

## EQAR Strategy 2024 - 2028

adopted by the 21st General Assembly, April 2024

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### 1. EQAR – a pillar of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

Realising the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is the common goal set by the 49<sup>1</sup> European governments who participate in the Bologna Process, supported by the European Commission and the consultative members<sup>2</sup>.

Strengthening European cooperation is a shared aspiration of all parties involved in the Bologna Process, governments as well as stakeholder organisations. The EHEA is envisioned as an area where students, staff and graduates can move freely to study, teach and do research and in which the fundamental values of higher education, democracy and the rule of law<sup>3</sup> should be respected. It aims to promote common frameworks for recognition, increase mobility and facilitate cooperation between countries and higher education institutions, i.e. through bilateral agreements, networks, joint and double degrees, as well as through European university alliances. Mobility and internationalisation as such will enhance higher education, as well as the European labour market.

While a broad range of policies have been agreed within the Bologna Process, three key commitments were identified as the main pillars of the EHEA<sup>4</sup>:

1. A harmonised educational landscape through the three-cycle structure based on a common qualifications framework (QF-EHEA)
2. Agreed principles for the recognition of qualifications as set out in the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)
3. A robust internal and external quality assurance in line with agreed Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG)

Quality Assurance (QA), as one of these key commitments, is essential for the enhancement of quality and for ensuring that a certain level of quality is met through accountability.

<sup>1</sup>As of the BFUG Meeting LXXX, held in Strasbourg on the 11th and 12th of April 2022, it was decided by the BFUG members to suspend the rights of representation of the Russian Federation and Belarus in the EHEA

<sup>2</sup>[EQAR](#) has a similar status to the consultative members (non-voting member of BFUG)

<sup>3</sup>Rome Ministerial Communiqué 2020 – [Annex I](#)

<sup>4</sup>Paris Ministerial Communiqué 2018 – [link](#)

EQAR is trusted as the EHEA's Register of quality assurance agencies that are substantially compliant with the ESG.

Higher education institutions have the primary responsibility for quality and its assurance, through their internal QA procedures. External QA, carried out by independent QA agencies, enables institutions to demonstrate accountability and helps institutions to improve. Together, they ensure a learning environment in which the content of study programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose, while taking into consideration the cycle and type of study programmes, their disciplinary background, as well as the institutional particularities.

Following the commitment of the EHEA ministers in the London Communiqué, **EQAR** was established in 2008, according to the operational model set up by the E4 Group<sup>5</sup>, as an independent organisation. EQAR has since then had a broad membership of stakeholders and governments in the governance of the organisation. Thus, EQAR represents the public interest and provides transparency and information by recognising agencies that meet established standards.

EQAR's role is fundamental as a basis for international trust in quality of European higher education, and thus for recognition and cooperation. To facilitate (automatic) recognition of higher education qualifications, EHEA Ministers promoted the development of the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) at their meetings in Paris (2018) and Rome (2020).

Higher education in the EHEA is in constant progress. Therefore, EQAR should be responsive to new developments and innovation in Higher Education. It should also take into account the diversity and differences in educational approaches and national contexts.

## 2. Strategic areas

The two strategic goals identified in EQAR's first Strategic Plan 2013-2017 and second Strategic Plan 2018-2022, stemmed logically from EQAR's specific mission and vision<sup>6</sup> and remain valid. These goals are translated in strategic areas in the current strategy, in order to emphasise the differentiation between specific strategic goals and more general strategic areas.

The first strategic area relates to what EQAR is doing and what lies in its own power, namely enhancing transparency, information and connectivity.

The second strategic area relates to the impact of EQAR. While EQAR can provide the foundation for trust and recognition, achieving this does not lie in EQAR's power alone and depends on various other actors.

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<sup>5</sup>The E4 are: the European association for quality assurance in higher education (ENQA), the European students' union (ESU), the European university association (EUA), the European association of institutions in higher education (EURASHE)

<sup>6</sup>See Annex to the Strategy

### Strategic Area 1: Transparency, information and connectivity

EQAR provides reliable and widely-used information on the compliance of registered quality assurance agencies with the ESG, for which it is considered a unique and officially used point of reference in EHEA. Furthermore, EQAR provides information on which higher education institutions or programmes have been subjected to external quality assurance in line with the ESG through its database DEQAR and maintains an up-to-date knowledge base on national legal frameworks for quality assurance. EQAR also connects with other organisations in order to increase its connectivity to facilitate smooth data-exchange and cooperation.

### Strategic Area 2: International trust and recognition

EQAR-registered agencies and their QA results are recognised across the EHEA. On that basis, qualifications that were subjected to external quality assurance by registered agencies (whether at institutional or programme level) are recognised. In cross-border quality assurance, registration in EQAR is used as a prerequisite and a guarantee of ESG compliance.

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EQAR's activities are underpinned by the values formulated in its mission statement: independence; transparency; openness to diversity; proportionate, consistent and fair decision-making; and continuous improvement.

## 3. Strategic goals for 2024 – 2028

Taking into account the strategic areas as set out above and the recommendations from the external evaluation of EQAR of 2021, three strategic goals for 2024-2028 are set out.

EQAR's core activity is to manage the Register in a fair and consistent way, through its Register Committee. This includes the decision-making on inclusion and periodic renewal, as well as the monitoring and accountability measures in place between the periodic renewals: annual updates, reporting of substantive changes and third-party complaints.

Other activities build on this core activity, in order to promote the wider goals formulated in EQAR's mission. Through DEQAR, a wide variety of data is collected from the registered agencies, which can be further used in data-analysis. EQAR thus serves the European higher education community by providing resources and expertise for policy shaping.

With other stakeholders in the EHEA, EQAR will also contribute actively to the revision and implementation of the ESG in the period 2024-2028.

In order to properly fulfil its mission, EQAR is dedicated to strengthening its organisational capacities, streamlining its processes and ensuring that the activities are performed in the manner which is effective, efficient and supportive of EQAR's relevance for its stakeholders.

The specific activities will be detailed and prioritised through EQAR's rolling Work Plans.

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### **Strategic Goal 1: Transparency, information and connectivity**

- Maintain the register of quality assurance agencies and provide widely used public information on the compliance of QA agencies with the ESG
- Ensure that EQAR is considered a unique and single point of reference for ESG compliance of QA agencies
- Guarantee that EQAR's instruments for monitoring agencies are seen as relevant, effective, fair and equitable by agencies and policy makers
- Keep the constructive dialogue with ENQA as the main review coordinator and representative body of QA agencies
- Maintain and enhance the database of external quality assurance results, reflecting the changing higher education landscape
- Support the interoperability of DEQAR and connection with other databases
- Provide and expand the public knowledge base on legal frameworks for external QA, including on cross-border quality assurance and on the use of the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes
- Equip member states and other stakeholders with easily accessible relevant statistics and analyses, based on their needs, in order to facilitate policy informing and guiding as well as promoting dialogue and sharing expertise on international fora within the EHEA and at a global level

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### **Strategic Goal 2: Trust and recognition**

- Encourage EHEA governments to use EQAR registration as a basis for the recognition of external QA results and the reduction of duplication of efforts that different (national) QA processes (requirements) might generate
- Promote the use of DEQAR as a transparency tool towards different stakeholders and the public
- Maintain the exchange of information with the ENIC-NARIC networks to promote the role of external QA and EQAR in supporting the (automatic) recognition of qualifications
- Encourage the integration of DEQAR by ENIC-NARIC centres in their recognition workflow and digital credentialing

- Contribute to the EHEA working structures where relevant and appropriate in light of EQAR's specific role
- Contribute to new initiatives in the EHEA by serving as a recognition hub for QA agencies' ESG compliance and providing policy expertise in the domain of cross-border QA and, when relevant, by contributing to European projects
- Encourage non-member EHEA countries to become governmental members

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### Strategic Goal 3: Strengthening EQAR's organisational capacities

- Develop a clear resource plan with a trajectory for the future
- Invest in support for and building expertise in data analysis
- Ensure the continuous professional development of EQAR staff by setting a specific Staff Training budget and prioritising it in the rolling Work Plans
- Expand DEQAR's technical capacities and strengthen the database's relevance for EQAR's stakeholders by developing a methodology for an in-depth analysis of user profiles of the DEQAR database in order to tailor data collection and presentation to the needs of beneficiaries
- Improve the efficiency and maintain consistency of the decision-making on inclusion in the Register
- In cooperation with providers of higher education, ensure a consistently high level of quality and relevance of the documentation used to make decisions about the compliance of QA agencies with the ESG

## 4. Transversal goals

To achieve the vision of the EHEA, ministers have committed to build an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA by 2030, able to underpin a sustainable, cohesive and peaceful Europe.

These commitments are translated into three transversal goals in the EQAR Strategy 2024 – 2028.

- **Inclusive**, because EQAR supports national systems and quality assurance agencies, it makes its data-sources open and accessible to all stakeholders and the public. Internally, EQAR's work ethic ensures and values the inputs of each staff member and experts alike

- **Innovative**, because EQAR focusses on the constant adaptation and improvement of its policies, processes, functions and tools, keeping abreast with the developments in higher education
- **Interconnected**, because EQAR actively engages its stakeholders and cooperates with other international organisations and frameworks to exchange expertise and data in order to support the commitments of the EHEA

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## 5. Indicators to monitor progress

- Number of applicant QA agencies (compared with the total number of QA agencies operating in Europe)
- Number of visitors to the EQAR website and the database of external quality assurance results (DEQAR)
- Number of DEQAR integrations by ENIC-NARIC centers
- Number of EDC (digital credentials) issued based on DEQAR QA reports
- Number of reports being updated using API
- Number of countries using external quality assurance in line with the ESG, by an EQAR-registered agency as a sufficient condition for recognition of qualifications
- Number of countries recognising decisions of all EQAR-registered QA agencies on joint programmes
- EQAR's governmental membership

More measurable objectives shall be set in the rolling Work Plans.

## 6. Outlook

Based on the Strategy 2024 – 2028, EQAR will undertake its next self-evaluation in 2025-26, followed by a third external evaluation, in 2030-31.

## Annex 1: Mission Statement

### Vision

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.

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### Mission

EQAR's mission is to further the development of the European Higher Education Area by increasing the transparency of quality assurance, and thus enhancing trust and confidence in European higher education.

EQAR seeks to provide clear and reliable information on quality assurance provision in Europe, thus improving trust among agencies.

EQAR seeks to facilitate the mutual acceptance of quality assurance decisions and to improve trust among higher education institutions, thus promoting mobility and recognition.

EQAR seeks to reduce opportunities for "accreditation mills" to gain credibility in Europe, thus further enhancing the confidence of students, institutions, the labour market and society more generally in the quality of higher education provision in Europe.

To achieve its mission EQAR, through its independent Register Committee, manages a register of quality assurance agencies operating in Europe that substantially comply with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG).

### Values

EQAR recognises the diversity of approaches to external quality assurance and is therefore open to all agencies, whether operating at programme or institutional level, and whether providing accreditation, evaluation or audit services.

EQAR is committed to the principles on which the ESG are based: external quality assurance should recognise the central responsibility of higher education institutions for quality development and should be carried out by independent quality assurance agencies in a transparent, objective and responsible manner, involving their stakeholders and leading to substantiated results based on well-defined procedures and criteria.

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

EQAR makes transparent its mode of operation and its procedures while ensuring necessary confidentiality. EQAR is committed to continuously improving the quality of its work.

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