Developments in external quality assurance since 2015

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) is pleased to report several positive developments relating to the priorities and commitments mentioned in the communiqué of the last ministerial meeting in Yerevan.

Since 2015, 21 quality assurance (QA) agencies have undergone an external review against the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG 2015)[1] in order to seek ENQA membership. ENQA welcomed three new members from EHEA countries not previously represented – Armenia, Greece, and Kazakhstan – an indication of the continued commitment to the shared goals of the Bologna Process. Considering these new additions, QA agencies from 28 of the EHEA's 48 member states have demonstrated compliance with the ESG and have been granted ENQA membership. ENQA continues to collaborate with QA agencies not yet able to demonstrate compliance with the ESG, an effort aided by ENQA's contribution to the activities of the "Enhancing Quality through Innovative Policy and Practice (EQUIP)" project, which have included focus groups, webinars, and studies to help QA agencies and higher education institutions overcome implementation challenges related to the ESG 2015.

The external review reports demonstrate diversity in QA agencies' approaches to quality assurance and a continued commitment to enhancement in the field. The reviews have also indicated increasing complexity of QA agencies' structures and a widening scope of their activities. For instance, several QA agencies have faced mergers with other similar agencies in their national context, thus gaining additional tasks and new challenges. At the same time, the systematic professionalisation of quality assurance has resulted in an increased level of maturity among QA agencies and a greater capacity for them to support higher education institutions in improving their internal quality assurance procedures and to encourage the growth of a quality culture. ENQA's support function in this area has included publishing the *ENQA Quality Assurance Professional Competencies Framework[2]*, a framework that QA agencies may use in job design, recruitment, and staff development and the *Handbook for Internal Quality Management in Competence-Based Education[3]*, which details a procedure designed within the "Internal Quality Management in Competence-Based Higher Education (IQM-HE)" project to help higher education institutions reflect on the best way to implement an internal quality management system.

In line with the ministers' commitment to enable higher education institutions to use a suitable EQAR-registered agency for their external quality assurance process and realising that further facilitation was necessary to guide stakeholders engaging in cross-border quality assurance, ENQA – in cooperation with the E4 Group and EQAR – published the document *Key considerations for Cross Border Quality Assurance[4]*. Reaffirming that the ESG are the basis for all quality assurance in the EHEA, the document aims to provide information and support to higher education institutions and QA agencies that engage in or are considering engaging in cross-border quality assurance activities.

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[1] Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015). Available at: http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/

[2] ENQA Quality Assurance Professional Competencies Framework (2016). Available at: http://www.enqa.eu/indirme/papers-and-reports/occasional-papers/ENQA%20Competencies%20Framework.pdf

[3] Handbook for Internal Quality Management in Competence-Based Education (2016). Available at: https://iqmhe.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/iqm-he-handbook.pdf

[4] Key Considerations for Cross-Border Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2017). Available at: http://www.enqa.eu/indirme/papers-and-reports/associated-reports/Key-Considerations-CBQA-EHEA.pdf

In order to further support the ministers' priority to develop more effective policies for the recognition of credits gained abroad, of qualifications for academic and professional purposes, and of prior learning, ENQA established a working group on the subject, which explored the relevant current practices of QA agencies. Work in this area continues within the "Linking Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance (LIREQA)" project, which has brought together communities of credential evaluators, quality assurance specialists, and higher education institutions to create a set of recommendations to address fair recognition of qualifications and to build the capacity of ENIC-NARIC centres, QA agencies, and higher education institutions.

ENQA has also taken up several activities relating to quality assurance and the ministers' priorities in the areas of student-centred learning, digital technologies, and the improved preparation of graduates for entry into the labour market. In addition, through several international projects, ENQA has supported the development of external quality assurance outside the EHEA, including support for regional quality assurance frameworks in the ASEAN and in Africa.

ENQA recommendations to the Ministers
Despite the aforementioned evidence of progress, external review reports reveal some alarming deficiencies caused by disparities between national legislation and the agreed priorities of ministers at past conferences of the EHEA. ENQA believes these failings can be remedied if ministers embrace the following recommendations:

Create and safeguard the necessary conditions that enable QA agencies to work with appropriate levels of independence and autonomy.
Since 2015, ENQA has observed an increase in the complexity of QA agencies' structures. For instance, several quality assurance agencies have faced mergers with other similar agencies in their national context, or with related education departments. While sometimes creating synergies and encouraging easier inclusion of stakeholders, in such cases of reorganisation, QA agencies should be granted sufficient resources for the maintenance and continuous development of their activities. It is crucial that each time a QA agency undergoes a material change, the issue of independence is re-negotiated, as the independence of quality assurance activities must be secured. ENQA urges all EHEA-member governments to create and safeguard the necessary conditions that enable QA agencies to work with appropriate levels of independence and autonomy.

Ensure that national regulations do not hinder a comprehensive use of the European Approach.
The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes has been a welcomed tool in the EHEA, as it recognises the value of educational cooperation across national borders. However, the 2018 Bologna Implementation Report demonstrates that the ministers' commitment to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes[5] is hindered by legal obstacles in 23 countries. ENQA considers that the possibilities of the European Approach have not yet been fully realised and therefore recommends that ministers make sure national regulations do not hinder a comprehensive use of the European Approach.

Clarify legislative frameworks in order to support a responsible development of cross-border quality assurance across the EHEA.
The openness of the EHEA relies on national legislation to define under which conditions QA agencies can provide formally recognised quality assurance services beyond their own territories. The 2018 Bologna Implementation Report indicates that only 12 quality assurance systems have implemented adequate conditions to allow cross-border quality assurance to take place. ENQA

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[5] The European Approach for to Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (2014). Available at:
https://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/bologna/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf

recommends a further clarification of legislative frameworks, in order to support a responsible development of cross-border quality assurance across the EHEA. The *Key considerations for Cross Border Quality Assurance* may shed light on issues that are currently unclear to higher education institutions, QA agencies, and ministries.

Allow and encourage student participation in quality assurance.
Involving students at all levels of quality assurance is a defining feature of the EHEA, yet external review reports indicate that it has not reached universal acceptance (one in seven QA agencies does not substantially comply with this standard). ENQA urges all member states to encourage student participation in quality assurance as full members of the process and to ensure that existing legislation does not hinder students from participating in external quality assurance.

Ensure that regulations and practices allow for the full publication of review reports.
It is a requirement of the ESG – and a logical consequence of transparent quality assurance – that all reports produced as a result of external quality assurance processes must be published and accessible to all interested stakeholders. External review reports reveal that one in seven QA agencies does not substantially comply with this standard, often due to national regulations limiting their capacity to publish. EHEA members should ensure that existing regulations and practices allow for this.

About ENQA
As the largest association of quality assurance agencies committed to agreed European standards, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) drives the development of quality assurance by representing agencies internationally, supporting them nationally, and providing them with comprehensive services and networking opportunities.

Founded in 2000, ENQA's origin and mission are firmly rooted in the Bologna Process. ENQA contributes to the promotion and enhancement of quality and the development of a quality culture in higher education through the coordination of projects, studies, and events. ENQA envisages an EHEA where all students have access to high-quality education provision and can achieve qualifications that are recognised worldwide, a goal which is furthered by ensuring that its members work in line with the ESG 2015. ENQA remains open and responsive to a diversity of higher education systems and quality assurance approaches and adheres to the core values of transparency, independence, and integrity.

Compliance with the ESG 2015, as demonstrated by an external review, has determined the current composition of ENQA, which now includes 51 member agencies from 28 countries in the EHEA. In addition to its members, ENQA's work is supported by its affiliates, which account for another 54 bodies with interest in quality assurance operating within Europe, East Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas. This increased interest towards ENQA's services by quality assurance networks in other world regions, as well as of individual agencies outside the EHEA, is a testimony to the success of the European approach to quality assurance of higher education. ENQA is involved in several international projects that reflect on the developments and new trends in higher education, supporting internationalisation and further implementation of the commitments of the Bologna process.

ENQA works in a consultative manner with its members and affiliates, European partners, and fellow associations, such as the E4 Group (ENQA, European Students' Union - ESU, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education – EURASHE, and the European University Association – EUA). ENQA is a founding member of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).

ENQA members
ENQA affiliates
EHEA countries, where ENQA has no members or affiliates
non-EHEA countries