eqar ////

Message to the
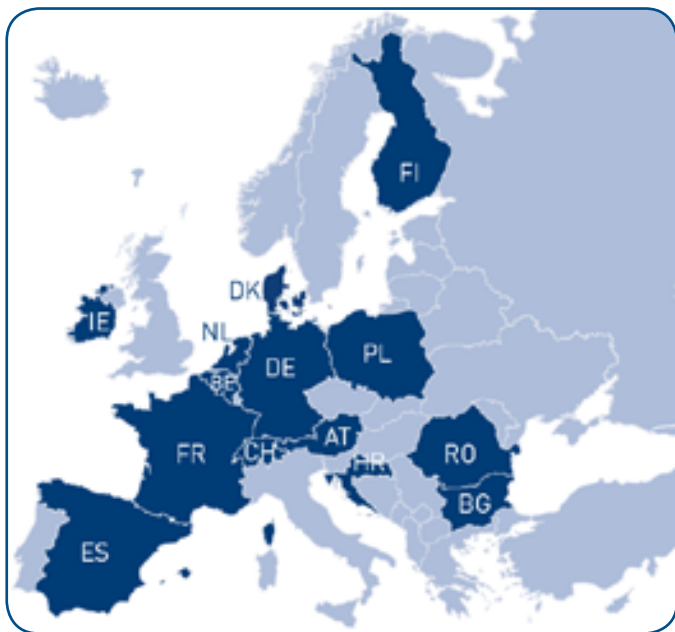# Bucharest Ministerial Conference

April 2012

With this message to European Ministers of Higher Education, gathering on 26/27 April 2012 in Bucharest, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) wishes to highlight some milestones in the development of EQAR and its role in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

EQAR wishes to draw Ministers' attention to the EQAR Annual Report 2011, including the Report of the Register Committee, the Final Report of the External Evaluation and EQAR's Follow-Up of the External Evaluation. Copies of the publication are available to delegations at the Bucharest Ministerial Conference.

Overview of Main Developments

- The Register includes 28 quality assurance agencies, based in 14 European countries (see map) and operating almost throughout the entire EHEA. These have evidenced through an independent external review process that they operate in substantial compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG).

- Eight European countries – Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Poland and Romania – officially recognise all EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies within their national quality assurance system in one way or another.

  These countries include higher education systems in which higher education institutions can turn to any EQAR-registered quality assurance agency for their regular external quality review, as well as examples of automatic recognition of quality assurance decisions by foreign, EQAR-registered agencies on joint programmes or transnational higher education provision.

view, as well as examples of automatic recognition of quality assurance decisions by foreign, EQAR-registered agencies on joint programmes or transnational higher education provision.

In a number of other countries legislative changes to that effect are being discussed or underway. Bearing in mind the substantial time it takes for legislative change, these developments demonstrate considerable progress for EQAR.

- Twenty-eight EHEA countries have decided to support actively the development of EQAR and engage in its governance as Governmental Members. Croatia, Latvia and Montenegro were welcomed as new members in 2011. Most recently, Turkey has joined EQAR as a Governmental Member in March 2012.

- The External Evaluation of EQAR took place in 2011 and was coordinated by a Steering Group working under auspices of the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

  A seven-member evaluation panel, including European and non-European experts in quality assurance and higher education, conducted a site visit to Brussels in May 2011 and interviewed EHEA governments, quality assurance agencies, international bodies and stakeholder organisations involved in the Bologna Process.

  The Evaluation Panel concluded that EQAR established a reputation "as a credible and valuable organisation" and noted in "the comments of those who met the Review Panel of confidence and trust in the integrity and independence of EQAR and of its procedures".

  The key recommendation made by the Panel is to strengthen EQAR's focus on "considering its strategic role in the development of higher education in Europe" and to "agree on its strategic priorities and incorporate them into a strategic plan".

- The first EQAR Members' Dialogue was organised in November 2011 as a forum for all Governmental and Stakeholder Members, as well as EQAR's committees, to discuss the follow-up of the external evaluation and EQAR's future strategy. The event gathered about 50 participants and was highly welcomed by all those involved.

  A second Members' Dialogue, open to all EHEA countries that are Governmental Members of EQAR, will be organised on 11/12 October 2012 to continue discussions towards a strategic plan for EQAR.

- Building on the first Members' Dialogue and additional deliberations within EQAR's bodies, the EQAR General Assembly on 17 January 2012 discussed and agreed on EQAR's Strategic Priorities and Follow-Up of the External Evaluation, including recommendations to Ministers (see below).

Strategic Priorities and Follow-Up of the External Evaluation of EQAR[1]

Developing the Role of EQAR

EQAR concurs with the Panel's general recommendation that EQAR should develop further from its focus on establishing robust procedures, during its initial developmental phase, towards developing, implementing and realising a strategy, with a view to realising the goals and objectives for EQAR defined at the outset.

In doing so, EQAR is guided by the following principles:

- EQAR's role is determined by and based on its mission, objectives and unique membership structure, including both stakeholder organisations and governments.

- EQAR's role as a register of quality assurance agencies is unique and not intended to duplicate other organisations' mission or activities. With its specific objectives the Register contributes to the wider goals of improving the quality of higher education, trust and recognition based on internationally recognised, transparent and robust quality assurance procedures within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

- EQAR's activities relate to its role as a register and the objectives agreed at the outset, rather than turning into a generic policy-making organisation dealing with a broad range of education-related issues. EQAR's unique broad ownership by stakeholders and governments is based on its role as a register and the objectives related to that.

- EQAR's "regulatory role" and "strategic role" are thus not separate, but two sides of the same coin, both of them being assumed under the same mission and objectives.

EQAR and the European External Quality Assurance Landscape

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is constructed on the basis of common European principles and on the growing internationalisation of higher education. In developing and pursuing their own profiles and missions, higher education institutions welcome the opportunity for evaluation, accreditation or audit that incorporate their diverse activities and have an international added value.

Since 2005 the ESG have codified the principles of a common European approach to quality assurance. More recently the establishment of EQAR has created the necessary preconditions for international recognition by serving as authoritative European reference point for quality assurance agencies working in substantial compliance with the ESG.

The survey of quality assurance agencies conducted as part of the EQAR self-evaluation process showed that the most relevant rationale for agencies to be on the Register is to improve international reputation. The second most prominent reason is to improve recognition of qualifications or institutions that agencies have evaluated, accredited or audited.

Whether or not quality assurance decisions and results are recognised within a certain national jurisdiction depends on the commitment of governments and other actors to the European QA infrastructure, including the principle of recognition of registered agencies.

The examples of official recognition of EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies reflect trust in the Register and represent a trend towards widespread international recognition of registered agencies or their decisions, which might be more direct and adapted to the principles of the EHEA than recognition of quality assurance agencies or decisions based on numerous bilateral agreements or complex multilateral agreements.

Strategic Priorities

EQAR agrees with the Panel's overarching recommendation to strengthen the strategic role of EQAR with a view to realising the wider goals and objectives for the Register defined in the ministerial mandate and the EQAR Mission Statement. EQAR will thus develop a strategic plan within the next year.

EQAR was established to further the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and, along with other organisations, to contribute to improving the quality of higher education in Europe

EQAR's particular mission is to manage a register of quality assurance agencies that demonstrate substantial compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). The Register allows stakeholders to identify quality assurance agencies that operate in line with agreed European principles, thus promoting the further development of a coherent and flexible external quality assurance system for Europe as a whole.

In order to fulfil this mission EQAR members agree on two strategic priorities for EQAR's work and as a basis for EQAR's future strategic plan:

- Promoting, through the Register, international trust and recognition of quality assurance agencies

- Increasing transparency and ensuring that information provided by EQAR is meaningful

[1] main messages and conclusions from the document agreed on 17 January 2012 by the General Assembly

Commitment of EHEA Governments

EQAR requires the active support and commitment of EHEA governments in order to develop and implement these strategic priorities, in particular as regards the acceptance and recognition of registered agencies.

EQAR's remit is to manage and promote the Register of quality assurance agencies complying substantially with the ESG. Legislation on higher education and quality assurance, however, is in the remit of national (or regional) governments and it thus requires commitment at national or regional levels in order to achieve recognition of registered quality assurance agencies throughout the EHEA.

Resources

Realising the two strategic priorities will require activities that cannot be implemented within EQAR's current, limited resources. EQAR will thus seek to both differentiate its income streams by exploring third-party sources of funding and increasing membership revenue.

Future of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)

EQAR is a key actor using the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). In turn, the ESG are the fundament for EQAR's work. Members consider it crucial that the EQAR perspective, based on the Register Committee experience, feeds substantially into the upcoming revision of the ESG.

The Register Committee works with the ESG for a unique purpose and from the perspective of EQAR's specific mission and objectives, distinct from those of other organisations. In the deliberations on the ESG revision, EQAR will have to ensure that the future revised ESG are fit for purpose as criteria for the Register.

Recommendations to Ministers

EQAR recommends that ministers take note of the strategic priorities defined by EQAR and commit to furthering recognition of registered agencies in the EHEA countries.

EQAR encourages all EHEA states that are currently not Governmental Members of EQAR to consider membership. In the long term, all EHEA states should be members of EQAR in order to ensure broadest possible ownership and support of the Register.

EQAR proposes the following text for the Bucharest Communiqué:

> Ministers welcome the Report of the Expert Panel appointed to review the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and note that the evaluation evidenced that EQAR's organisational structures and processes are fit for purpose, effective and efficient, and enjoy trust and confidence.

> Ministers take note of the strategic priorities and follow-up of recommendations agreed by EQAR.

> Ministers commit to further recognising EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies that, within the framework of national requirements, should be able to undertake activities throughout the EHEA. In particular, ministers commit to recognise quality assurance results and decisions of EQAR-registered agencies on joint and double degree programmes.

> Ministers invite EQAR to report back to the next ministerial conference on the implementation of the external evaluation recommendations and progress made regarding the recognition of EQAR-registered agencies.