



## DEQAR CONNECT Conference – Event Report<sup>1</sup>

### From Data to Policy - Linking Quality Assurance and Recognition

<b>Date:</b>	Monday 6 December 2021 14:00 – 18:45 Tuesday 7 December 2021 10:00 – 14:30
<b>Online event:</b>	Let's Get Digital platform
<b>Agenda:</b>	<a href="https://www.eqar.eu/about/projects/deqar-connect/conference/agenda/">https://www.eqar.eu/about/projects/deqar-connect/conference/agenda/</a>
<b>Speakers:</b>	<a href="https://www.eqar.eu/about/projects/deqar-connect/conference/speakers/">https://www.eqar.eu/about/projects/deqar-connect/conference/speakers/</a>
<b>Presentations:</b>	<a href="https://www.eqar.eu/about/projects/deqar-connect/conference/presentations/">https://www.eqar.eu/about/projects/deqar-connect/conference/presentations/</a>
<b>Participants:</b>	
<b>Total number of participants (Different stakeholder groups; Breakdown by group below)</b>	182
<b>EQAR Governmental members: (representatives of ministries of higher education)</b>	24
<b>EQAR Stakeholder Members: (ENQA, ESU, EUA, EURASHE, Education International)</b>	5
<b>Members of the BFUG Thematic Peer Group on QA</b>	37

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Members of the BFUG Thematic Peer Group on Recognition	21
DEQAR CONNECT project partner organisations	22
ENIC-NARICs	19
Higher Education Institutions	13
Quality assurance agencies	26
EQAR staff/committee members	11

## 1. Background

One of the DEQAR CONNECT project strands is "to support the activities of the BFUG Thematic Peer Groups (TPG) on QA and on Recognition, or their succeeding bodies in the post-2020 BFUG working structure".

The rationale was that the enhanced coverage of DEQAR (the first project strand) would give insight into how the key commitment was realised and allow for better analytical work on the priority topics of the TPG on QA (legal frameworks, cross-border QA, European Approach, stakeholder involvement). The use of DEQAR in recognition would relate to a priority topic of the TPG on Recognition, namely how to leverage digital tools in recognition.

That is why the primary target audiences of the conference were the BFUG Thematic Peer Groups on Recognition (B) and Quality Assurance (C).

## 2. Objectives and programme

The DEQAR CONNECT Conference (formerly referred to as Thematic Peer Group Seminar) was thus designed to feed the project findings into policy making for the EHEA, bearing in mind the EHEA key commitments and policy goals.

The conference, in particular, aimed to:

- Discuss the findings of the analyses and policy briefs.



- Showcase the pilot DEQAR integrations in recognition workflows and share lessons learned.
- Mainstream the experiences gained through the pilots.

The overall objectives of the event were to:

- Enable and support peer learning.
- Facilitate the exchange of experiences among policy makers, stakeholders and researchers.
- Explore and discuss the state of play of databases in higher education as well as the creation of interoperability between databases.
- Share good practices in the use of the database for the recognition of degrees, issuing of digital credentials, cross border QA, internationalisation, cooperation and partnerships.
- Showcase possibilities of using and merging DEQAR data for policymaking at national and European level.

The optimism at the beginning of the 2021 of having an in-person event eventually turned into pessimism, as well as the hope for a hybrid event, planned in conjunction with the BFUG meeting in Slovenia, which was renounced a short time before the planned date. The event was thus organised fully online, using a professional event platform.

## 2.1 Opening & Welcome and Key Results of DEQAR CONNECT

After a presentation about the key results of the project by EQAR, representatives from the lead project partner ASHE and the project partner organisation AIC gave short presentations. The first focused on the evolution of the project since the first DEQAR project and the achievements of the database (the increase of the number of reports, the recognition of the database by the public, the importance of the database for the processes taking place in HE etc.). The second overview elaborated how the peer learning activities of the project aided agencies in their efforts to upload reports into DEQAR.

## 2.2 Session 1: Integrating DEQAR in Automatic Recognition

Lead project partner CIMEA started by presenting the way the DEQAR API was integrated in DiploMe (a blockchain based wallet that enables students to verify their credentials digitally) and how this reduced the process steps taken by the credential evaluators in the recognition workflow. Other important factors contributing to the success of DEQAR in the incorporation of the connection were the open access and ready made interoperability features that enabled an easy and straightforward integration. All this contributed to improving the triangle of transparency among QF & ECTS,



recognition and quality assurance, which in turn would increase the visibility of a European dimension for graduates.

A representative of the Slovenian Ministry of Education proceeded with a presentation on how DEQAR would be integrated in the (digital) enrolment form led by the ministry for study applications submitted by foreign students, thus making the (normal) recognition procedure redundant (if an institution or study programme was found via the DEQAR integration).

A quality advisor on internationalisation from the University of Applied Sciences in Rotterdam gave a presentation on how they used DEQAR in their screening workflow for trustful HEIs and how this had helped and speeded up their processes. He appealed to all EQAR-registered agencies to participate in DEQAR and stressed the importance of keeping DEQAR up to date with the latest reports. He especially praised the systematized information and the easy access in English language.

A representative of the European Students' Union responded by underlining that DEQAR and all developments derived from DEQAR integration that shorten bureaucratic processes, thereby enhancing transparency in general and improving the students' (mobility) experience in particular, are to be encouraged and supported.

## 2.3 Session 2: Informing Policy-Making through DEQAR

The session addressed the lessons that could be taken from the policy briefs, based on both DEQAR and ETER data, at European and national level.

EQAR presented the policy briefs results on:

- The existing and changing framework of external quality assurance approaches (programme and institutional level) in the EHEA).
- How DEQAR contributing agencies can be used as a proxy for the stage of implementation of the (Bologna) key commitment on external quality assurance.
- How DEQAR and ETER combined data sets provide an even better indicator of ESG coverage by considering the size of the student population in reviewed higher education institutions (next to the number of reviewed institutions).
- How cross-border QA is widely employed by DEQAR contributing QA agencies (62%) and higher education institutions (16% of the total HEIs in DEQAR).

The respondents (ETER Project Coordinator and Eurydice representative) commented on how these findings can be used in policy-making e.g. in the monitoring of the Key Commitment on QA and what further potential lies in correlating DEQAR with ETER or other datasets i.e. considering different dimensions in the internationalisation of higher education institutions. They also stressed that the use of the European Approach for the QA of joint



degree programmes still remains the exception and that DEQAR and ETER data could be further used in analysing the differences in the external quality assurance of universities, universities of applied sciences, specialised institute or academy (medical, music, arts, military) and other.

### 2.4 Session 3: Using DEQAR for Research and Analysis

Prior to the conference, EQAR opened a [call for researchers](#) who use DEQAR data, inviting them to submit proposals for research papers and posters. The aim was to promote the use of DEQAR data for doing research, but also to give a platform to young researchers to set topics of interest for the policymakers. Three groups of researchers were selected, based on the relevance of the topics and the feasibility of the research plan.

At the conference, short presentations of research (posters) using DEQAR data were presented by their authors, followed by a discussion moderated by an associate professor of the University of Oslo.

1. [“The Impact of Pandemic in Cross-Border External Quality Assurance in Europe.”](#)
2. [“Quo Vadis? Analysing the cross-border quality assurance of EQAR-registered agencies beyond EHEA.”](#)
3. [“Bridging Data gaps in automatic recognition: A way forward through the eyes of students.”](#)

### 2.5 Session 4: Keeping DEQAR Linked Up and Future-Proof

A representative of the European Commission, DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, presented the whats, whys and hows of the European Digital Credentials for Learning and how the DEQAR accreditation dataset will be uploaded in the Qualification Dataset Register (Europass) and how the Accreditation Status will then be displayed in the Diploma Supplement.

The advantages of linking European Digital Credentials for learning to DEQAR were also explored by a representative of a (European) university (Alliance), but then in the context of the quality assurance of a joint degree, i.e. facilitating automatic recognition.

The third presentation of the session delved into the European Blockchain Partnership (EBP) and the European Blockchain Service Infrastructure (EBSI) focussing on the Diploma use case and DEQAR's integration therein. EBSI is all about creating a (digital) ecosystem. By joining it, each actor will be able to contribute to the future of Digital Europe.

Speakers agreed that DEQAR plays a key role in the creation of the (digital) ecosystem and has enormous (integration) potential.



## 2.6 Closing panel and closing words

The closing panel, with policy makers and representatives of stakeholder organisations, discussed the main takeaways for EHEA and EU policy as well as how to further international cooperation, how to make automatic recognition a reality and how to maximise DEQAR's potential.

The following comments and conclusions were shared:

- Interoperability, further linking DEQAR and optimising existing synergies were the key areas where EQAR should focus on.
- There were still many hurdles to be crossed in the form of national, regional, institutional regulations to get full automatic, system level recognition, but if all governments would fully align with the ESG, DEQAR would be “the” place to verify that.
- DEQAR (data) should be used to inform policy-making and play a role in the discussion on current and future developments in the EHEA.
- More awareness should be raised on how and why HEI's and experts can use DEQAR (data).

## 3. Summary and conclusions

The main conclusion of the conference was that DEQAR is seen as a great success and that the DEQAR CONNECT not only further maximised its coverage and reach but also unearthed new possibilities and uses. Speakers praised the database and both stakeholders and experts are convinced of DEQAR's usefulness, trustworthiness and value.

It was furthermore brought up that DEQAR's full potential could be more extensive than originally foreseen, when looking at the possibilities of interoperability and DEQAR API integration in general and integration with digital credential ecosystems specifically. Reaching this full potential will not happen overnight and will require persistence and diligence.

Other findings of the DEQAR CONNECT Conference were:

- DEQAR is crucial in the (real) system level automatic recognition.
- DEQAR data (alone or in combination with data of other databases) should be used for informing policy making.
- DEQAR should continue its work on linking up, connecting and facilitating interoperability.
- DEQAR can and should have an important role in (the discussions on) micro-credentials, the concept of the European Degree, the QA of joint degrees in general and the QA of the European University alliances in particular.

In the mean time, attention should be paid to keeping DEQAR up to date and having all registered agencies upload in DEQAR.



#### 4. Evaluation

Although automatic survey questions (rating the session from 1-5 stars) were sent out after every session, there was only a small amount of participants answering them (between 2 and 14 respondents per session). Although all were between 4 and 5 stars, the sample was deemed insufficient to draw firm conclusions.

When leaving the platform, participants were then led to another survey on the EQAR website, where they could rate the overall content and organisation (of the whole event) as well as write suggestions and or impressions in the “free comment” section. The 20 respondents (again a small sample) were overwhelmingly positive and rated both the “overall content” and the overall organisation” as follows:

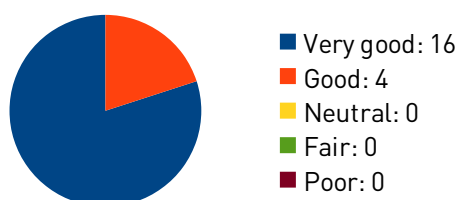


Figure 1: Content overall

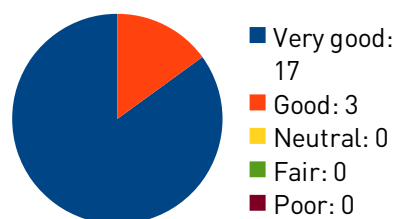


Figure 2: Organisation overall

More interesting results yielded the free comment section:

- “It was a very informative conference, regarding the content. Also very interactive, which i enjoyed. Great IT platform of the conference! Keep doing the great work! “
- “I loved to see the glimpse of backend view of some solutions connected with DEQAR (e.g. what Chiara showed for the tool supporting credential evaluation).”



- “The conference helped me to broaden my view on areas where DEQAR is useful. Nice conference platform.
- “Very good organisation and interesting variety of topics.”
- “This was excellent. The virtual environment was pleasant. The video’s gave it a personal touch. Content wise really interesting and impressive how far DEQAR has come in a relatively small time. During the interventions it struck me that the implementation of DEQAR and the discussions held are also helping to establish a better understanding of AR (Red: automatic recognition). This conference was the first time I heard so many non recognition specialist passionately explaining AR (correctly)”
- “Very structured with useful information!”
- “Thank you very much. It was very informative!”