External evaluation of EQAR – Terms of Reference

(as agreed between EQAR and the Steering Group)

1) Background

1.   EQAR was founded by the E4 Group in March 2008, following the mandate received from ministers at the London summit in May 2007. Ministers had asked the E4 Group to establish EQAR based on the E4's London Report and to ensure that the register was externally evaluated:

> "*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)

2.   This was reiterated at the latest ministerial conference:

> "*We ask the E4 group [...]) to continue its cooperation [...] and in particular to ensure that the European Quality Assurance Register is evaluated externally, taking into account the views of the stakeholders.*" (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009)

3.   EQAR has been receiving and evaluating applications for inclusion on the Register only since August 2008. The external evaluation should therefore commence two years from then, in the autumn of 2010.

2) Framework – mission and objectives of EQAR

4.   The London Communiqué, the E4 Group's Report, the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG), the objectives defined in the Statutes and the Mission Statement constitute the framework in which EQAR has been founded and operates.

5.   The London Communiqué (2007) sets out which aims European governments pursued in mandating the E4 Group to establish EQAR:

> "*The purpose of the register is to <u>allow</u> all <u>stakeholders and the general public</u> open <u>access to objective information about trustworthy quality assurance agencies</u> that are working in line with the ESG. It will therefore <u>enhance confidence in higher education</u> in the EHEA and beyond, and <u>facilitate the mutual recognition of quality assurance and accreditation decisions</u>.*"

6.   The E4 Group's London Report (2007) had set out the objectives in further detail:

> "*The Register should assist in furthering the development of the European Higher Education Area by creating and managing a Register that will <u>provide clear and reliable information about reliable and trustworthy quality</u>*

assurance agencies operating in Europe. The Register's objectives would be to help to:

- *promote student mobility* by providing a basis for the *increase of trust* among higher education institutions

- *reduce opportunities for* dubious organisations or 'accreditation mills' to gain credibility

- *provide a basis for national authorities to authorise higher education institutions to choose any agency from the Register, if that is compatible with national arrangements*

- *provide a means for higher education institutions to choose between different agencies, if that is compatible with national arrangements*

- *serve as an instrument to improve the quality of quality assurance agencies and to promote mutual trust amongst them."*

7. When founding EQAR as a new and independent organisation, the E4 organisations defined its objectives as follows in the Statutes:

"The Association pursues the objective of furthering the development of the European Higher Education Area by enhancing confidence in higher education and by facilitating the mutual recognition of quality assurance decisions. The Association does not pursue to gain any profit from its activities.

In order to achieve its objectives, the Association establishes and manages a list of quality assurance agencies ([...] "the Register") that operate in substantial compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area [...] and can demonstrate in particular that

> a. they operate independently, without interference in their decisions and operations from economic, governmental, institutional or other interests,
>
> b. they operate in an objective and responsible manner, and
>
> c. their quality assurance is based on well described procedures, which involve their stakeholders, and the results thereof are substantiated."

8. The mission statement (Mission and Values, adopted by the 1st General Assembly) elaborates further on EQAR's objectives. It sets out values that EQAR commits to:

"EQAR recognises the diversity of approaches to external quality assurance and is therefore open to all agencies [...].

EQAR is committed to the principles on which the ESG are based [...].

EQAR acts independently from other organisations and is committed to taking proportionate, consistent, fair and objective decisions.

EQAR will make <u>transparent</u> its mode of operation and its procedures while ensuring necessary confidentiality. EQAR is committed to continuously <u>improving the quality of its work</u>."

3) Purpose and scope of the evaluation

9.   The external evaluation shall analyse the performance of EQAR in fulfilling its mission and objectives within the framework described above.

10.   Therefore, the external evaluation is expected to address three main questions:

   a.   Are the organisational structures and methods of EQAR fit for purpose in the light of the agreed objectives? Have they functioned effectively and efficiently in practice?

   b.   What has been the initial impact of EQAR? Is it in line with the desired goals?

   c.   What improvements are desirable? How might the organisation develop and act further with a view to best achieving its missions and objectives?

11.   Thus the ministerial decision to establish a register of quality assurance agencies as an independent, stakeholder-driven organisation and based on the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), as well as the ESG themselves are not subject to the evaluation.

4) Coordinator

12.   The coordinator of the evaluation will have the following 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

      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

13.   The panel of experts bears full responsibility for the report and its contents, on which the Coordinator will not have any influence.

14.   The Coordinator role is assumed by a Steering Group working under the auspices and with the administrative support of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

15.   The Steering Group comprises of:

   a.   Judith Eaton, president of CHEA (Chair)

   b.   Jan Schreiner Levy, Norwegian Ministry of Higher Education

c. Norman Sharp, former director of QAA Scotland

d. Martina Vukasović, Centre for Education Policy

5) Self-evaluation

16. EQAR will appoint an internal self-evaluation group that will prepare a self-evaluation report. The composition of the group should reflect the roles and responsibilities borne by EQAR's different bodies for the organisation's work:

- 2 Executive Board members

- 2 Register Committee members

- 1 Observer on the Register Committee

- Director

17. 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"). It should not exceed 40 pages in length (excluding appendices).

18. The self-evaluation process will elicit the views of all types of partners and stakeholders (e.g. quality assurance agencies, experts who participated in reviews of agencies, users of the register).

19. 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

20. The evaluation will be carried out by a panel of experts in quality assurance of higher education and the workings of organisations in general. It would also be desirable if the panel included members with a broad range of experience in relation to higher education and the Bologna Process in general.

21. Panel members should cover the perspectives of the relevant stakeholders, in particular higher education institutions, students and quality assurance bodies. The panel should involve a significant number of members who represent a non-European perspective.

22. The desired profiles of the quality assurance experts on the panel should be elaborated further during the discussions with the Coordinator, in particular with a view to avoiding conflicts of interest. The panel might include:

a. European expert, background in HEI (e.g. senior staff of a HEI)

b. International expert, background in HE policy/management

c. European expert, current or recent student

d. European expert, outside stakeholder (e.g. HR responsible of an enterprise)

e.   International expert, background in QA (e.g. former staff of a QA agency)

23.   The panel will be appointed by the Coordinator (CHEA working with the Steering Group) while EQAR will have the right to raise substantiated objections in respect of proposed panel members. The evaluation report shall include an account of the procedures followed by the Coordinator to recruit and appoint the panel members.

24.   The Coordinator will designate one panel member as Chair and one as Secretary. The Secretary is a full member of the panel; s/he will be responsible for drafting the evaluation report in consultation with the panel and under the responsibility of the panel Chair.

7) Basis of the Panel's findings

25.   The panel will base its findings on information gathered through:

- Self-evaluation report and other documentation prepared by EQAR and made available at the request of the panel (see note on confidentiality below)

- Site visit to EQAR and interviews with the Secretariat, Register Committee, Executive Board and Appeals Committee

- Interviews with a range of different stakeholders:

   o Members of EQAR (E4 organisations, social partners, sample of governments)

   o Sample of European governments that are not members of the EQAR association

   o Council of Europe

   o UNESCO / CEPES

   o Bologna Secretariat

   o European Commission

   o Sample of applicant quality assurance agencies (successful and unsuccessful)

   o Sample of non-applicant quality assurance agencies

- Other interviews as requested by the panel

26.   The evaluation panel shall review the final list of interviews/interviewees with EQAR. While EQAR has a right to raise substantiated objections to proposed interviews/interviewees it is ultimately up to the evaluation panel to take the final decision. In cases where it is not feasible for interviewees to travel to Brussels, interviews will be conducted by telephone.

8) Content of evaluation report

27.   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, who have requested the external evaluation when asking for the establishment of EQAR, demonstrating the fitness for purpose of EQAR's structures and activities.

28. The report should set out the panel's findings and make recommendations for improvement. EQAR will have an opportunity to comment on the draft report and point out factual errors. The evaluation panel will bear responsibility for the final report. It should not exceed 40 pages in length (excluding appendices).

9) Actions following final report submission

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

30. Based on the final report, EQAR will agree on a response to the panel's recommendations. As appropriate, the EQAR General Assembly will adopt a follow-up and implementation plan (proposed by the EB in consultation with the RC). EQAR will then publish the report together with its follow-up and implementation plan, and present it to interested external partners, in particular to the BFUG.

10) Confidentiality

31. Confidentiality, in particular in relation to applicants whose have applications have been unsuccessful, is an important principle for EQAR. Thus, while the panel needs to have access to documentation on applications that were withdrawn by applicants or rejected by EQAR, the confidentiality of any such information must be strictly observed by the panel, the Steering Group and the coordinator.

32. Confidentiality clauses shall be included in any contracts with the Coordinator and the evaluation panel members. The self-evaluation report (if published) and the panel's report will need to be made anonymous where they contain references to confidential information.

11) Timing

33. The indicative schedule of the review is as follows:

Initial plans for the external evaluation discussed	18/19 February 2010	endorsed by the GA
EQAR officially approaches the Coordinator	February/March 2010	EB and Secretariat
Terms of Reference discussed	July - September	electronic

between EQAR and coordinator	2010	consultation of the GA
Steering Group meets Final Terms of Reference agreed	8 October 2010	Coordinator
Appointment of the panel	December 2010	Coordinator
Draft self-evaluation report presented to EQAR members	March 2011	discussion by GA
Self-evaluation report submitted	end of March 2011	Self-Eval. Group
Site visit(s)	May/June 2011	Panel
Panel's draft report	September 2011	Panel
EQAR provides comments on factual accuracy	October 2011	Self-Eval. group
Seminar for EQAR members to discuss the evaluation results	October/November 2011	EQAR
EQAR adopts implementation/follow-up plan	November 2011	adopted by the GA
External report and implementation/follow-up plan finalised and published	December 2011	EQAR
Bologna Ministerial Conference, Bucharest	Spring 2012	