



ESG Coverage of Higher Education Systems in Europe

DEQAR Policy Briefs¹

1. Introduction

In the context of the DEQAR CONNECT project, EQAR set out to prepare a number of policy briefs based on the analysis of the data collected through the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR).

The first analysis delves into the external quality assurance frameworks and their alignment with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) through an exploration of two combined datasets: DEQAR and the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER).

The analysis was carried out by EQAR with the support of ETER.

2. External quality assurance frameworks within the European Higher Education Area

The way quality assurance processes have been implemented in all the Bologna Process signatory countries is reflected in the different approaches towards the design of their quality assurance system. While the **terminology** of what may be understood as an external quality assurance procedure varies from country to country, most of them fit into one of the following categories: reviews, evaluations, assessments, audits, certifications and accreditations. Due to the lack of a universal terminology two procedures called the same in two different places might yet vary in their design and focus.

The main **scope** of external QA procedures developed with reference to the ESG relates to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation. It usually takes place at the level of higher education institutions or of study programmes. In some cases, the same or additional external QA procedures might (also) take the form of an i.e. assessment of a recruitment procedure of academic staff, an evaluation of the individual performance of researchers (Spain), an evaluation of research institutes/units (Spain and France) or the evaluation of cooperation strategies between the different higher education institutions (France). The latter cases do not form part of the current analysis as they are outside the scope of the ESG².

The expectations of the ESG is that external quality assurance has to be carried out on a cyclical basis. While there are no stipulation concerning **the length of the cycle**, the analysis into the external QA cycles applied by EQAR-registered agencies (see Figure 1 below) show that most commonly the review takes place

¹The content of this policy brief represents the views of the author only and is their sole responsibility. The European Commission and the Agency do not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.

²<https://www.eqar.eu/about/official-documents/#use-and-interpretation-of-the-esg>
p. 3-6



Co-funded by the
 Erasmus+ Programme
 of the European Union

every 5 to 6 years. Exceptionally, the validity of such an external QA can in some cases be quite long (7-8 years) or even rather short (2-3 years):

- In Germany, an institutional level accreditation is given for a period of 8 years;
- In Iceland, Estonia, Georgia, Lithuania, an accreditation may be awarded for 7 years in case of a positive evaluation;
- In Romania, a provisional authorisation is given for two years for new study programmes, after which they have to seek full accreditation;
- In Lithuania, an interim evaluation is carried out after 3 years for study programmes where not all requirements have been met.

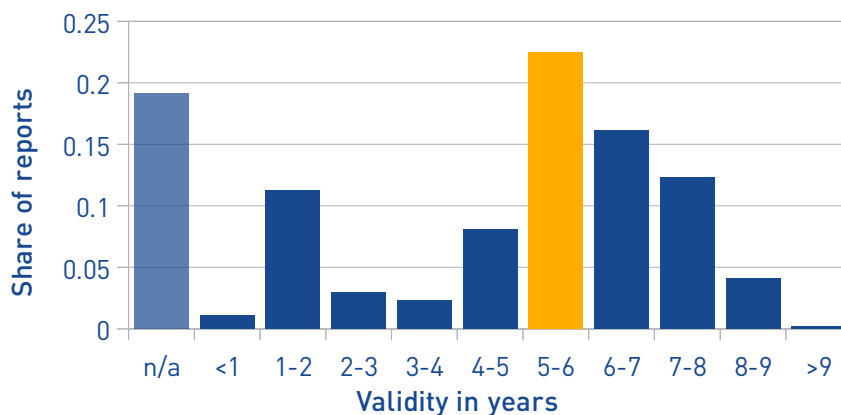


Figure 1: Length of time (validity) of an external QA procedure

In analysing external QA frameworks one important distinction that can be drawn is whether the primary **aim and focus** of the external quality assurance is placed at institutional or at programme level.

2.1 External QA requirements at institutional and programme level

EQAR’s Knowledge Base³ shows that only a handful of countries require an external quality assurance at programme or at institutional level only, while in most countries a combination of both approaches is employed (see Figure 2).

■ Institutional & programme level
 ■ Institutional level only
■ Programme level only
 ■ Institutional & sometime programme level

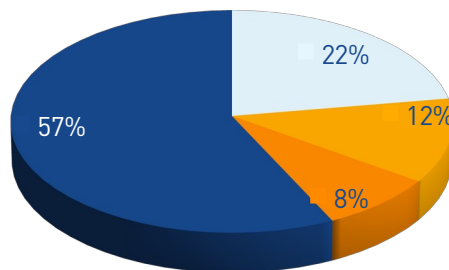


Figure 2: Focus of external QA frameworks within the EHEA

³EQAR’s Knowledge Base is a repository of information on external QA systems, updated through annual consultations with ministry representatives in the Bologna Follow-Up Group.



Currently 39 higher education systems⁴ within the EHEA require external QA at both institutional and programme level. In 28 of these systems programme and institutional external QA takes place regularly (Albania, Andorra, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia*, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia*, France*, Georgia, Greece, Holy See, Hungary*, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia*, Lithuania*, Moldova, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania*, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden) while in 11 other countries the external QA is carried out at institutional level and only occasionally at programme level (Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium-Flemish Community, Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, Lichtenstein, Malta, Norway, Luxembourg Slovenia).

To limit the accreditation burden on higher institutions and their programmes and to make it more manageable for quality assurance agencies to carry out these reviews at both institutional and programme level, some countries decided to adopt a clustered (see below *) review of study programmes instead of an individual programme level accreditation. Other higher education systems have opted for either a lighter form of accreditation at programme level (i.e. Portugal) or they have in some cases combined the institutional evaluation with an ex-ante programme accreditation (Romania).

Countries where institutional external QA is combined with a cluster form of programme review (*) are: Croatia (clustered evaluation of the 3rd cycle); Latvia, Lithuania, Romania (clustered evaluation for the 2nd cycle); France, Estonia, Hungary (clustered evaluation for the 1st and 2nd cycle). This clustered form of reviews is usually done by selecting specific disciplines at higher education level, which allow for a system level analysis into specific study field on a regular basis.

A number of other countries (in 11 of the 39 higher education systems) have in addition to the regular review of higher education institutions a **programme level external QA that is only occasionally carried out** depending on the type of accreditation, the field of the study or the self-accreditation status of the HEI, as is the case in the following countries:

1. Programme level authorisation, accreditation or certification is required for the establishment of new study programmes only in: Belgium-Flemish Community, Croatia, Lichtenstein, Slovenia.
2. Programme level accreditation is required for one or more specific professions (i.e. medical study programmes): Armenia, Switzerland.
3. In some cases an external QA of the study programme is required if the higher education institutions does not (yet) have 'self-accreditation' rights (usually independent providers, university colleges or specialised university institutions, foreign private higher education institutions, university colleges without institutional accreditation etc.):

⁴49 higher education institutions were considered in total: BE-Fr & BE-Fl are counted separately, while San Marino is not counted since no information is currently available on the development of its external QA framework.



2.2 External QA requirements at institutional level

Higher education institutions in Finland, Iceland, Turkey and the United Kingdom are subjected to obligatory regular external quality assurance at institutional level only, in the form of audits, institutional evaluation or institutional accreditation.

Programme level external QA might still be taken up by institutions voluntarily, as a way to increase recognition within a specific field of study and to improve their reputation internationally, but they are not mandated as part of the external QA framework.

2.3 External QA requirement at programme level

In the French Community of Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Ukraine only study programmes are required to undergo a regular external QA. While the external QA at institutional level is voluntary, in some countries, this procedure can exempt higher education institutions from an obligatory programme level external QA (Germany) or may simplify the programme accreditation procedure (the Netherlands).

- Germany introduced a voluntary system level accreditation in 2007. A positive accreditation would entitle the higher education institution to award the quality seal of the Accreditation Council for study programmes, which would normally be awarded following an external programme accreditation procedure. While Germany went through a major system accreditation reform in 2018, it has kept this principle of 'voluntary institutional accreditations' in its external QA approach.
- The Netherlands first introduced institutional audits in 2010. The positive result of an audit allowed Dutch higher education institutions to use a limited framework for the accreditation of their study programmes instead of undergoing a full programme accreditation. The limited framework approach only focusses on four main standards: vision & policy, implementation, evaluation & monitoring and development.

3. Changes in external QA frameworks

The nature of external QA in higher education systems is not static. The reports and updates submitted to EQAR (external reviews of QA agencies, change reports, updates on legal frameworks on external QA) reveal that in many higher education systems the external and internal QA requirements are continuously developing, i.e. from changes in the current external QA activities, to the discontinuing or development of new forms of external QA.

Between 2015 and 2020, 1 in 3 EQAR-registered agencies reported **substantive changes** in their delivery of external QA activities while 1 in 4 agencies reported a development of new external QA activities⁵. Many of these changes came as a result of a revision of the national quality assurance framework where QA agencies carry out their regular external QA activities. Such changes were often meant to cut back on the heavy workload of multiple or lengthy accreditation procedures, to reduce the evaluation fatigue with the repetition of the same

⁵See: <https://www.eqar.eu/general-assembly-discussed-new-targeted-review/>



external QA procedures, and to improve the effectiveness of the internal QA. Considering the shift in approaches to external QA, the changes reported by registered QA agencies over the last years reveal that a number of higher education systems transitioned from a programme only external QA to a mainly institutional focused external QA (Denmark) or to a form of institutional evaluation with a lighter form of programme review (Portugal)⁶.

Other higher education systems are currently piloting or considering a change

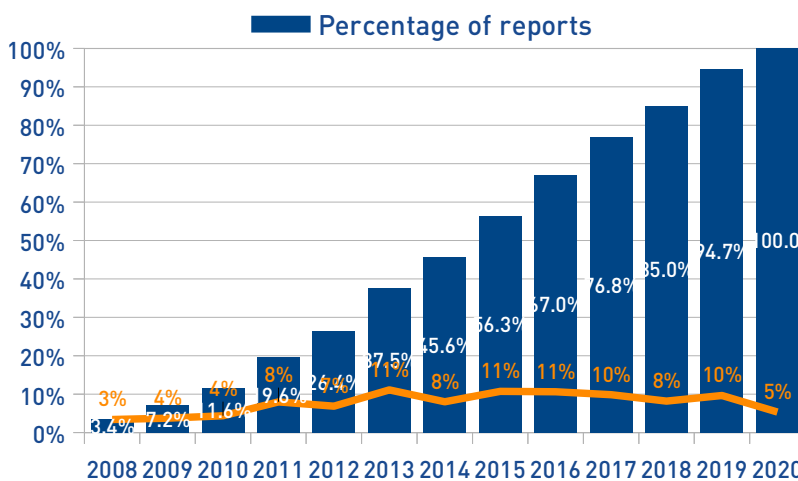


Figure 3: Evolution (in %) of external QA reports uploaded into DEQAR

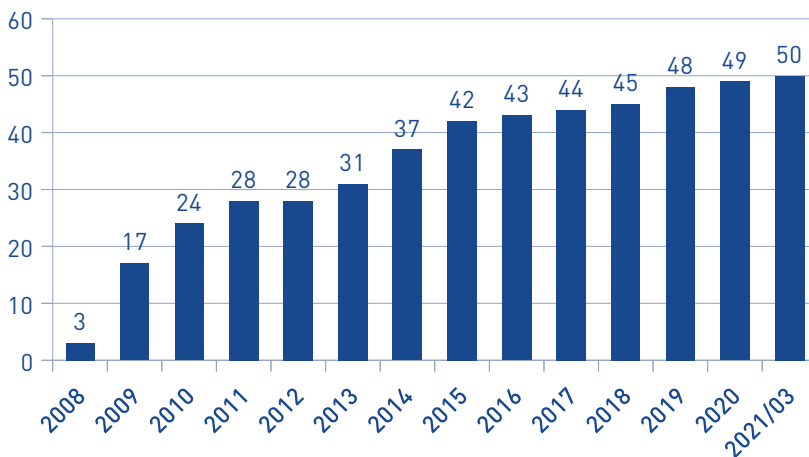


Figure 4: Evolution of application of EQAR- registered agencies

in their external QA approach. The French Community of Belgium is in the process of piloting institutional accreditation, considering a change from its programme only focused external QA, while Ukraine is discussing introducing a new regulation on institutional external QA.

The Database of External QA Results (DEQAR) provides an insight into the **yearly changes in the volume of external QA activities** carried out by EQAR-registered agencies⁷. While the database is expected to grow with each new agency added

⁶See: <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/country-information/country/?id=139>

⁷Considering the data uploaded by the 42 agencies by DEQAR



to the Register (and consequently to the database), the data shows that the overall volume of external QA activities has more or less plateaued since 2013, and slightly decreased after 2017/8 (see orange line in Figure 3). This is in part due to a slowing down in the new agencies registered in EQAR (see Figure 4) and also due to the change towards an institutional external QA approach such as the one described in Germany, which meant that programme level external QA was less featured in the activities of QA agencies carrying out reviews in Germany (Germany currently makes up 46% of the total of reports uploaded into DEQAR).

The data also show a drop of external QA activities carried out in 2020, which might indicate that registered agencies have carried out less external QA activities during the pandemic compared to previous years.

4. Aligning external QA systems with the ESG

4.1 Number of reviewed higher education institutions within EHEA

The 60 131 quality assurance reports (and decisions)⁸ collected through the DEQAR database from the 42 of the 50 EQAR registered agencies provide a comprehensive system level outlook on the external QA activities in 85% of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member countries.

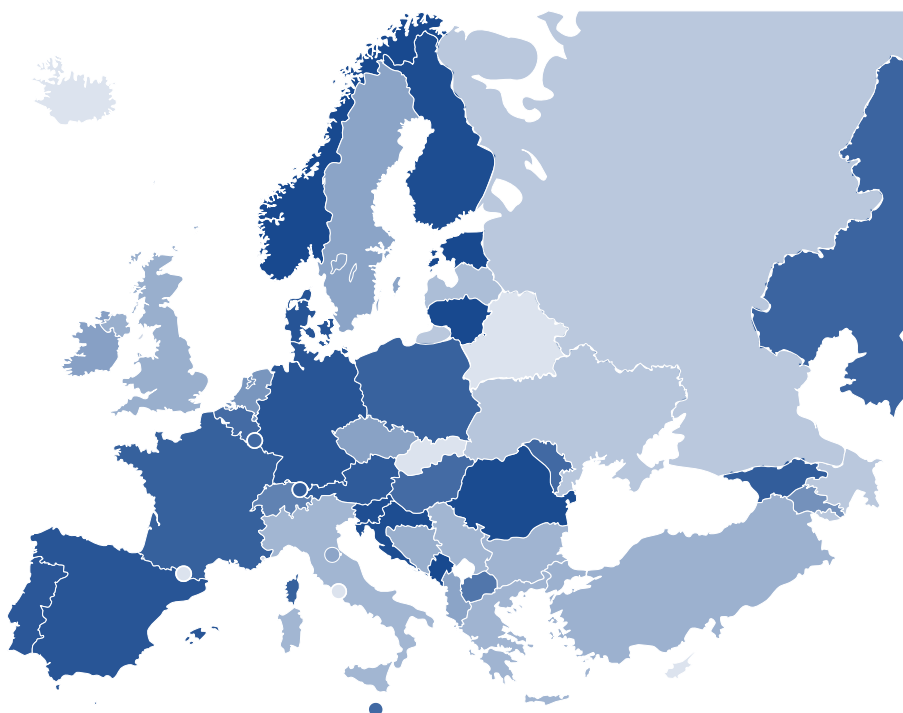


Illustration 1: DEQAR coverage of external QA systems reviewed by an EQAR-registered agency within EHEA

DEQAR currently does not include any external QA reports for higher education institutions from Andorra, Belarus, Cyprus, Holy See, Slovakia, San Marino and Iceland and has few external QA reports from some large or medium size higher

⁸As of 17 May 2021, of which 25 666 “active” reports, meaning reports where the accreditation validity period has not yet passed or that were carried out less than 6 years ago (in cases where the report does not provide a validity/expiry date).



education systems like Bulgaria, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Serbia or Sweden (see Illustration 1). This is mainly due to the lack of any external QA activity by an EQAR-registered agency in these systems or due to the lack of data provided by registered QA agencies that operate in that country, e.g. CYQAA for Cyprus; QAA for United Kingdom; QQI for Ireland; NEAA for Bulgaria; UKÄ, - recently registered QA agency- for Sweden.

The number of higher education institutions within a country that have been reviewed by an EQAR-registered agency can be considered as a proxy for the extent to which a higher education system has realised the **EHEA key commitment on external quality assurance**, i.e. that higher education institutions are subject to regular external QA by an agency that has successfully demonstrated compliance with the ESG through registration on EQAR. While the DEQAR external QA coverage is not complete for all higher institution systems (as explained above), the existing data show that at least 50% of higher education institutions in 23 countries have been reviewed at programme or institutional level by an EQAR-registered agency (see Illustration 1⁹).

4.2 Reviewed higher education institutions by size of the student population

While the number of institutions provides a rough estimate of the coverage at system level, taking into account the size of the student population within reviewed institutions renders a more accurate picture of the extent to which a higher education system is covered: if larger institutions are covered this is relevant to more students. To achieve this, data on student numbers provided by ETER¹⁰ is combined with the DEQAR data (2008-2021) on externally reviewed higher education institutions, hence showing the share of the student population covered by the external QA reports in DEQAR (see bubble plot below).

- **Y axis:** the percentage of higher education institutions within a country reviewed by an EQAR-registered agency;
- **X axis:** the percentage of students within a higher education system enrolled in higher education institutions reviewed by an EQAR-registered agency;
- **Bubble size:** the absolute number of students in those higher education institutions reviewed by an EQAR-registered agency.

Some higher education systems for which DEQAR data exists are not covered in this analysis since these systems could not take part in the ETER data collection exercise (i.e. Ukraine and Bosnia-Herzegovina) or they have not (yet) provided data about the size of the student population for their higher education institutions (i.e. France, Montenegro, Romania and Belgium French Community). Furthermore DEQAR also sometimes includes data about small size higher education institutions i.e. with less than 200 students and 30 full-time equivalents of staff which are excluded from ETER. This is the case for a

⁹For the exact estimate of each country's coverage, please consult the online version of the EHEA map at <https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/search/by-institution/>

¹⁰ The reference year for ETER data is 2015, and it covers the student population enrolled in an ISCED5-7 level, corresponding to a short-cycle, first cycle and second cycle in tertiary education.



number of reviewed HEIs in Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, Greece and North Macedonia, which might be featured in DEQAR but not included in the ETER database.

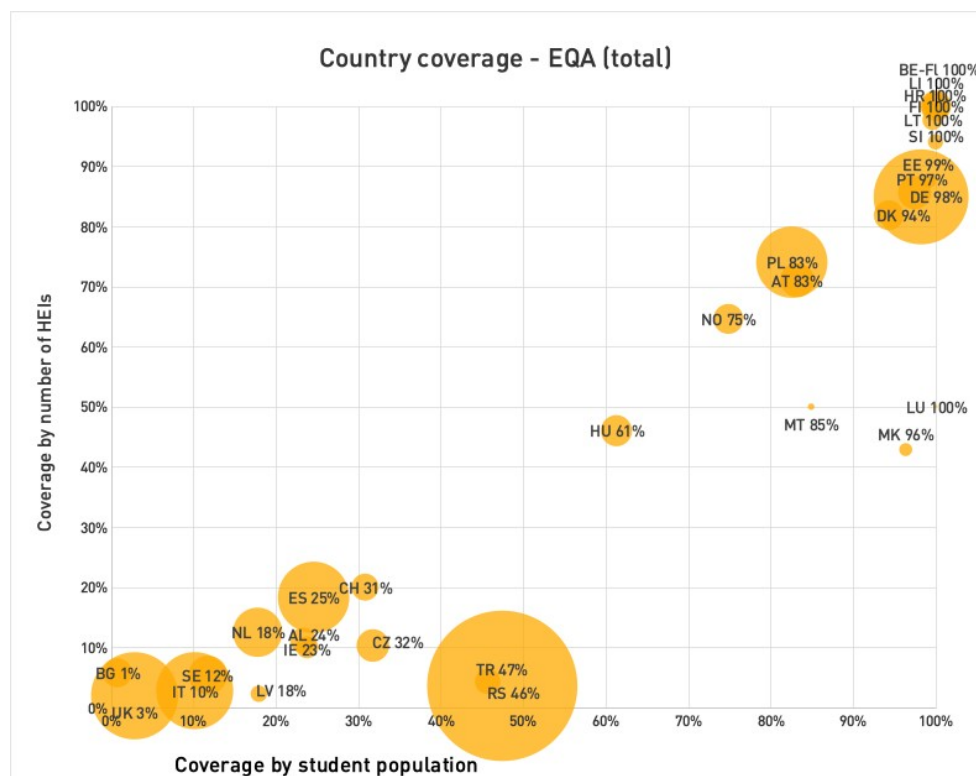


Figure 5: External QA coverage of higher education systems by % HEIs and % of the student population (ISCED 5-7).

Notwithstanding these exceptions, the combined DEQAR and ETER data sets provide an extensive picture on the coverage of reviewed higher education institutions and their student population. Of the 2 948 higher education institutions found in ETER, 46.4% have been reviewed at programme or institutional level against the ESG. A nearly identical percentage is shown when looking at the coverage in terms of the student population of these reviewed higher education institutions: 46,6%.

The analysis of the coverage of different higher education systems reveals some striking differences in the review of higher education institutions within a country. The external QA of a few large size HEIs may cover a significant share of the student population within a country and thus largely ensure that country’s “ESG coverage” with only a few HEIs i.e. 6 of the 14 reviewed higher education institutions in North Macedonia cover 96% of its student population; 7 of the 195 higher education institutions reviewed in Turkey cover 47% of the total student population; 2 of the 46 higher education institutions reviewed in Serbia cover 46% of the student population¹¹.

¹¹While data for both RS & TR might be incomplete (data on students either missing for some institutions or HEIs not included if they enrol under 200 students), considering the overall size of the student population, this does not impact in a significant way the figures included above.



Considering the coverage of reviewed higher education institutions and their student population, the bubble plot does not show the full picture for higher education systems where the external QA results of a national EQAR-registered QA agency have not (yet) been uploaded into DEQAR i.e. Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Latvia, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and UK. Similarly, the coverage in a country where multiple registered agencies carry out external QA activities might be incomplete as not all EQAR-registered QA agencies have submitted their external QA reports into DEQAR, i.e. ANECA for Spain.

4.3 Reviewed higher education institutions at institutional and programme level by size of the student population

When separating the external QA coverage of higher education systems with a look at institutional and programme level the two bubble plots (see Figure 6 and Figure 7) reveal a good coverage of external QA at both programme and institutional level for i.e. Slovenia, Estonia, Portugal, Croatia and Belgium-Flemish Community (the centre or upper part of both bubble plots) while countries with an institutional external QA focus i.e. Finland, Denmark show a good coverage within the institutional external QA bubble plot and little to no coverage (as expected) on the programme external QA bubble plot.

The limited coverage shown within the programme level external QA bubble compared to the coverage of institutional level external QA indicates that institutional external QA is more prevalent i.e. more HEIs go through an EQA at institutional level compared to HEIs that go through a programme level EQA. While variations within countries exist i.e. Germany shows a 95% programme level EQA coverage and 47% institutional EQA coverage, the figure might look quite different in the future as with the expiry of the validity of reports for programme level EQA, and the increase in HEIs self-accrediting procedure (which also have a longer validity, of 8 years). It would be therefore relevant to further consider a time evolution of the bubble plots for each country as they would reveals trends in the external QA of HE systems.

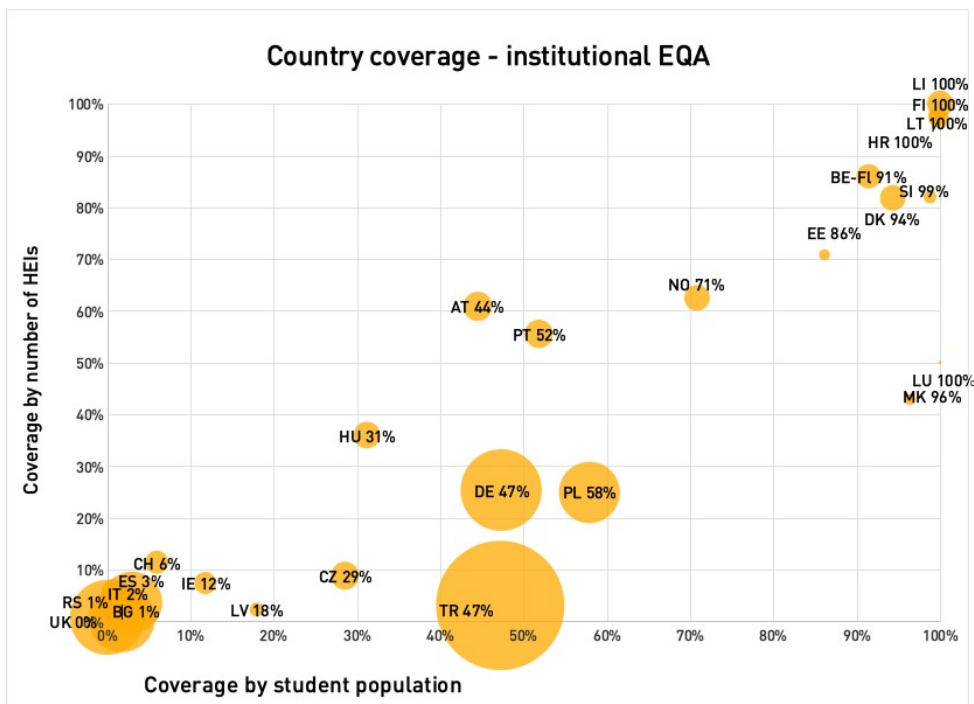


Figure 6: Institutional external QA coverage of higher education systems by % HEI and % of the student population (ISCED 5-7).

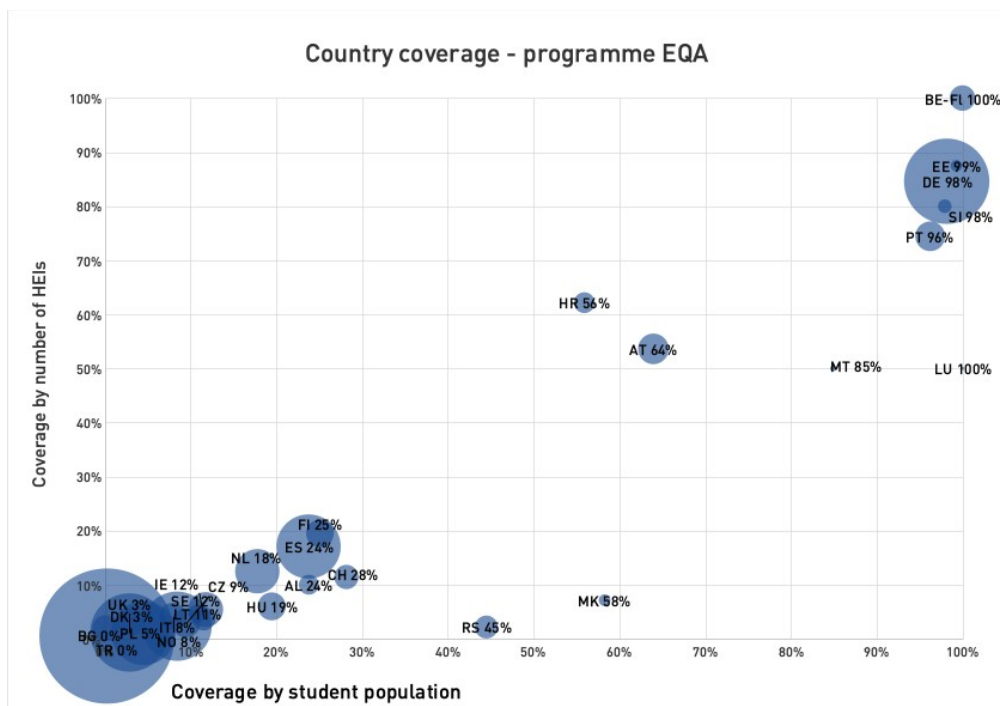


Figure 7: Programme level external QA coverage of higher education systems by % HEI and % of the student population (ISCED 5-7).



5. Conclusion

The diverse and evolving nature of the external QA in European higher education systems is captured and reflected in the type and number of external QA activities carried out by EQAR-registered QA agencies.

The different intensity of external QA reviews is dependent on the requirements for institutional or programme level external QA, and the validity (length of time) of these external QA procedures. Most higher education systems employ a combination of both institutional and programme level external QA with only a handful of countries requiring an external quality assurance only at programme or only at institutional level. The length (validity) of decisions following an external QA is most often 5–6 years, but varies a lot depending on the procedure or the consequences of a previous decision (i.e. conditional accreditation vs. full accreditation).

The DEQAR and ETER combined data sets provide a good picture on the “ESG coverage” of higher education systems by considering both the number of reviewed higher education institution and the size of the student population. A few large higher education institutions may account for a significant portion of the student population, thus EQAR should express the “ESG coverage” of HE systems also in terms of student population and not (only) in terms of number of higher education institutions within a country.

6. Codes, abbreviations, acronyms, general terms

Country code

| | |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| AD Andorra | IT Italy |
| AL Albania | KZ Kazakhstan |
| AM Armenia | LI Liechtenstein |
| AT Austria | LT Lithuania |
| AZ Azerbaijan | LU Luxembourg |
| BA Bosnia and Herzegovina | LV Latvia |
| BE-fr French Community | MD Moldova |
| BE-fl Flemish Community | ME Montenegro |
| BG Bulgaria | MK North Macedonia |
| BY Belarus | MT Malta |
| CH Switzerland | NL Netherlands |
| CY Cyprus | NO Norway |
| CZ Czech Republic | PL Poland |
| DE Germany | PT Portugal |
| DK Denmark | RO Romania |
| EE Estonia | RS Serbia |
| EL Greece | RU Russia |
| ES Spain | SE Sweden |
| FI Finland | SI Slovenia |
| FR France | SK Slovakia |
| GE Georgia | TR Turkey |
| HR Croatia | UA Ukraine |
| HU Hungary | UK United Kingdom |
| IE Ireland | VA Holy See |
| IS Iceland | |



Abbreviations

DEQAR – Database of External Quality Assurance Results

EHEA – European Higher Education Area

EQAR – European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education

ESG – The Standards and Guidelines for the Quality Assurance in the EHEA

ETER – The European Tertiary Education Register

HEI – Higher Education Institution

ISCED – International Standard Classification of Education

QA – Quality Assurance

General terms

The **ESG** are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in higher education. They were first adopted by EHEA ministers in Bergen in 2005. A revised version was later adopted in 2015 in Yerevan.

Quality assurance agency – a body that regularly carries out external quality assurance of an educational establishment or study programme. QA agencies may have a national or regional focus, or an international/field specific focus.

ISCED has been developed to facilitate comparisons of education statistics and indicators across countries on the basis of uniform and internationally agreed definitions. The ISCED 5-7 refers to the programmes offered at tertiary education level, equivalent to bachelor and master level, including short cycle provisions.