Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance

Third Meeting
1-2 June 2023, Astana

<u>Minutes of meeting</u>

List of Participants

Country	Name	Last Name
Armenia	Varduhi	Gyulazyan
Micro-credentials WG member (online)	Agnes	Witzani
Azerbaijan	Ilham	Humbatov
Belgium Flemish Community (Co-Chair)	Liesbeth	Hens
IMINQA project expert	Ruth	Lamote
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Benjamin	Muhamedbegovic
Bulgaria	Siyka	Chavdarova
Czech Republic	Tereza	Křepelová
European Commission	Julia	Anderson
ENQA (online)	Anna	Gover
EQAR	Magalie	Soenen
EQAR	Melinda	Szabo
ESU	Horia	Onita
EUA	Maria	Kelo
France	Amélie	Bensimon
Hungary	Zsolt	Dános
Greece	Christina	Besta
IMINQA project expert	Petrișor-Laurențiu	ȚUCĂ
Ireland	Bryan	Maguire
Italy	Marilena	Maniaci
Kazakhstan (Co-Chair)	Rauza	Mendaliyeva
Latvia	Jolanta	Silka
Lithuania	Almantas	Serpatauskas
Malta	Giacomo	Annese
The Netherlands	Marianne	van Exel
Romania (Co-Chair)	Daniela Cristina	Ghitulica
Slovenia	Franci	Denšar
Sweden	Ulf	Hedbjörk
BFUG Secretariat	Manjola	Hasa
BFUG Secretariat	Oliana	Sula

Albania, Austria, Belgium French Community, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, EI-ETUCE, EURASHE, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Holy See, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, San Marino, Slovak Republic, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and Ukraine did not attend the meeting.

1. Welcome by the Hosts and the Co-Chairs of the TPG C on QA

Rauza Mendaliyeva (Co-Chair, Kazakhstan) opened the meeting welcoming all the participants and stressing the recent developments in Kazakhstan in the field of QA in higher education. Dr. Kuanysh Yergaliyev (Vice-minister, Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan) conveyed to the participants greetings on behalf of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, HE Sayasat Nurbek. Mr. Yergaliyev affirmed that TPG C on QA is a platform of knowledge-sharing between countries. QA has a crucial role for the future of HE. Dr. Yergaliyev emphasized the commitment of Kazakhstan to the Bologna Process. The country has made efforts in terms of internal and external quality assurance (QA) aiming to promote Asian Higher Education Area through sharing experience and best practices with other countries from the region

and extending EHEA in this part of the world. Rauza Mendaliyeva (Co-Chair, Kazakhstan) presented the group and its members. Cristina Ghitulica (Co-Chair, Romania) welcomed the participants underlining that during the week there were three events on QA in Astana showing the importance of this field for Kazakhstan. Liesbeth Hens (Co-Chair, Belgium Flemish Community) expressed the gratitude to the hosts for organising the meeting. The agenda of the two days of the meeting was presented and it was approved without changes.

For more information please see: *Agenda of the third meeting TPG C on QA*

2. Tour de table and implementation of countries'action plans

Cristina Ghitulica (Co-Chair, Romania) opened the session explaining that it will be held on the format of tour de table consisting on the implementation of national actions plans. It was emphasized that not all the countries have elaborated an action plan. The tour de table started in an alphabetic order. Armenia had 4 milestones in its action plan: integration of program and institutional accreditation, introduction of QA of micro-credentials, introduction of the European approach for QA of joint programs and modularization of institutional accreditation criteria. The action plan of Azerbaijan focused in connecting QA to the labour market, building capacities of the QA agency, strengthening collaboration with ENQA, improving internal QA of HEIs through training, training independent evaluators. Whereas Belgium Flemish Community focused in two actions: the QA agency is conducting system wide analysis in topics, as an added process in the QA system. In a system wide analysis HEI come together to discuss the way they approach a certain topic. It provides added value to the outcomes of the institutional reviews. They also work on vision papers on the future of HE, including life-long learning (including micro-credentials) and digitalisation. The main progress areas for Bosnia and Herzegovina were on the selection and training of experts, program accreditation procedures. Two conferences on QA were organised. The main challenges for Bulgaria were on the digitalisation of QA, cross-border and joint programs QA, QA of micro-credentials and strengthening the capacity oof the QA agency. The main progresses to be achieved in 2024 are the creation of an electronic platform that gather information on HEIs, the evaluation of the social dimension of HEIs, micro-credentials, evaluation of HEIs digitalisation and joint programs. The main goals of the action plan for Czech Republic were for the QA Agency to achieve the independence as a legal entity, the inclusion of site visits for the accreditation of the study programs and how to include the teaching aspect in assessment reports and the initiation of a training program for evaluators. The main progress is a conference on teaching and pedagogical skills organised in 2023, preparation of assessment of degree programs, the elaboration of thematic guiding papers on "Supervisor Standards and Responsibilities" and "Standards of Vocational Degree Programs" and a staff mobility program in Austria. The 7 points of the action plan of Hungary are: micro-credentials courses in the HEIs to start in June 2023, commitment of HEIs to adopt digital technologies, development of ex-post evaluation procedures, increase involvement of international experts, improvement of the internal QA procedure of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC) and an assessment tool to monitor training and learning activities and competencies of HEI available in English and promoted internationally. The main challenges for France are the improvement and review of all process and the promotion of an integrated approach on QA. Progress was made in the areas of QA of European Universities, QA of joint programs and QA of TNE. There is not yet a definition on micro-credentials. There are 5 areas of improvement in Italy: normative improvement to allow ESG compliance and innovation in QA, training of experts, improvement of the involvement of international experts, QA of research and third mission activities and the renewal of the application in ENQA. For Ireland, academic integrity remains very important. Other goals are the process for the development of QA for digital learning environments and a code of practice on international education. In Lithuania, there have been changes in the law that caused postponements in the processes of external QA. The main progresses are the development of a new QA framework to be implemented starting 2025, from 2029 HEIs will have the right to offer degree programs only in the research fields for which they are successful. No progress has been made in terms of QA of micro-credentials. Other preoccupations are in the field of QA of short-cycle study programs and the introduction of the European Approach for the QA of Joint Programs. In Latvia, there has been a process of transformation of external QA, a new QA model has been developed together with different stakeholders, that is more oriented towards enhancement. The European Approach for the QA of Joint Programs was introduced so the HEIs have more possibilities to develop such programs. Malta aims to improve the QA framework by 2024, to expand the pool of peer reviewers with international expertise, revise the internal QA procedures, offer support to HEI for the development of self-assessment reports and work on thematic analysis of external QA findings. In The Netherlands there has been progress in moving towards institutional accreditation, micro-credentials and thematic analysis. In Romania, the action plan has two main directions: support to HEI for internal QA and revision of external QA methodologies. Work is being

done in the field of QA of microcredentials, QA of dual education study programs, implementation of the European Approach for the QA of Joint Programs, as well as on the digitalisation of the external QA procedures and functioning of the QA agency. The external evaluation for a European Universities Alliance is ongoing. As for Slovenia, the action plan focuses on revision of the QA system to answer to the new developments in HE (like concrete steps to be undertaken in the field of micro-credentials), digitalisation of QA processes, law on quality, strengthening the analytical work of the agency, increase international visibility and cooperation and. Sweden has three main objectives in its national action plan which are alignment of national QA regulations with cross-border QA, digitalisation and increasing international collaboration. Kazakhstan has established national guidelines for internal and external QA. Progress has been made in terms of lifelong learning through the recognition of non-formal education. Luxembourg and Moldova sent their presentations but representatives of these countries were not present in the meeting. Melinda Szabo (EQAR) appreciated all information shared and invited countries to uptake the country profile in EQAR website accordingly. Maria Kelo (EUA) encouraged all the countries to use the European approach on joint programs.

For more information please see: *Implementation of the Countries Action Plans*

3. State-of-play and work plan of TPG C

Liesbeth Hens (Co-Chair, Belgium Flemish Community) presented the progress report of the IMINQA project which has 7 WPs. The firstWP is project management, the second WP is dealing with organising the TPG C meetings. The dates of the next meetings of the TPG C were listed, the next one being held online on the 5th of December. WP 3 is on staff mobilities. In the first call for applications 29 individuals participated. The majority of participants were from QA agencies. Some of the main topics of staff mobility were: stakeholder engagement, legislative framework, internal QA, enhancement and oriented use of ESG and European approach of QA of joint programs. The second staff mobility started on June 1st, 31 applications were received and the majority is from QA agencies. The preferred host country is Sweden. The WP4 is on PLAs, the PLAs organised within the TPG C were listed reminding the participants that the next PLA on the European approach of QA of Joint Programs will be on the 13th of September 2023 in Brussels. The WP of the QA for Micro-credentials was presented as well, a desk research, based on a survey and interviews was made. DEQAR worked on providing a data model for inclusion of micro-credentials providers in DEQAR, WP 6 QA on QA of European Universities was introduced as well. The presentation was concluded with the presentation of WP7 on digitalisation. Cristina Ghitulica (Co-Chair, Romania) encouraged all the participants to fill the survey that was launched in May. Participants underlined the specialised character of the survey, requiring expertise in the information technologies field, and asked to have the outline of the survey so that the right person could fill it in.

For more information please see: *State of play and work-plan of TPG C*

4. Preparatory Analysis: Cross-Border Quality Assurance and Quality Assurance of Transnational Education

Melinda Szabo (EQAR) finalised the paper on Cross-Border QA (CBQA) and QA of Transnational Education (TNE) by integrating the outcomes of the discussion of the second PLA that took place on the 21st of March in Bucharest. The main sources of information used to investigate the state of cross-border QA were DEQAR, EQAR's knowledge base, EQAR's policy paper on CBQA (2020), RIQA project report, UNESCO-OECD guidelines on the provision of CBHE (2022) and information gathered through the second PLA. In terms of DEQAR coverage, some countries such as Romania, Sweden Germany are performing better. Taking into consideration the current status of CBQA the majority of EHEA members had had at least one EQA activity performed by a foreign EQAR. CBQA activities within EHEA are happening in countries that have a legal framework that recognises a foreign EQAR registered agency. A lot of cross-border activities are happening now outside the EHEA as there is an increased interest of HEIs outside the EHEA to follow the European model. Presentation of data collection on CBQA activities was made as well; domestic voluntary CBQA dominates compared to mandatory CBQA activities. Nevertheless, CBQA activities have increased during the years. The same trend applies to recognition procedures. German agencies are the most active in terms of providing CBQA activities and more than half of registered EQAR agencies work abroad. The countries where CBQA happens more often are Kazakhstan and Germany. The number of CBQA reviews

have increased but QA agencies that want to operate in another country might have to meet some requirements such as eligibility assessment, systemic level limitations and recognition of reviews. QA activities should be done in a transparent way, national level expectations on CBQA should be taken into consideration. Agency shopping should not be encouraged and a fair market price ensured. Regarding TNE, there are a lot of data but it remains a complex topic especially in terms of the definition of TNE and the legal framework. It is important to take in consideration the benefits of "importing" and "exporting" education. TNE should be connected to the labor market as well.

Amélie Bensimon (France) shared with the participants the experience of the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCÉRES) which is the responsible agency for QA at national level in France. The mission of HCÉRES is evaluating, developing quantitative analysis, driving research integrity and sharing experience internationally. The international activity of HCÉREs focuses on evaluation and accreditation activities and other international activities together with the participation in different international projects. The agency conducts CBQA activities as part of its mandate. HCÉRES has specific procedures in conducting CBQA that include a first phase of exploratory mission, the second phase of evaluation and the third phase of accreditation concluded with issue of the HCÉRES label for 3 or 5 years. The agency caters for the national specificities when conducting CBQA, the process being done with the consultation of local experts, provided by local agencies, and sometimes with the French Embassies. The same standards that are used in France are used abroad as well. External factors that influence CBQA are the difficulties of comparability between HE systems, the absence of automatic recognition, the need to constantly adapt procedures and how to manage uncertainty and the geopolitical factor. Internal factors that influence CBQA are higher costs, the difficulty to find a local expert, language barriers and that procedures are complex and time-consuming. A map of HEIs that deliver degree programs in French language is being elaborated. TNE remains a complex matter. Joint programs and joint venture institutions aare evaluated by HCERES. An example was given how a joint venture institution is set up in the framework of an agreement of cooperation between the French Ministry of International Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of a counterpart country. A joint evaluation is conducted in this case and there are two accreditation decisions.

Rauza Mendaliyeva (Co-chair, Kazakhstan) commented that there are many differences between France and Kazakhstan. For Kazakhstan is easier to deal with Eastern European countries because of the curricular similarities. One question was raised on how to deal with cooperation in terms of QA. Horia Onita (ESU) commented that there is a need to review the openness of CBQA to promote cooperation. Melinda Szabo (EQAR) added that CBQA brings a lot of added value. Maria Kelo (EUA) brought up the issue of regulation in CBQA. Cristina Ghitulica (Co-Chair, Romania) concluded that regulations might be needed in order to promote key principles in conducting CBQA

For more information please see: *Preparatory Analysis: Cross-Border Quality Assurance and Quality Assurance of Transnational Education* and *Presentation of a country case – France*

5. **The survey outcomes within the Quality Assurance Fit for the Future project (QA-FIT)**

Preliminary results of the survey made within the QA-FIT project were presented by Magalie Soenen (EQAR) and Anna Gover (ENQA). Magalie Soenen (EQAR) as a first step presented the partners of the project and the aim of the project which is to have a look at the current version of the ESGs and the needs to be adapted in the future. Surveys were sent to different stakeholders (QA agencies, ministries, HEIs, national student unions and student pool QA members). The outcomes will be presented in a series of papers and webinars. Focus groups will be organised in order to discuss the output from the surveys. The project will conclude with a final publication with policy recommendations and a final conference will be organised in Brussels. If appropriate, a proposal will be made for the Tirana Communiqué in 2024. The view of QA agencies, HEIs and national students' unions on the principal roles of QA was investigated (accountability versus enhancement). Half of QA agencies and HEIs agreed that the main role of external QA is accountability, while for national students' unions this figure is lower. In terms of enhancement, the majority of QA agencies and half of HEIs

agree that the main role of external QA is enhancement, but the figure is low for national students' unions. For majority of the ministries the outcome of the external QA activity is the decision for granting permission to open new programs and the responsible body for designing external QA policies and processes are the QA agencies. Anna Gover (ENQA) presented the level of the agreement between different stakeholders on various aspects of QA. The survey results showed that there were some disagreements between stakeholders, as for example in the topic of the role of HE. Most students believe that the main purpose of HE is to support students' personal development, while for Ministry, QA agencies and HEIs it is "preparing students for their future careers"

Most stakeholders agree that fundamental values should be evaluated through QA, but students are very keen (85%) while QA agencies (63%), ministry (61%) and HEIs (55%) are more cautious. Students and ministries largely disagreed that the ESG should be reduced to fewer standards and the majority of stakeholders agreed that the current ESG focus on L&T needs only minor revisions. Mrs. Gover underlined that one outcome of the survey was that the ESG should provide more guidelines. Stakeholders were asked on the revision of the different parts of ESG as well, HEIs were the least keen on revision and on expanding the scope of the ESG. This could be explained by the fact that HEIs do not work with the ESG on daily basis. Students do not see a need for expansion in the area of collaboration with the labour market. Other aspects of expansion of the ESG that some stakeholders wanted were digitalisation, research, academic freedom and third mission. It is difficult to draw a clear conclusion in this aspect because the majority of stakeholders wanted their inclusion in the ESG (more than 50% in favour for all stakeholders), but there are also significant portions of each stakeholder group (between 35% and 15%) that disagree. The last findings of the survey were on the topic of third mission and social dimension (SD). In terms of service to society stakeholders were in favour for including it in the ESG, the keenest being the QA agencies; but it can be noted that 82% of QA agencies are already addressing it in the external QA activities.

ESU commented that the level of different perceptions of different stakeholders is not surprising and there is a need to be conscious on the interpretation of the data. EUA underlined that not everything should be regulated at the EHEA level and national priorities should be taken into consideration as well. Ireland raised an issue on the role of QA agencies in the Bologna Process and how they could promote inclusion. Anna Gover (ENQA) responded that in some systems this is under the responsibility of QA agencies but in many systems, there is a different body that deals with it. Slovenia asked a question on whether standards should be kept as they are and then add some standards that are not part of accreditation but that are part of evaluation.

For more information, please see: *Survey outcomes within the Quality Assurance Fit for the Future project (QA-FIT)*

6. Conclusions from the parallel sessions

Participants were divided in two groups and discussed on two topics emerged from the QA-FIT survey: QA to support the SD of HE (moderated by Horia Onita - ESU) and the role in society of HE and its implication for QA (moderated by Maria Kelo - EUA).

Ulf Hedbjörk (Sweden) reported on the discussions on the first topic. There are lot of national strategies that include the concept of SD but often too generic and can be monitored through other mechanisms. Some aspects are covered by HE legislation as well, such as i.e., admission or student support. SD might be implicitly addressed by other bodies as well and the role of QA agencies remains unclear. In terms of principles and guidelines in some countries they are already included in the SD framework but not monitored by QA. SD is sometimes linked to HEIs funding and in some countries NGOs as a stakeholder play an important role. One of the main conclusions of the group discussions was that when SD is addressed by external QA it relies on strong internal QA procedures from HEIs. Taking into consideration the QA-FIT results, the group suggested that SD should be more explicitly addressed by external QA, one of the reasons is that the dimensions of SD are not assessed by anybody if not by the QA agencies. Some of the aspects of SD are covered by different assessment areas.

EC commented that the data of the QA-FIT were very useful and she suggested to look more on the environmental sustainability considered as the fifth mission which is linked to the HE role in the community as well.

Marilena Maniaci (Italy) reported on the second topic. The first aspect that emerged from group discussion was that there is a lack of definition of third mission as this varies according to different HEIs. There is a need of a participatory approach to third mission activities. The second aspect addressed as how to evaluate third mission activities; third mission is rarely evaluated separately from teaching and research. The third aspect concerned the aims, perception and beneficiaries of third mission specific activities that varies according to the countries. As a fourth aspect the group addressed the needs at the EHEA level, it was agreed that there is a need for a shared definition, recommendations and guidelines and possibility of building an EU project on the topic. A case study of ANVUR Italy related to the evaluation of third mission activities for 20 years was presented. Third mission is evaluated through a VQR exercise (evaluation of research quality) carried every 5 years through peer review. An evaluation manual for third mission activities was published. The definition of the impact of third mission in the VQR is an open one that includes aspects of transformation of economy, society, culture, health and environment and there are 10 main fields of action. For the future exercises, there is need to review the fields, the number of case studies and indicators for evaluation.

For more information please see: _Quality Assurance to support the social dimension of HE-Conclusions_ and _The role in society of higher education and implications for quality assurance – Conclusions_

7. Session on Artificial Intelligence

Ass. Prof.Dr. Beibut Abdikenov (Astana IT University) presented projects focused on AI solutions for healthcare and education. The projects in the healthcare sector were about using AI for neuro-habilitation of patients that had a stroke, breast cancer among others. The projects in the field of education were on using video analytics during the entrance exams at the university and a reading application that motivates people to read giving bitcoin bonuses. AI in education can be applied through personalised learning, smart content creation, monitoring and grading. There are still a lot of ethical issues related to AI especially concerning data.

Bryan Maguire (Ireland) presented challenges and opportunities of AI for QA in HE. In the past 5 years at QQI there were concerns related to the threats that can come from the use of technology in assessments and QA processes. This was the main motivation to change the legislation, and a national network for academic integrity was developed. This will be used to launch a global academic network for QA agencies and other bodies interested in combating academic fraud. The speaker appreciated that whole HE system was disrupted some months ago by ChatGPT, anything that is text based is now suspect and it is challenging academic integrity. The interface of ChatGPT is easy to use and might encourage students to cheat. QQI organised a series of webinars on the phenomena. Academic community and QA community should make attempt to regulate AI. A text of a self-assessment report produced by AI was showed, that included errors which prove the need to use the human mind.

Participants suggested that individuals should be able to distinguish where it is useful to use AI and where it is not useful to use it and there is a need to build more AI skills and AI literacy. While using AI we should not lose our cognitive abilities.

For more information please see: How AI will shape our future?

8. Quality assurance of micro-credentials Desk research

Agnes Witzani (Austria), member of the WG on micro-credentials, presented the outcomes of the report on QA of micro-credentials. In addition to desk research, interviews (HEIs, QA agencies and alternative providers) and a survey (31 responses) were made. The main aim of the desk research was to provide a state of play on the topic; trends and areas for development were identified. This will feed into a forthcoming guidance for internal and external QA policies and processes. The first finding was that many countries do not still have a definition on micro-credentials, the term is used more at a European level, rather than at a national level. Findings suggest that countries of EHEA are at different stages of implementation of micro- credentials and countries were grouped in three 3 groups, taking into consideration the above-mentioned aspect. In group 1 countries are exploring the options of micro-credentials and raising awareness. Countries of group 2 are working on the implementation of a framework for micro-credentials, pilot initiatives and are drafting policies and laws. In group 3 countries have completed or are in the final stages of including micro-credentials

in national law (if needed) and the national qualification frameworks are being or have been updated. There are two approaches in offering micro-credentials: unbundling existing programs and standalone micro-credentials and both are covered by internal QA processes. HEIs need to review internal QA producers in order to see if they are suitable for micro-credentials. The most important criteria for internal QA of micro-credentials are well-defined learning outcomes. In terms of external QA for micro-credentials, QA agencies should design procedures that are suitable for micro-credentials. Some QA agencies have started to make a revision of procedures for micro-credentials. Most agencies are planning to not evaluate alternative providers because they do not have a legal basis and resources to it. Anna Gover (ENQA) reminded that micro-credentials are very agile and in terms of regulation it is not suitable to over-regulate. Liesbeth Hens (Co-Chair, Belgium Flemish Community) added that the policy on micro-credentials evolves every day.

Marianne van Axel (The Netherlands) shared the experience of The Netherlands in micro-credentials. The Netherlands uses the definition set by the Recommendation of the EU council. In the Netherlands there is a support for coordinated efforts on life-long learning and mobility. A pilot project on micro-credentials (32 HEIs) has started in 2021 with the aim to create a system where micro-credentials have a recognised value. A digital certificate of a minimum of 3 ETCS will be issued and the QA mechanism will be similar to the accreditation processes. QA is based on the ESG and HEI is responsible for setting internal QA for micro-credentials. As concrete policies and strategies on micro-credentials are needed, a working group with different stakeholders is set up and it will start its work in September.

EQAR asked a question related to accreditation process if it will be only at program level; it was answered that the use of the term accreditation was made in a general way. Sweden asked how the pilot initiative was initiated, it was answered that the pilot initiative started using the top-down approach. Cristina Ghitulica (Co-Chair) asked about the non-higher education institutions providers, and the answer was that The Netherlands and as well as Austria, were not too far on that process. Anna Gover (ENQA) added that the issue of non-higher education providers is not only an issue of QA but rather an issue of providing recognition of prior learning. In Italy is important not only the number of credits that can be recognised but as well the competencies gained. In Sweden, most courses are offered through modules that can be taken during the whole life for free and there is a need to think more about vocational education; employers play an important role in setting the type of qualifications that they require. In Ireland, the same agency is responsible for the accreditation of different providers of micro-credentials, there has been funding for HEIs to offer micro-credentials as well.

For more information, please see: *Quality Assurance of Micro-credentials - Outcomes of desk research* and *Micro-credentials (The Netherlands)*

9. AOB

Liesbeth Hens (Co-Chair, Belgium Flemish Community) reminded the participants to not forget the upcoming meetings of the group. Cristina Ghitulica (Co-Chair, Romania) and Liesbeth Hens (Co-Chair, Belgium Flemish Community) expressed once again the gratitude to the host for organising the meeting and to the participants for coming.

10. Conclusions

Rauza Mendaliyeva (Co-Chair, Kazakhstan) concluded the meeting with thanking all the participants for coming to Kazakhstan.