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SELF-EVALUATION REPORT

March 2016

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adopted by the EQAR General Assembly, 7 March 2016

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1. Introduction

1.1 About EQAR

The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) is the only organisation created directly as a result of the Bologna Process. The concept of a European register of quality assurance agencies was first welcomed by the ministers of the Bologna signatory countries in 2005, at their Bergen summit and further developed by the E4 Group until EQAR's establishment in March 2008.

EQAR's current Mission Statement reads:

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 provi-

sion 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.

Organisational Structure

EQAR's organisational structure (see Figure 1) includes distinct roles and responsibilities for its different bodies, so as to ensure checks and balances between them. The structure was designed to enable the Register Committee to independently manage the Register of quality as-
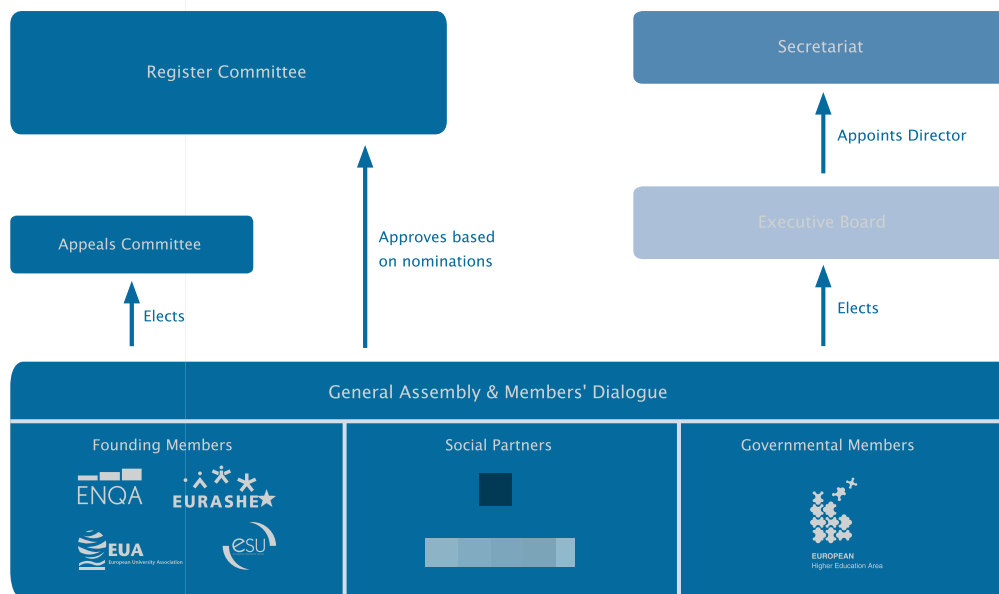
Figure 1: Organisational Chart

surance agencies (see Self-Evaluation Report 2011, p. 8).

The Register Committee (RC) is responsible for the core function of EQAR: it decides on applications for inclusion on the Register and adopts related policies and procedures.

Each Founding Member (ENQA, ESU, EUA, EURASHE) nominates two members of the Register Committee, each Social Partner (BUSINESSEUROPE, Education International) one. The nominations to the Register Committee are approved by the General Assembly. The members of the Register Committee act independently and in their personal capacity, they may not hold any function in the organisation that nominates them.

The Register Committee appoints an additional member as its Chair, and elects a Vice-Chair from amongst its members.

The Appeals Committee considers appeals against decisions of the Register Committee. Members of the Appeals Committee are elected by the General Assembly in

an individual capacity.

Members of EQAR are the four founders (ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE), 37 European governments that have decided to support the operation of EQAR and get involved in its governance, as well as the social partner organisations represented in the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG).

The General Assembly is the highest decision-making body of EQAR, gathering all its members. The Members' Dialogue is an annual event gathering all members and committee members of EQAR, organised in-between the General Assemblies to discuss recent policy developments in quality assurance.

The Executive Board (EB) is in charge of the strategic coordination and management of EQAR, with the support of the Secretariat. The Board's four voting members are elected by the General Assembly, one from each Founding Member. The Chair of the Register Committee is an ex officio member of the Board, without voting rights. The Executive Board has agreed to annually rotate the

different functions (President, etc.) among its voting members.

The Secretariat is in charge of the daily administration and management of EQAR. It supports all other bodies in their work and serves as contact point for all third parties; the Director represents EQAR externally.

1.2 External evaluation of EQAR and Strategic Plan 2013-2017

When mandating the E4 Group to establish EQAR, Ministers also asked the E4 organisations "to ensure that after two years of operation, the register is evaluated externally, taking account of the views of all stakeholders" (London Communiqué 2007).

The external evaluation took place in 2011 and was coordinated by a Steering Group working under the auspices and with the support of the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). This Steering Group appointed an independent expert panel to carry out the evaluation, including European and non-European experts in quality assurance of higher education, coming from different backgrounds and including all stakeholder perspectives.

The external evaluation report (September 2011) set out the panel's findings – based on the self-evaluation report, the site visit and the interviews – and made recommendations for improvement. These recommendations are addressed in several places throughout this report and summarised in section 5.1.

In October 2011, EQAR organised the first Members' Dialogue to discuss the results of the evaluation and give input to a follow-up and implementation plan. This led to the decision of the 2012 General Assembly on Strategic Priorities and Follow-Up of the External Evaluation, and, following further discussion, the adoption of the Strategic Plan 2013-2017 by the 2013 General Assembly.

Two strategic goals were formulated in the Strategic Plan in order to guide EQAR's activities:

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.

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.

For both strategic goals, indicators were devised that would allow EQAR to monitor progress (see chapter 4), bearing in mind that these would often require action to be taken by national governments or other actors, rather than only by EQAR itself.

1.3 The Self-Evaluation Process 2015/16

The aforementioned Strategic Plan 2013- – 2017 included the following commitment:

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.

Objectives and Key Questions

The Executive Board agreed that the self-evaluation exercise should consist of a self-reflection of the organisation as to how it has performed with a view to its mission and how it would improve. The specific objectives of the 2015/16 self-evaluation exercise were:

• To take stock of how recommendations of the 2011 external evaluation of EQAR were implemented;

• To feed into the revision of the Strategic Plan;

- To demonstrate accountability to its members and stakeholders.

The self-evaluation therefore focussed on the following key questions:

1. Are EQAR's mission and objectives still relevant? What are the expectations of governments and stakeholders? Is the singularity of EQAR's mission clear?

2. Are EQAR's activities fit for purpose with regard to its mission and objectives? How does EQAR know, what impact did they have?

3. How did EQAR perform against the indicators for success defined in our Strategic Plan 2013-2017?

The self-evaluation process was coordinated by a self-evaluation group (SEG) which included representatives of EQAR's main bodies and stakeholders. In setting up the SEG, background, gender and geographical balance were taken into account (see Annex 4).

Next to an analysis of existing documents (published by EQAR or other organisations) the SEG gathered data through a number of surveys and events:

Unless specified otherwise, when views of "members" are referred to in the report those were expressed in the responses to the respective survey or in the discussions at the Members' Dialogue. If views of "quality assurance agencies" (QAAs) or "ENIC-NARIC centres" are referred to, they stem from the respective surveys.

Surveys		Sent to	Responses
Survey of EQAR members and potential members (37 governmental members, 12 other EHEA governments, 6 stakeholder organisations, EQAR GA observers: European Commission (EC), Council of Europe (CoE), UNESCO, BFUG Secretariat)		59	43
Survey of quality assurance agencies (QAAs) 40 EQAR-registered, 61 other		101	64
Survey of ENIC-NARICs		56	32
Public survey (website)			48
PESTLe/SWOT survey of EQAR bodies (Register Committee, Executive Board, Appeals Committee and Secretariat)		24 + alumni	16
Events		Target groups	
Focus group at the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF, 19-21 Nov 2015)		QAAs, higher education institutions (HEIs), students	
EQAR Members' Dialogue (26/27 Nov 2015)		governments, European stakeholder organisations, EQAR committees	
Other sources			
Website statistics, newsletter statistics, desk research			

Table 1: Surveys and Data Sources

2.1 Relevance and Clarity

The responses to the surveys showed that EQAR's mission and objectives are relevant to both its members and to quality assurance agencies. They are – by and large – clearly understood.

The only exception is that about half of respondents also considered relevant two objectives that are not actually part of EQAR's explicit mission: "promotion of the enhancement of quality" and "the development of a quality culture in higher education" (see Figure 2).

Objectives where EQAR has an indirect contribution

Another aspect noted in the surveys as well as during the EQAR Members' Dialogue is that some objectives can be achieved by EQAR itself, while others are not in EQAR's power and because of its specific mandate the organisation can thus only make an (indirect) contribution to achieving these objectives.

The most notable example is the objective "Promoting student mobility": EQAR can only promote student mobility by helping to ease recognition of qualifications or periods of study, and even there EQAR only makes a specific contribution to address one dimension of recognition, quality, through the recognition of quality assurance results.

Respondents to all surveys considered EQAR's activities as rather not fit to achieve this objective. This suggests that the indirect contribution of EQAR is either not visible or not considered significant.

Respondents to the surveys and participants in the Members' Dialogue suggested that the indirect contribution of EQAR to its objectives needs to be better explained. Figure 3 illustrates this relationship.

Reducing opportunities for "accreditation mills" to gain credibility

Diverse comments were received concerning the objective of "reducing opportunities for 'accreditation mills' to gain credibility": most of the ENIC-NARIC centres surveyed considered this objective very relevant (75%) to their own activities. At the same time, only 15% of EQAR members and potential members considered this ob-
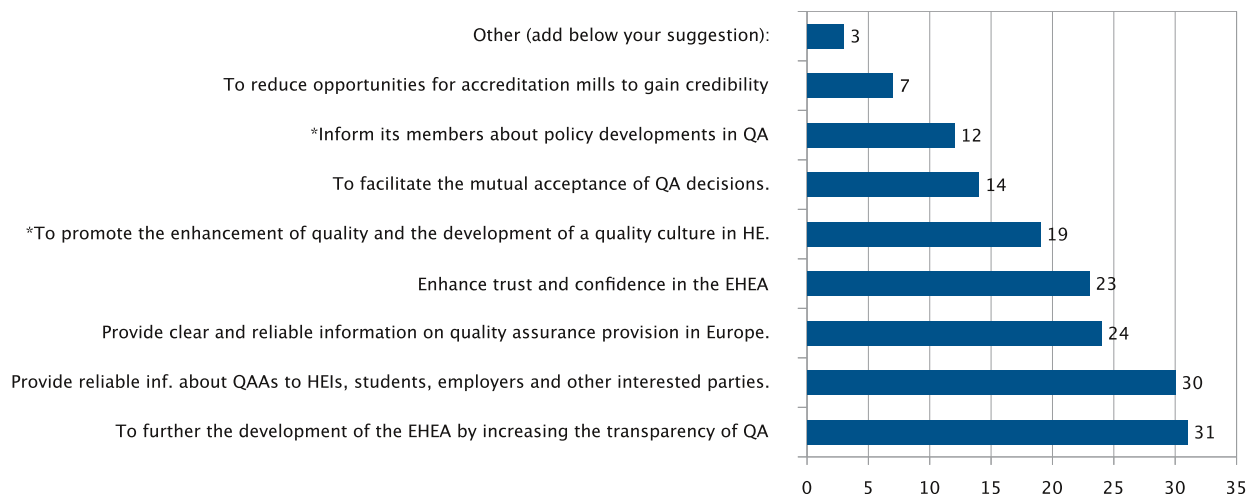
Figure 2: Aspects relevant to EQAR's mission

jective as being relevant to EQAR's mission.

Based on the comments made in the surveys as well as the Members' Dialogue, it seems that some members do not see accreditation mills and degree mills as a major issue in their context. Some members wonder what EQAR could possibly do to fight accreditation and degree mills. They do not consider it as EQAR's role to actively fight accreditation mills, while recognising that a register of credible agencies, i.e. a whitelist, is one helpful element.

80% of QAAs surveyed and 70% of members and potential members consider EQAR's activities, as they are, fit or rather fit for this objective. ENIC-NARICs would find it very important (58%) or rather important (35%) for EQAR to provide regular information to the general public about "degree mills". Some survey respondents suggested that EQAR could provide some basic contextual information, e.g. a page on its website explaining what accreditation mills are, how the Register can be used to confirm that an agency is credible, and providing links to further information on the issue.

2.2 Organisation in the Public Interest

In relation to EQAR's role in policy discussions, the 2011 external evaluation report noted that "EQAR is increasingly likely to be asked by other organisations and institutions for views on a range of higher education matters, in particular, quality assurance in higher education, to which it should be able to respond in a well-informed and authoritative way". The panel recommended that EQAR "agree on its strategic priorities and incorporate these into a strategic plan".

In its response to the evaluation report and recommendations, the EQAR General Assembly (2012) emphasised that EQAR's "activities relate to its role as a register and the objectives agreed at the outset", and that the organisation should not turn "into a generic policy-making organisation dealing with a broad range of education-related issues". It considered that "EQAR's unique broad ownership by stakeholders and governments is based on its role as a register", and that its
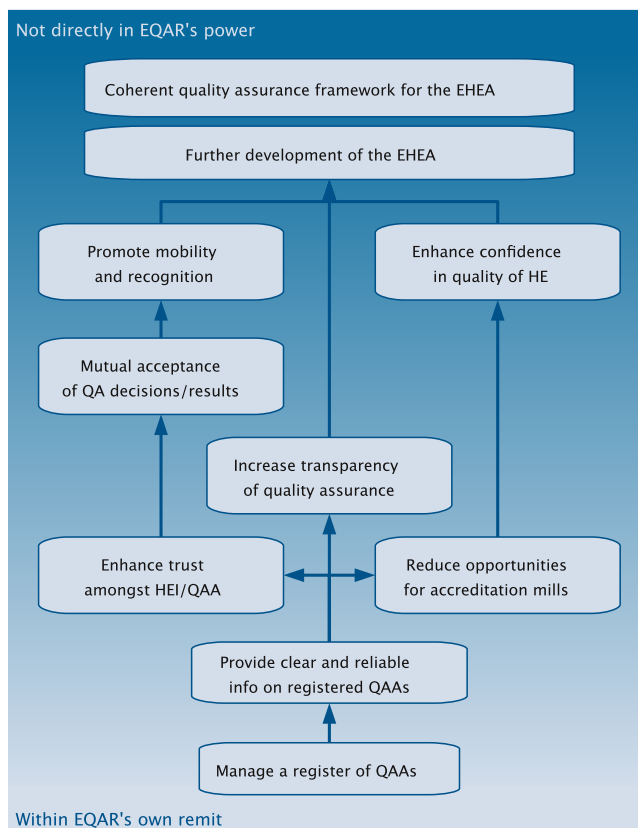
Figure 3: EQAR Objectives

"'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".

Over the years, EQAR has indeed been involved in an increasing number of policy discussions, most notably through its participation in the BFUG working structure and presence in many conferences and events.

Occasionally, including in the various surveys and discussions in the Members' Dialogue, questions were raised as to which policy areas EQAR should engage in, and whose view or interest it would represent.

EQAR was founded by the E4 organisations and its membership includes two more stakeholder organisations

and currently 38 European governments. Members entrusted EQAR to "[further] the development of the European Higher Education Area by enhancing confidence in higher education and by facilitating the mutual recognition of quality assurance decisions" (Statutes, Article 2), by independently managing a register of quality assurance agencies that substantially comply with the ESG. They join the organisation in order to support it in pursuing its specific mission, rather than to represent their joint views (for which the different categories of members have other fora).

EQAR is part of the European Higher Education Area's (EHEA) quality assurance infrastructure and thus its raison d'être is to fulfil a public function and it is an organisation that acts in the public interest. EQAR's broad membership of stakeholders and governments represents the public interest in the governance of the organisation.

In recent years, EQAR has established its role in the policy arena in relation to its function in the public interest. The organisation has confined its contribution to policy discussions to a specific set of issues, related to strengthening the Register as a tool of the EHEA and topics linked to the realisation of EQAR's mission and objectives.

2.3 Role in the EHEA and Relation to ENQA

EQAR was founded for a specific function, based on a mandate of EHEA ministers: it is responsible for the official register of QAAs that substantially comply with the ESG, it is not an interest organisation, especially not of QAAs. To underline this, EQAR has always stressed in its communication that registered quality assurance agencies are not members of EQAR: while registration is an "official stamp of approval", it does not confer agencies any rights to participate in EQAR's governance.

Within the EHEA, there are a number of networks and stakeholder organisations working on quality assurance of higher education, most notably the E4 organisations, EQAR's founders.

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) is an umbrella organisation of quality assurance agencies in the EHEA. As such, ENQA represents its members, provides support to its members, promotes European co-operation and disseminates information and expertise among its members and towards stakeholders. Membership of quality assurance agencies in ENQA has been subject to compliance with the ESG since 2005. About 75% of registered agencies used an ENQA-coordinated external review against the ESG to support their registration on EQAR.

Despite EQAR and ENQA sharing a mutual understanding of their respective functions and purposes, the use by EQAR and ENQA of the same requirements for registration and membership, respectively, but for different purposes, is not always easily understood by the community.

The 2011 self-evaluation report of EQAR discussed the relationship between EQAR and ENQA, and the 2011 external evaluation recommended that ENQA and EQAR clarify their respective roles. During the past years, a number of steps were taken:

- EQAR has explained its role clearly in its own communication, e.g. on its website, in statements and reports.

- Following an initiative by EQAR, the E4 Group agreed on a common description of the E4's, ENQA's and EQAR's role, which is published on the organisations' websites (see http://eqar.eu/about/e4-group.html).

- Both EQAR and ENQA have clarified organisational eligibility for registration (see section 3.2) and membership, respectively.

- EQAR's interpretation of "substantial compliance" was clarified through the "Practices and Interpretations" (published 09/2013), now replaced by the Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG (see section 3.2).

- In addition to many informal discussions and day-to-day exchange of views, official meetings with ENQA took place in 2013 and 2015 to discuss various issues, including those referred to in the recommendation of the 2011 external evaluation.

There is evidence that almost all European quality assurance agencies seek to be members of ENQA and to be registered on EQAR: 41 of 42 registered agencies are members of ENQA, while 41 of ENQA's 48 members are registered. This supports the assumption that agencies are interested to have both a European stamp of approval (EQAR) as well as to be part of a representative organisation, including access to a network of agencies from across the EHEA (ENQA). In the survey, QAAs also appreciated the possibility to use one external review for two purposes, ENQA membership and EQAR registration, an arrangement which saves agencies from excessive cost and workload.

The 2015 surveys showed that more stakeholders, governments and QAAs have a clearer understanding of the role of EQAR now than in 2010. This can be regarded as a success of the significant and continuous efforts that both organisations have made to explain their different missions and purposes.

Despite the progress made, some residual confusion remains, and is likely to remain, since both EQAR registration and ENQA membership are based on compliance with the ESG, despite the different missions and purposes.

While there have been occasional questions whether EQAR should use different or additional criteria than the ESG, it has always been EQAR members' consensus that the ESG, as the agreed standards for quality assurance in the EHEA, need to serve as criteria for the official register of quality assurance agencies in the EHEA. This reflects the ministerial mandate of 2007.

2.4 Emerging European Quality Assurance Area

One of the developments facilitated by the existence of the Register is that an increasing number of countries have enabled their higher education institutions to choose a suitable agency from the Register for their compulsory external evaluation, accreditation or audit. The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes is a further reinforcing development for the specific case of joint programmes requiring programme accreditation or evaluation, setting out that it is the higher education institutions' responsibility to select a suitable EQAR-registered agency.

While this is not a completely new situation, most EHEA countries traditionally have one or several national QA agencies, each responsible for a defined group of institutions, thus finding themselves in a "monopoly situation". Where higher education institutions (HEIs) are able to choose a suitable agency, QAAs might now find themselves competing with each other for being commissioned by HEIs.

In the surveys, EQAR members and potential members raised the issue of a possible "market" of quality assurance as an issue they expect EQAR to tackle. Suggestions ranged from EQAR being asked to monitor these developments and study their impact, including its possible advantages and downsides, to EQAR increasing its role in regulating this market.

At a system level, EQAR has studied the impact of these developments as part of the RIQAA project, including the rationale behind a cross-border quality assurance review. The discussions showed that the members would expect EQAR to continue its work on this topic.

Discussions at the Members' Dialogue further indicated that EQAR's existing instruments to monitor registered agencies' work and compliance with the ESG (annual reporting, substantive change reports, third-party complaints, regular renewal of registration, see also section 3.2) are generally fit for purpose. However, these instruments might not always be sufficiently well-known.

2.5 Conclusions

- EQAR's mission remains relevant for the EHEA. There are no strong reasons to revise the Mission Statement at the moment. The indirect relation between EQAR and its wider objectives, however, needs better explanation.

- EQAR's approach to fighting accreditation and degree mills is to publish the Register as a white list of credible agencies.

- EQAR is an organisation that acts in the public interest. It has established its role in the policy arena in line with this status, confined to a specific set of issues linked to the realisation of EQAR's mission and objectives.

- EQAR has consolidated and clearly communicated its role and function as part of the EHEA quality assurance infrastructure, which is now better understood by the higher education community than in 2010. ENQA and EQAR have a shared understanding of their respective functions and purposes, even though some confusion remains due to the fact that registration on EQAR and membership in ENQA are both based on compliance with the ESG.

- EQAR has a functioning set of instruments to monitor registered agencies' work and compliance with the ESG between the periodical applications for renewal of registration every 5 years.

- EQAR's members appreciate the efforts made to maintain a knowledge base on legal frameworks and to analyse developments in cross-border external quality assurance at system level.

2.6 Recommendations

The Self-Evaluation Group recommends that EQAR's competent bodies consider:

- To use the Strategic Plan to prioritise on which of the objectives EQAR's activities should focus.

- To improve the information exchange with ENIC-NARICs as an additional way to build trust in higher education institutions that have been quality assured by a registered agency.

- To include on the EQAR website some general, contextual information on accreditation mills and degree mills, in order to help users to understand the issue and make use of the Register in that respect.

- To maintain the active dialogue and communication at official and informal level with ENQA, being the representative body of QA agencies and the most frequently used coordinator of external reviews.

- To ensure that EQAR's instruments for monitoring registered agencies' work and compliance with the ESG are well known by those concerned.

3. How are we trying to do it? - Fitness for Purpose

This chapter addresses the organisational structure of EQAR (see 3.1) and provides an overview of the activities carried out to achieve its objectives, in particular through the Register Committee and the management of the Register of agencies, EQAR's core function (see 3.2), and in relation to its Strategic Plan and the goals defined therein (see 3.3).

3.1 Organisational Structure and Financing

The organisational structure of EQAR (see 1.1) has remained virtually unchanged since the organisation was founded in 2008. The following adjustments were implemented through an amendment to the Statutes and the adoption of Rules of Procedure by the GA of 2014:

- The five governmental observers to the Register Committee are appointed by the General Assembly, and no longer by the BFUG;

- The responsibility of the General Assembly for strategic planning is explicitly mentioned in the Rules of Procedure;

- The Executive Board can co-opt a replacement member if one of its members is temporarily unable to exercise his/her role.

Following the 2011 self-evaluation, EQAR developed a Code of Conduct, which was adopted jointly by the Executive Board and Register Committee in early 2012.

Since 2011, an annual Members' Dialogue has been organised as a platform to discuss relevant policy developments in quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with governmental members, stakeholder organisations, observers and statutory bodies. The Members' Dialogue has been welcomed for its positive impact in engaging governments and stakeholders in

a regular dialogue on quality assurance matters.

Table 2 illustrates the changes in the composition of EQAR's statutory bodies during the period from 2011 to 2015; a comprehensive overview of members of all bodies (from 2011 to 2015) is annexed. The Chair of the Register Committee 2010-2012 was not available for a second term. The Register Committee appointed Eric Froment as its chairperson from 1/7/2012, who has held the position since.

Budget and Staff

EQAR's annual budget has increased from EUR 220 000 in 2011 to ca. EUR 300 000 in 2015 (revenue without project grants, see Figure 4). This is mainly due to an increase in governmental membership. The increase in registered agencies certainly had an effect as well, while the impact of application and listing fees paid by registered agencies remains small, with 16% of EQAR's revenue.

Thanks to the increased commitment of EHEA governments EQAR was able to increase its staff from 1,6 full-time equivalents (FTE) in 2011 to now 2,6 FTE. This allowed EQAR to respond to an increased workload due to an increase in the number of registered agencies; changes in the application process for QAAs; communication with members, stakeholders and external representation activities; as well as more frequent interaction with registered agencies (e.g. substantive changes) within the 5-year review cycle.

	Register Committee	Executive Board	Appeals Committee
Continuing since 2011	5	0	1
Newcomers	8	6	5
Ending mandates	7	5	4
Resignations	2	1	1

Table 2: Changes in the composition of EQAR's bodies (2011-2015)
Comprehensive overview of all members
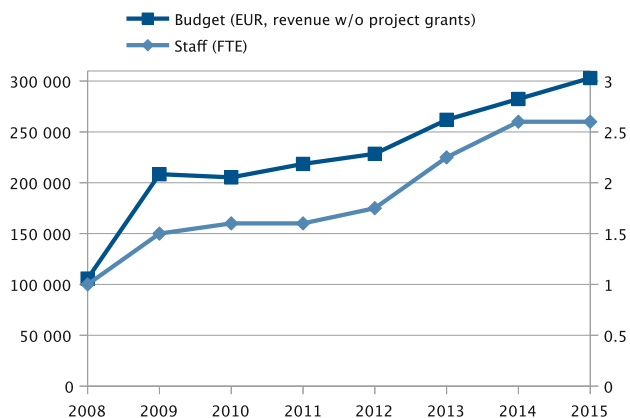
Figure 4: Budget and staff (2008 - 2015)

While EQAR has been able to attract additional project funding (RIQAA project 2013 - 2014, partner in the EQUIP project 2015 - 2018), its statutory functions are covered by its regular income from membership contributions and agency fees. EQAR's current resources are just sufficient to discharge its statutory functions and to realise most of the activities earmarked in its Strategic Plan (see chapter section 3.3). Additional activities, such as more peer-learning activities or additional analyses, would require additional funding.

Roles and Responsibilities

The survey of members and potential members revealed that the roles and functions of EQAR's different bodies are very clear to respondents (see Figure 5).

Although a few survey respondents noted that EQAR's structure is relatively complex for an organisation of its size (in terms of budget and staff), they, however, acknowledged that this complexity is rooted in the specific function of EQAR, and the need to ensure adequate checks and balances. Respondents consequently noted that they could not see how the structure could be simplified.

One issue that was, however, brought up in the Members' Dialogue is that there is no regular reporting or feedback to the General Assembly from the governmental observers on the Register Committee. It was suggested that they could report back annually in order to enhance transparency.

Leadership and Representation

The internal consultation of EQAR committee members brought up the question of leadership and continuity in the Executive Board, as well as the responsibilities for representing EQAR externally.

Since the Executive Board members usually hold full-time roles in "their" organisation and are known in public as representatives of "their" organisations, the President of the Board has de facto become an internal function. S/he has not represented EQAR externally so as to underline EQAR's independence and to avoid confusion.

Furthermore, it was mentioned in the internal consultation that the annual rotation of the Board's presidency (and other functions) amongst its members did not support continuity and long-term leadership.
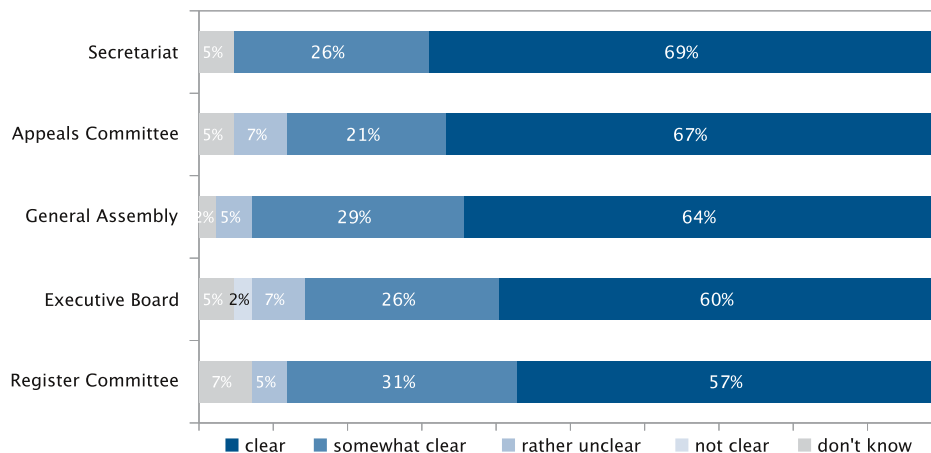
Figure 5: Clarity in the functioning of EQAR's bodies
(members, potential members, observers, n=42)

The 2011 external evaluation panel recommended that "the General Assembly should appoint a high profile, independent President capable of raising the visibility and promoting the benefits of EQAR with key stakeholders". The General Assembly (2012) decided to consider this recommendation further as part of the present self-evaluation.

In practice, the external representation of EQAR (in meetings, conferences, the BFUG working structure, etc.) has so far been performed mainly by the Director, the Project Officer and the Chair of the Register Committee. The latter has thus de facto filled the existing gap, which has been a welcome and pragmatic solution in light of the current structure. In principle, however, the Chair of the Register Committee is responsible specifically for the Register Committee and for safeguarding the Committee's independence, while representing EQAR as a whole is – currently – not amongst his/her functions.

Discussions in the SEG and at the Members' Dialogue showed that a majority of members considers that it would be valuable for EQAR to have a president who is independent of its members, in order to raise the visibility of EQAR and to enhance stability and leadership internally.

The General Assembly's (2012) response to the 2011 external evaluation panel recommendations already set out that if a President is appointed, s/he should act as chair of the General Assembly and the Executive Board, and thus replace the rotating presidency of the Executive Board. The SEG considers that the relationship between the functions of President of EQAR and Chair of the Register Committee would require further careful consideration.

In the Members' Dialogue, participants considered that the President should in principle be an honorary position, however with adequate compensation, and that the appointment of a President should not change the character of EQAR as an organisation, in particular its specific role in policy debates (see section 2.2).

3.2 Management of the Register

The EQAR Register Committee independently decides on registration of quality assurance agencies. Over the past years, the Committee has further developed its established process for considering applications for inclusion on the Register and for renewal of registration.

The 2011 Self-Evaluation Report contained a detailed description of the process at the time. The present report focuses on those elements that have changed since 2011.

Since 2008, the Register Committee has considered 58 applications for inclusion on the Register and 18 applications for renewal of registration (see Table 3).

The Register Committee revised the EQAR Procedures for Applications twice, in 2012/13 and in 2014/15.

First Revision of the Procedures for Applications

The first revision primarily responded to some of the specific recommendations made in the 2011 external evaluation. The following changes came into force as from 2013:

- Clarification of the eligibility requirements for registration;
- Introduction of a process for verifying organisational eligibility before an external review;
- Publishing the full (approval and rejection) decisions by the Register Committee;
- Clarification of the processes for substantive changes and extraordinary reviews of an agency's registration.

Transition to the ESG 2015

The transition to the revised version of the ESG (see also 4.1 below) was a priority for the Register Committee in 2014 and 2015.

In early 2014, following the presentation of the proposal for the ESG 2015, the Register Committee discussed

possible scenarios and organised a consultation of EQAR's governmental and stakeholder members, re-gistered quality assurance agencies, ENQA and other organisations that have coordinated reviews of registered agencies on arrangements for transition to the ESG 2015, as far as the Register of agencies is concerned.

The Register Committee adopted a Policy on Transition to the Revised ESG, which ensures that by 2020 all agencies on the Register will have been reviewed against the ESG 2015. The Policy also clarifies as from when the ESG 2015 are used when considering Substantive Change Reports or Complaints.

The second revision of the Procedures occurred in the context of the transition to the ESG 2015. The following changes came into force as from 2015:

- Agencies apply for inclusion on the Register/re-newal of registration before undergoing an external review. The eligibility of the application is verified immediately and the agency receives a confirma-tion which of its activities are within the scope of the ESG and should be reviewed;

- In addition to the final decision to approve or reject an application, the full application documents are published, that is, including any clarification re-quests and responses that influenced the decision;

- Substantive change reports, following clarification requests and responses, as well as the decisions on substantive change reports are published in full;

- The practice of "flagging" issues for attention at the following review was discontinued;

		2008-2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
A	Initial Applications	31	5	3	5	8	6	58
B	Approved	25	4	3	5 [6]	6	6	49
C	Withdrawn	3	1			1		5
D	Rejected	3				1		4
E	Renewal Applications		3	4	1	6	4	18
F	Approved		3	4	1	6	4	18
G	Withdrawn							0
H	Rejected							0
I	Appeals	1					1	2
J	Successful	1						1
K	Unsuccessful						1	1
L	Registration ended/expired		1	2	3	1		7
M	Registered [B - G - H - L]	25	28	29	31	37	42	42

Table 3: Applications for Inclusion and Renewal

- The possible result of a complaint in a formal warning to the agency concerned was added to the Procedures.

Transparency and Communication

The Register Committee has reported annually to the EQAR General Assembly and the wider public. Its reports are an integral part of the EQAR Annual Report.

While certain interpretations of the ESG in specific circumstances were always addressed in those reports, the Register Committee published in 2013 a separate document explaining the acquired practices of the Register Committee in considering compliance with the ESG and the principal interpretations it has made with regard to the standards (Practices and Interpretations, 2013).

In relation to the transition to the ESG 2015, the Register Committee adopted a new document providing an ex ante transparency of the official EQAR interpretation of the ESG. The Policy on the Use and Interpretations of the ESG replaced the "Practices and Interpretations" and aims to increase transparency, understanding and consistency within the decision-making process of the Register Committee. The main target groups of the policy are the quality assurance agencies, the external review coordinators and the external review panels.

Since 2013, the full decisions of the Register Committee have been published (see also above). As from the autumn of 2015 this includes the full correspondence between EQAR and the applicant.

Specific Policies

The Register Committee adopted a range of policies since 2011. The following policies specify the Register Committee's understanding and application of the ESG and the Procedures for Applications in specific cases or circumstances (in chronological order, in parenthesis: year in which the policy was first adopted, most have been revised since):

- Complaints Policy (2011): Individuals or organisations that have substantiated doubts whether a re-

gistered agency does comply substantially with the ESG, may address these to EQAR in line with the Complaints Policy (see also below);

- Merger Policy (2012): This policy addresses the registration status of EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies after a merger, including the conditions, requirements and timeframes for merged agencies to remain on the Register;

- Practices and Interpretations (2013): replaced by the Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG, see above;

- Policy on Transition to the Revised ESG (2014): see above.

Monitoring and Accountability of Registered QAAs between Periodical Reviews

Figure 6: Periodic renewal and monitoring

Registered agencies are required to renew their registration every five years, based on a new external review against the ESG. In addition, there are several accountability mechanisms in place during the five year cycle (see Figure 6):

- Substantive Change Reports: Agencies are required to report changes to their organisational status, structure or methodology. Even though the obligation to report, substantive changes has existed since the beginning, specific guidance and an online reporting form were developed to underline the importance and facilitate such reports. Since 2011, the relevance of substantive change reports has grown, see Figure 7.

- Complaints: third parties can address to EQAR substantiated concerns about a registered agency's compliance with the ESG. The Complaints Policy defines a clear basis and a transparent process for handling third-party complaints.

- Annual Update: In order to provide a regular overview of the scope and volume of EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies' activities, at home and across borders, since 2015 registered agencies have been requested to provide an annual update on the number of reviews completed, broken down by countries. Especially in the light of registered agencies being increasingly active internationally and performing reviews across borders, this has helped EQAR to keep an overview of those activities.

In general, there is now a stronger focus on monitoring registered agencies' work and compliance with the ESG between the periodical applications for renewal of registration every five years. This reflects the expectation of governments and stakeholders that EQAR ensures that registered agencies work in line with the ESG consistently in different countries.

Challenges

In the internal consultation, Register Committee mem-
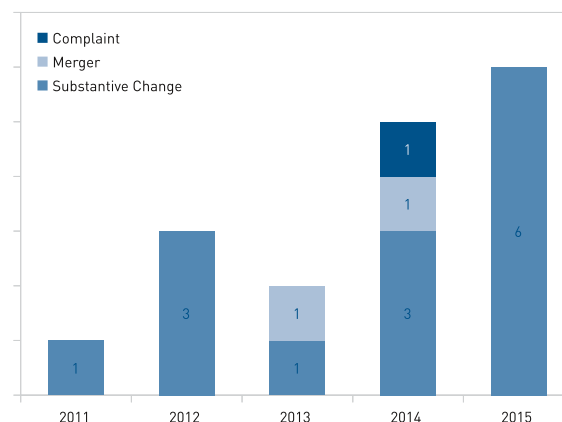

Figure 7: Substantive Changes, Mergers, Complaints

bers noted the challenge of making fair and consistent decisions (on substantial compliance with the ESG) based on external review reports over which EQAR has limited control. In the surveys, also some members raised the question whether EQAR should carry out its own reviews of quality assurance agencies, especially in case of following up a complaint or substantive change that requires more thorough investigation.

This would, however, involve substantial additional workload for EQAR and should thus only be considered if the current approach led to major difficulties.

In order to address this challenge, the Register Committee took a number of measures to enhance fairness and consistency of its decisions within the current arrangements:

- Maintaining and using a systematic collection of precedents and interpretations (published since 2013, see above);

- Publishing full decisions (see above);

- Ensuring continuity in the membership of the Committee (see section 5.2);

- Contributing to the revision of the ESG with a view to enhance their clarity (see section 3.3).

In order to ensure that the experts carrying out reviews that are used for EQAR registration are fully informed about the requirements and expectations., the new Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG specifies expectations what external review reports "should at least demonstrate". EQAR also improved communication with review coordinators, including presentations by EQAR at the expert trainings of the most frequently used review coordinators, ENQA and the German Accreditation Council (GAC).

Feedback from Quality Assurance Agencies

Very positive feedback was received from the survey of QAAs (see Figure 8) about the application process and decision-making of the Register Committee.

Compared to the 2010 self-evaluation surveys, agencies are now more satisfied in terms of "proportionate, consistent and fair decision-making". This might be explained by the various transparency measures, e.g. the

document on "Practices and Interpretations" published in 2013 as well as the practice to publish all decisions in full. Also in terms of "transparency of the criteria for inclusion and their interpretation", there seems to be a positive development. In the other areas, no significant changes can be seen.

3.3 Strategic Goals

While the two previous sections addressed the organisational structure and the work that is part of EQAR discharging its statutory core functions, set out in the Ministers' mandate and its Statutes, the Strategic Plan set out a number of activities to contribute to each strategic goal.

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

Carry out an in-depth analysis of both legal provisions in EHEA countries recognising EQAR-registered QA agen-
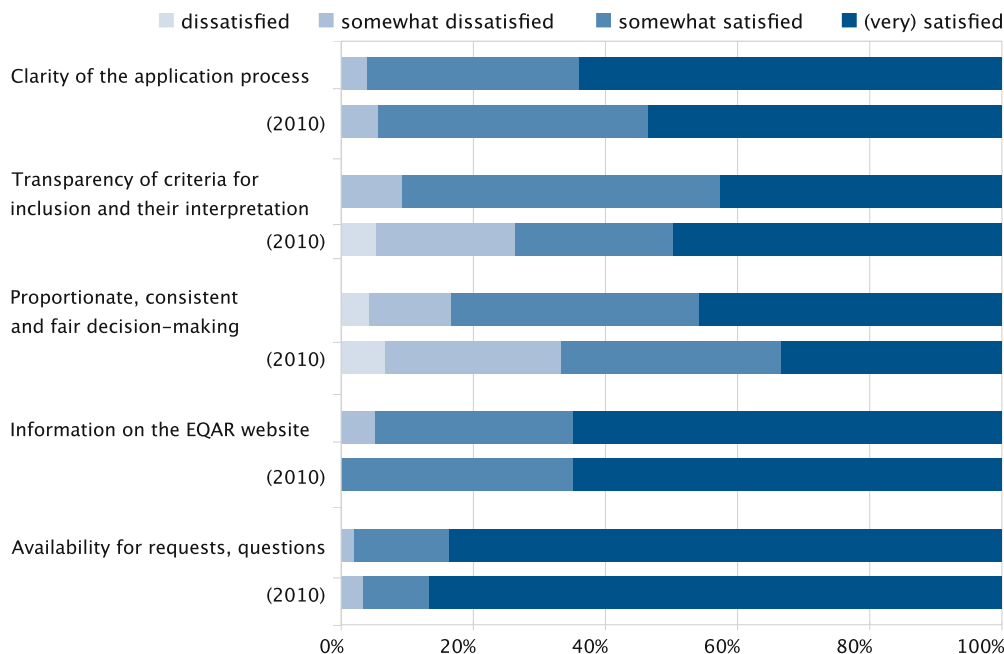

Figure 8: Quality assurance agencies' feedback

cies 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.

Between 2013-2014, EQAR carried out the project "Recognising International Quality Assurance Activity in the EHEA" (RIQAA) to inform policy makers on the existing legal provisions and to provide information on how higher education institutions make use of the existing possibilities to request quality reviews by foreign agencies, as well as the rationale behind it.

The project report was well received by governments and stakeholders. The results of the RIQAA report also fed into the Message to the Yerevan Ministerial Conference adopted by the EQAR General Assembly (2015).

Throughout and beyond the RIQAA project, EQAR has maintained a public knowledge base (on its website) on national frameworks for cross-border recognition of quality assurance agencies, including specific national requirements in place across the EHEA. The information is complemented with information on the registered agencies activities collected annually (see section 3.2).

In addition, EQAR contributed to the development of the EHEA scorecard indicator on the "Level of openness to cross border quality assurance activity of EQAR-registered agencies", included in the Bologna Process Implementation Report (2015).

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

EQAR co-organised a peer-learning seminar for representatives of ministries, QA agencies and other stakeholder in cooperation with the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia in Trakošćan, on 11 December 2013. The number of separate peer-learning events was limited due to the limited resources of EQAR and the limited interest of national ministries to co-organise such events.

In addition, EQAR (co-)organised some further events on the topic of recognition of EQAR-registered agencies and their quality assurance outcomes/decisions:

- Seminar on Austria's new legal framework for external quality assurance, together with the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, September 2013, Brussels

- RIQAA Seminar for Quality Assurance Agencies, April 2014, Bayreuth

- RIQAA Final Conference, October 2014, Palermo

- DAAD seminar, in cooperation with EQAR, on quality assurance of joint programmes, September 2015, Berlin

The topic as such was, however, part of the EQAR Members' Dialogues 2013, 2014 and 2015. The "knowledge café" format allowed for peer-learning also as part of those events.

In addition to the above, EQAR contributed to a number of peer-learning activities and seminars organised by others.

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.

EQAR was an active partner in the Steering Group for the revision of the ESG. EQAR's contributions and input to the process were prepared by a dedicated subcommittee of the EQAR Register Committee, based on EQAR's Input to the MAP-ESG Project (2011) and the Register Committee's experience in using the ESG 2005.

Issues related to cross-border QA activity were raised by EQAR in the Steering Group's deliberations as a major change of context. The addition of professional conduct to standard 3.6 is one result of that. The ESG 2015 also underline the applicability of the standards to transna-

tional and cross-border provisions.

The ESG 2015 include a close link to the Frameworks for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), and the clarity of many standards was enhanced. In that way, the common denominator for quality assurance in Europe became larger and the ESG are thus now a better basis for trust and recognition.

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.

EQAR has been in regular contact with the ENIC-NARIC networks and their coordinators/bureau, and contributed to a number of seminars and conferences that explored the relation between quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and the recognition of qualifications.

In the light of its limited resources, EQAR was not able to develop further own activities on that topic.

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.

EQAR contributed to the work of an ad-hoc expert group, commissioned by the BFUG, that developed the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. As part of this contribution, the Director presented the group's work in progress in a number of BFUG discussions and other events (e.g. ENIC-NARIC meeting).

The European Approach aims at single, integrated quality reviews of joint programmes, carried out by a suitable EQAR-registered agency and recognised in all EHEA countries, where an external review at programme level is needed. It consists of a set of agreed European standards and an agreed procedure for external QA of joint programmes, based exclusively on the ESG and the QF-EHEA.

Following the adoption of the European Approach EQAR has contributed to relevant conferences and seminars

(e.g. HERE-ES PLA on Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, November 2015, Salamanca; DAAD Seminar, September 2015, Berlin; ECA-NVAO Seminar, December 2015, Tthe Hague).

Strategic Goal 2: Enhanced Transparency and Information Provision

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

Full decisions have been published since January 2013 (see section 3.2). Following the 2015 revision of the Procedures for Applications, also the full correspondence with applicant quality assurance agencies, substantive change reports and the decisions on those have been published for all applications/reports made from the second half of 2015.

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

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

EQAR requests registered agencies to update their information on the Register annually. Since 2014, registered agencies have reported on the number of reviews carried out, broken down by countries. The EQAR-registered QAAs carried out around 8 000 reviews in 2014, at both programme and institutional levels.

In addition to the list of registered agencies, an interactive map of all EHEA countries has been available on the EQAR website since 2012, providing information on which registered agencies are based in the country, which agencies have carried out reviews in the country, and whether the country's legal framework recognises foreign, EQAR-registered agencies and their decisions/results.

In the current Work Plan, it was planned to update EQAR's website to include more features. This has, however, been delayed by the need to give priority to oth-

er activities.

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

Some internal discussions have been held on the possibility to develop and maintain such a database. General consideration was given to how a database could be implemented, including possible alternatives, such as a central portal allowing to search data that is made available on different agencies' websites. Informal discussions were also held with the owners of Qrossroads, a database including data from currently 15 EQAR-registered agencies.

The survey of ENIC-NARICs and discussions at the Members' Dialogue have pointed out that those dealing with the recognition of qualifications would consider beneficial a tool providing easy access to information on higher education institutions and programmes reviewed by EQAR-registered agencies would. Moreover, a couple of governmental members expressed their view that such a tool would be useful in regulating, for instance, eligibility for student grants when studying abroad.

During the discussions over the past years and as part of the current self-evaluation, it was underlined that the specifications of the database need to be carefully defined, in consultation with its potential users. In principle, the database would need to be compatible with different systems and approaches to external quality assurance across the EHEA. Furthermore, since EQAR is an official institution of the EHEA any database or information it offers needs to be accurate, so as not to put its own reputation at risk.

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.

While the causality between the work of EQAR and the work of QA agencies is evident, the influence on the work of institutions and the quality of their provision is, indeed, dependent on the ESG rather than on the work of EQAR itself.

In its contribution to the ESG revision EQAR argued that the link between quality assurance in line with the ESG and quality of higher education must be clear and explainable to the public. The new ESG, in particular Part 1, link quality assurance processes more closely and explicitly to the student experience and the institution's processes in teaching and learning.

Thus, the 2015 version of the ESG can be regarded a positive development for EQAR in that regard. In relation to ESG 2.1, the Register Committee further set out in its Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG (2015) that it expects agencies to demonstrate clearly how they address the standards of ESG Part 1 in their work, through their own processes and criteria.

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

EQAR has promoted those shared principles in its contributions to conferences, seminars (see above) and policy debates at various levels.

3.4 Organisational Development

In addition to the two strategic goals, the Strategic Plan 2013-2017 earmarked a number of activities for EQAR's organisational development:

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

EQAR approached non-member EHEA countries in two targeted mailings to those countries' ministers of higher education, in 2011 and 2015. EQAR has contributed actively to the work of the BFUG and its working groups over the past years. Numerous opportunities have that resulted from that work, which allowing EQAR to be in contact with non-member countries.

A number of those countries have subsequently decided to join EQAR; the resulting increase of EQAR's governmental membership is discussed in section 4.3.

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

EQAR has maintained contacts with quality assurance agencies active across the EHEA and provided them with relevant information on EQAR registration. Next to direct contacts, EQAR could rely on the events and communication channels of ENQA as well as regional/topical networks (CEENQA, ECA, etc.).

EQAR also had active contributions in different meetings and events organised by QA agencies or their networks/associations (about 5-6 such events every year).

The resulting development of the number of applications and registered QA agencies is analysed in section 4.3.

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.

Since 2011, three European, non-national QA agencies successfully applied for inclusion on the Register (ECCE, EAPAA, IEP). A few new applications were submitted based on the 2015 ESG and a few additional QAAs have communicated their intention to undergo an ESG review.

In addition, EQAR has also maintained contacts with some European, sector-specific QA networks that are not QA agencies themselves, but provide a label that is awarded by other, often national QA agencies. While these European networks would not be eligible for EQAR registration themselves, several EQAR-registered agencies are part of such networks and award the respective labels.

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

Between 2012 and 2015, EQAR participated in a growing number of external events on quality assurance or related matters (e.g. recognition), in the majority of cases being invited to take an active role in the form of a presentation or moderating discussions (see Figure 9).

Topics of EQAR's contributions related both to the functioning of the Register as well as to the European framework for external quality assurance and its recent developments. The increase over the last years suggests that there is increased recognition and interest in EQAR and its role in the EHEA.

Amongst those events, EQAR was present in all regular meetings and events of important partner organisations, including ENQA, the ENIC-NARIC networks and CHEA.

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.

Minor clarifications and adjustments have been made with an amendment to the Statutes and the adoption of Rules of Procedure in 2014 (see section 3.1).
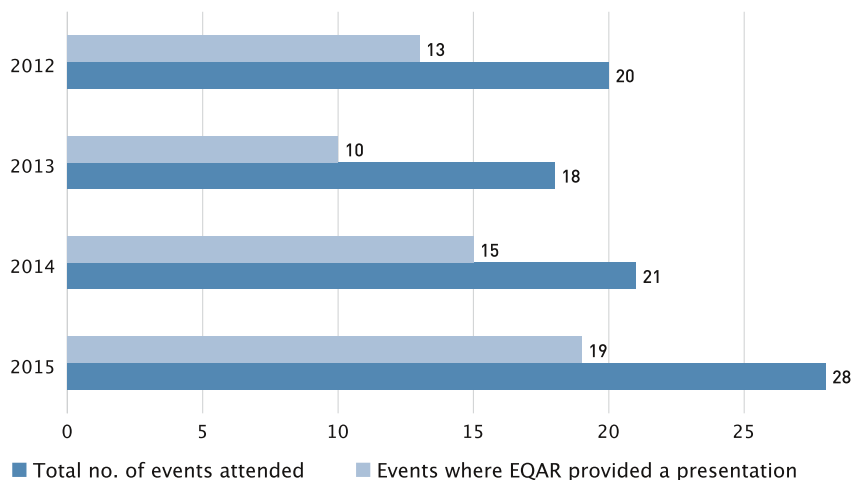

Figure 9: EQAR's representation in external events
(2012-2015, not including working groups/committees EQAR is a member of)

As part of the present self-evaluation, the recommendation of establishing the position of an independent President was discussed (see sections 3.1 and 5.1).

3.5 Conclusions

- EQAR's organisational structure is in general fit for purpose and clear to those concerned.

- EQAR's budget and staff have grown considerably since 2011, primarily due to the increase in governmental members. The current resources are sufficient to discharge its statutory functions and to realise most of the activities earmarked in its Strategic Plan.

- EQAR is getting closer to including all EHEA countries as governmental members and can thus not expect a further substantial increase of its budget through increasing the number of governmental members.

- EQAR, through the independent Register Committee, has managed the Register efficiently and effectively, and quality assurance agencies' satisfaction with the application process has improved. Various measures have been taken over the past years to increase transparency, fairness and consistency of the work and decision making of the Register Committee.

- The monitoring of registered quality assurance agencies' work and compliance with the ESG during the 5-year cycle has been strengthened.

- EQAR realised most activities earmarked in its Strategic Plan. In the light of its current resources, the organisation prioritised external representation and analysing legal frameworks and practices regarding the cross-border recognition of EQAR-registered agencies' results/decisions. Consequently, other topics received less attention and resources.

- EQAR was present in the BFUG working structures and relevant conferences, contributing actively to quality assurance matters and in those areas linked to its mission and objectives.

- EQAR contributed significantly to the revision of the ESG and the 2015 version is supportive to EQAR's strategic goals. The same holds true for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

3.6 Recommendations

The Self-Evaluation Group recommends that EQAR's competent bodies consider:

- To invite the governmental observers on the Register Committee to report to the General Assembly annually in order to increase the transparency.

- To establish the position of a president, who does not hold functions in EQAR's members simultaneously, in order to raise the visibility of EQAR and to enhance stability and leadership internally.

- To give more attention to the role quality assurance and the Register can play to support the recognition of qualifications.

- To develop specifications for a possible database of quality assured higher education institutions or programmes (depending on the national system), in consultation with the relevant stakeholders, in particular the ENIC-NARIC networks, and to make an estimation of the long-term operational costs of such a database on that basis.

4. How does it work? - Impact in the EHEA

As part of the survey, members and potential members were asked to rate the impact of EQAR's different activities from their perspective. Furthermore, the Strategic Plan 2013-2017 defines a number of indicators for progress under EQAR's strategic goals. These are quoted in the following sections.

4.1 International Trust and Recognition

The activities under Strategic Goal 1 that received the highest score for impact (high impact and some impact) were: the contribution to the development of ESG 2015, the monitoring of developments in cross-border external quality assurance and contribution to the BFUG structures, in particular the development of a European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

Also QAAs and EQAR committee members have also pointed out that the analysis of cross-border quality assurance activities and the mapping of legal framework have strengthened EQAR's knowledge base and thus had a positive impact.

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).

The analysis of national higher education legal frameworks (see Map 1) revealed that before 2011, three countries allowed their higher education institutions to request an evaluation, accreditation or audit from a suitable QAA listed in EQAR. By the beginning of 2016, nine more higher education systems have done so. Some other countries are currently planning to change their legal framework in order to enable EQAR-registered agencies to operate.

In a few further countries, higher education institutions can choose a foreign QAA only if it is approved by the national agency or in a national licensing process, while very few countries allow higher education institutions to choose practically any agency.

In 2014, more than half of EQAR listed agencies carried out quality assurance reviews across borders. Related to this, the increased interest of QAAs to carry out external QA abroad should be noted: 72% of the surveyed registered QAAs indicated that enhancing their possibilities to accredit/ evaluate/ audit HEIs abroad is relevant or rather relevant to being registered on EQAR, compared to only 57% in 2010. Some registered agencies also reported being increasingly contacted by

Indicator 1.1

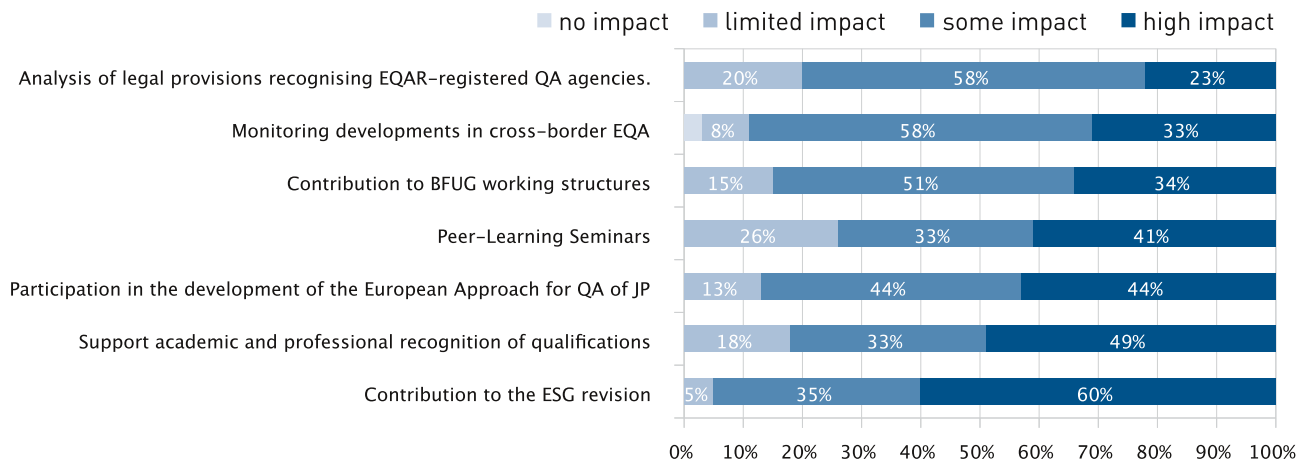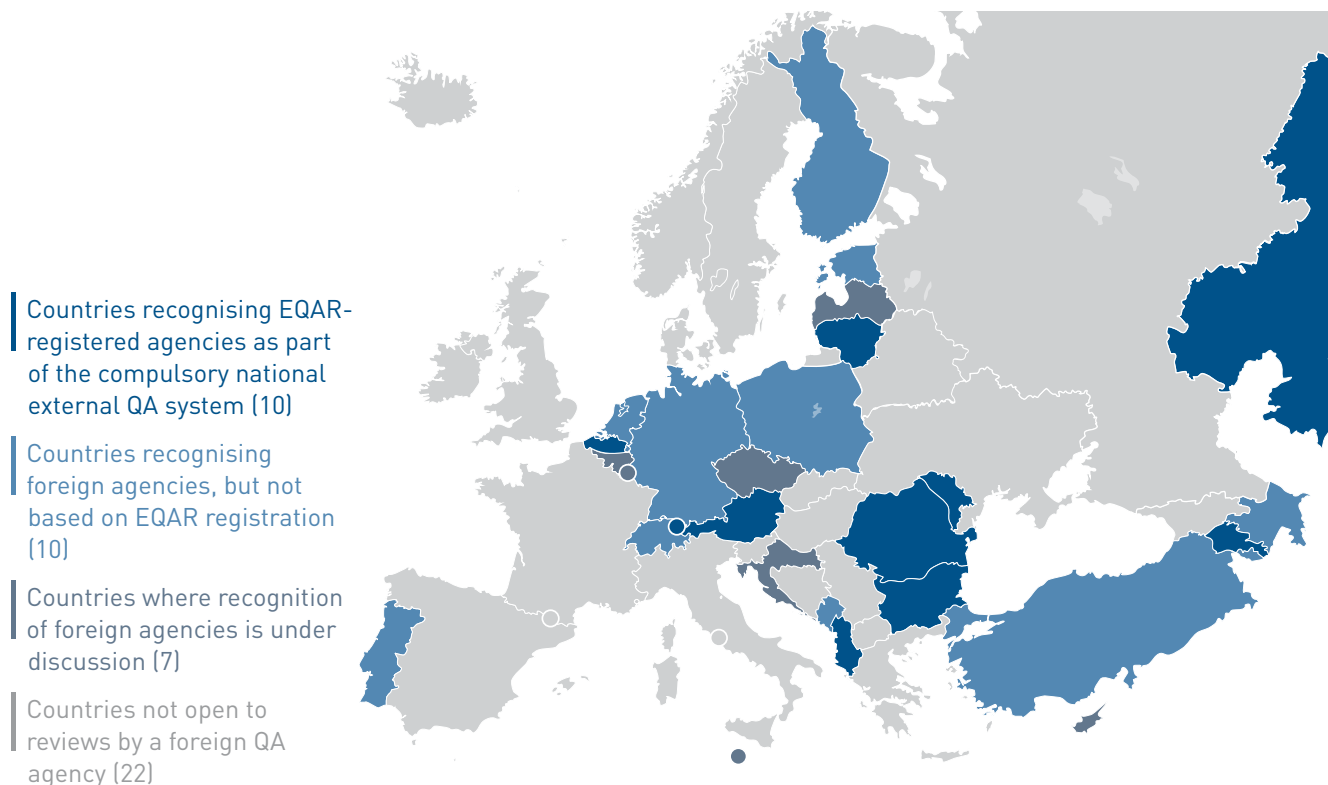|	August 2011	March 2016
Number of registered agencies	24	42
Number of governmental members	27	38
Transparency of Decision-Making	Publication of information on the registered agencies	Publication of positive and negative decisions, incl. full documentation
Staff	1,6 FTE (full time equivalent)	2,6 FTE (since 2014)
Budget	EUR 218 505	EUR 303 014 (2015)

Table 4: Key changes 2011 - 2016

Figure 10: Impact of activities - International Trust and Recognition
(members, potential members, observers, n=42)

Countries recognising EQAR-registered agencies as part of the compulsory national external QA system (10)

Countries recognising foreign agencies, but not based on EQAR registration (10)

Countries where recognition of foreign agencies is under discussion (7)

Countries not open to reviews by a foreign QA agency (22)

Map 1: Recognition of EQAR-registered agencies and their results

(foreign) higher education institutions for an evaluation, accreditation or audit as a result of their registration on EQAR.

EQAR analysed the phenomenon of cross-border external quality assurance in detail as part of the RIQAA project (2014). Cross-border external QA is taking place in almost all EHEA countries, but in the absence of according legal provisions these reviews are not always recognised as fulfilling the official external QA obligations in the institution's country.

Higher education institutions welcomed the opportunity to choose an agency that best suits their own mission and profile and from which they can get the most valuable feedback. A review by an EQAR-registered agency from another country is perceived as a genuinely international experience, and can support the institution's international strategy and image.

Indicator 1.2

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

In addition to those countries recognising external quality assurance results for all programmes, quality assurance decisions by EQAR-registered agencies on joint programme are recognised in Germany (since 2009 based on case-by-case decision, since 2015 automatically) and Denmark (since 2011 for Erasmus Mundus programmes and since 2014 for all joint programmes).

Related to this indicator is the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (adopted 2015), based on the principle that one single evaluation or accreditation by an EQAR-registered agency is recognised in all countries. The European Approach can be used in a few countries with obligatory programme accreditation that have made recent legal changes or where existing legal provisions already allow its use (e.g. Flemish Community of Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands).

European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes available to all higher education institutions[1] (10)

European Approach available to some higher education institutions or under specific conditions (9)

Legislative proposals to implement the European Approach have been prepared (2)

European Approach not available to higher education institutions in the country (28)
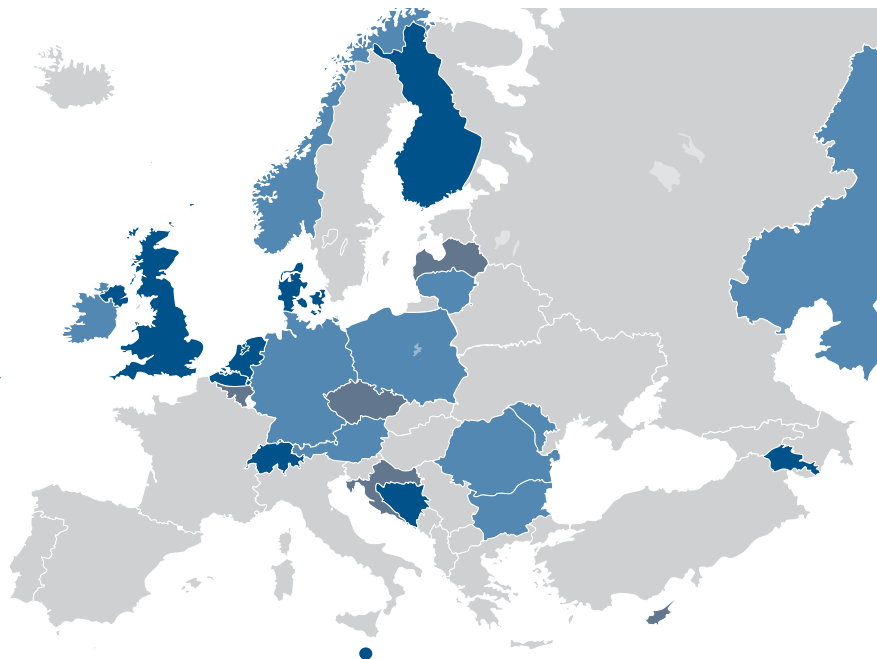
Map 2: Availability of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

[1] Either through recognition of single external quality assurance procedure for programmes or by virtue of HEIs being self-accrediting. EQAR Self-Evaluation Report
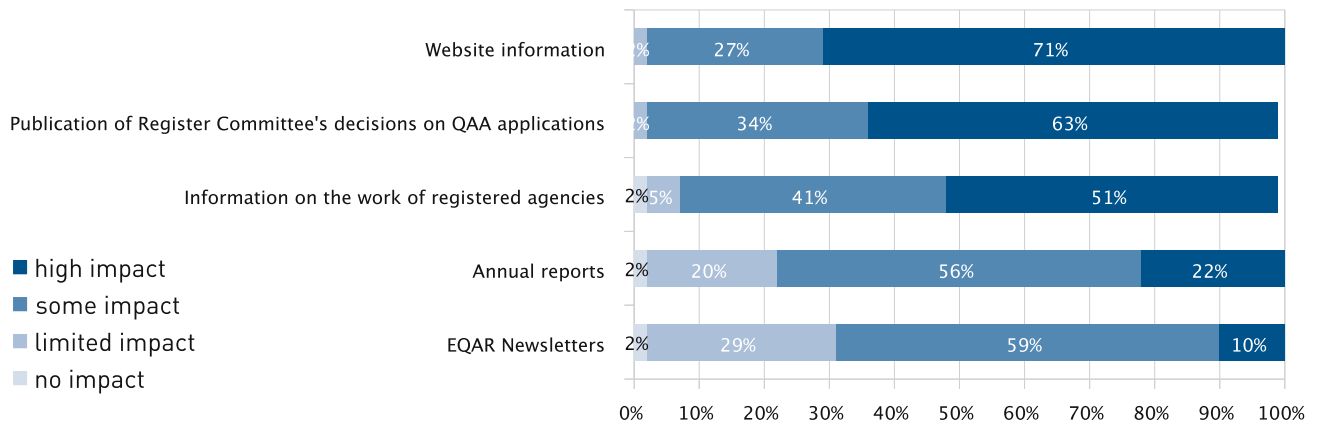
Figure 11: Impact of activities - Enhanced Transparency and Information Provision
(members, potential members, observers, n=42)

As all EHEA ministers have adopted the European Approach more EHEA states with obligatory programme evaluation/accreditation are now expected to follow their political commitment and align translate it into the necessary changes of their systems and legal provision to the EHEA ministerial commitments.

Indicator 1.3

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

Recognition of registered QAAs carrying out cross-border reviews:

- In April 2012, the EHEA ministers adopted the Bucharest Communiqué and committed to "allow EQAR-registered agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements" and expressed the aim to "recognise quality assurance decisions of EQAR-registered agencies on joint and double degree programmes". The level of progress was assessed in the EHEA scorecard indicators.

- The European Commission's Report on Progress in Quality Assurance of Higher Education (COM (2009) 487 and COM(2014) 29) has set out as part of its

priorities to work together with Member States to encourage more quality assurance agencies to apply for EQAR registration; and to allow foreign EQAR-registered agencies to operate in their HE systems.

- At their Ministerial meeting in Yerevan (2015), ministers renewed their commitment to enable "higher education institutions to use a suitable EQAR registered agency for their external quality assurance process, respecting the national arrangements for the decision making on QA".

- Recognition of registered QAAs reviewing joint programmes:

- Ministers also adopted in Yerevan the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, to be applied by EQAR-registered agencies.

Recognition of registered QAAs for automatic recognition of academic degrees:

- The EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition (2015) recommended "to support the role of quality assurance assessing recognition processes in higher education institutions and to commit to strengthening quality assurance in general

through, inter alia, supporting the implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)".

- One practical example is the [Flemish Community of Belgium](), which automatically recognises any foreign programme accredited by an agency included in EQAR to be at the same level as a Flemish qualification.

4.2 Enhanced Transparency and Information Provision

Members and potential members considered the website information (list of registered agencies, mapping of legal frameworks, publication of decisions) to have the highest impact in relation to Strategic Goal 2.

Indicator 2.1

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

71% of members and potential members consider it very important that their national QAA(s) is/are registered on EQAR. A number of countries encourage or require within their legal framework or steering documents that their national QA agency(-ies) seeks registration in EQAR (e.g. Albania, Armenia, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Moldova, Norway, Nether-
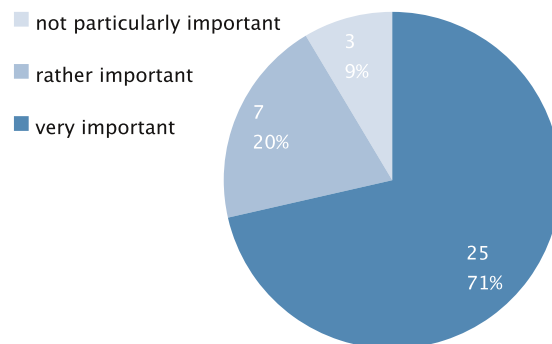

Figure 12: Importance of national/regional agency being registered
(members, potential members, n=35)

lands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain).

The relevance of EQAR is also regularly highlighted in the E4 organisations' policy documents, e.g.:

- ENQA's 4th Quality Procedures Survey and its report to the Yerevan ministerial conference (2015) emphasised that registration on EQAR is a high priority for most European quality assurance agencies;

- ESU's Bologna with Students Eyes (BWSE) 2015 reports on the relevance of EQAR from the student's perspective and suggests a further development of EQAR by developing a database of quality assured institutions and study programmes (see section 3.3);
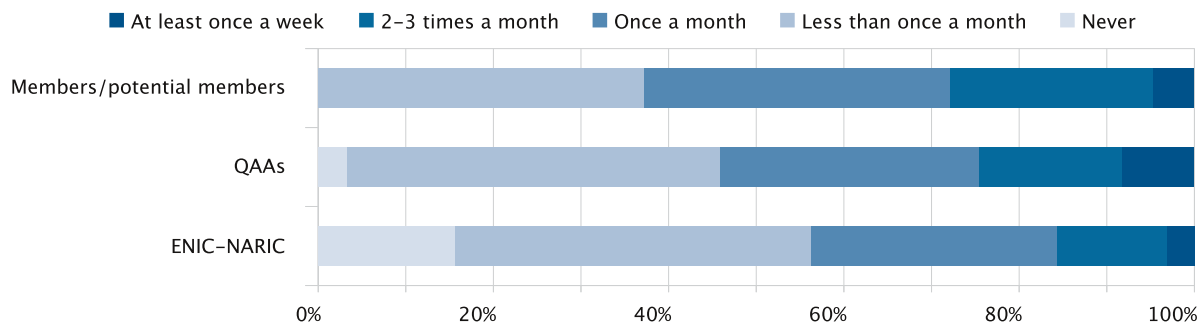

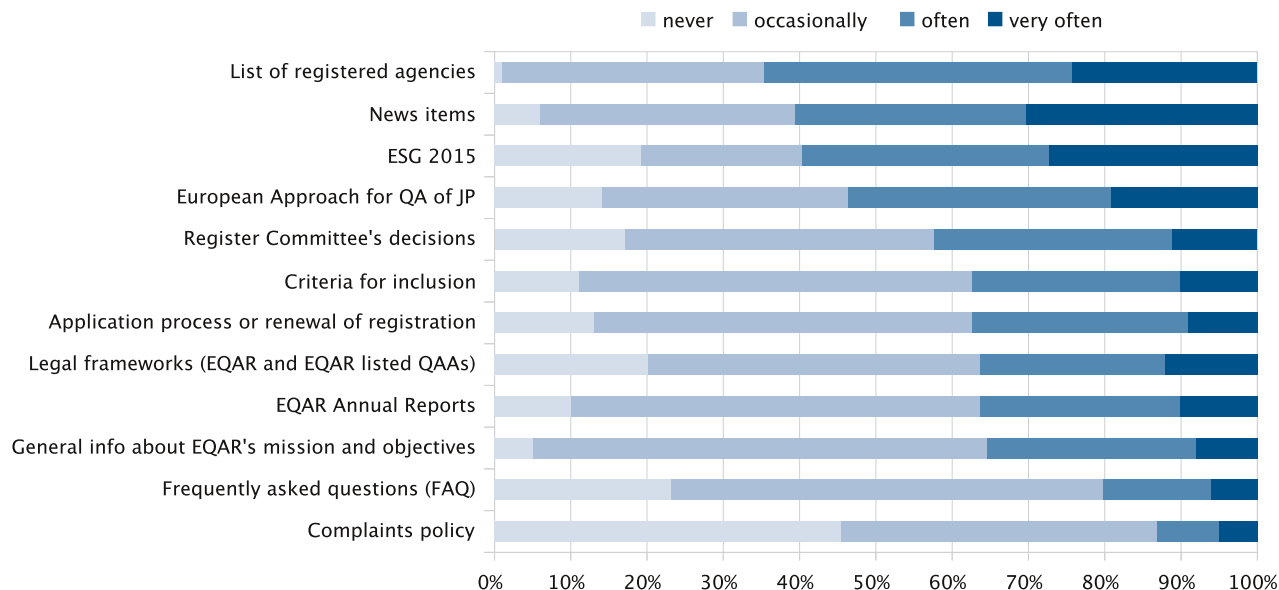**Figure 13: Frequency of visits to the EQAR website**
(n=136)

Figure 14: Information consulted by visitors to the EQAR website
(n=99)

- EUA's Trends report (2015) states that cross-border EQA activities are increasing due to an increased interest of quality assurance agencies and HEIs' international aspirations, but concluded that "the actors (institutions and agencies) are ahead of the policy makers as indicated by the lack of progress in legal frameworks allowing institutions to choose any quality assurance agency that is listed in EQAR";

- EURASHE, in its Policy Paper on Quality Assurance and Transparency Tools, emphasises EQAR's transparency function together with the need to support the diversity in QA models, while noting that there is a high degree of congruence between the various models in the EHEA.

EQAR has become a standard reference in quality assurance of higher education and is known and used by stakeholders and policy makers at European and national level (e.g. ministries, rectors' conference, students' unions), as can be seen in reports, policy documents, etc.

EQAR, however, had only a limited impact on recognition of qualifications and credits. This is visible in the responses provided by ENIC-NARIC centres: most reported that they had never or rarely used the Register of agencies in their work. 84% of ENIC-NARIC centres responded that they would find it beneficial to use a database of HEIs and programmes reviewed by EQAR-registered agencies.

Indicator 2.2

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; newsletter statistics, social media use etc.

The EQAR website attracts approximately 15 000 visits per months. The number has been relatively stable following a continuous increase during earlier years (2013: ca 14 000, 2012: ca 8 000, 2011: ca 6 000). About 55% of those surveyed visit the EQAR website at least once a month, members and potential members visit the web-
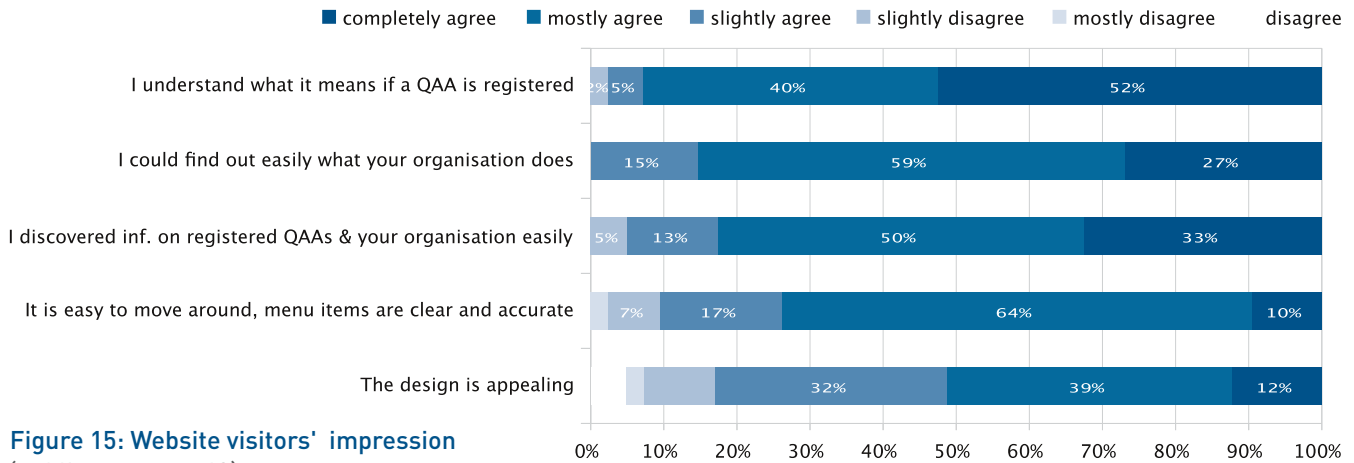
Figure 15: Website visitors' impression
(public survey, n=42)

Chart legend: completely agree · mostly agree · slightly agree · slightly disagree · mostly disagree · disagree

	completely agree	mostly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	mostly disagree	disagree
I understand what it means if a QAA is registered	52%	40%	5%	2%		
I could find out easily what your organisation does	27%	59%	15%			
I discovered inf. on registered QAAs & your organisation easily	33%	50%	13%	5%		
It is easy to move around, menu items are clear and accurate	10%	64%	17%	7%		
The design is appealing	12%	39%	32%			

site most frequently (see Figure 13).

The list and map of registered agencies, news items, and the ESG 2015 are most often consulted on the website (see Figure 14).

While there are no huge differences between different target groups, it is interesting to note that Annual Reports are significantly more often read by members and potential members than by QAAs (6th vs. 10th rank). Not surprisingly, QAAs consult information on the application process more often than governmental members and potential members.

The Register Committee's decisions are often (48%) or very often (13%) consulted by most EQAR members and potential members, ranked 4th from 12, while most QAAs occasionally access these decisions (45%), ranked 8th from 12.

Respondents to the Website Visitors Survey rated positively the clarity and helpfulness of the information on the EQAR website, while the least positive rating was given to the design.

In 2012, EQAR set up a Facebook profile, which reached approx. 600 different people via its posts, and a Twitter profile (@eqar_he), which gathered 476 followers mostly from higher education institutions and quality assurance

agencies. The EQAR LinkedIn profile was also set up in 2012 and has a total of 316 followers. While the social media has in general a good outreach with the online community, website visitors have pointed out that EQAR's frequency on social media could be increased.

EQAR has released a regular (3-4 times a year) newsletter since 2012, providing information about agencies newly admitted to the Register, developments in its governmental membership, recent meetings, publications and relevant policy developments in quality assurance.

EQAR's newsletter has recorded a continuous increase in reach, from 400 recipients at its initial launch in 2012 to a total of 705 recipients in 2015.
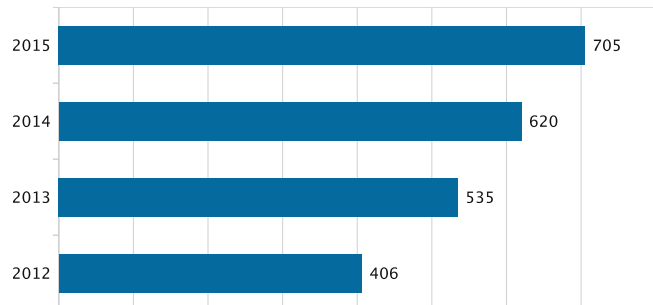

Year	Subscribers
2015	705
2014	620
2013	535
2012	406

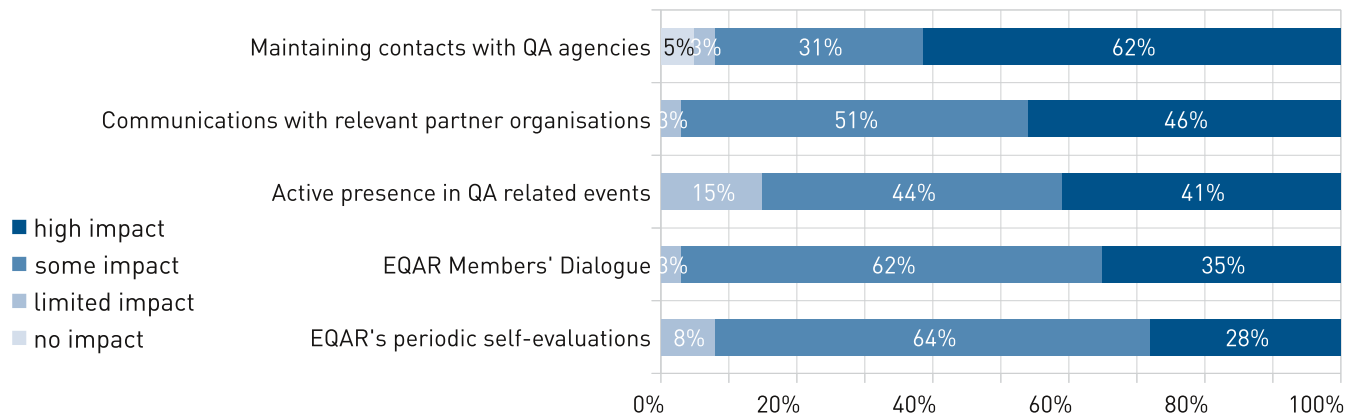Figure 16: Subscribers to the EQAR newsletter

Figure 17: Impact of activities - Organisational Development
(members, potential members, observers, n=42)

Indicator 2.3

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

EQAR itself has not been able to carry out any cross-cutting study or analysis of external review reports, beyond its regular dealing with them as part of the application process. Such studies were not prioritised as activities in the Strategic Plan, despite the existence of this indicator.

Based on the Register Committee's work there is a general perception that the reports on the external review of agencies' compliance with the ESG pay increased attention to the agencies' impact on teaching and learning, not the least following the trend to analyse the use of Part 1 of the ESG in greater detail under ESG 2.1.

4.3 Organisational Development

Indicator 3.1

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.

There are roughly 90 organisations in the EHEA that are prima facie quality assurance agencies and 54 of them have undergone an external review against the ESG. 88% of those agencies have applied for inclusion on the Register (see Figure 18).

At the end of 2015 the Register included 42 QAAs from 21 EHEA countries. In 2011, the Register included 28 QAAs from 14 countries. This represents a 44% increase in the number of listed QAAs.

QAAs are also more confident that registration on EQAR benefits (somewhat or strongly) their external QA activities (85% in 2015 versus 66% in 2010).

It is encouraging to know that two thirds of the non-registered QAAs surveyed plan to (re-)apply for inclusion on the Register in the future. However, a bit more than a third of European QAAs have not yet undergone an ESG review. While some of these agencies have been recently established, others have chosen not to undergo an ESG review (yet) although they have been operating for a considerable time.

Indicator 3.2

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

Since 2011, 10 more countries joined EQAR as governmental members, reaching a total of 37 countries
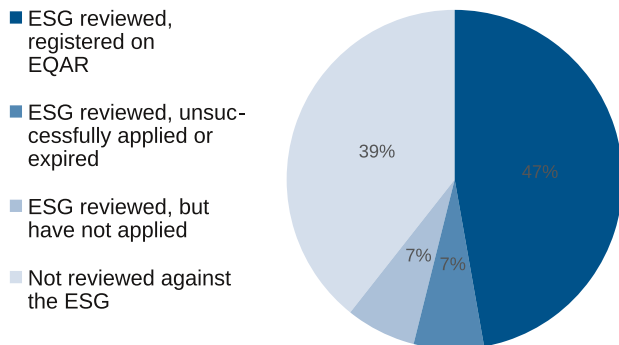
- ■ ESG reviewed, registered on EQAR
- ■ ESG reviewed, unsuccessfully applied or expired
- ■ ESG reviewed, but have not applied
- ■ Not reviewed against the ESG

39%
47%
7% 7%

Figure 18: QA agencies in the EHEA
(n=89, estimated)

(38 higher education systems) of the 48 EHEA members that are eligible to apply for governmental membership (see Figure 19). The representation of EU and non-EU countries in EQAR's governing structures has become balanced: now, 79% of EU member countries are members (2011: 67%) and 75% of non-EU countries (2011: 35%).

A few countries that have not yet joined EQAR explained in the survey that they have not done so due to changes in their legal framework and instabilities in the country's government.

It should also be noted that some of the 11 EHEA countries that are not members of EQAR are also otherwise not very actively involved in the Bologna Process.

4.4 Conclusion

- • EQAR has become a standard reference in quality assurance of higher education and is known and used by policy makers and stakeholders at European and national levels.

- • The growth in governmental members indicates a higher level of trust in EQAR, in its development and in the European framework for quality assurance, especially the ESG.

- • The EQAR website largely serves those with a good

knowledge in the field of quality assurance and EQAR has established itself as a reliable information source about quality assurance agencies in Europe. The information provided is well appreciated by members and QAAs.

- • While cross-border external quality assurance is taking place in almost all EHEA countries, there is still reluctance to allowing higher education institutions to discharge their external quality assurance requirements with a non-national quality assurance agency, despite the established common European framework for quality assurance.

- • Through the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, EQAR is likely to increase its impact in the area of quality assurance of joint programmes.

- • Almost all European quality assurance agencies that have been reviewed against the ESG have applied for inclusion on the Register. Most non-registered agencies that were surveyed plan to apply for registration in the future.
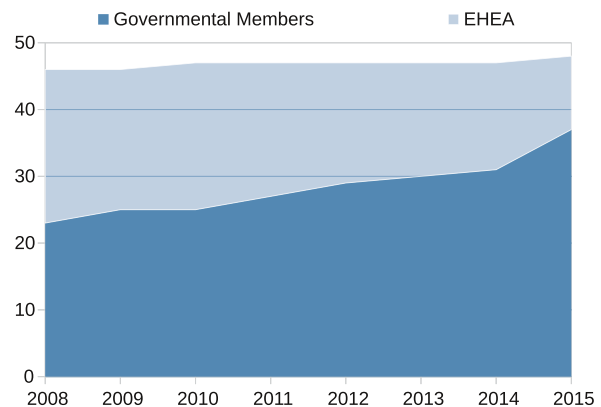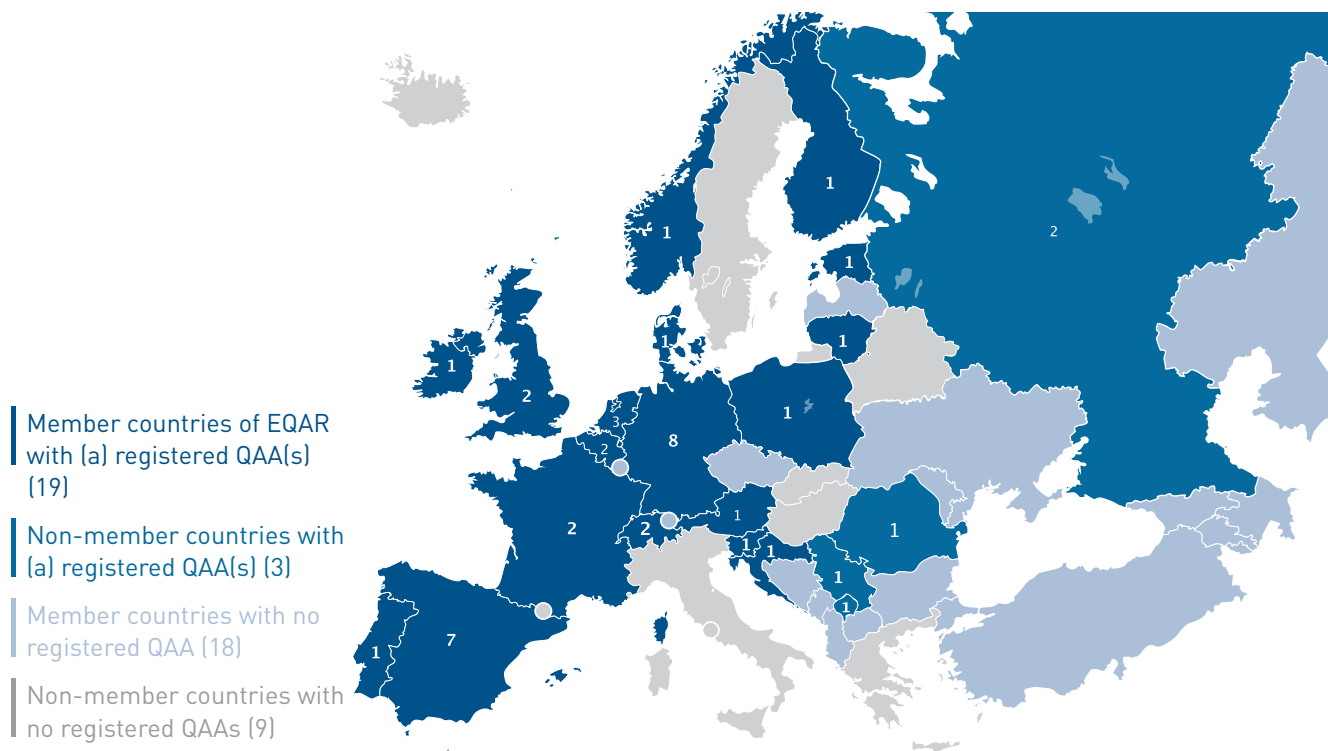

■ Governmental Members   ■ EHEA

Figure 19: Governmental Members (2008 - 2015)

4.5 Recommendations

The Self-Evaluation Group recommends that EQAR's competent bodies consider:

- To encourage EHEA governments to make full use of EQAR to recognise quality assurance results of EQAR-registered agencies, so as to reduce duplication of efforts.

- To monitor the use and application of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

- To improve the use of social media as a means to increase visibility and impact.

- To take efforts to increase EQAR's relevance to other stakeholder groups, particularly students and ENIC-NARIC centres. This could be realised by facilitating access to information on institutions and study programmes reviewed by EQAR-registered agencies, e.g. through a database.

- To continue EQAR's efforts to encourage non-member EHEA countries to consider membership.

Member countries of EQAR with (a) registered QAA(s) (19)

Non-member countries with (a) registered QAA(s) (3)

Member countries with no registered QAA (18)

Non-member countries with no registered QAAs (9)

Map 3: EQAR governmental members and registered agencies (as of 31/12/2015)

5. How do we change in order to improve? - Further Development

5.1 Follow-up of the Recommendations of the 2011 EQAR External Evaluation

The 2011 External Evaluation Panel made twelve specific recommendations (see report at https://eqar.eu/about/external-evaluation.html, section 8, pages 7- – 13, and appendix 6). How EQAR has responded to them was already explained in the previous chapters. The following list provides an overview of the changes relevant in terms of addressing those recommendations.

i.   The General Assembly should add strategic planning to its current list of functions. [Para 8.5].

The GA adopted a Strategic Plan in 2013. Its responsibility for strategic planning was clarified in the Rules of Procedure (see section 3.1)

ii.   EQAR should promote with the organisations nominating representatives to the General Assembly the benefits to EQAR of ensuring, as far as possible, that those representing them remain on the Assembly for three years renewable for a further three years [Para 8.6].

The GA took note of the recommendation. However, the member of the GA is the respective country/organisation, not a person. The representatives are not acting in a personal mandate and EQAR can thus only encourage continuity, but could not impose a fixed term.

iii.   Members of the Executive Board should serve an initial mandate of at least three years (currently two years) renewable for up to two times (currently three times) [Para 8.7]

iv.   Members of the Register Committee should serve an initial mandate of at least three years (currently two years) renewable for up to two times (currently three times) [Para 8.8]

The General Assembly decided not to change the 2-year terms, since a 3-year term could pose difficulties for some organisations. Practice has also shown that most members (of both the Register Committee and Executive Board) remain involved for several consecutive mandates, and often for the maximum term of eight years (4 terms of 2 years).

The need for continuity was further addressed by encouraging the E4 organisations to stagger the replacement of Register Committee members nominated by them. In order to enhance continuity during the transition to the ESG 2015 the General Assembly extended the mandate of the current Register Committee by one year, until June 2017.

v.   EQAR should clarify its current criteria for establishing prima facie organisational eligibility to apply for registration [Para 8.12]

The criteria were clarified with the revision of Procedures for Applications, completed and in effect since 1/1/2013 (see section 3.2).

The 2015 revision of the Procedures further clarified the process of determining organisational eligibility.

vi   EQAR should enhance the transparency of its decision-making by:

- making public the names of each applicant which satisfies organisational eligibility criteria; and

- making public the Register Committee's decision on each application [Para 8.14]

The full publication of the Register Committee's decision was introduced in the 2013 revision of the Procedures for Applications (see section 3.2). All decisions made since January 2013 are publicly available at https://eqar.eu/publications/decisions.html.

The 2015 revision of the Procedures introduced the publication of a list of withdrawn applications as well as the full communication with applicant agencies.

vii. Observers should no longer be appointed to the Register Committee [Para 8.15]

The GA decided to keep five governmental observers on the Register Committee, which was perceived as useful to enhance transparency, accountability and ownership.

The GA changed the EQAR statutes to the effect that these observers would be appointed by the GA in the future, instead of the BFUG (see section 3.2).

In order to increase the transparency and effectiveness of having observers on the Committee, the SEG suggests that observers regularly report to the GA (see section 3.2).

viii. Each element of EQAR [see Para 7.3] should evaluate formally its effectiveness on a regular basis [Para 8.16]

The GA agreed that EQAR should undertake regular self-evaluations, coordinated by the Executive Board and a Self-Evaluation Group.

The SEG suggests that EQAR adopts a 5-year cycle for regular self-evaluations, while an external evaluation could follow every second self-evaluation, i.e. every 10 years.

ix. Consideration should be given to finding a way to give academics as a collectivity a voice in EQAR, which would help to embed quality assurance and the Register more firmly in institutions [Para 8.27]

The GA agreed to focus EQAR's communication strategy on making clear its indirect link to and impact on teaching and learning on the ground. However, given that EQAR's relevance for and impact on teaching and learning is mainly determined by the ESG, the issue was primarily taken up within the ESG revision process.

The increased attention to the impact of QAAs on teaching and learning, in connection with ESG Part 1 and standard 2.1, further strengthens the link between the work of EQAR and teaching and learning at grassroot levels.

Academics are represented in EQAR through their own stakeholder organisation EI/ETUCE. In addition, a number of nominees and representatives of other organisations are active academics from a European higher education institutions. The feedback and discussions as part of the self-evaluation exercise did not suggest that academics are underrepresented in comparison to other groups, e.g. institutional leadership, students, policy makers or administrators.

x. EQAR should engage in dialogue with ENQA on a range of matters with a view to clarifying and making public:

- the differences in function and purpose of the two organisations;

- their respective interpretations of the phrase '... substantial compliance ...' with the ESGs; and

- their respective criteria for establishing organisational eligibility for registration and membership respectively [Para 8.31].

EQAR and ENQA share a mutual understanding of their respective missions, functions and purposes, and have each clarified organisational eligibility for registration and membership, respectively (see section 2.3). EQAR's interpretation of "substantial compliance" with the ESG has been made transparent through various public documents (see section 3.2).

xi. EQAR should be more pro-active in promoting its existence and the benefits of being on the Register. This could include encouraging the E4 Group to be more proactive in promoting the existence of EQAR and the benefits of registration [Para 8.34].

Various measures have been taken in line with EQAR's Strategic Plan and annual Work Plans, including regularly organising a Members' Dialogue; active presence in the BFUG structures; contribution to QA-related events; the RIQAA project; maintaining contacts with members, agencies and stakeholders; enlarging EQAR's contact database; regular newsletters.

The E4 organisations were involved in those activities and further promoted the existence and role of EQAR in

their own activities, such as quality assurance-related studies and publications, the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF, regular contributions by EQAR) or other events organised by them.

xii.   The General Assembly should appoint a high profile, independent President capable of raising the visibility and promoting the benefits of EQAR with key stakeholders. Such an appointment should be for a period of up to four years in the first instance [Para 8.35].

The GA (2012) agreed to consider this recommendation further in the context of improving the visibility and functioning of EQAR, and to make proposals within the current EQAR self- evaluation.

The recommendation was discussed at the Members' Dialogue and the SEG, see section 3.1. The SEG suggests that EQAR considers the appointment of an independent president, recognising that a detailed proposal will require additional careful consideration by the responsible bodies of EQAR.

5.2 Summary of Conclusions

Mission and Role in the EHEA

EQAR's mission remains relevant for the EHEA. There are no strong reasons to revise the Mission Statement at the moment. The indirect relation between EQAR and its wider objectives, however, needs better explanation.

EQAR's main task in terms of fighting accreditation and degree mills is to publish the Register as a whitelist of credible agencies.

EQAR is an organisation that acts in the public interest. It has established its role in the policy arena in line with this status, confined to a specific set of issues linked to the realisation of EQAR's mission and objectives.

EQAR has consolidated and communicated clearly its role and function as part of the EHEA quality assurance infrastructure, which is now better understood by the higher education community than in 2010. ENQA and EQAR have a shared understanding of their respective functions and purposes, even though some confusion remains due to the fact that registration on EQAR and membership in ENQA are both based on compliance with the ESG.

EQAR has become a standard reference in quality assurance of higher education and is known and used by policy makers and stakeholders at European and national levels. The growth in governmental members indicates a higher level of trust in EQAR, in its development and in the European framework for quality assurance, especially the ESG.

Organisational Structure

EQAR's organisational structure is in general fit for purpose and clear to those concerned.

EQAR's budget and staff have grown considerably since 2011, primarily due to the increase in governmental members. The current resources are sufficient to discharge its statutory functions and to realise most of the activities earmarked in its Strategic Plan.

EQAR is getting closer to including all EHEA countries as governmental members and can thus not expect a further substantial increase of its budget through increasing the number of governmental members.

The EQAR website largely serves those with a good knowledge in the field of quality assurance and EQAR has established itself as a reliable information source about quality assurance agencies in Europe. The information provided is well appreciated by members and QAAs.

Management of the Register

EQAR, through the independent Register Committee, has managed the Register efficiently and effectively, and quality assurance agencies' satisfaction with the application process has improved. Various measures have been taken over the past years to increase transparency, fairness and consistency of the work and decision making of the Register Committee.

The monitoring of registered quality assurance agencies' work and compliance with the ESG during the 5-year cycle has been strengthened.

Almost all European quality assurance agencies that have been reviewed against the ESG have applied for inclusion on the Register. Most non-registered agencies that were surveyed plan to apply for registration in the future.

Strategic Goals

EQAR realised most activities earmarked in its Strategic Plan. In the light of its current resources, the organisation prioritised external representation and analysing legal frameworks and practices regarding the cross-border recognition of EQAR-registered agencies' results/decisions. Consequently, other topics received less attention and resources.

EQAR's members appreciate the efforts made to maintain a knowledge base on legal frameworks and to analyse developments in cross-border external quality assurance at system level.

EQAR was present in the BFUG working structures and relevant conferences, contributing actively to quality assurance matters and in those areas linked to its mission and objectives.

EQAR contributed significantly to the revision of the ESG and the 2015 version is supportive to EQAR's strategic goals.

The same holds true for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, through which EQAR is likely to increase its impact in the area of quality assurance of joint programmes.

While cross-border external quality assurance is taking place in almost all EHEA countries, there is still reluctance to allowing higher education institutions to discharge their external quality assurance requirements with a non-national quality assurance agency, despite the established common European framework for quality assurance.

5.3 Summary of Recommendations

To fulfil its public function and to pursue its mission to further the development of the EHEA, by increasing the transparency of quality assurance, the Self-Evaluation Group recommends that EQAR's competent bodies consider:

Mission and Role in the EHEA

- To use the Strategic Plan to prioritise on which objectives EQAR's activities should focus.

- To improve the information exchange with EN-IC/NARICs as an additional way to build trust in higher education institutions that have been quality assured by a registered agency.

- To include on the EQAR website some general, contextual information on accreditation mills and degree mills, in order to help users to understand the issue and make use of the Register in that respect.

- To maintain the active dialogue and communication at both official and informal level with ENQA, being the representative body of QA agencies and the most frequently used coordinator of external reviews.

Organisational Structure

- To invite the governmental observers on the Register Committee to report to the General Assembly annually in order to increase the transparency.

- To establish the position of a president, who does not hold functions in EQAR's members simultaneously, in order to raise the visibility of EQAR and to enhance stability and leadership internally.

- To continue EQAR's efforts to encourage non-member EHEA countries to consider membership.

- To adopt a 5-year cycle for regular self-evaluations, with an external evaluation following every second

self-evaluation, i.e. every 10 years.

Management of the Register

- To ensure that EQAR's instruments for monitoring registered agencies' work and compliance with the ESG are well known by those concerned.

Strategic Goals, Impact

- To encourage EHEA governments to make full use of EQAR to recognise quality assurance results of EQAR-registered agencies, so as to reduce duplication of efforts.

- To take efforts to increase EQAR's relevance to other stakeholder groups, particularly students and ENIC-NARIC centres.

- To give more attention to the role quality assurance and the Register can play to support the recognition of qualifications.

- To develop specifications for a possible database of quality assured higher education institutions or programmes (depending on the national system), in consultation with the relevant stakeholders, in particular the ENIC-NARIC networks, and to make an estimation of the long-term operational costs of such a database on that basis.

- To monitor the use and application of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

- To improve the use of social media as a means to increase visibility and impact.