

## SHORT DEQAR REVIEW

### Intro: the DEQAR project

EURASHE asked me to write a review of EQAR's DEQAR project as an independent QA expert. This review is based on the visit of DEQAR's website as developed and accessible in its public preview on 22 and 23 March 2019 and uses as criteria its transparency and the quality of the amount of public information already collected, the accessibility and research features as well as the comparability of its data. The remarks as user are purely personal and not as representative of one of its identified users' categories. (see below)

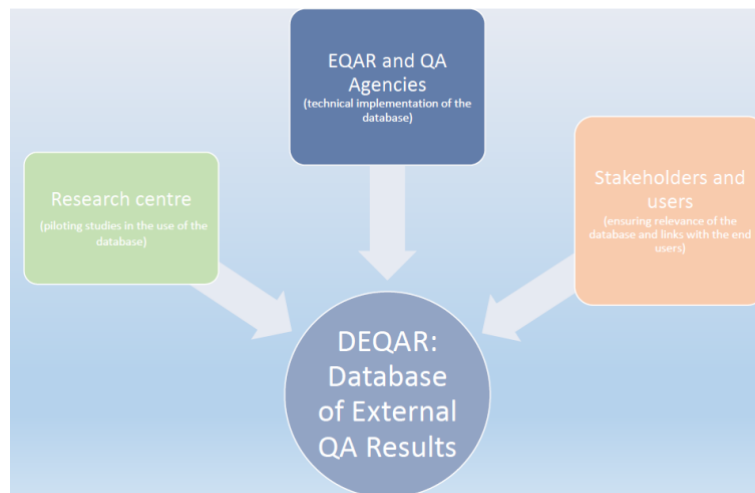
DEQAR stands for "Database of External Quality Assurance Reports". It is an international project that was selected for EU co-funding under Erasmus+ Key Action 3, European Forward-Looking Cooperation Projects and is coordinated by EQAR. The main aim of the project is the development of a database that will enhance access to reports and decisions on higher education institutions (HEI) and/or programmes externally reviewed against the ESG by EQAR-registered agencies, primarily in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) but also their reports from reviewing in non-EHEA countries.

Its objectives are: improve access to information on the external quality assurance (EQA) of higher education (HE), facilitate the recognition of qualifications, map the diversity of EQA frameworks in Europe, facilitate the exchange of data and links with other tools, and pilot the use of the database as a basis for Europe-wide thematic studies.

The database is expected to enable a broad range of users, including but not limited to: recognition information centres (ENIC-NARICs), recognition and admission officers in HEIs, students and student organisation representatives, quality assurance agencies (QAA), and (HE) ministry representatives and other authorities. The information of the database should satisfy their information needs and support different types of decisions, such as recognition of degrees, mobility of students, portability of student grants or loans, strategic search for partnership and network members by HEIs.

During the preparation of the project there was a feasibility study that showed that the ENIC-NARICs were most interested followed by the students' organisations and the recognition and admission officers in HEIs. The QAAs seemed to be divided so that their consortium, ENQA, could not make a united decision.

However, the project could collect as stakeholders and users all key stakeholders of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), being: the Italian ENIC-NARIC CIMEA, ENQA, ESU, EUA, EURASHE and EI, as well as 16 QAAs, who have, together with the German Accreditation Council (GAC) and the *Hochschulrektorenkonferenz* (HRK), as main responsibility the technical implementation of the database. Indeed, the DEQAR database is and will be loaded from their existing national databases (NVAO only Flanders). A comparable collection was done before in the Qrossroads project of the European Consortium of Accreditation (ECA), who is one of the associate partners. Other associate partners are 3 registered QAAs from non-eligible countries, being the Russian AKKORK and NCPA, and the Kosovo KAA, though the latter is not EQAR-registered anymore. Last but not least, the DEQAR project also has a research centre, the Centre for Higher Education Governance (CHEGG) of Ghent University, who will be responsible for piloting studies in the use of the database. The figure below shows the structure of the project:



### Transparency and amount of public information

Within the QA framework of the EHEA as described in the 2015 European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) two of the main principles are the stakeholders' model and transparency through public information. The DEQAR project is clearly a project in which all the stakeholders are involved. ESG 1.8 (Public information provided by the HEI), 2.5 (criteria for EQA outcomes should be public), 2.6 (public full reports), 3.1 (public QAA mission statements), and 3.4 (publication of thematic analyses) all prescribe the necessity of being transparent and of providing public information.

One of the main asset of the DEQAR project is that, at least as EQA reports by EQAR-registered QAAs are concerned, it collects all the material in one database. Thus the users can find all the information on an international level by only consulting one database. In former times searchers for this information could either consult its less developed forerunner, Qrossroads, or all the national databases separately.

Of course, the credibility of the database depends on the amount of EQA reports that the project can collect and on the quality of those reports, mainly defining the quality of the information. The linked interesting information per country will be dealt with below. Unfortunately, the quality of the reports can hardly be investigated, since they are embedded in different national systems with different political and cultural contexts. However, it would be most interesting to launch a research on the quality of the reports, not as ENQA sometimes does against the standards, but purely from the informative and convincing (which facts, analyses and arguments underpin decisions?) side of the reader.

At the moment there seem to be 37 EHEA countries covered, gathering information about 554 HEIs. There are also already 18 non-EHEA countries inserted with 49 HEIs. This non-EHEA information is delivered by EQAR-registered agencies being partners of the project and having performed an EQA activity ending in (a) report(s) in those countries. The basic information on the HEI includes location(s), website, founding year (of merger), QF-EHEA level(s) and the ETER code (ETER is the first comprehensive database on European HEIs <https://www.eter-project.com/code>).

The fact that the number of data per country, both EHEA and non-EHEA, differs so much is primarily caused by the degree of commitment of the QAAs, either being partner or not, delivering all their EQA activities and reports or not, and whether the national agency covers all HEIs/programmes in the country or not. Although the degree of coverage per country is numbered, it is a pity that there is

no indication of totals of HEIs, nor reviewed ones, neither of the total number of study programmes within the country. Although this would mean a tremendous work surplus for the project, it would certainly gain in transparency and give an idea of how much information is already gathered. This recommendation could be formulated in a simple fraction (# of HEIs/programmes with reports in the database/total # of HEIs/programmes within the country). Yet, the starting numbers of countries, and HEIs as well as unnumbered study programmes in the EHEA are already impressive, and certainly in top countries such as Belgium/Flanders (fully covered), Spain (450), Poland (315), France (202), Romania (88), and Germany (87).

The basic information that is shown on the level of study programmes consists of the qualification, the QF-EHEA level, the type of EQA, the agency that performed the EQA, the formal decision, and the starting and expiry dates of the decision. Then you can click to get the review report and/or decision. In this information the number of ECTS is really missing. Although it will certainly be mentioned in the report, the number of ECTS is that important both for mobility and recognition, and it differs that much among national qualifications frameworks that it should be mentioned in the basic information.

Although one should think the number of data/EQA reports is also limited by the language, this is not the case. All reports are in their original, mostly native, tongue, and some have an English summary. So there is no limitation of only collecting reports in English. Yet, since the lingua franca of the EHEA is English and this is the language that is most understood internationally by the potential DEQAR users, it would be good to draw the attention of the QAAs to produce an English summary, at least a decision in English, as is suggested in the ESG.

The fact that some QAAs in the EHEA, though full ENQA members and EQAR-registered, did or do not want to provide their EQA reports to DEQAR is a pity. Yet, the start with more than 16 QAAs has proved to be a success and HEIs who want to upload their EQA report seem to be able to do so, e.g. Maastricht University Bachelor in European Public Health reviewed by AHPGS, although the report could also be provided by the QAA not being partner of DEQAR. Thus some (parts of) countries are already fully covered, while others (sometimes even by the same QAA as The Netherlands in NVAO's case) are almost not. The latter depends on which QAA reviewed the HEI/programme and whether the QAA is a DEQAR partner as well as to which degree the country is open to EQA by non-national QAAs. It can only be hoped that DEQAR will win in credibility based the number of HEIs/programmes that are already included in the database, so that QAAs that have not provided any report will reconsider their decisions.

Another very positive side of the DEQAR database is that it also described in clear style the national EQA framework and system as well as the country's openness to international EQA. These country profiles are important not only for users as QAAs and HEIs, but especially also for the ENIC-NARICs. The fact that in the section with the country information there is standard place for information about whether the country is open to any suitable EQAR-registered agency as well as whether it allows the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes is a real asset in times of internationalisation of HE. There is often even a possibility to click to the national law on HE (in native tongue or English) if provided.

However, the country profiles lack some important structural information, since it makes the common mistake in QA only to concentrate on legal procedures and methodologies instead of on elements central in quality making as identified in part 1 of the ESG. Two major lacks, even along the line of the ESG are the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and ECTS. ESG 1.2 prescribes the use of a NQF in the design and approval of programmes with learning outcomes (LOs) and its link with

the QF-EHEA. It would be a major step forward to insert in the country profile information on whether the nation has a NQF, how its use is legislated and how it is linked to the QF-EHEA. As this information is not difficult to get either from the EQAR country members or from the registered QAAs or from the EHEA implementation report, this should not cause a heavy work surplus.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> major lack in the country profile is the national system of ECTS. All countries whose HEIs work with ECTS have a national counting system in their laws on HE. It would be interesting to have an overview of the existing HE degrees or qualifications and the amounts of ECTS for each level. This essential information for recognition and mobility could easily be made in a table. In these ways, by adding information on NQF and ECTS, the country profile would also be linked to the information about the study programme, where the level is built in and ECTS should be added. (see below)

Unfortunately no table with the standards or criteria of the national EQA framework is given. The framework used can only be derived from the EQA report itself, but there is the problem of the language again. It would be good to insert the table of standards or criteria, both on institutional and/or programme level, so that the national authorities can compare and learn from each other, but also that the users can compare for recognition or mobility reasons. Upgrading such a table from the EQA report to the basic information about the country would certainly raise the useful information and transparency. The collection and comparison of such EQA framework tables could be a subject of research by the research partner.

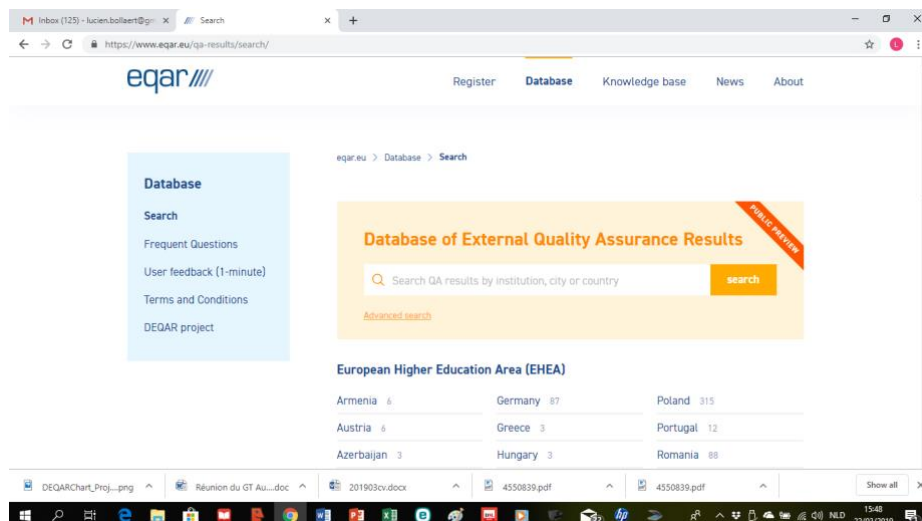
Although the student's life is still focussed on the study programme and less on the HEI, except perhaps its institutional services. However, the information gathered within the DEQAR database depends on the level the national EQA system concentrates on. Thus in those countries the EQA is on institutional level, the user is obliged to look for or click the HEI's own (web)information to know which study programmes are offered and so allowed under the umbrella of a positive EQA decision on institutional level. If the national EQA is on the level of study programmes the result is shown on this level and you can click to the public external reports. It is not always clear though whether the list of reviewed programmes is complete per HEI or not.

In how much the quality (results or assurance system) of the study programmes is reflected or dealt with in the institutional EQA reports (results and/or QA system) would be a good subject for investigation by the research partner.

### Accessibility and search

The database is accessible on EQAR's portal website and announced both on top of its home page as "database" as well as a possible entrance to start the research immediately. It would be good though to enlist it also in the left column of all other EQAR website pages, not only those of the databases.

Once on the home page of EQAR or the database itself the search for EQA results can be done by selecting a country or a QAA. Unfortunately there is no search possibility with the name or degree of a study programme. In advanced search too you can only select a country or an agency. The former can also be done from the list of countries on the project's home page below the search entrance. The amount of HEIs within each country in the database is indicated in parentheses and thus clear at a glance. Yet, the degree of coverage in relation to the total number of HEIs is not. (see recommendation of fraction)



In case of EQA on the level of study programmes the degrees are enlisted after a click on the name of the HEI. Yet, there too there is no fraction of the number of programmes enlisted in the database to the total given.

The way to enter and research the database is not only quite accessible. It is also user friendly. The link to the country profile is included. The fact that on the homepage of the database you can also click on frequently (asked) questions, a user feedback of a student, the terms and conditions of the project as well as a general description of the project from the feasibility study raises its background information and transparency. The section of frequently asked questions is very helpful as far as clarification of used terminology is concerned, the limitations of the database (in case a HEI and/or programme shows no results in the research of the database) and even the possibility to report mistakes and the legal allowance also referring to the terms and conditions to use the database.

Furthermore there is a specific technical section for documentation for QAAs, which is necessary as the whole database is fed by the databases of the QAAs, next to the section of basic information and reference to the national EQA system and legislation.

In all these ways technically speaking the database is easily accessible and quite user friendly, except for the information missing mentioned in previous chapter.

### Comparability

The comparability of the information provided by the database and its research possibilities depends on the information itself as well as on its transparency. As the various EHEA implementation reports show the EHEA is still quite diverse and the national authorities still have the competence to rule HE legally. Thus it is hard to compare national systems, although the structured information in the basic information about the countries allows to compare certain items, such as the EQA system and the degree of international openness. The addition of tables with the standards or criteria used in the national EQA framework as well as information on the NQF and the ECTS regulation in the section about the country would enhance the comparability and transparency.

The same can be said about the addition of information about the number of ECTS per degree in the basic information about the study programmes, as this number is also still a national affair. The

(international) comparability of the quality of HEIs and study programmes is always a hard process. As the databases clearly and rightly opt for the lengthy descriptions (and scores) to be found in the EQA reports, which mostly use national standards or criteria as used by the QAAs, it takes quite some time and effort to read the reports. It is even harder to compare them. This is precisely why rankings and transparency tools are so attractive. Yet, as on national level, diving into the reports is still the best way to hopefully get to know something about the quality of education of a HEI or study programme at a particular HEI in a specific country.

Thus, it seems to me that the database will rather be used as an information tool for recognition and mobility rather than for comparing the quality of teaching and learning. Anyway, as the information of the degree of coverage of all HEIs and/or study programmes is missing, a full comparison will be always be impossible.

### Conclusions

The DEQAR database already contains a lot of information both on the level of the national EQA systems as on the state of EQA finalized in a decision and report on institutional or programme level. The most added value of DEQAR is that the information is that international, trustworthy and complete and that it can be researched at one place by some clicks. The fact that this database is managed and controlled by EQAR, being the only independent Bologna organisation existing, but in close collaboration with all the stakeholders, is an important victory. Hopefully the information will extend to the whole EHEA. The information is easily accessible and the research is user friendly. The information is important for all stakeholders of HE, but will primarily be used for reasons of recognition (ENIC-NARIC), for reasons of information about national EQA systems (QAAs and national authorities), the EQA status of HEIs and/or study programmes (HEIs' strategic partner search and recognition of mobility and students' enrolment and/or mobility choices). While DEQAR holds a lot of information, the information can and will be used less for reasons of comparison.

### Recommendations

In order to enhance the information and the data research following recommendations can be formulated:

- Collect more data, both by convincing the QAAs as well as the member countries of EQAR, who cover almost the EHEA completely.
- Try to develop fractions with the number of HEIs/programmes in the database as numerator and the total number of HEIs/programmes in the country as denominator.
- Add structurally information on the NQF and ECTS system in the country profiles.
- Add a table with the standards or criteria used in the national EQA systems in the section with information on the country.
- Add the ECTS in the section with basic information on the study programme.
- Try to convince the QAAs to write at least an English summary of the EQA report and provide an English translation of the decision.
- Try to convince the QAAs to write English reports when dealing with an international EQA or using the European Approach.
- Be sure only to collect information from the time the QAA is or was registered, if the information is still valid. (*\*Note from EQAR: This is being done already*)

- Launch a research proposal to examine the information about the quality and EQA results on the level of study programmes in institutional review reports.
- (Launch a research proposal to investigate the informative and convincing side of EQA reports for the reader.)

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