Strategic Plan 2013 – 2017

(adopted by the EQAR General Assembly of 13 March 2013)

I. Vision, Mission and Values

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.

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 European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (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. EQAR is committed to continuously improving the quality of its work.

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II. Strategic Goals

At the General Assembly in January 2012, EQAR members agreed on two strategic priorities for the organisation's work:

1. International Trust and Recognition, and

2. Transparency and Information.

The two strategic goals formulated below are intended to set the framework for EQAR's development in the coming years. The present strategic plan proposes specific activities and other measures to be undertaken in support of these strategic goals.

For each strategic goal indicators are proposed that will allow EQAR to monitor progress, bearing in mind that these will often require action to be taken by national governments or other actors, rather than only by EQAR itself. Realising these strategic goals will therefore require the active support and commitment of all EQAR members: European governments and stakeholder organisations.

Strategic Goal 1:   International Trust and Recognition of Registered Quality Assurance Agencies Across Europe

In line with national requirements all EQAR-registered agencies and their decisions are officially recognised by all EHEA countries and in the context of relevant European initiatives, and all EHEA countries allow higher education institutions to request evaluation, audit or accreditation by any registered agency to fulfil their formal external quality assurance obligations.

Current situation

- At this moment nine countries allow their institutions to work with foreign, registered QA agencies for their regular external evaluation, audit or accreditation procedures. Two more countries recognise quality assurance decisions of all EQAR-registered agencies on joint programmes.

- The extent to which higher education institutions make use of such possibilities is not known by EQAR.

Activities

- Carry out an in-depth analysis of both legal provisions in EHEA countries recognising EQAR-registered QA agencies and their decisions, and the use made of such provisions by HE institutions/programmes. Organise activities enabling institutions to inform themselves about the existing possibilities, different QA agencies, their methodologies and profiles.

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- Organise peer-learning seminars on the possibilities, benefits and challenges linked to the recognition of EQAR-registered agencies.

- Ensure that the revision of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) takes account of their importance in underpinning trust in EQAR-registered agencies and thus in increasing the willingness of public authorities to recognise registered agencies in their systems, and ensure that the specific challenges of cross-border quality assurance activities are considered.

- Promote the benefits of EQAR registration and thus the broader recognition of QA agencies' decisions in relation to the academic and professional recognition of qualifications.

- Promote recognition of EQAR-registered agencies' decisions as a way to facilitate the external quality assurance process for joint programmes and cross-border higher education provision.

Indicators to Monitor Progress

- Number of countries allowing higher education institutions to request evaluation, audit or accreditation from any EQAR-registered QA agency to fulfil their external quality assurance obligations (legislation with reference to EQAR)

- Number of countries recognising decisions of all EQAR-registered QA agencies on joint programmes or cross-border provision

- Reference to the goal of recognition of registered agencies and enabling institutions to turn to different agencies in relevant policy documents

Strategic Goal 2:   Enhanced Transparency and Information Provision

 EQAR operates transparently, responds to the expectations of its key target groups and provides information that is useful to them.

Current situation

- EQAR makes public which QA agencies have demonstrated their compliance with the ESG and provides basic information on their activities.

- EQAR is directly relevant primarily for governments and QA agencies, as well as for those higher education institutions that have an interest in the European developments in QA.

- The link between the work of EQAR at European level and the day-to-day learning and teaching processes in Europe's HE institutions is an indirect one, and mainly occurs through the work of quality assurance agencies at different levels.

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Activities

- Publish all decisions made by the Register Committee on applications for inclusion on the Register, including their reasons.

- Review EQAR's information policy towards different target groups (governments, agencies, institutions, students), in particular:

    - Enhance the information provided on registered QA agencies and their activities.

    - Explore the feasibility of a database of evaluated and accredited institutions and programmes, linking with existing initiatives where possible.

- Promote more visible causality between the work of EQAR, QA agencies, institutions and their programmes through EQAR's contribution to the future development of the ESG and their use.

- Promote the shared principles for QA reflected in EQAR's criteria (the ESG) within the EHEA and internationally.

Indicators to Monitor Progress

- Relevance of EQAR to different stakeholders as expressed in their own documents and reports

- Statistics on the access and use of EQAR's website, including information on user groups, information users have been seeking and the extent to which published decisions on applications are read.

- Attention given in external review reports on QA agencies' compliance with the ESG to the impact of agencies' activities on teaching and learning.

III. Organisational Development

This third and final section focuses on the development of EQAR as a membership organisation with a clear mission, objectives and strategic goals.

In order to fully realise the two strategic goals, EQAR will need to be able to build on the full support of its broad constituency of stakeholders and European governments, in particular to encourage all quality assurance agencies operating in Europe to comply with its criteria and to seek registration.

Current situation

- Governments from 65% of EHEA countries (31 out of 47) are governmental members of EQAR

- 38 out of 45 European QA agencies that have undergone an external review against the ESG (and could thus potentially apply for inclusion) have applied for inclusion on the Register (84%). These are primarily national QA agencies.

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In addition there are also a growing number of European, non-national QA bodies (e.g. quality labels in specific disciplines) that have not undergone reviews against the ESG.

Activities

- Spread information on EQAR and promote governmental membership amongst non-member EHEA states, through the BFUG structures and direct contact.

- Promote the advantages of registration amongst QA agencies, as well as among the institutions accredited/evaluated by them.

- Address European, non-national (e.g. sector-specific) QA bodies specifically to promote amongst them the importance of the ESG as European principles and encourage their review against the ESG, as a basis for EQAR registration.

- Ensure EQAR's active presence in QA-related events (seminars, conferences, etc.) attended by European QA agencies and governments.

- Review the organisational structure of EQAR and the functions and responsibilities of its different bodies, bearing in mind the recommendations of the panel that reviewed EQAR externally in 2011.

Indicators to Monitor Progress

- Number of applicant QA agencies, compared with the total number of QA agencies in Europe and the number of QA agencies reviewed against the ESG

- Number of governmental members, compared to the number of EHEA countries

- Number of European-level and international events at which EQAR makes an active contribution

IV. Implementation and Review

EQAR will seek to obtain the financial and human resources necessary to implement all activities envisaged in this Strategic Plan. This will include investigating different funding sources in addition to membership and agency fees, such as project grants. EQAR will further seek to carry out activities in partnership with other actors where appropriate, while safeguarding EQAR's full independence.

The activities envisaged in the Strategic Plan will thus be further specified and prioritised within EQAR's Plans of Work, taking account of the financial and human resources as they develop.

EQAR commits to undertaking a comprehensive self-evaluation exercise in 2015/16, involving all its bodies, in order to assess progress made and to consider a revised Strategic Plan in 2017.