) ESG will be published after their adoption by Ministers.

8. EQAR developed a **Policy on Transition to the Revised ESG**. The Policy provides registered agencies sufficient time to adjust their processes and ensures that by 2020 all agencies on the Register will have been reviewed against the revised version of the ESG.

9. EQAR updated its **Complaints Policy** in order to streamline its handling of concerns raised by individuals or organisations about registered agencies and their compliance with the ESG.



Openness to EQAR-registered QA agencies within EHEA

- Countries recognising EQAR-registered agencies as part of the national requirements for external QA
- Countries recognising foreign agencies as part of the national requirements for external QA
- Discussions are ongoing or plans have been made to establish a legal framework allowing EQAR-registered agencies to operate
- Countries not open to external QA evaluation by an internationally active EQAR-registered QA agency

International Quality Assurance Activity in the EHEA

10. In line with its strategic priorities, EQAR carried out the project **Recognising International Quality Assurance Activity in the EHEA (RIQAA)**. It included an analysis of legal provisions recognising EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies and their decisions as well as of the experiences of higher education institutions with external quality assurance across borders.

The main conclusions of the RIQAA project are:

/ At European level, the necessary infrastructure for quality assurance across borders has been put in place during the past years, based on ESG and EQAR together with other Bologna tools, especially the Qualifications Frameworks for the EHEA.

/ Quality assurance agencies have been actively cooperating internationally. Cross-border external quality assurance reviews of higher education institutions and programmes are a reality in almost all EHEA member countries.

/ Higher education institutions welcome if they can work with an agency that best suits their own mission and profile, which gives the most valuable feedback. A review by a foreign/international agency is perceived as a genuinely international experience, supporting the institution's international strategy and image.

/ Although additional challenges and efforts are required to prepare for such a review, these are outweighed by the additional benefits (e.g. receiving valuable feedback, improved recognition of their qualifications).

/ When they carry out reviews across borders, agencies bear a significant responsibility for delivering high quality reviews in less familiar QA frameworks and require support to develop systematised cross-border external quality assurance activities.

/ Despite the commitments of the Bucharest Communiqué (2012) progress has been slow in opening national higher education systems and recognising decisions from quality assurance agencies abroad.

/ International evaluations or accreditations therefore often happen in parallel to the mandatory, national external quality assurance, rather than being recognised as part of it. This leads to an unproductive duplication of efforts and does not contribute to a genuine European dimension to quality assurance.

The full RIQAA project report can be found at:

www.eqar.eu/riqaa/

Further Activities by EQAR

11. EQAR will continue to discharge its responsibility for overseeing agencies' compliance with the ESG and monitor their cross-border activities in particular. EQAR will therefore:

/ review the effectiveness of its tools for follow-up and monitoring of registered agencies' compliance with the ESG;

/ enhance its provision of information for students, institutions, the labour market and society with regards to cross-border EQA activities of listed agencies including accessibility of the reports and results of these activities;

/ pay full attention to quality assurance agencies' cross-border EQA activities (in line with the ESG) in considering their applications for registration and renewal;

/ report annually on the development of national frameworks for cross-border quality assurance across the EHEA and on the extent of registered agencies' activities across borders.

5. Recommendations to Ministers

12. The revised version of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) show that there is a clear common ground for internal and external quality assurance of higher education in the EHEA. The new ESG provide a better and more solid basis for trust and cross-border recognition of quality assurance decisions.

EQAR therefore recommends that EHEA ministers:

/ review and, if necessary, adapt national regulations to help their national agency/agencies to comply with the revised ESG;

/ allow their higher education institutions' to take responsibility for assuring their own quality and to choose a suitable EQAR-registered quality assurance agency for the external quality assurance process;

/ allow EQAR-registered agencies to operate in their country without additional prerequisites and recognise their outcomes in line with the national requirements.

EQAR further invites all EHEA states that are currently not Governmental Members of EQAR to become members.

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