Message to the Yerevan Ministerial Conference
– adopted by the EQAR General Assembly, 23 March 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 some of its 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.

1. Main Developments Since Bucharest (2012)

1. The Register now includes 36 quality assurance agencies from 18 EHEA member countries that have demonstrated their substantial compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

2. 37 European governments (representing 36 EHEA countries) are now members of EQAR, thus participating in the overall strategic governance of EQAR and supporting its activities. Since the Bucharest ministerial conference, Azerbaijan, the Czech Republic, 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 Figure 2) have set up at national level a regulatory/legal framework to recognise the work of EQAR-registered agencies within their national quality assurance system and thus offer the possibility to (some or all) higher education institutions to choose a suitable EQAR-registered quality assurance agency for their regular external evaluation, accreditation or audit.

Figure 1: 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

Figure 2: Registered Agencies and Governmental Members
2. EQAR Contribution to Developing European Quality Assurance

4. EQAR actively participated in the work of the Steering Group (2012-2014) for the revision of the 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 the other Bologna instruments, such as qualifications frameworks. They also reflect the specific challenges of cross-border quality assurance activities.

5. EQAR actively contributed to the development of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. The Approach addresses the issue of fragmented quality assurance procedures and provides a joint approach for quality assurance of joint programmes, based on the agreed tools of EHEA and without applying additional national criteria. The approach is based on the principle of recognising EQAR-registered agencies’ decisions on joint programmes, which was agreed upon 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: https://eqar.eu/publications/decisions.html.

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 has been published. A new document on the Use and Interpretation of the (revised) ESG will be published after the ESG have been adopted by Ministers.

8. EQAR developed a Policy on Transition to the Revised ESG. The Policy provides registered agencies sufficient time to be reviewed against the revised ESG 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 dealing with concerns raised by individuals or organisations about registered agencies and their compliance with the ESG.

3. International Quality Assurance Activity in the EHEA

10. In line with its strategic plan, EQAR carried out the project Recognising International Quality Assurance Activity (RIQAA). The project included an in-depth analysis of legal provisions in EHEA countries recognising EQAR registered quality assurance agencies (QAA) and their decisions, and the use made of such provisions by higher education institutions/programmes.

11. 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 identify 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 the best feedback, a review best suited to their own needs, or improved recognition of their qualifications).
   • When they carry out reviews across borders, QAAs bear a 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 and recognising decisions from quality assurance agencies abroad.
   • International evaluations or accreditations therefore often happen in addition and parallel to the national, mandatory external quality assurance, rather than being recognised as part of it. This leads to an unproductive duplication of efforts and does not contribute to promoting a genuine European dimension to quality assurance.

The full RIQAA project report can be found at:
https://eqar.eu/projects/analysis-recognition.html
4. Further Activities by EQAR

12. 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

The revised version of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) show that there is a clear common basis for internal and external quality assurance of higher education in the EHEA.

The revised ESG offer 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.