Policy Brief 2020

External Quality Assurance Activities within and beyond the EHEA

-June 2020-

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1. Introduction

External quality assurance takes place in a dynamic higher education sector, that had to in the past decades adapt to the massification of higher education, to turbulent economic times and more recently to the lockdown measures as a result of the global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus. As countries and quality assurance agencies are adapting to new challenges, new ways of teaching and learning, and new ways of quality assurance, it is thus important to keep the information on the existing and changing landscape of quality assurance systems up-to-date.

As part of its primary activity EQAR manages the Register, but also monitors the agency's external QA activities and substantive changes in their work and annually collects information on the number of external QA activities carried out. The activities of EQAR-registered agencies and their QA results are recognised across the EHEA and on that basis EQAR also monitors the regulations and legal frameworks in all EHEA countries.

This is why EQAR has prepared the following analysis mapping the external QA activities in line with the ESG across and beyond the EHEA and reflecting on the latest trends and changes in the external quality assurance of higher education systems within Europe.

The current policy brief is built on the data collected from EQAR's regular Annual Update of registered QA agencies activities from 2014 until 2019, information provided by registered QA agencies within their applications reports to EQAR including any additional information provided within agencies' change reports and the knowledge base on external QA across the EHEA i.e. implementation of key commitments, cross-border quality assurance and European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes.

2. Registered Agencies' External Quality Assurance Activities

The way quality assurance processes are aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) within all Bologna signatory countries is reflected in the external QA activities of EQAR-registered agencies. The portfolio of these agencies include over 300 forms of external QA activities comprising of all forms of evaluations, accreditations, certification, assessments, audits or reviews within the scope of the ESG included in the agency's list of activities. There are ca. 140 forms of external QA at institutional level, ca 150 forms of external QA at programme level and 30 different joint programme accreditations and evaluations. Less common (ca. 12) are a combination of institutional and programme external QA activities carried out jointly. Overall, this picture suggests that the evaluation procedures of quality assurance agencies aligned with the ESG, and by extension the quality assurance systems where they operate, are extremely diversified.

A third of quality assurance agencies carry out (or have 'on offer') from 1 to 3 forms of reviews, one third between 4 and 8, and another third conduct 9 to 15 types of external QA activities within the scope of the ESG.

Considering the volume, spread and type (programme, institutional and joint programme) of these activities, the analysis below reflects on possible trends and changes within higher education systems across the EHEA since 2014 with a focus on the latest data collected for 2019.

Trends in the external QA activities of EQAR-registered agencies

In 2019, a total of 11.312 external QA activities were conducted by EQAR-registered agencies

at programme, institutional or joint programme level.

Compared to 2018 we observe an increase in the volume of external QA activities by 22% for 2019. The increase can be attributed to some degree to the increase in programme level external QA which spiked by 30 % while institutional level external QA have dropped by 20%. The share of programme/institutional level of external QA activities is however comparable to the figures declared by agencies for previous years. In general, the disparities in the frequency of external QA can be largely explained by changes in the review cycles for each agency which might lead to a considerable drop in activities in the year after that, or due to changes within certain higher education systems i.e. changing from an individual programme evaluation to a clustered field specific programmes evaluation etc.
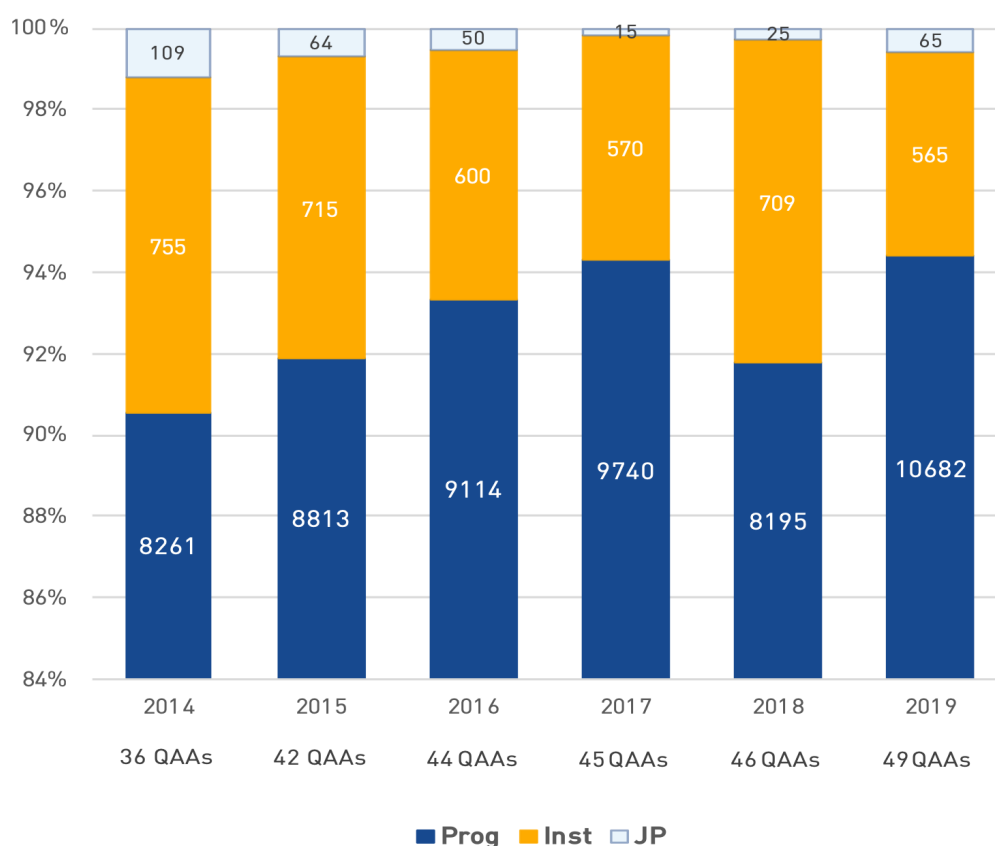
Chart 1: Programme, Institutional and Joint Programme reviews by year (2014-2019)

Compared to 2018, 14 QA agencies (AAC-DEVA, ACQUIN, AQ Austria, AQAS, ARACIS, EKKA, evalag, HCERES, IQAA, madri+d, MusiQuE, NCPA, NVAO, Unibasq) had increased the number of external QA activities at programme level by at least 50% while only 8 have registered a drop of 50% (AI, AQU, ASIIN, FIBAA, IAAR, NEAA, SKVC, SQAA).

While yearly changes in the volume of external QA activities of agencies are common, a few agencies have recorded a continuous decrease for the past four years (A3ES, ACSUG, AK-KORK and QAA) or a continuous increase (AQ Austria, NVAO, and QQI).

With a view to higher education systems where EQAR-registered agencies operate (covering the whole higher education system), the data revealed there was a **significant increase in programme level** external QA in 2019 compared to the previous year (of over 40 %) in Spain, France, the Netherlands, Romania, Belgium, Austria and Russia, while some higher education systems recorded a significant **decrease institutional level** external QA activities in

2019 compared to the previous year i.e. over 40% drop in the institutional audits or evaluations in United Kingdom, Kazakhstan, Portugal, Germany and Slovenia[1].

These changes in the volume of external QA assurance activities may be explained by the a number of different system level changes. Some illustrative cases are presented below:

- In **Portugal**, the national QA agency (A3ES) has started its second cycle of accreditation in 2018, based on a combination of institutional audits with a sampling system of programmes to be accredited. The accreditation is carried out by scientific domaine, clustering together programmes within and across institutions. In addition, at the end of the First Cycle, all higher education institutions are being assessed through a once-off Institutional Assessment (AINST), which leads to a lower number of external QA activities reported after 2019.

- **Slovenia** has changed its evaluation framework from a predominantly programme level accreditation to an institutional one (following the adoption of the 2016 ACT Amending the Higher Education (HEA-K)). While the national QA agency (SQAA) has kept the accreditation of new study programme, it has reduced the re-accreditation form at programmes level to 2% of the total number of accredited programmes within a year. This change lead to a significant reduction in the overall number of accreditations carried out. The drop in activities was further coupled with the end of the institutional evaluation cycle in 2019.

- In **Lithuania**, 2019 marked the end of the cycle of evaluating single running study programmes. The national QA agency (SKVC) has set up a new system for the evaluation of clusters of study programmes grouped by study fields (to be launched in 2020). From 2021 onwards SQAA further intends to roll ou**t its first round of institutional evaluations.** The number of individual programme accreditations has considerably decreased over the past years in preparation for these changes.

Spread of the external QA activities (2019)
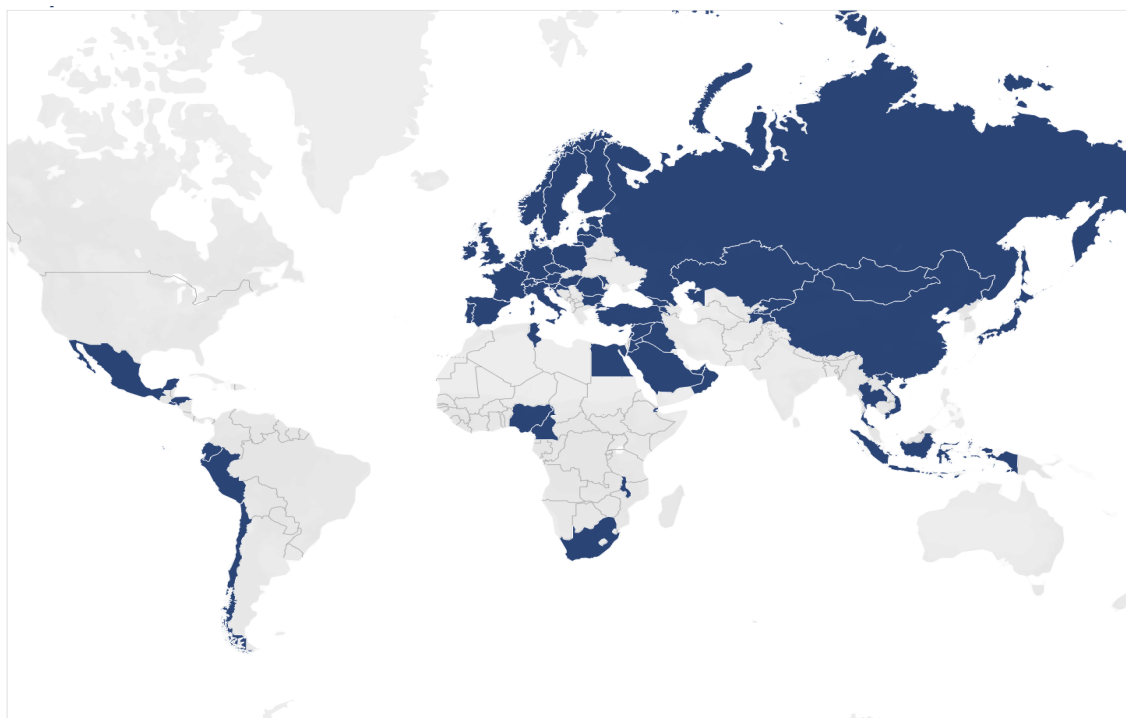
Map 1: Map of external QA activities of EQAR-registered QA agencies in 2019

In 2019, the 48 registered quality assurance agencies carried out external QA in 68 higher education systems. The spread of EQAR-registered QA agencies' activities in 2019 was similar to the previous years. The external QA activities were carried across 34 the EHEA higher education systems.

The analysis also revealed that about half (51%) of the total number of reviews carried out in 2019 took place within only two countries, with large higher education systems i.e. France and Spain. These activities were carried out by the national or regional QA agencies from within these countries i.e. HCERES & CTI in France and ANECA, AQU, ACSUCYL, ACSUG, Unibasq, ACPUA for Spain, but also by a number of other registered agencies carrying out cross-border external QA I.e. EAEVE, MusiQuE.

Similar results were also reported in previous years, with the concentration of external QA activities taking places in two or three countries i.e. in 2018, 51% of reviews were carried out in Spain, Kazakhstan and Germany by 25 registered agencies, in 2017, 54% of reviews were carried out in Spain, France and Germany by 20 registered quality assurance agencies (same for 2016).

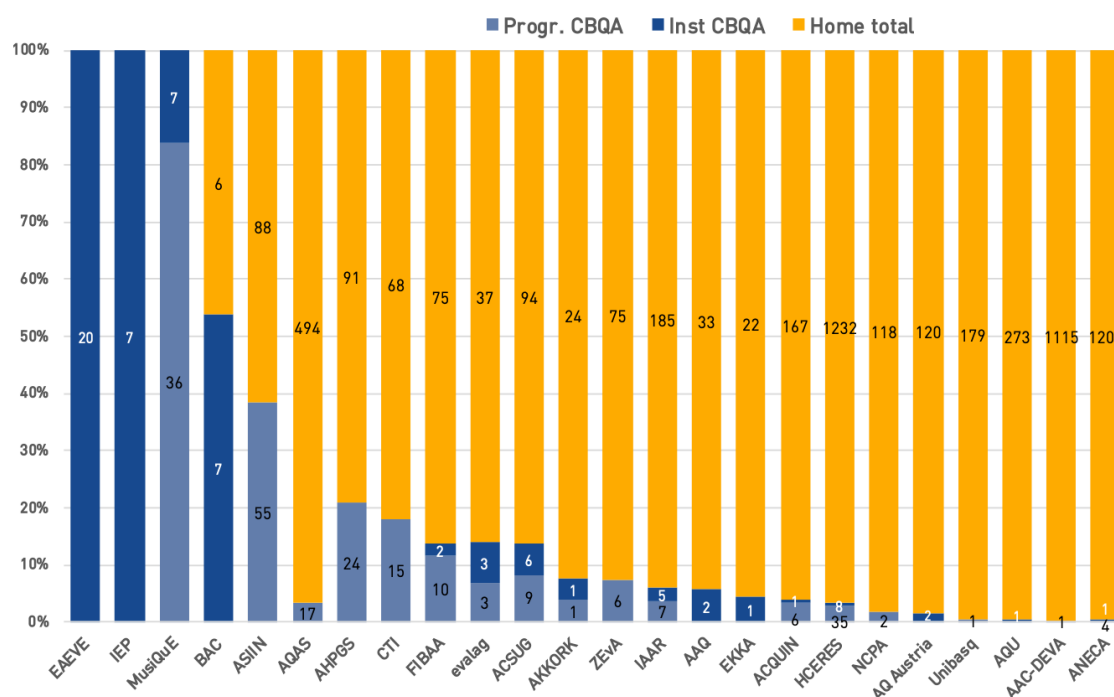## 2.1 Cross-Border External Quality Assurance Activities

Chart 2: Cross-border vs home based external QA activities (2019)

In 2019, 25 out of the 49 registered QA agencies have reported external QA activities in a country other than the one where the agency is based in. These agencies carried out a total of 310 cross-border QA activities of which 63% at programme level, 20% at institutional level and 17% at joint programme level. The share of the cross-border external QA activities, compared to the 'home reviews' of these agencies ranges from 6% (in 2016, 2017 and 2019) to 8% (in 2018). This share varies among QA agencies from 100% to less than 50% (see chart 2 and further analysis below).

Classification of cross-border external QA activities

European QA agencies such as i.e. EAEVE, IEP and MusiQuE carry out only cross-border QA activities by definition, since their scope of reviews is not designed for one particular higher education system (regional or national) (see chart above).

The large group of QA agencies with a primarily regional or national focus can be grouped by their share of cross-border reviews:

- **higher share, representing a key part of their core external QA activity:** 30 to 50% of their total volume of reviews i.e. BAC, ASIIN, AQAS (2019);

- **moderate share, representing a substantial part of their external QA activity**: 10 to 20% of their total volume of reviews i.e. AHPGS, CTI, FIBAA, evalag and ACSUG (2019);

- **lower share, representing an occasional form of activity**: < 10% i.e. AKKORK, ZEvA, IAAR, HCERES (2019) etc.

Another differentiation is whether QA agencies offer a **field-specific external QA or a label** for specialised educational establishments, faculties or programmes across-borders. Such external QA activities currently include the accreditation of music academies by MusiQuE, visitation of establishments for veterinary education by EAEVE, accreditation of engineering

study programmes by CTI, the award of a specific field label EUR-ACE, EUR-INFO by ASIIN, the institutional accreditation offered by BAC. These assessments may be part of the recognised accreditation framework i.e. lead to a judgment on accreditation or may only serve as an add-on to their regular external QA procedure, done mostly for enhancement purposes.

Higher education institutions within and beyond the EHEA may be also seeking an ESG-review by QA agencies from a certain country or region. The choice of such an agency is often made by the higher education institutions considering the working language of the QA agency: i.e. HCERES (reviews carried out in French for higher education institutions in Cote d'Ivoire, Lebanon, Djibouti, Luxembourg), AQ Austria (reviews in German at higher education institutions in Luxembourg and Liechtenstein), ACQUIN (reviews carried out in German Liechtenstein), AHPGS, AQAS, evalag (Austria), ACSUG (reviews in Spanish carried out in Peru and Mexico), ANECA (reviews in Spanish Chile, Mexico), AQU (Peru), IAAR (reviews in Russian carried out in Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) and AKKORK (reviews in Russian carried out in Armenia).

The table below attempts to offer a classification on the type of a cross-border external QA activities depending on the type of QA approach (field specific or a more comprehensive, institutional review), on whether the external QA fulfils a mandatory requirement, the level it is carried out at, and the frequency of reviews.

Table 1: Typology of cross-border QA activities

Type of review offered by QA agencies active across borders:	Field specific review	Comprehensive review
Recognised as part of national requirements for external QA:	depends (if legal framework allows)	No
Programme or institutional level	programme/faculty	institutional
Frequency of cross-border QA reviews	low/medium	high

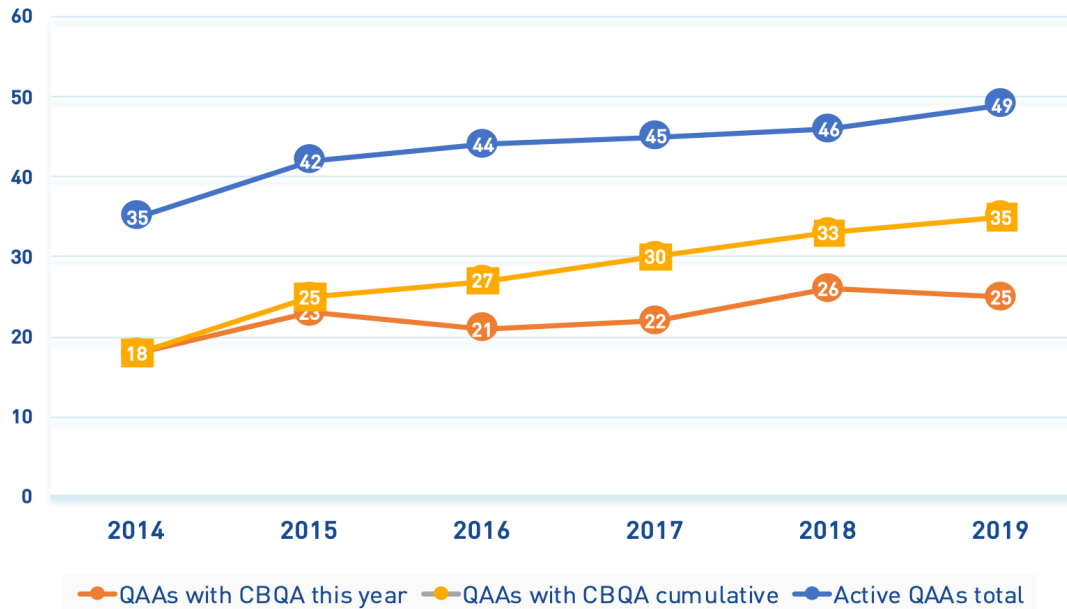## Trends in cross-border external QA activities

Chart 3: Stacked line chart. EQAR-registered agencies carrying out CBQA by year

Cross border QA activities make up a small share i.e. ca. 3% of the total number of external QA activities carried out by registered agencies and ca. 7% of the activities of only those agencies active across border. Of the 49 registered agencies, two thirds have carried out (at least one) external QA activity across borders in the past six years and a little over half of the registered agencies report cross-border QA activities every year (see stacked line chart above).
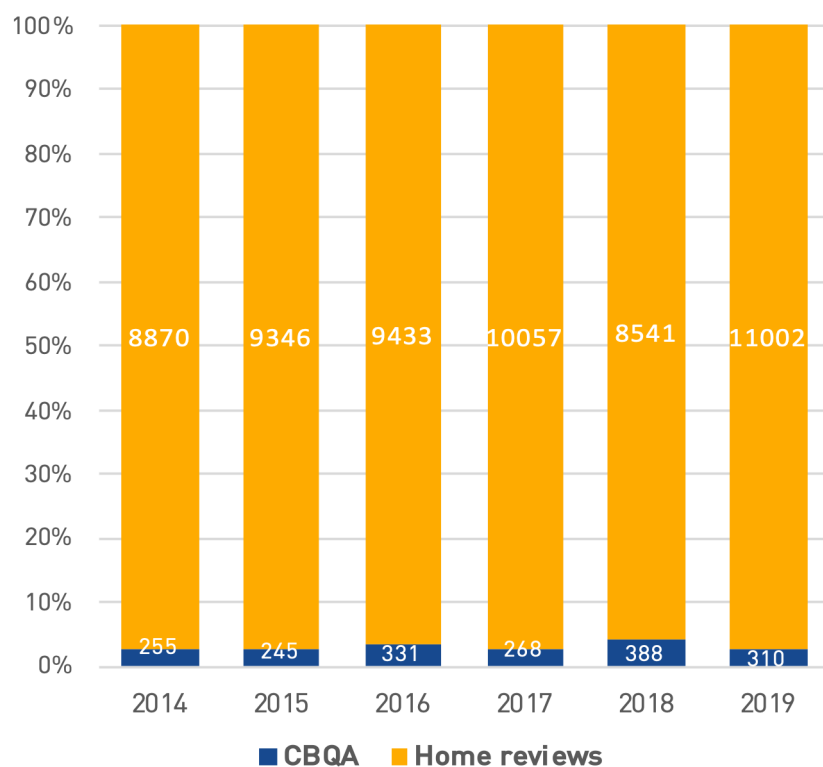
Chart 4: Home vs cross-border QA activities by year (2014-2019)

Compared to the previous year, the overall number of cross-border QA activities has fallen by 9% (see above chart). The drop in cross-border QA activities is mainly the result of a decrease in programme reviews by some QA agencies (ACQUIN, AQAS, ASIIN, FIBAA have reduced their cross-border QA activities from 25% to 100%) between 2018 and 2019. At the same time, the number of cross-border QA activities at institutional level have overall increased by 17% (mostly due to the increase in the cross-border QA reviews by HCERES, IAAR, Musique, EAEVE) while joint programme reviews have tripled compared to the past year.

For the first time in the past 6 years, **there has been more cross-border QA activities outside the territories and countries of the EHEA (58%)**. This change confirms an increased interest from higher education institutions outside the EHEA, seeking the recognition that comes with an ESG type of review carried out by an EQAR-registered agency.

Most of the cross-border reviews beyond EHEA were carried out by ASIIN, HCERES, AHPGS, AQAS and ACSUG within Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Peru (see chart below).
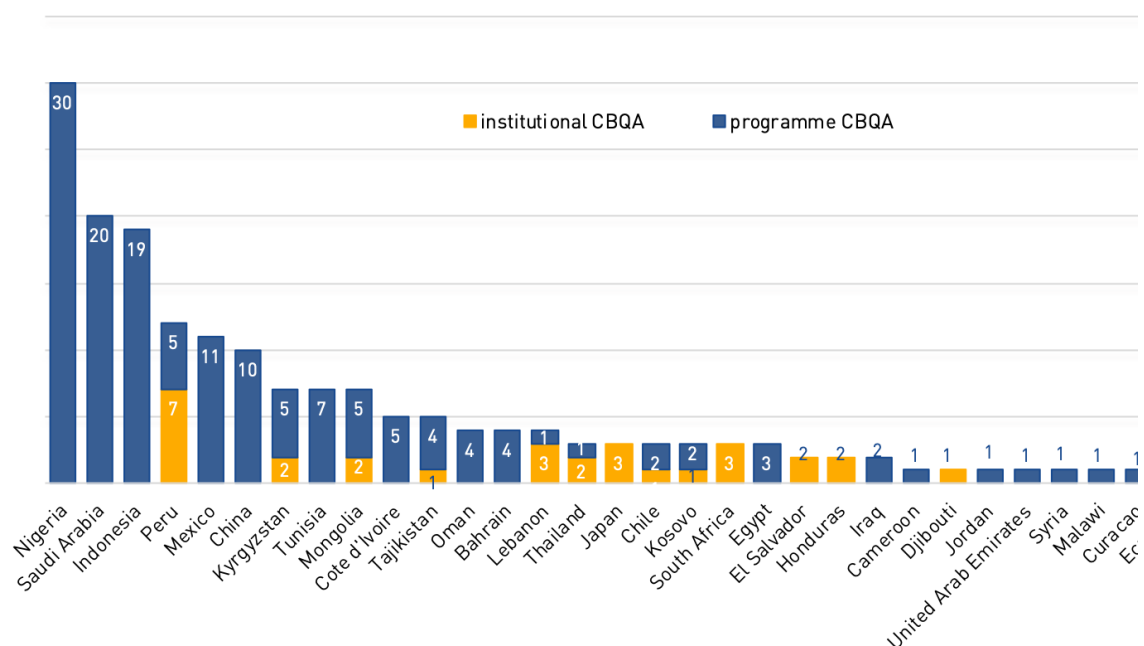
Chart 5: Cross-border QA activities in higher education systems beyond the EHEA (2019)

Spread of cross-border external QA activities (2019)

In 2019, EQAR-registered QA agencies have carried out cross-border external QA of institutions and programmes across 28 higher education systems within EHEA and 33 systems beyond EHEA. Compared to previous years, the number of QA agencies active across borders remained the same (see Chart 3) but the spread of cross-border QA activities was much wider (61 higher education systems).

The cross-border QA activities within the EHEA were mostly carried out within countries that have a legal framework recognising foreign EQAR-registered agencies (i.e. Kazakhstan, Belgium, Romania, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Austria, Poland[2]). Some EHEA higher education systems still do not permit higher education institutions to choose an EQAR-registered QA agency for their mandatory external QA requirements so in these countries (i.e. Russia, Sweden and Spain) the reviews were an add-on to the regular external QA.

3. Conclusions

Reflecting on the latest trends and changes in the external quality assurance of higher education systems within Europe, the year 2019 saw the highest number of external QA activities carried out by registered agencies. This was due partly to an increase in the number of QA agencies listed on EQAR but also due to the significant increase in the external QA activities carried out at programme level.

The picture of external QA activities within the scope of the ESG is highly diverse, illustrating that ESG has been adapted successfully to the various specificities of higher education systems.

[2]Following a descending ordered corresponding to the amount of reviews carried out in each of the listed countries

Most of the external QA activities are carried out by a few agencies. Similarly the largest volume of cross-border external QA activities are carried out by a handful of QA agencies, although two thirds of them had carried out external QA activities at least once.

For the first time in 2019, there were more cross-border external QA activities **outside the territories and countries of the EHEA than within, signalling an increasing demand for ESG type of external QA activities to be carried out for higher institutions beyond the EHEA.**

4. Annexes

4.1 List of Registered Quality Assurance Agencies in 2019

The following agencies were included on the register in 2019 (or for part of 2019). Agencies are included for five years counting from the date of their external review, the duration of inclusion is indicated in the table for each agency.

Table 2: List of registered quality assurance agencies in 2019

Registered Agencies in 2019:	Included since:	Inclusion until:
A3ES - Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (Portugal)	29/11/2014	30/06/2024
AAC-DEVA - Andalusian Agency of Knowledge, Department of Evaluation and Accreditation (Spain)	29/11/2014 *(07/10/2009*	30/09/2019 *31/01/2014)*
AAQ – Swiss Agency of Accreditation and Quality Assurance	08/05/2012	31/07/2021
ACPUA -Aragon Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (Spain)	03/12/2016	31/08/2021
ACQUIN – Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (Germany)	08/04/2009	30/06/2021
ACSUCYL – Quality Assurance Agency for the University System of Castilla y León (Spain)	18/11/2010	31/12/2019
ACSUG – Agency for Quality Assurance in the Galician University System (Spain)	18/11/2010	31/07/2019
AEQES – Agence pour l'Evaluation de la Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur (Belgium)	03/12/2012	28/02/2022
AHPGS – Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Health and Social Sciences AHPGS (Germany)	7/10/2009	27/02/2019
AI - The Danish Accreditation Institution	18/11/2010	30/09/2021
AIC - Academic Information Centre (Latvia)	21/06/2018	30/06/2023
AKKORK - Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Career Development (Russia)	17/11/2015	31/10/2019
ANECA – National Agency for the Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (Spain)	07/05/2013	31/10/2022

	(05/12/2008	30/06/2012)
ANQA – National Center For Professional Education Quality Assurance (Armenia)	20/06/2017	28/02/2022
AQ Austria - Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria	29/11/2014	30/06/2024
AQAS - Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes (Germany)	25/05/2010	31/01/2022
AQU Cat. – Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (Spain)	5/12/2008	30/06/2022
ARACIS – Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education	07/10/2009	30/09/2023
ASHE – Agency for Science and Higher Education (Croatia)	25/11/2011	28/02/2022
ASIIN – Akkreditierungsagentur für Studiengänge der Ingenieurwissenschaften, der Informatik, der Mathematik und der Naturwissenschaften (Germany)	08/04/2009	31/05/2021
BAC - British Accreditation Council for Independent Further and Higher Education	05/06/2015	31/01/2020
CTI - Engineering Degree Commission (France)	18/11/2010	30/06/2024
CYQAA - The Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education	01/02/2019	29/02/2024
EAEVE - European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education	01/04/2018	30/04/2023
EKKA – Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (Estonia)	23/10/2013	28/02/2023
Evalag - Evaluation Agency Baden-Württemberg (Germany)	25/05/2010	30/06/2024
FIBAA – Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (Germany)	08/04/2009	31/01/2022
FINHEEC - Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (KKA)	18/11/2010	28/02/2022
Fmid - Fundación para el Conocimiento Madrimasd (Spain)	05/06/2015	29/02/2020
HAC – Hungarian Accreditation Committee	01/09/2018	30/09/2023
HCERES - High Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (France)	14/05/2011	28/02/2022
IAAR – Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating of the Republic of Kazakhstan	20/06/2017	28/02/2022
IEP – EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme (Switzerland)	15/12/2011	29/02/2024

IQAA – Independent Kazakhstan Quality Assurance Agency in Education	20/06/2017	28/02/2022
MusiQuE – Music Quality Enhancement (Belgium)	06/06/2016	30/11/2020
NCEQE - National Center For Educational Quality Enhancement (Georgia)	01/04/2019	30/04/2024
NCPA – National Centre for Public Accreditation (Russia)	17/11/2015	30/06/2019
NEAA - National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency	01/02/2018	28/02/2023
NOKUT - Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education	22/05/2014	30/6/2023
NVAO – Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders	05/12/2008	30/09/2022
PKA – State Accreditation Commission (Poland)	08/04/2009	31/10/2023
QAA – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (United Kingdom)	23/10/2013	30/06/2023
QANU - Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities	14/05/2011	31/12/2021
QQI – Quality and Qualifications Ireland	05/06/2015	30/06/2024
SKVC – Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (Lithuania)	03/12/2012	30/06/2022
SQAA – Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (Slovenia)	23/10/2013	31/10/2023
Unibasq - Agency for Quality of the Basque University System (Spain)	01/04/2014	29/02/2024
VLUHR QAU – Quality Assurance Unit of the Flemish Council of Universities and University Colleges (Belgium)	07/05/2013	30/09/2019
ZEvA – Central Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (Germany)	08/04/2009	30/06/2021