

EQAR Members' Dialogue 2016

Summary of discussions re. database of external QA reports

The EQAR Members' Dialogue, held on 24/25 November 2016 in Oslo, discussed the [report and operational model for a database of external quality assurance reports](#). Members welcomed the thorough analysis, which enabled a well-informed discussion.

1. Potential users

- Most members received positive feedback from their national stakeholders and considered that the database would enhance accessibility of results (i.e. reports and decisions) from external quality assurance procedures in line with the ESG.
- Members considered that a European database could be useful for various groups:
 - **recognition information centres** (ENIC-NARICs) and **recognition officers** in higher education institutions would be a key user group. They could use the database to establish whether a higher education institution (or its programmes) has been subject to external quality assurance in line with the ESG;
 - **quality assurance agencies** could use the database to find previous external quality assurance results (from other agencies) for a higher education institution which has requested an evaluation, accreditation or audit;
 - (potential) **students** could use the database to inform themselves of a higher education institution's quality or how it is managed;
 - **higher education institutions** could also use the database for additional purposes than recognition, e.g. to access objective information on potential partners before entering into a cooperation;
 - various other public and private agencies could use the database to establish whether a higher education institution (or its programmes) has been subject to the external quality assurance, for a variety of purposes.
- Some members specifically highlighted that they consider clear and fast access to external quality assurance results in line with the ESG as a pre-condition to realise automatic recognition of qualifications in their system.

- Next to value added for potential users, there would be increased visibility at the European level of registered agencies' work.

2. Functionality

- Most members welcomed the “lean approach” on which the operational model is based: it includes only the information that is really necessary for potential users and that registered agencies have available already. That is, EQAR itself would establish the platform to which agencies provide that information, but would not have to produce new information.
- The lean approach was considered crucial to make the initiative realistic. It could always be decided later to add other features, if there was a need for them.
- It was noted that ENIC-NARIC offices in some countries had confirmed that the proposed lean model would be useful and sufficient, as it included the information relevant for recognition bodies' work. While there was an understanding that decisions could not be based solely on the database, the information should be triangulate with other sources.
- It was noted that external quality assurance reports and decisions are not always easily accessible in terms of style and language, especially to regular students. While the database would make it easier to find reports, it would not have direct influence on their readability for different audiences.
- It was noted that the history function also needs to extend to the national system information. This information might change over time, and for proper contextualisation it was important to show the information as effective when an external QA procedure was carried out.
- In general, it was considered useful to use ETER as a starting point, and thus to reuse the information already available and updated by others, rather than to duplicate efforts. Some members, however, stressed that ETER does not cover all institutions in the countries it covers. It was therefore underlined that it would not serve as an exclusive list and that all higher education institutions would be equally represented. EQAR would receive the necessary information on officially recognised institutions not included in ETER from registered agencies or national authorities.

3. Costs

- Most members considered that the costs were reasonable in relation to the potential use and benefits.

- Some members raised questions regarding the cost estimate. It was underlined that the estimates are based on the expectation that the system would function with minimal manual intervention once it has been set up.
- While it would be welcome if additional financial support (e.g. through the EU's Erasmus+ programme) could be secured for the implementation phase, it was considered logical and necessary to ensure sustainability to cover the long-term costs through an increase of EQAR's membership fees. The expected increase was considered reasonable.
- Members also noted that the effort (and thus cost) required on the side of registered agencies to provide the required information regularly was probably more significant compared to the cost of central management. Members found it crucial that the database would be implemented in a way that minimises the additional workload for agencies.

4. Challenges

- Members considered that the risks and challenges were comprehensively addressed in the report.
- There was consensus that the key challenge was to ensure prompt updating, i.e. to ensure that agencies provide information on the external quality assurance procedures they have conducted in a timely manner.
- Members agreed that this was only realistic if the information can be exported/uploaded automatically from the agencies' own systems, using a common interface, at least for those agencies that wished to do so. It was welcome that this is a cornerstone of the operational model, and it would minimise the workload for agencies after the initial set-up.
- Members agreed that, rather than obliging EQAR-registered agencies to participate in the database, participation should be incentivised. It is thus crucial to ensure a low burden of participation through a smart and efficient approach. The prospect of increased visibility at European level could be a further factor.
- Some members had received positive feedback from their national quality assurance agencies, and expected that agencies would be interested to participate.
- There are several important indicators to gauge success and how well the database works: number of agencies participating, number of visitors, including returning visitors; number of cases that required manual intervention by EQAR. These should be monitored after set up.

5. Next steps

- While it was suggested to pilot a database with some agencies, members agreed that any pilot would need to be open to all interested. Any consultations, meetings or workshops should always be open to ensure that every agency has the opportunity to contribute to drafting of technical specifications.
- Members suggested that EQAR should organise an initial workshop for registered agencies, in order to get detailed feedback on the technicalities and how the system could minimise the burden placed on them. This would be a first step to draft detailed technical specifications.
- It was suggested for EQAR to apply for external funding for the setup phase, should sources be available. It was recommended to also discuss this further with the European Commission.
- Members asked for a formal proposal to the 2017 EQAR General Assembly to include the establishment of the database in EQAR's Work Plan and to provide the necessary budget for the database, including a corresponding adaptation of membership fees.