

# **External Evaluation**

**of the**

## **European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)**

### **Report of the Expert Panel**

**Coordinated by**  
***Central European University***  
***Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education***

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# External Evaluation of EQAR: Report of the Expert Panel

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## List of abbreviations

AC	<i>Appeals Committee</i>
BFUG	<i>Bologna Follow-Up Group</i>
CEU	<i>Central European University</i>
DEQAR	<i>Database of External Quality Assurance Results</i>
EB	<i>Executive Board of EQAR</i>
EHEA	<i>European Higher Education Area</i>
ENIC	<i>European Network of Information Centres</i>
ENQA	<i>European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education</i>
EOSC	<i>European Open Science Cloud</i>
EQAR	<i>European Quality Assurance Register</i>
ESG	<i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA</i>
ESU	<i>European Students' Union</i>
ETER	<i>European Tertiary Education Register</i>
EU	<i>European Union</i>
EUA	<i>European University Association</i>
EURASHE	<i>European Association of Institutions in Higher Education</i>
GA	<i>General Assembly of EQAR</i>
HE	<i>higher education</i>
HEI	<i>higher education institutions</i>
IT	<i>information technology</i>
MC	<i>micro-credentials</i>
NARIC	<i>National Academic Recognition Information Centre</i>
QA	<i>quality assurance</i>
QAA	<i>quality assurance agency</i>
RC	<i>Register Committee</i>
SEG	<i>Self-Evaluation Group</i>
SER	<i>Self-Evaluation Report</i>
U&I	<i>Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG</i>
YECHE	<i>Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education</i>

## Executive Summary

This report is the outcome of an external evaluation of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) conducted by an international Review Panel in the period August-October 2021. The overall purpose of the evaluation was to find out if EQAR's structure and activities are fit for purpose and effective in light of its mission and objectives.

The Coordinator of the external evaluation was the Central European University's Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education (YECHE). The Coordinator had appointed an eight-member Review Panel of international higher education experts, having assured that the composition of the Panel covers the perspectives of relevant stakeholders and is balanced in terms of geographical representation, gender, and professional background.

In its approach to evaluation, the Review Panel was guided by the Terms of Reference.

The report builds upon the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) prepared by the EQAR Self-Evaluation Group (SEG) in April 2021, as well as other resources made available by EQAR to the Review Panel either as appendices to the report or during the evaluation process.

The Review Panel conducted a site visit to EQAR's offices in Brussels on September 16-18, 2021, and continued with online interviews in the period between September 28 - October 19, 2021. The Panel interviewed EQAR staff, governing body representatives, committee members, and a representative sample of partners and stakeholders.

The report consists of three main sections:

The first section provides information on the background of the evaluation, composition of the review panel, and approach to evaluation.

The second section is the core part of the report describing the Panel's findings and recommendations. This section is organised along the lines of the Terms of Reference and, as such, consists of six sub-sections – four main questions and two additional points of interest. Each sub-section includes main findings, commendations (when relevant), and recommendations (when relevant).

The third section is a summary of recommendations.

The Review Panel came to the conclusion that EQAR is one of the most successful pan-European organizations in higher education. It is excellent in fulfilling its original mandate, and its staff is to be commended for their professionalism, resourcefulness, and responsiveness. The Review Panel acknowledges that there are new emerging trends in the European Higher Education Area that have direct implications for quality assurance, most notably in the areas of micro-credentials and trans-national initiatives. The Panel concluded that the core mandate of EQAR remains highly relevant. The exact modalities in which this mandate is implemented in practice, however, may require certain adjustments, in view of these new trends and developments, which could not have been anticipated when EQAR was set up. Since those trends are still very much in their infancy and given the Terms of Reference of the Review Panel, it is not possible for this Panel to state at the present time how EQAR can best fit in. The main overall recommendation of the Review Panel is that EQAR continue the process of internal reflection, with the close involvement of its stakeholders, and develop an action plan on how it can best support relevant new developments and address new challenges in EHEA from the QA perspective.

## Introduction

The present report was prepared by the Panel of Experts (the Review Panel) appointed by the Central European University's Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education (YECHE) to conduct an external evaluation of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

EQAR, the official register of quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that operate in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG), was founded by the E4 Group based on the mandate received from ministers at the London summit in May 2007.

EQAR adopts a five-year cycle for regular self-evaluations, with an external evaluation following every second self-evaluation, that is every ten years. The first self-evaluation was conducted by EQAR in 2010 while an external evaluation took place for the first time in 2011. In 2016, EQAR completed a second comprehensive self-evaluation. In its Strategy 2018 – 2022, EQAR committed itself to initiate the next self-evaluation in 2020, followed by an external evaluation in 2021.

In June 2020, the EQAR General Assembly endorsed the key features for the evaluation, underlining that it should be an objective and credible analysis, and be regarded as such by EQAR's members, partners and stakeholders.

In October 2020, EQAR launched a Call for Tender to choose an independent organisation to coordinate the second external evaluation. Out of five tenders received, the Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education at Central European University (YECHE) came out as first choice to assume the overall responsibility for the evaluation process. From the side of YECHE, the external evaluation process was coordinated by its Senior Program Manager, Matyas Szabo, who recruited and appointed the members of the Review Panel, and provided the logistical and administrative support of the evaluation process.

## Approach to evaluation

In conducting the evaluation, the Review Panel was guided by the Terms of Reference (ToR), agreed upon between EQAR and YECHE in April 2021 as follows:

The overall purpose of the external evaluation is to analyse whether EQAR's organizational structure and the activities implemented by EQAR are fit for purpose and effective in light of EQAR's mission and objectives. Particular questions to be addressed were the following:

1. Do EQAR's processes comply with those ESG standards that are pertinent for and can be applied to EQAR correspondingly? What improvements are desirable? How might EQAR develop and act further with a view to best achieving its missions and objectives?
2. How has EQAR performed against the indicators defined in the Strategic Plan 2018-2022?
3. What is the extent of EQAR's contribution to the wider policy goals enshrined in its mission and objectives, and the vision of the EHEA?
4. Have the commitments and planned actions outlined in EQAR's response to the previous external evaluation's and self-evaluation's recommendations been implemented and have they brought the desired results?

It was also agreed that the evaluation would explore two additional points of interest:

- a. Are EQAR's processes well-equipped to respond to the growing diversity of quality assurance arrangements catering for the increasingly diverse higher education provision across Europe?
- b. Does the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) enable its users to satisfy their needs and support different types of decisions as described in the aims of DEQAR?

The primary sources of evidence used during the evaluation were EQAR's Self-Evaluation Report, including all relevant links and appendices contained therein, documents shared by EQAR with members of the Review Panel, and interviews – conducted partly on site in person during the Panel's visit to Brussels, and partly online.

All information collected through individual or group interviews were treated confidentially. Both in-person and online conversations were recorded. The recordings were used exclusively for drafting the present report and were deleted immediately afterwards.

During the evaluation process and particularly after completing all the interviews and document reviews, the Panel had several extensive online consultations to discuss findings and agree on conclusions and recommendations.

The ToR, the program of the site visit, the list of interviews conducted in person and online, as well as the key reference documents are included as appendices.

## Review Panel

Liviu Matei, CEU Provost, Professor of Higher Education; Director, Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education (Chair of the Panel)

Tatiana Yarkova, Higher Education Consultant, Munich, Germany; Interim CEU Academic Secretary (Secretary of the Panel)

Adrian Curaj, Former Minister of Education, Romania; Head of the UNESCO Chair on Science and Innovation Policies, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA)

Liv Teresa Muth, PhD candidate in Synthetic Biology, Ghent University, Belgium and Steering Committee member of ESU's Quality Assurance Pool of Student Experts

Terhi Nokkala, Senior Researcher, Finnish Institute for Educational Research (FIER), University of Jyväskylä; Adjunct Professor of Higher Education Administration, Faculty of Management, University of Tampere

Sauwakon Ratanawijitrasin, Professor, Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, Thailand; former Director of South-East Asian Ministers of Education Organization-Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED)

Oliver Vettori, Dean, Accreditation & Quality Management; Director Programme Management & Teaching and Learning; WU Vienna University of Economics and Business

## Acknowledgements

The Review Panel would like to thank all those stakeholder representatives who made themselves available during the Panel's site visit in Brussels on 16-18 September and during the following weeks through online conversations. The Panel is grateful for their openness, constructive attitude and readiness to share their views regarding EQAR's current and future work. A list of all those interviewed during the external evaluation process is available in Appendices 2 and 3.

The panel would also like to thank the staff of the EQAR Secretariat, in particular Colin Tück, Director of EQAR, and Annelies Traas, Communications Officer, for the valuable logistical, technical and administrative support they provided throughout the entire process, both remotely and in person during the Panel's site visit, and for assisting the panel in selecting and contacting the people to be interviewed during the evaluation process.

Finally, the Panel wishes to express its gratitude to the President of EQAR, Karl Dittrich, for creating an open, welcoming atmosphere and for his impeccable professional support during the evaluation process.

Last but not least, the Panel wishes to congratulate the authors of the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) for the detailed, accurate, informative and high-quality document they produced, which represented a valuable source for the panel and an important guiding document for the evaluation process.

## Detailed findings and recommendations

### Terms of reference I: ESG compliance

*Do EQAR's processes comply with those ESG standards that are pertinent for and can be applied to EQAR correspondingly? What improvements are desirable? How might EQAR develop and act further with a view to best achieving its missions and objectives?*

#### 1.1 Fitness for purpose

##### **Findings:**

EQAR is the official register of quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that operate in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG). The mandate of EQAR, as defined in its Statutes, is to “further the development of the European Higher Education Area by enhancing confidence in higher education and by facilitating the mutual recognition of quality assurance decisions”, and to do so by managing a register of quality assurance agencies.

Further, EQAR's Mission Statement specifies:

*EQAR's vision is a coherent quality assurance framework for the European Higher Education Area in which higher education institutions have the freedom to turn to a suitable EQAR-registered agency for their external quality assurance reviews, and in which qualifications are thus universally recognised.*

*EQAR's mission is to further the development of the European Higher Education Area by increasing the transparency of quality assurance, and thus enhancing trust and confidence in European higher education.*

The primary purpose of this external evaluation was to determine whether EQAR's organisational structure and activities are fit for purpose and effective in light of its mission and objectives.

It should be noted that the mandate of EQAR has evolved slightly since the last evaluation. Firstly, the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) has been introduced in 2018, thus advancing the work of EQAR somewhat outside the initially intended purpose of a mere agency register. Secondly, the outreach of EQAR has gotten broader in terms of information sharing, and EQAR has since become a comprehensive source of information on higher education and quality assurance systems in EHEA. Thirdly, with the enhanced expertise of the staff and following the establishment of the President's position, EQAR's potential to engage with informing policy is increasingly coming to the forefront of discussions between EQAR and its stakeholders.

In this section, we focus exclusively on the original purpose of EQAR, that of maintaining the register. The other aspects of EQAR's work outlined immediately above are discussed in detail in respective sections of this report.

Based on the analysis of documents and interviews with multiple stakeholders, the Review Panel has concluded unequivocally that EQAR is operating fully in line with its mission and objectives. The stakeholders describe EQAR as a reliable, trustworthy, independent register that plays an important role in securing a credible QA system in EHEA. Stakeholders note in particular that given the internationalisation and commercialisation of higher education and quality assurance, this core function of EQAR is more important than ever.



**Commendations:**

There is broad consensus among stakeholders that EQAR is excellent in performing its core functions.

**Recommendations:**

Given the excellent work in this area, the Review Panel has no specific recommendations for improvements in this section.

## 1.2 Governance Model and Stakeholder Engagement

**Findings:**

EQAR was founded at the request of European ministers responsible for higher education, laid down in the 2007 London Communiqué. EQAR's governance comprises a large variety of stakeholders, represented by three groups of members:

The Founding Members are the E4 Group (ENQA, ESU, EUA, EURASHE).

The Social Partner Members are the consultative members of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) that represent the interests of employers or employees, currently BUSINESSEUROPE and Education International/European Trade Union Committee for Education (EI-ETUCE).

The Governmental Members are 41 out of 49 countries that are signatories of the Bologna Process. EQAR aspires that all EHEA countries would eventually become members. The Review Panel recognizes EQAR's continuing efforts in aiming to achieve this goal.

The General Assembly (GA) is the supreme decision-making body of EQAR, comprising all of its members. In addition, there are four permanent observers at the GA: the European Commission (EC), the BFUG Secretariat, the Council of Europe (CE) and UNESCO.

The Executive Board (EB) is in charge of the ongoing management and strategic coordination of EQAR, including administrative and financial matters. The Executive Board consists of five members: the President and one representative from each of the Founding Members.

The Review Panel took note of the potential conflict of interest resulting from the double role of the E4 members as both Executive Board members and stakeholder representatives. As described already on p. 12 of the Self-Evaluation Report (SER): "The composition and the role of the Executive Board were designed ad hoc and with a view to expedite organisational processes when EQAR was established. The experience shows that the composition of the Executive Board by E4 representatives assures a close link and coordination of EQAR with the key stakeholder organisations, but also leads to a double role of its members. This bears a potential for conflict where EQAR's strategic interests might collide with those of an individual organisation."

In interviews, the Review Panel focused specifically on this double role and the potential conflict of interest. Of all the stakeholders that were interviewed, the Founding members without doubt are the most engaged and assertive regarding EQAR's purpose. The Founding members are unanimous that EQAR should stay true to its core function of a register and avoid mission creep at all costs. While the Review Panel acknowledges that there is a certain degree of territorialism resulting from

this governance configuration, it finds that a stable relationship has emerged over time, the boundaries have been delineated with reasonable clarity (though even more could be done), and all parties have found a way to cooperate effectively in governance and co-exist in productive ways.

The creation of the President's position, and the appointment of Karl Dittrich to this position, seem to have played the paramount role in the improved relationship among parties. The SER concurs that the introduction of the President's position "allowed the organisation to have a representative who is independent of its members, can raise the visibility of EQAR externally, and enhances stability and leadership internally. The position also reaffirmed the central role of the Register Committee and avoids potential for internal confusion or conflict, compared to the previously separate leaderships of the Executive Board and the Register Committee." The Review Panel notes further that the EQAR President Karl Dittrich has made a significant contribution to closer cooperation and a clearer differentiation of roles between EQAR and ENQA.

In its interviews with the Social Partner members, the Review Panel found that they value an opportunity to participate in EQAR's work, but at the same time report that they do not have close engagement and have rather limited insights into the issues currently being faced by EQAR. Both note the importance of quality assurance in higher education for their respective constituencies. There is evidence that information does flow through from EQAR over to the Social Partners to their respective members; there is, however, no knowledge as to whether and to what extent those constituent members use that information. One of the Social Partner members expressed an interest in being involved more closely in the governance of EQAR.

In the interviews with a sample of governmental representatives, the Review Panel registered significant appreciation of EQAR's work in QA in EHEA. There is consensus among the governmental representatives who were interviewed by the Review Panel that EQAR has the trust of governmental members, and they also feel sufficiently involved in EQAR's decision-making process.

The Review Panel concluded from the interviews that EQAR does exemplary work of engagement of and communication with stakeholders. Most notably the General Assembly and Members' Dialogue forum, EQAR's two annual main events for members, allow its key stakeholders to be involved in discussing the organisation's priorities.

#### **Commendations:**

- EQAR governance and the relationship management with different stakeholders has improved significantly since the creation of the position of President. The Review Panel would like to commend Karl Dittrich personally for the role he has played in improving the governance processes.
- EQAR provides an excellent formal and informal platform for exchange and networking of governmental representatives through the Members' Dialogue forum. It is one of the few forums on the European level for such a great variety of stakeholders.

#### **Recommendation:**

- The Review Panel takes note of the conclusion of the SER that "it might be worthwhile discussing how the Board is composed and what are its responsibilities vis-à-vis those of the President and the Director, balancing the need for a link with the E4 organisations and the need for EQAR to act independently." The Review Panel did not, however, find significant support for this suggestion in the interviews with the stakeholders. Stakeholders were largely

well aware of potential tensions between the different hats they were wearing due to their various roles, but seem to have found adequate solutions to mitigate potential risks and conflicts. The Review Panel recommends maintaining the existing governance structure and does not advise making any immediate changes to the decision-making bodies, in particular when it comes to changing the current balance of power. The current structure represents a workable model of strong stakeholder representation, which appears to be functional and effective. At the same time, having a relatively functional status quo does not mean that there is no room for improvement, as was stated by several interviewees. Every possible effort should be done to assure there is not even an appearance of a conflict of interest at this level. EQAR and its stakeholders should continue the process of reflection regarding such solutions.

### 1.3 Staff and Resources

#### **Findings:**

Based on the information provided in the SAR, EQAR has an annual revenue of ca. EUR 400,000 and currently employs 4,2 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff. The main sources of revenue are annual membership fees from EQAR's founding and stakeholder members, governmental members and application/registration fees. EQAR has some additional funding from the Erasmus+ projects, most notably DEQAR and DEQAR CONNECT. EQAR's fees have been revised only once in its history, following the introduction of the President's position and the launch of DEQAR in 2018.

The Review Panel concludes that for its core functions as a register and a vehicle to disseminate information, EQAR is adequately resourced. Any new projects, however, would require either additional resources or the abandonment of previous endeavours.

In its interviews with the stakeholders, the Review Panel explored the willingness of stakeholders to contribute higher fees to support new projects that they would consider worthwhile implementing. The Founding Members spoke against increasing the fees – this aligns also with their vision of EQAR as performing strictly its register function and not venturing into other areas. They acknowledged, however, that despite their initial scepticism towards DEQAR as a new initiative, the project turned out to be successful. At the same time, the governmental representatives interviewed by the Panel were highly appreciative of EQAR's work also outside its register function and expressed willingness to pay higher fees for the types of projects that would benefit quality assurance of higher education in their respective countries and EHEA as a whole.

EQAR's staff have been commended by all stakeholders as highly professional and helpful. The Review Panel notes this as well. It should be mentioned however that the staff seem to be somewhat overburdened. Their engagement is fantastic, and they are eager to use their expertise to reach outside their direct job descriptions and take on new projects. While this is excellent, it represents a potential threat as well, as it leads to a situation where the staff overload themselves. It should be noted also that the staff lacks some essential expertise in big data analysis. The development of this type of expertise will be essential for the continuing success of DEQAR.

#### **Commendation:**

- The Review Panel would like to commend EQAR's highly engaged, competent, and proactive staff.

## Recommendations:

- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR invest in further professional development of its staff – especially in the area of data analysis. EQAR may consider adopting a staff development plan. This is particularly important in the framework of DEQAR, but is also essential for maintaining staff motivation and professional growth. Moreover, it would promote a more efficient use of resources as staff with adequate skills tend to perform better in their jobs. This would also mean that time would need to be allocated for the staff to participate in dedicated trainings.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR develop a clear resource plan with a trajectory for the future. This is particularly relevant when EQAR considers engaging in new initiatives. The budgeting for new projects seems to sometimes underestimate the workload strains on staff. New projects are not always realistically budgeted; and if certain tasks remain after project funding has ended, the existing resources will be further stretched. The Review Panel recommends that any planned new activities be budgeted accordingly and with the long-term sustainability in mind.

## 1.4 Internal policies and processes

### Findings:

The core activity of EQAR is to maintain the register of quality assurance agencies, providing reliable information on quality of European higher education. The central body in this process is the Register Committee (RC). The RC is responsible for all matters related to the management of the Register, with its primary task being to evaluate and decide upon applications for inclusion on the Register and for renewal of registration. Another important task of the RC that should be noted here is that it adopts a policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG (U&I).

As reported in the documentation provided by EQAR, the RC is composed of eleven members experienced in quality assurance of higher education, acting as independent experts in their individual capacity. Each Founding Member nominates two members of the Register Committee and one member is nominated by each Social Partner. The Register Committee is approved by the General Assembly for a mandate of two years; a member may be re-nominated up to three times. In addition, the President is a member of the Register Committee without voting rights. Five governmental representatives are nominated by the General Assembly as observers on the Register Committee. The observers attend the RC meetings and closely follow the work of the Committee; they report annually at the General Assembly.

The body in charge of reviewing and ruling on appeals is the Appeals Committee (AC). The AC has the responsibility to consider appeals against decisions of the RC. It consists of the chair, two members, the deputy chair and two deputy members. They are elected by the General Assembly for a mandate of four years, renewable once.

The agency registration process consists of an independent external review of the registered or applicant agency, coordinated by a third-party organisation that is independent of the agency under review. The RC makes a determination on whether to (re-)register the agency on the basis of the review report.

Agency reviews take place every five years, and agencies are under obligation to report substantive changes in between in case of changes to their external QA activities, organisational structure, statutes, or methodology. The most recent reaction of EQAR to the diverse needs of QA agencies

was to introduce targeted reviews for agencies that are going through their third or further review against the ESG in order to avoid that reviews become a repetitive, excessive exercise.

The Review Panel interviewed the members of the RC, AC, representatives of quality assurance agencies, and a sample of external reviewers. Furthermore, ENQA representatives have also been interviewed separately in their role as the main review coordinator. In the interviews, three themes emerged recurrently: (1) that of the length of the review (specifically, time between conclusion of the review and the decision of the RC); (2) that of divergence between the decision of the review panel and the RC; and (3) that of the Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG (U&I). Other topics that were discussed had to do with (4) substantive change reporting and (5) the new initiative of targeted reviews. The Review Panel's findings in those areas are discussed below:

- (1) Length of reviews. While the Review Panel acknowledges that ESG compliance assessment of the kind conducted by EQAR tends to be lengthy and somewhat bureaucratic by necessity, it nevertheless would like to stress that the time between the site visit and the Register Committee's decision of one and a half, sometimes even two years, as reported in the interviews, is unusually long. Reviewers report that they struggle with providing additional information or answering questions when they are approached by RC for clarification many months after the review, as their memories have already faded and it is difficult to do reconstruction of all the details at that late time from the site visit notes. The Review Panel acknowledges that EQAR's process only starts once the final report is received, and takes, on the side of EQAR, 3 – 4 months in straightforward cases, and around 7 – 8 months where applications are deferred. The remainder of the time is that between the site visit and the final report. EQAR reported that review coordinators are free to design their own processes and EQAR has no control over them. However, for the agency under review this is still uncomfortably long. EQAR is aware of this difficulty as mentioned in the SAR and is committed to work together with the review coordinators towards minimizing the overall length of the site visit-to-decision timespan. Same observation goes, to a lesser degree, for the appeals procedure. In the latter, the Review Panel concurs with the conclusion of the SAR that the "timing for the submission (90 days) and consideration of appeals could be shortened in the future so as to allow for a more expedient decision on an agency's registration ... in some cases a final rejection decision could only be published a year after it has been taken by the Register Committee."
- (2) Divergence of conclusions. The interviews reveal that despite significant efforts made by EQAR and by the RC specifically in that area (such as, for example, through the U&I, publication of RC's decisions, as well as enhanced participation of EQAR staff in reviewers' trainings), there remains insufficient understanding of the reasons why the RC sometimes arrives at different conclusions. There appears to be a degree of resentment among reviewers who are of the belief that their conclusions, arrived at through in-depth interviews and study of documents during the site visit, are being dismissed as non-valid by the RC. The Review Panel recognizes that this issue has been, at least in part, caused by different scales used by ENQA and EQAR in the past. With the harmonization of scales there is an expectation to arrive at a higher degree of convergence in the future.
- (3) U&I. This is the area where the Review Panel found quite a divergence of opinions during the interviews. Some stakeholders, notably the QAAs and the external reviewers, and to some extent also governmental representatives, found the document helpful and even necessary. They pointed out that, otherwise, there will be different interpretations from different actors involved, and a higher risk of misinterpretations. Others, notably some of the Founding Members, claimed that while it was EQAR's role to advance the implementation of ESG and to take part in the shared interpretation of the ESG, EQAR should not interpret the ESG at all and should not be the ultimate authority on interpreting the ESG. The Review

Panel withholds judgement here – the U&I is a fait accompli and to debate it at this point in time is moot. The Review Panel notes that while it agrees in principle that EQAR should not be the ultimate authority on interpreting the ESG, the role of U&I in achieving the consistency of review results should nevertheless be noted. This matter requires further consideration internally at EQAR, in coordination with all stakeholders.

- (4) Substantive change reporting. The Review Panel concurs with the findings of the SER (p. 25 of the report) regarding the issues related to substantive change reporting, specifically the fact that many “reportable” changes get reported with significant delay or do not get reported at all.
- (5) Targeted reviews. This is a new initiative and it was unanimously welcomed by all interviewees. The approach is sensible and is to be commended; it is, however, too early in the process to draw firm, evidence-based conclusions about the initiative’s success.

The Review Panel concludes that the registration processes are well-established, function well overall, and are, to quote from the SER, “clearly documented” and “mostly well understood by the agencies”. This is one area however where some serious issues have been identified that would require addressing.

#### **Commendations:**

- EQAR is to be commended for making a special effort in communicating EQAR's requirements more clearly in ENQA reviewer trainings.

#### **Recommendations:**

- The Review Panel recommends an in-depth process analysis to identify possibilities to minimise the time between the site visit and the RC’s decision. This could be achieved by working with review coordinators to establish a timeline template for review panels, and by instituting more direct communication between the EQAR Register Committee and the review panels. For example, the panel chair could be invited to attend the deliberations of the RC to answer questions, rather than exchanging formal letters.
- The Review Panel supports EQAR’s self-recommendation to shorten the time for consideration of appeals.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR consider developing even clearer policies and procedures for, and improve communication about, the substantive change reporting.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR conduct an analysis of outcomes of targeted reviews once a sufficient number of cases has been amassed.

## Terms of reference II: Strategic Plan

*How has EQAR performed against the indicators defined in the Strategic Plan 2018-2022?*

EQAR’s Strategic Plan 2018-2022 puts forward two strategic goals:

### 2.1 Strategic Goal 1: Transparency and Information

*EQAR provides reliable and widely-used information on registered quality assurance agencies as well as on which higher education institutions or programmes have been subject to external quality assurance in line with the ESG.*

Two aspects in particular are noteworthy in this section. One is DEQAR, which, apart from the Register itself, is the other big contributor to EQAR's role in providing transparent and reliable information. This is an important new line of EQAR's work since the previous evaluation, and is discussed, in line with the ToR, in a dedicated section, along with the respective recommendations.

The other is the apparent need on the side of EQAR members for more analytical output from EQAR, specifically "providing the sector with statistics and analysis", as demonstrated in the chart on p. 30 of the SER. As this bears relevance to another section of the ToR related to policy contribution, it, too, is discussed in its own dedicated section, along with the respective recommendations.

## 2.2 Strategic Goal 2: International Trust and Recognition

*EQAR-registered agencies and their QA results are recognised across the EHEA. On that basis, qualifications that were subject to external quality assurance by registered agencies (whether at institutional or programme level) are recognised and, in line with national requirements, higher education institutions are allowed to work with a suitable registered agency to fulfil their formal external quality assurance obligations.*

Based on EQAR members' feedback (as reported in SER, p. 36), EQAR performs well in activities earmarked under this strategic goal, most notably in maintaining the public knowledge base. Stakeholder interviews conducted by the Review Panel confirm this. There appears to be consensus among QAAs and government representatives interviewed by the Review Panel that EQAR has a crucial role to play in creating trust and promoting cross-border recognition.

One area where more work could still be done, as reported also in SER, is in increasing awareness and/or raising flags with the member governments when it is identified that the national system prevents agencies from complying with the ESG. Representatives of QAA agencies whose (re)registration was denied due to the constraints of their national framework report that EQAR remained supportive throughout and continued to engage with the agencies in advising on ways how to regain registration.

The Review Panel supports EQAR's ambition to "engage into a more direct dialogue with countries about their system, so as to support countries in creating the right conditions for ESG compliance and the use of the Register for cross-border cooperation." (SER, p. 38).

Another important matter that raised concerns is the fact that the possibility for HEIs to choose a QAA from other countries remains limited. This is, however, not in any way a reflection on EQAR's performance in this area. EQAR has contributed by conducting relevant analysis and creating possibilities for information exchange and regularly placing this on the agenda of its MD fora. The national frameworks along with long-rooted perception of importance of national accreditations mean that longer time will be required for cross-border accreditation to become a common practice, and EQAR is only one player among many in helping make this a reality.

### **Commendation:**

- EQAR is to be commended for supporting agencies whose (re)registration was denied due to the constraints of their national framework in advising on ways how to regain registration.

### **Recommendations:**

The Review Panel offers no specific recommendations in this section.

## Terms of reference III: Policy contribution

*What is the extent of EQAR's contribution to the wider policy goals enshrined in its mission and objectives, and the vision of the EHEA?*

### **Findings:**

The Review Panel explored this topic extensively in its interviews with stakeholders and found some divergence of opinions on the subject. On the one side, there seems to be a consensus among stakeholders that EQAR should not move too far away from its register function and in the direction of the policy. Where opinions really differ is with regard to the extent of EQAR's potential policy involvement. A number of stakeholders acknowledged that EQAR staff have developed great expertise in the area of quality assurance that would be invaluable to policy-makers. There is a pressure for EQAR to engage policy analysis, which is a logical outcome of the expertise they have accumulated and of the mission of EQAR.

The Review Panel registered a lack of clarity among both stakeholders and EQAR staff regarding what such potential involvement in policy might mean. For example, EQAR's policy briefs, while appreciated by many as useful sources of information, are perceived by others as a possible example of mission creep. It is important to differentiate between policy-informing and policy-shaping here. From this point of view, the title "policy brief" is somewhat unfortunate as the name does not necessarily adequately reflect the intention and the content of such documents (not every analysis is a policy brief, including defined policy recommendations). A different title might help alleviate the concerns expressed by some stakeholders, while still addressing the information need of the others.

Most individuals interviewed were of the opinion that while EQAR should remain neutral beyond the policies already agreed upon by the various stakeholders as part of EQAR's mission and not shape policy unilaterally, they should regularly share their knowledge, insights, positions and proposals with the interested parties engaged in policy setting.

### **Commendation:**

- Stakeholders pointed out that they find the DEQAR data and EQAR's publications/briefs aggregating interesting findings useful for their policy work.

### **Recommendations:**

- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR use clear terms in its external communication to avoid misinterpretations of its intentions. As the majority of reservations regarding EQAR-driven policies are related more to potential future risks than to actual experiences in the past, EQAR should be sensitive and precise regarding the language that is used and to clearly distinguish between areas where EQAR has a "function" and where it has an "agenda".
- In view of different attitudes of stakeholders regarding EQAR's involvement in policy, the Review Panel recommends that EQAR organize a process of internal reflection and arrive at a clear and balanced strategic position with regard to this matter.



## Terms of reference IV: Previous evaluations

*Have the commitments and planned actions outlined in EQAR's response to the previous external evaluation's and self-evaluation's recommendations been implemented and have they brought the desired results?*

By and large all commitments have been met, as addressed in other sections throughout this report. DEQAR should particularly be acknowledged as a successful outcome of previous recommendations. Another recommendation that has proven to have a highly successful outcome is the establishment of the President's position. More remains to be done in the area of cross-border recognition of registered agencies' results.

### **Commendation:**

- EQAR is to be commended for following up on recommendations from the previous report in a well-planned and conscientious manner.

### **Recommendations:**

The Review Panel offers no recommendations in this section.

## Terms of reference V: Future orientation

*Are EQAR's processes well-equipped to respond to the growing diversity of quality assurance arrangements catering for the increasingly diverse higher education provision across Europe?*

### **Findings:**

There are new developments in HE and QA which are not directly and immediately covered by the ESG and the work of EQAR. Given the early stage of these developments, it is not easy to see how EQAR should come into this picture. The two topics that emerged recurrently in the Review Panel's conversations with the interviewees were micro-credentials and joint degrees (especially in the context of the new European Universities Initiative). Many stakeholders are of the view that EQAR plays, and should continue to play, a reactive role to developments in HE, keeping itself up to date but not playing an active role akin to policy entrepreneurialism. EQAR should be involved if its 'technical expertise' is needed.

It is clear from the SER that the reflection process has started at EQAR regarding in particular its potential future role in QA of micro-credentials, and some preliminary research has been done by surveying the QA agencies regarding their processes in that area of micro-credentials and their alignment with the ESG. The SER acknowledges, however, that "as there is no consensus yet if there should be standards different from the ESG, how they would look like or how they would relate to the ESG, it is impossible to discuss this further at this stage" (p. 44).

The Review Panel is of the opinion that EQAR should stay abreast of the emerging trends and available to engage. EQAR would also need to respond and adapt to how different new trends are taken up by other stakeholders, in particular policy-makers and agencies.

### **Commendation:**

- EQAR is to be commended for taking initiative in the area of joint degrees and it has become a major source of information (and driver) of cross-national QA procedures.

**Recommendation:**

- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR continue with an internal process of reflection that has already started, with the involvement of members and stakeholders, to develop an action plan on how best to engage in the new developments in EHEA, such as micro-credentials and new joint degrees initiative.

**Terms of reference VI: Database of External Quality Assurance Results**

*Does the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) enable its users to satisfy their needs and support different types of decisions as described in the aims of DEQAR?*

**Findings:**

DEQAR was launched in 2018 and builds upon data already available through the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER). The initial establishment of DEQAR was supported by an EU-funded Erasmus+ project grant; there is now a second grant for DEQAR CONNECT. Consequently, the efforts of EQAR staff are presently targeted at interconnecting DEQAR with other databases in order to fulfil the ambition of making DEQAR the single reference point for QA in EHEA.

Given its young age, the success of DEQAR is not to be underestimated: according to SER, as of April 2021, 41 of 50 registered agencies participate in DEQAR, providing over 58,248 reports on 2,768 higher education institutions. It is also, according to SER, the most frequently visited part of EQAR website, accounting for 33% of the website's traffic. Based on the website analytics, DEQAR site has around 3,5 thousand unique users on average per month.

In its interviews the Review Panel found that DEQAR is unanimously praised by stakeholders – even by those who reported that they had been sceptical of the initiative at the time of its launch. Interviewees seem to be in agreement that DEQAR is a great tool for linking quality assurance and recognition. Not surprisingly, the most common (and grateful) users of DEQAR are the ENIC-NARICs.

It is both recognised in the SER and came forward in a number of interviews that technical hurdles remain, the information in DEQAR is not always complete or up-to-date; and interoperability with other databases and sources is still not ideal.

One area into which the Review Panel probed in particular is the issue of users and 'non-users'/'potential future users' of DEQAR, or, in other words, the question of whether all potential users who could and should be using the database are actually using it.

The Review Panel acknowledges that EQAR is working towards developing a more in-depth understanding of DEQAR's current and future beneficiaries and their needs. EQAR has put together a list of nine different target audiences, with an adapted communication strategy for each category of users. The staff is already reaching out and seeking feedback from some of the beneficiaries, in particular ENIC-NARICs, governments, QA agencies, and researchers.

The picture of the actual current users of DEQAR is, however, still not clear-cut. For example, EQAR staff reported during the interview that it was not possible to determine, based on the website traffic, who the visitors of the website were (in terms of profile). EQAR staff supplements inherent limitations of web-analytics with other means, such as micro-surveys. According to SER (p. 32), the DEQAR micro-survey yielded 94 responses in the period between April 2019 and January 2021, and it appears that those who left comments were mostly looking for information that is not available at DEQAR – either by design or for a reason (e.g. users were looking for institutions that are not in

DEQAR because they have not been quality-assured by an EQAR-registered agency), though it was not clear to the users why the information they were looking for was not there.

A related theme that came forward in discussions is DEQAR's approachability. Interviewees reported that DEQAR data is quite specialised, and suggested that the format could be re-thought. More could be done also about how DEQAR is framed. For example, the language of the "database of external quality assurance results" and being the "authoritative database regarding ESG-compliance in the EHEA" is not catering to the actors who are less involved in the community language.

Regarding interoperability with other databases, the Review Panel recognizes that EQAR is making great strides in this area in the framework of DEQAR CONNECT. In addition to cooperation with European Tertiary Education Register (ETER), EQAR is encouraged to pursue further the integration and inter-operationalization of DEQAR data with other international and national databases, possibly even with Eurostat - especially in regard to (automatic) recognition by the ENIC-NARIC networks but also higher education institutions performing recognition procedures themselves. EQAR is advised to open dialogue with European Open Science Cloud (EOSC). DEQAR hosts significant amounts of data, and the way data will be part of and visible in EOSC will make the difference in their use.

The Review Panel concluded that EQAR has a clear vision for the future of DEQAR and is working in this direction. There is an outline of a robust theoretical model, which could, however, benefit from further elaboration. For example, while there is an agreement among stakeholders about the database's success, the indicators against which this success is measured are not yet in place. The Review Panel acknowledges that, given the young age of this initiative, it is to be expected that there is still a way to go until this theoretical model becomes a reality.

**Commendation:**

- DEQAR has been successfully established and has exceeded the expectations of various stakeholder groups.

**Recommendations:**

- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR define clear and measurable indicators of success for its DEQAR database.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR develop a methodology for an in-depth analysis of user profiles of the DEQAR database in order to be able to tailor the data gathering and presentation to the needs of beneficiaries. Data collection and data presentation should be calibrated to serve to the best extent possible the selected target groups. That might require presenting data differently depending on the category of users, as well as creating engaging formats of data presentation that are attractive and understandable for beneficiaries outside the QA professional field. Framing the language around DEQAR somewhat differently and more broadly could also make it more approachable to different target groups.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR conduct an evaluation of DEQAR against the identified indicators of success as part of its next self-evaluation.

## Summary of Recommendations

The Review Panel came to the conclusion that EQAR is one of the most successful pan-European organizations in higher education. It is excellent in fulfilling its original mandate, and its staff is to be commended for their professionalism, resourcefulness, and responsiveness. The Review Panel acknowledges that there are new emerging trends in the European Higher Education Area that have direct implications for quality assurance, most notably in the areas of micro-credentials and trans-national initiatives. The Panel concluded that the core mandate of EQAR remains highly relevant. The exact modalities in which this mandate is implemented in practice, however, may require certain adjustments, in view of these new trends and developments, which could not have been anticipated when EQAR was set up. Since those trends are still very much in their infancy and given the Terms of Reference of the Review Panel, it is not possible for this Panel to state at the present time how EQAR can best fit in. The main overall recommendation of the Review Panel is that EQAR continue the process of internal reflection, with the close involvement of its stakeholders, and develop an action plan on how it can best support relevant new developments and address new challenges in EHEA from the QA perspective.

Detailed recommendations follow:

- The Review Panel takes note of the conclusion of the SER that “it might be worthwhile discussing how the Board is composed and what are its responsibilities vis-à-vis those of the President and the Director, balancing the need for a link with the E4 organisations and the need for EQAR to act independently.” The Review Panel did not, however, find significant support for this suggestion in the interviews with the stakeholders. Stakeholders were largely well aware of potential tensions between the different hats they were wearing due to their various roles, but seem to have found adequate solutions to mitigate potential risks and conflicts. The Review Panel recommends maintaining the existing governance structure and does not advise making any immediate changes to the decision-making bodies, in particular when it comes to changing the current balance of power. The current structure represents a workable model of strong stakeholder representation, which appears to be functional and effective. At the same time, having a relatively functional status quo does not mean that there is no room for improvement, as was stated by several interviewees. Every possible effort should be done to assure there is not even an appearance of a conflict of interest at this level. EQAR and its stakeholders should continue the process of reflection regarding such solutions.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR invest in further professional development of its staff – especially in the area of data analysis. EQAR may consider adopting a staff development plan. This is particularly important in the framework of DEQAR, but is also essential for maintaining staff motivation and professional growth. Moreover, it would promote a more efficient use of resources as staff with adequate skills tend to perform better in their jobs. This would also mean that time would need to be allocated for the staff to participate in dedicated trainings.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR develop a clear resource plan with a trajectory for the future. This is particularly relevant when EQAR considers engaging in new initiatives. The budgeting for new projects seems to sometimes underestimate the workload strains on staff. New projects are not always realistically budgeted; and if certain tasks remain after project funding has ended, the existing resources will be further stretched. The Review Panel recommends that any planned new activities be budgeted accordingly and with the long-term sustainability in mind.
- The Review Panel recommends an in-depth process analysis to identify possibilities to minimise the time between the site visit and the RC’s decisions. This could be achieved by

working with review coordinators to establish a timeline template for review panels, and by instituting more direct communication between the EQAR Register Committee and the review panels. For example, the panel chair could be invited to attend the deliberations of the RC to answer questions, rather than exchanging formal letters.

- The Review Panel supports EQAR’s self-recommendation to shorten the time for consideration of appeals.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR consider developing even clearer policies and procedures for, and improve communication about, the substantive change reporting.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR conduct an analysis of outcomes of targeted reviews once a sufficient number of cases has been amassed.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR use clear terms in its external communication to avoid misinterpretations of its intentions. As the majority of reservations regarding EQAR-driven policies are related more to potential future risks than to actual experiences in the past, EQAR should be sensitive and precise regarding the language that is used and to clearly distinguish between areas where EQAR has a “function” and where it has an “agenda”.
- In view of different attitudes of stakeholders regarding EQAR’s involvement in policy, the Review Panel recommends that EQAR organize a process of internal reflection and arrive at a clear and balanced strategic position with regard to this matter.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR continue an internal process of reflection that has already started, with the involvement of members and stakeholders, to develop an action plan on how best to engage in new developments in quality assurance in the EHEA, such as with regard to micro-credentials and new joint degrees initiatives.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR define clear and measurable indicators of success for its DEQAR database.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR develop a methodology for an in-depth analysis of user profiles of the DEQAR database in order to be able to tailor the data gathering and presentation to the needs of beneficiaries. Data collection and data presentation should be calibrated to serve to the best extent possible the selected target groups. That might require presenting data differently depending on the category of users, as well as creating engaging formats of data presentation that are attractive and understandable for beneficiaries outside the QA professional field. Framing the language around DEQAR somewhat differently and more broadly could also make it more approachable to different target groups.
- The Review Panel recommends that EQAR conduct an evaluation of DEQAR against the identified indicators of success as part of its next self-evaluation.

## Appendices

Appendix 1: Terms of Reference – External Evaluation of EQAR

Appendix 2: Site visit program with list of interviews conducted during the site visit

Appendix 3: List of interviews

Appendix 4: Reference documents

## Appendix 1



# Terms of Reference

## External Evaluation of EQAR

(as agreed between EQAR and the CEU Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education)

### 1. Background

EQAR was founded by the E4 Group based on the mandate received from ministers at the London summit in May 2007. Ministers requested that EQAR be evaluated externally after two years of operation:

*“We ask the E4 group [...], and to ensure that after two years of operation, the register is evaluated externally, taking account of the views of all stakeholders.” (London Communiqué, 2007)*

Consequently, a first external evaluation of EQAR was organised in 2010/11, the report of which is published on the EQAR website. In 2015/16, EQAR carried out a comprehensive self-evaluation. The report, adopted by the 2016 General Assembly, is published on the EQAR website.

The self-evaluation report contained the recommendation that EQAR

*“adopt a 5-year cycle for regular self-evaluations, with an external evaluation following every second self-evaluation, i.e. every 10 years”*

In its Strategy 2018 – 2022, in line with the above principle, EQAR committed itself to carry out the next self-evaluation, followed by an external evaluation, in 2020/2021. The evaluation report should be based on an objective and credible analysis, and be regarded as such by EQAR's members, partners and stakeholders.

### 2. Framework – EQAR's vision, mission and values

#### Vision

As described in its Strategy 2018 - 2022 document adopted by the 14th General Assembly in April 2018, EQAR's vision is a coherent quality assurance framework for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in which higher education institutions have the freedom to turn to any EQAR-registered agency for their external quality assurance reviews, and in which qualifications are thus universally recognised.

#### Mission

EQAR's mission is to further the development of the European Higher Education Area by increasing the transparency of quality assurance, and thus enhancing trust and confidence in European higher education.

More specifically, EQAR seeks to provide clear and reliable information on quality assurance provision in Europe, thus improving trust among agencies.

EQAR seeks to facilitate the mutual acceptance of quality assurance decisions and to improve trust among higher education institutions, thus promoting mobility and recognition.

EQAR seeks to reduce opportunities for “accreditation mills” to gain credibility in Europe, thus further enhancing the confidence of students, institutions, the labour market and society more generally in the quality of higher education provision in Europe.

To achieve its mission EQAR, through its independent Register Committee, manages a register of quality assurance agencies operating in Europe that substantially comply with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

### **Values**

EQAR recognises the diversity of approaches to external quality assurance and is therefore open to all agencies, whether operating at programme or institutional level, and whether providing accreditation, evaluation or audit services. EQAR is committed to the principles on which the ESG are based: external quality assurance should recognise the central responsibility of higher education institutions for quality development and should be carried out by independent quality assurance agencies in a transparent, objective and responsible manner, involving their stakeholders and leading to substantiated results based on well-defined procedures and criteria. EQAR acts independently from other organisations and is committed to taking proportionate, consistent, fair and objective decisions. EQAR makes transparent its mode of operation and its procedures while ensuring necessary confidentiality.

### **3. Purpose and scope of the evaluation**

The overall purpose of the external evaluation is to analyse whether EQAR's organisational structure and the activities implemented by EQAR are fit for purpose and effective in light of EQAR's mission and objectives. Particular questions to be addressed are the following:

1. Do EQAR's processes comply with those ESG standards that are pertinent for and can be applied to EQAR correspondingly? What improvements are desirable? How might EQAR develop and act further with a view to best achieving its missions and objectives?
2. How has EQAR performed against the indicators defined in the Strategic Plan 2018-2022?
3. What is the extent of EQAR's contribution to the wider policy goals enshrined in its mission and objectives, and the vision of the EHEA?
4. Have the commitments and planned actions outlined in EQAR's response to the previous external evaluation's and self-evaluation's recommendations been implemented and have they brought the desired results?

As part of this, the evaluation would explore as additional points of interest:

- a. Are EQAR's processes well-equipped to respond to the growing diversity of quality assurance arrangements catering for the increasingly diverse higher education provision across Europe?



- b. Does the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) enable its users to satisfy their needs and support different types of decisions as described in the aims of DEQAR?

#### **4. Coordinator**

The Coordinator of the external evaluation (the CEU Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education, represented by its Director and Senior Managers) will assume the following roles and responsibilities:

- a. agree with EQAR on the Terms of Reference;
- b. assume overall responsibility for the evaluation process, including:
  - i. recruit and appoint the Panel of Experts (see its description below)
  - ii. provide adequate briefing to the Panel, setting out the context of the evaluation
  - iii. make sure that the evaluation process is conducted in line with the Terms of Reference
  - iv. provide logistical and administrative support to the Panel of Experts (Note: the Panel bears full responsibility for the final evaluation report and its contents, on which the Coordinator will have no influence)
- v. ensure the timely delivery and quality of the final evaluation report.

#### **5. Self-evaluation**

Prior to the external evaluation EQAR will carry out an internal self-evaluation and produce a self-evaluation report.

The report will contain an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities for improvements and threats/constraints as regards the main questions of the evaluation (see "Purpose and scope").

The self-evaluation process will elicit the views of all types of members and stakeholders.

The self-evaluation group will consult with EQAR's various bodies internally and bear final responsibility for the self-evaluation report. The EQAR General Assembly will be presented the final draft before it is submitted to the Panel.

#### **6. Panel of experts**

The evaluation will be carried out and the final evaluation report will be written by a Panel of Experts, recruited and appointed by the Coordinator. EQAR will have the right to raise substantiated objections in respect of proposed panel members. Members of the Panel should cover the perspectives of the relevant stakeholders, in particular higher education institutions, students and quality assurance bodies. The composition of the Panel should be balanced in terms of geographic representation, gender and professional background of its members.

#### **Composition of the Panel, profile of its members:**

1. Chair of the Panel

2. Secretary of the Panel (will be appointed later on in consultation with the Chair of the Panel) – the Secretary will have extensive expertise in drafting QA external evaluation reports and excellent written command of English
3. International Expert in Higher Education with significant experience in the European Higher Education Area
4. Student expert in higher education policy
5. Non-European expert in higher education
6. Independent higher education expert specializing on quality assurance at the university level
7. Expert with experience in quality assurance agencies

One of the members of the Panel could be a representative of the previous, 2010 external evaluation team.

The communication between the Panel and the Coordinator will be conducted mainly between the Chair and Secretary of the Panel and the main administrative manager of the Coordinator.

## **7. Content of evaluation report**

The evaluation report should serve two purposes:

- a. as a tool for improvement for EQAR, assisting the organisation to further develop with a view to best achieving its missions and objectives.
- b. as a tool for accountability to European governments and stakeholders, demonstrating the fitness for purpose of EQAR's structures and activities.

The report should describe the Panel's findings and make recommendations for improvement.

The report should base its findings on the self-evaluation report and other documentation provided by EQAR, as required by the panel. In addition, the evaluation should be informed by:

- the site visit to EQAR with interviews of its leadership, staff and governing bodies;
- interviews with external stakeholders and partners, such as:
  - o members of EQAR and permanent observers;
  - o registered agencies as well as agencies that applied for registration unsuccessfully;
  - o external partners (non-member governments, national organisations, institutions);
- additional desk research, survey(s), etc.

EQAR will have an opportunity to comment on the draft report and point out factual errors. The Panel will bear responsibility for the final report.

The evaluation panel shall submit the final report to the Coordinator, which assures that the report meets the Terms of Reference, and submits the report to EQAR.

EQAR will publish the report, together with its follow-up or implementation plans as appropriate.

## **8. Confidentiality**

During the evaluation process the Panel needs to have access to a variety of documents that might contain sensitive information, therefore it is very important that the confidentiality of any such information is strictly observed by the Panel and by the Coordinator. Confidentiality clauses shall be included in any contracts with the Coordinator and the members of the Panel.

## 9. Timing

The indicative schedule of the external evaluation is the following:

<b>Completed activity</b>	<b>Deadline</b>	<b>Responsible</b>
Terms of Reference agreed	14 March 2021	Coordinator & EQAR
Members of the Panel proposed	31 March 2021	Coordinator
Panel finalized	15 April 2021	
Self-evaluation report submitted	30 April 2021	EQAR
Site visit and/or online interviews	June/July 2021	Panel
Draft report prepared	30 September 2021	Panel
Comments on factual accuracy	31 October 2021	EQAR
External report finalized	30 November 2021	Panel

## Appendix 2

# EQAR Evaluation Site Visit Program

September 16-18, 2021

Brussels, EQAR Office, Aarlenstraat 22 Rue d'Arlon

### Thursday, September 16

9:00-10:00	Meet & Greet, Set-up	EQAR Secretariat
10:00-11:00	Panel working session	
11:00-13:00	Self-evaluation group	Karl Dittrich, Michal Karpisek, Tia Loukkola, Ivana Radonova, Beate Treml, Colin Tück
13:00-14:00	Panel working lunch	
14:00-15:00	ENQA: Founding member	Goran Daković, Maria Kelo
15:00-16:00	ENQA: Review coordination	Goran Daković, Anais Gourdin
16:00-18:00	Register Committee	Beate Treml, Eltjo Bazen, Riita Pyykkö

### Friday, September 17

10:00-12:00	Panel working session	
12:00-13:00	EUA: Founding member	Tia Loukkola, Amanda Crowfoot
13:00-14:30	Panel working lunch	
14:30-15:00	Panel working session	
15:00-16:00	Belgium (Walloon): Governmental member	Caroline Hollela
16:00-17:00	European Commission	Lucie Trojanova
17:00-18:00	DEQAR	Aleksandra Zhivkovikj, Colin Tück

### Saturday, September 18

9:00-10:00	Panel working session	
10:00-11:00	QAA: AEQES	Caty Duykaerts
11:00-12:00	EQAR staff	

12:00-13:00

Panel lunch

Karl Dittrich, Colin Tück, Melinda Szabo,  
Pooja Venkatesh, Aleksandra Zhivkovikj,  
Annelies Traas

## List of participants

September 16-18, 2021

### Review panel:

Liviu Matei, CEU Provost, Chair of the Panel

Tatiana Yarkova, Higher Education Consultant, Munich, Germany, CEU Academic Secretary  
(Secretary of the Panel)

Matyas Szabo, Senior Manager, CEU Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education (external evaluation  
manager)

Adrian Curaj, Former Minister of Education, Romania, Head of the UNESCO Chair on Science and  
Innovation Policies at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA)

Liv Teresa Muth, PhD candidate in Synthetic Biology, Ghent University, Belgium and Steering  
Committee member of ESU's Quality Assurance Pool of Student Experts

Terhi Nokkala (*participating online*), Senior Researcher at the Finnish Institute for Educational  
Research (FIER), University of Jyväskylä

Sauwakon Ratanawijitrasin (*not participating*), Professor, Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences and  
Humanities, Mahidol University, Thailand; former Director of South-East Asian Ministers of  
Education Organization-Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED)

Oliver Vettori, Dean, Accreditation & Quality Management, WU Vienna University of Economics and  
Business

### Self-evaluation group:

Karl Dittrich, President, EQAR

Michal Karpisek, EQAR Executive Board member, EURASHE Secretary General

Tia Loukkola, EQAR Executive Board member, EUA Deputy Secretary General

Ivana Radonova, Governmental member (Bulgaria)

Beate Treml, Register Committee member

Colin Tück, Director, EQAR

### ENQA:

Goran Daković, ENQA Reviews Manager, EQAR Executive Board member/ Treasurer

Maria Kelo, ENQA, Director

Anais Gourdin, ENQA Project and Fiscal Manager

### Register Committee:

Beate Treml, Vice-Chair

Eltjo Bazen, Member  
Riita Pyykkö, Member

**EUA:**

Tia Loukkola, EUA Deputy Secretary General, EQAR Executive Board member  
Amanda Crowfoot, EUA Secretary General

**Walloon government:**

Caroline Hollela, Attachée

**European Commission:**

Lucie Trojanova, Policy Officer

**DEQAR:**

Aleksandra Zhivkovikj, Policy and project officer, EQAR  
Colin Tück, Director, EQAR

**EQAR Staff:**

Karl Dittrich, President  
Colin Tück, Director  
Melinda Szabo, Senior Policy Analyst  
Pooja Venkatesh, Project Reporting & Finance Officer  
Aleksandra Zhivkovikj, Policy and Project Officer  
Annelies Traas, Communications Officer

**Agence pour l'Evaluation de la Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur (AEQES), Belgium**

Caty Duykaerts, Director

## Appendix 3

### List of Interviews

	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Position</b>
<b>Founding members</b>	ENQA	Goran Đaković	Reviews Manager
		Maria Kelo	Director of Secretariat
		Anaïs Gourdin	Senior Project Manager
	ESU	Jakub Grodecki	Vice-President
		Pegi Pavletic	Executive Committee member
	EUA	Tia Loukkola	Deputy Secretary General
		Amanda Crowfoot	Secretary General
	EURASHE	Michal Karpíšek	Secretary General
		Armando Pires	President

<b>Government Representatives</b>	Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria	Andreas Neuhold	Directorate General for Higher Education
	Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland	Maija Innola	Senior Ministerial Advisor
	Federal Ministry of Education and Research, Germany	Peter Greisler	Head of Directorate Universities
	Ministry of Culture, Higher Education and Research, Luxembourg	Reinhardt Isabelle	Attache
	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, Slovenia	Duša Marjetič	Head of Higher Education Division
	Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine	Kateryna Suprun	Expert, Directorate of Higher and Adult Education
	Ministry of the French Community of Belgium	Caroline Hollela	Attache

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	Music Quality Enhancement, Belgium	Linda Messas	
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	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom	Alastair Delaney and Douglas Blackstock	
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	Denmark	Tue Vinther-Jørgensen	ministry
	Latvia	Inguna Blese	student
	Ireland	Norma Ryan	academic
	Germany	Ronny Heintze	QAA
	Poland	Ewa Kolanowska	academic
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## Appendix 4

### Key reference documents

[Self-Evaluation Report 2021](#)

[External Evaluation Report 2011](#)

[EQAR Statutes](#)

[EQAR Mission Statement](#)

[EQAR strategy 2018 – 2022](#)

[Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG](#)

[Eligibility of External Review Coordinators and Panels](#)

[Complaints Policy](#)

[Appeals Procedure](#)

[DEQAR](#)

[DEQAR CONNECT project](#)

[Analysis of Register Committee Decisions](#)

[Policy Brief on External QA](#)

[Cross-border recognition](#)