

Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance (TPG C on QA)

Fourth Meeting, Online
5 December 2023

Minutes of meeting

List of Participants

Country	Name	Last Name
Armenia	Varduhi	Gyulazyan
Austria	Jurgen	Petersen
Azerbaijan	Ilham	Humbatov
Belgium Flemish Community	Ruth	Lamotte
Belgium Flemish Community	Jana	Vandeputte
Belgium Flemish Community (Co-Chair)	Liesbeth	Hens
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Maja	Macan
Bosnia and Hercegovina	Jelena	Santic
Czech Republic	Tereza	Krepelova
ENQA	Anna	Gover
EQAR	Aleksandra	Zhivkovikj
EQAR	Blazhe	Todorovski
EQAR	Melinda	Szabo
European Students' Union (ESU)	Horia	Onita
European University Association (EUA)	Maria	Kelo
EURASHE	Jakub	Grodecki
European Commission (EC)	Julie	Anderson
Eurydice	David	Crosier
Finland	Helka	Kekäläinen
France	Sophie	Guillet
Greece	Christina	Besta
Hungary	Péter	Lakatos
Ireland	Bryan	Maguire
Italy	Marilena	Maniaci
ANVUR, Italy	Stefano	Santoli
Kazakhstan	Olzhas	Bakytbek
Kazakhstan	Akbota	Islam
Kazakhstan	Yermek	Makash
Latvia	Jolanta	Silka
Lithuania	Almantas	Serpatauskas
Luxembourg	Patricia	Marx
Malta	Giacomo	Annese
Montenegro	Dunja	Bulajic
North Macedonia	Borco	Aleksov
Norway	Philipp Emanuel	Friedrich
Poland	Jakub	Brdulak
IMINQA project expert	Iordan	Petrescu
IMINQA project expert	Petrișor-Laurențiu	Tucă
Romania (Co-Chair)	Daniela Cristina	Ghițulică
San Marino	Monica	Cavalli
San Marino	Paula	Cenci
Slovenia	Filip	Drazenovic
Sweden	Ulf	Hedbjörk
NAQA, Ukraine	Oleksandra	Ossiuk
NAQA, Ukraine	Oxana	Trebenko
BFUG Secretariat	Edlira Adi	Kahani Subashi
BFUG Secretariat	Blerina	Caslli

Albania, Belgium French Community, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, ETUCE, ESU, Georgia, Germany, Holy See, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Moldova, The Netherlands, Slovak Republic, Spain and Switzerland did not attend the meeting.

1. Welcome by the Co-Chairs of the TPG C on QA

The Co-Chairs extended a warm welcome to all participants at the fourth meeting of the TPG C on QA. Daniela Cristina Ghitulica, representing the host country Romania, expressed gratitude for the robust turnout, underlining the significance of regular attendance at the biannual meetings. The agenda was presented and approved without changes. The minutes of the third meeting were approved. A tour de table followed, where all participants introduced themselves and their respective positions within the institutions they represented.

For more information please see: [Agenda of the meeting](#)

2. General state-of-play and work plan of TPG C

Liesbeth Hens (Co-Chair, Belgium Flemish Community) gave a general overview of the state of play of the TPG C. She emphasized the action plan's goals, which encompass aligning the legislative framework with ESG principles, bolstering internal quality assurance, and addressing emerging areas like micro-credentials. Notably, 36 out of the 43 members have submitted their action plan. The Co-Chair highlighted that the subsequent meeting is scheduled for 13-14 June in Romania and the final one in Belgium in November.

For more information, please see: [TPG C on QA update](#)

3. Experience from the staff mobility

Jana Vandeputte (Belgium Flemish Community) presented an update on the progress of the staff mobility program. She reported that the program is proceeding smoothly, and a report on staff mobility is expected within a month after the completion of each mobility program. So far, visits have been made to Sweden, Estonia, Slovenia, Finland, and Spain, with plans for 21 additional mobilities in December, January, and February. The final report on staff mobility is due in November 2024, coordinated by the ministry and the matchmaking committee. Additionally, two participants in this program were invited to share their experiences.

Stefano Santoli (ANVUR, Italy) detailed the successful mobility in Brussels, which included representatives from four countries and focused on discussions regarding the European approach to QA of joint programs. Meetings with other agencies facilitated comparisons of QA approaches and methodologies. Discussions at the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science centered on the European approach to micro-credentials and European alliances of Universities. He emphasized the necessity of enabling participation in European alliances and updating regulatory frameworks for international cooperation. ANVUR is currently working on implementing the European approach for QA of Joint Programs in Italy and facilitating Italian Universities' involvement in European alliances. ANVUR has applied for inclusion in EQAR and is collaborating with the ministry to update regulatory frameworks.

During the discussion, participants stressed the importance of the ministries issuing comprehensive Ministerial Decree on international programs for universities, considering changes in joint programs, QA, or European universities. It was also highlighted the significance of Ministry representatives participating in staff mobility initiatives to raise awareness and knowledge about these issues.

Oxana Trebenko (NAQA, Ukraine) recounted her participation in the Staff Mobility Week at UKA Sweden in October, noting it was highly productive, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange in a positive atmosphere. Discussions during the event covered various topics, including the enhancement-oriented use of ESG. She noted the diversity in approaches to ESG 3.4 among agencies, as well as differing methods of thematic analysis.

Reflecting on lessons learned from Ukraine's higher education institutions, emphasis was placed on the importance of compliance with national legislation in cross-border QA. She highlighted the significance of knowledge sharing on national legislation between agencies in the EHEA, as well as the necessity of enhancing collaboration among agencies for cross-border QA. Additionally, stakeholder engagement could be improved through student union training, akin to the model in Sweden where students are afforded a year off for student activities.

Further, she underscored the importance of expert training in Ukraine and the challenges faced by the agency in this regard. She stressed the need for additional training and professional development, incorporating experts' experiences and feedback for continuous improvement. Clear criteria for expert selection, guidelines for questioning, and instructions for data handling were identified as crucial needs. The post-mobility action plan centers on thematic analysis, collaborating with peer review panels, and advancing NAQA's IT system. Future steps include identifying key themes for analysis, developing methodologies and guidelines, selecting higher education institutions (HEIs) for piloting workshops, preparing reports, hosting feedback conferences, and conducting comparative analyses.

A discussion ensued highlighting the absence of a platform for agencies to exhibit their work. It was noted the tendency to visit prominent Western agencies, neglecting the potential benefits of showcasing smaller Eastern European agencies. To address this, it was suggested that more agencies should be involved in mobility projects to streamline the process and provide broader representation.

4. The European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes PLA (EA)

Daniela Cristina Ghitulică (Co-Chair, Romania) provided an overview of the Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) organized within the framework of the TPG C Project's action plan. Three PLAs were conducted, each focusing on distinct themes: the legal framework, cross-border QA and transnational education, and the European approach for QA of joint programs.

Blazhe Todorovski (EQAR) delivered a brief presentation, sharing insights from the third and final PLA held in Brussels on September 13th. This event, centered on the European approach for QA of joint programs, was hosted by the Department of Education & Training of the Flemish Community of Belgium. The PLA comprised three parallel discussion sessions, involving approximately 34 participants from 18 countries, predominantly representatives from national Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs) and stakeholder organizations, with fewer Ministry representatives in attendance. Prior to the PLA, preparatory thematic analysis was shared with participants and subsequently published on the EQAR website.

Presentations during the PLA covered various aspects, including changes in the legal framework to accommodate the European approach (presentations from Belgium and Poland), institutional perspectives (KU Leuven and the University of Groningen), and agency perspectives (AQAS from Germany and Unibasq from Spain). Key discussion topics encompassed the country's readiness for the European approach and the legal framework's compatibility. Reflections were categorized into limitations and recommendations. Limitations included legal constraints, limited experience and knowledge of the EA, lack of accessible information on different systems and requirements, and additional costs for institutions opting for the EA.

Recommendations aimed to mitigate obstacles in creating and implementing joint programs, advocating for greater openness in systems towards the EA, enhancing communication among key stakeholders, and leveraging existing tools like the ImpEA project toolkit. Incentives such as covering expenses for procedures with external funding were also proposed to encourage institutions to adopt the EA. Thematic analyses are nearing completion and will be shared with participants in the upcoming weeks.

5. Quality Assurance of micro-credentials

Anna Gover (ENQA) provided a brief overview of the Working Group on QA of micro-credentials' activities. The report titled "Approaches to Quality Assurance of Micro-Credentials" was published in August 2023 and was presented at the previous TPG C meeting. It was highlighted that the Working Group is currently developing a set of reflective questions for both internal and external QA of micro-credentials. The next meeting of the Working Group is scheduled for January 17th, to be conducted online. Originally, the plan was to create three separate guidance documents: one for institutions, one for agencies, and one for alternative providers. However, the group opted to merge them into a single document structured as reflective questions. These questions offer a non-prescriptive approach and can serve as a self-reflection tool for organizations to assess their approach to QA of micro-credentials. The questions are divided into sections for institutions, agencies, and alternative providers, each accompanied by a brief explanation of key issues. The working group has received a final draft and has until mid-month to provide feedback. The document is anticipated to be published by the end of the year or early next year.

The first section focuses on supporting institutions and analyzing whether micro-credentials are covered under existing QA arrangements for programs or lifelong learning. It also considers the institution's target audience and the objectives they aim to achieve with micro-credentials. Regarding the section with reflective questions for QA agencies, it delves into the varying roles agencies play in external QA of micro-credentials, depending on the context, scope, and remit of their role in the national system. Different roles include external evaluation, information provision, support and guidance to institutions on QA of micro-credentials, and facilitation of peer learning opportunities. The section on alternative providers focuses on supporting access to higher education, facilitating recognition of prior learning, and supplementing higher education for employability and career progression. It emphasizes the tools available in the higher education sector for alternative providers and how they can align themselves with these tools. Attention is drawn to the importance of using specific terminology in higher education and QA interactions with alternative providers. The final draft of the document is currently undergoing the working group's final round of comments.

Aleksandra Zhivkovikj (EQAR) delivered a presentation of EQAR's activities regarding the QA of micro-credentials. Notably, the focus this year has been on integrating micro-credential provisions and alternative providers into DEQAR, a database consolidating external QA results. This initiative seeks to centralize accreditations and evaluations aligned with ESG undertaken by EQAR-registered agencies onto a single platform.

The project entailed extensive research, critical analysis, and stakeholder consultations, including with the Working Group on micro-credentials as part of the IMINQA project. A five-month consultation process, spanning until May, preceded system testing and the upload of initial reports for micro-credential accreditations and alternative providers. Four quality assurance agencies, three from Germany and one from Kazakhstan, took part in the testing phase. Subsequently, the system underwent presentation to the IMINQA working group and other stakeholders, with final feedback incorporated. The anticipated final stages of launching the system are slated for early 2024, with the live version expected to be available in January. A webinar is planned to introduce the model to agencies and offer continuous support for QA agencies wishing to upload their reports.

The integration of a section for micro-credentials and alternative providers in DEQAR aimed for comprehensive inclusion of all such entities, and a structured approach was adopted to accommodate varying national definitions and methods. A clear definition of micro-credentials to be included was established following extensive research and consultation, defining them as study provisions offered at specified EQF or ISCED levels. These provisions, expressed in ECTS credits, do not lead to a fully recognized degree.

The database aims to gather information on the quality of micro-credentials, stakeholders, and the target groups. Mandatory fields include program qualification name, connection to National Qualification Frameworks (NQF), workload in ECTS, and learning outcomes.

Regarding alternative providers, defined as entities offering learning opportunities at higher educational levels without full degree-awarding powers, EQAR plans to collect information such as provider names, legal seat, and website. The database will also detail information on QA agencies certifying the providers, along with certification validity dates and report files.

Moreover, EQAR is conducting a feasibility assessment of ESG-based quality labels for alternative providers under the project. This study aims to explore the rationale and implications of such labels, guided by input from the working group. The domain work is expected to be carried out in 2024, with contributions from stakeholders encouraged to enrich the process.

It was highlighted that the incorporation of alternative providers into DEQAR faced challenges, primarily stemming from the absence of regulation in certain national systems. To address this, the solution entailed consulting national systems to ascertain whether a certification is officially recognized as a diploma. Certifications not fully recognized nationally but accredited by a registered agency would be categorized separately. Given the disparity in micro-credential definitions across countries, there was a suggestion to develop QA recommendations instead of rigid procedures to accommodate the evolving landscape of micro-credentials.

6. QA of European Universities

Liesbeth Hens (Co-Chair, Belgium Flemish Community) gave a brief presentation on the state of play on the QA of European Alliances of Universities activity. It was stated that the desk research has been completed and two Working Groups have been organized concerning the QA package in IMINQA on European alliances of universities. The original proposal was to conduct a feasibility study with 5-6 countries to implement a unique framework. However, due to the constantly evolving alliances organization system and staff changes in the Ministry of Education in Flanders, the proposal was dropped. The steering group was asked and agreed to submit an adjusted proposal to the European Commission, replacing the feasibility study with questionnaires and focus groups directed at ministries, QAAs, and alliances. This would change the workload for both parties involved and allow more countries to participate, as well as ensure that the new work package is more practical and effective. The proposal is expected to be completed the next spring, allowing for the analysis of the questionnaire before summer. However, it was made clear that the plan is still in its early stages and not fully clarified. Afterwards, a proposal will be sent to the European Alliances Working Group to inform them of the next steps.

Participants suggested creating a proposal as soon as possible and considering the date of the Tirana Ministerial Conference to make the analysis feasible within this timeframe and provide recommendations for the Conference. They also suggested focusing more on qualitative information rather than quantitative data.

7. Digitalisation of QA processes – preliminary results of the survey

Daniela Cristina Ghițulică (Co-Chair, Romania) briefly introduced the survey regarding the digitalization of QA processes. The survey aims to provide insights into the use of information technology in QA processes.

Iordan Petrescu (The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS)) presented a study on the digitalization of QA processes implemented by QAAs across EHEA countries, based on the results of the survey. The study aimed to assess how digitalization could enhance QA procedures and practices. The research methodology includes a questionnaire sent to QAAs, analysis of ENQA external review reports, and interviews with selected agencies. Challenges were acknowledged in obtaining responses to the questionnaire.

The survey, structured into seven domains, was sent to ENQA members, with 31 QAAs from 25 countries responding. Concerningly, only 45% of QAAs reported having a strategic plan for digitalization, with 13 having multi-annual plans and 1 having an annual plan, while 17 QAAs have no strategic plan on digitalization. Additionally, only 5 QAAs had a dedicated department for digitalization, and just 35% implemented a two-step authentication procedure, while only half performed periodic data backups.

Key factors influencing the development of strategic plans included improving internal procedures' efficiency, enhancing data management and sharing, ensuring data security, fostering cooperation and legislative compliance, personnel training, and considering hardware costs. Major obstacles in designing and implementing digital tools included resource constraints, costs, staff skills, data protection concerns, and platform disparities hindering interoperability. The team plans to analyze the gathered data and draw conclusions on digitalization in QA for presentation in the next meeting.

For more information, please see: [Digitalisation of QA processes](#)

8. The Draft Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024 (BPIR) – QA chapter

David Crosier (Eurydice) presented a brief overview of the BPIR report, covering six chapters addressing various commitments. QA is predominantly discussed within the Key Commitments section but is also examined in relation to indicators in other chapters like the social dimension. Data for the report primarily originates from sources such as DEQAR, and the QA-FIT project, gathered through a questionnaire distributed to BFUG members across countries. Notably, the report includes an indicator assessing the development stage of external QA systems, which has sparked controversy.

The indicator's proposal to remove the light green category, indicating alignment with European standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG), but not registered in EQAR, has been met with divided opinions. A compromise suggested by ENQA at the BFUG meeting in Madrid was to add clear references to countries

and agencies not registered on EQAR but who are ENQA members. A final decision on the indicator's direction is pending. Graphs in the report depict improvements in the first indicator between 2019 and 2023, with an increase in dark green categories from 20 to 32. Some countries shifted from light green to yellow or orange due to changes in indicator classification, indicating shifts in the QA landscape within the EHEA.

A comparative indicator shows the share of HEIs being reviewed by an EQAR-registered QAA, revealing high coverage of QA from an EQAR registered agency. The second indicator concerning student participation in QA procedures, shows progress, with 26 countries in dark green compared to 20 in the previous report. This improvement could be attributed to the work done in the TPG C, ENQA and other fora.

Melinda Szabo (EQAR) focused on the next scorecard indicator, which evaluates the level of international participation in external QA. The data for this indicator is based on self-reported information from ministries, with verification conducted using ENQA reports on higher education and QA systems. Despite challenges posed by the pandemic, there has been progress in incorporating international experts into review panels or national agency boards. However, data from some countries is missing, and efforts will be made to include it if information becomes available, with Serbia being an exception due to the non-submission of the answers to the questionnaire.

Another scorecard indicator assesses cross-border QA of EQAR registered agencies, reflecting the openness of countries in permitting HEIs to choose such agencies for external QA. While some countries exhibit greater openness, progress remains slow in many parts of Europe, likely determined by legal frameworks. Additionally, monitoring is conducted on the implementation of the European approach to QA of joint programs, which allows institutions to accredit their programs without undergoing separate external QA procedures. While there has been some progress and openness in this approach since 2015, it is not widely adopted across EHEA.

It was emphasized that the overall state of play clearly shows progress in QA, considering also the impact of TPG C, but nevertheless still leaves room for improvement.

Following the presentation, participants deliberated on the scorecard indicators and monitoring processes over the years and addressed concerns regarding the indicators. The discussion revolved around the diversity of systems and approaches for demonstrating alignment with ESG, reiterating calls for the reinstatement of the green light category of the indicator. It was also discussed the distinction between regular commitments, and other highly valued but optional indicators such as students serving on governance bodies of QAAs and panels of international experts. It was suggested clarifying the indicators if they are based on commitments or if they are based on interesting case data without specific commitments.

During the discussion, emphasis was placed on the significance of international indicators in fostering transparency and comprehension across diverse countries, underscoring the necessity for adaptable contexts and regulations. Furthermore, there was a discourse on the importance of diverse student participation in accreditation committees, advocating for a more inclusive approach. Additionally, there was a call for a more comprehensive monitoring system for higher education systems within the Bologna Process.

It was suggested that the BPIR should not be perceived as a political tool but rather as a scorecard reflecting ministers' commitments. It was recommended to employ neutral language in the report, presenting the situation objectively without making assessments or providing recommendations for individual countries.

David Crosier clarified that the first indicator does not depend solely on DEQAR data; it serves as supplementary information for additional insights. It was also emphasized that all members' perspectives will be taken into account based on written feedback to determine the most suitable approach for addressing concerns. Melinda Szabo suggested evaluating the utilization of scorecard indicators and monitoring processes within the working group.

For more information, please see: [QA section in the Bologna Process Implementation Report](#)

9. Report of TPG C and contribution to Tirana Communiqué

9.1 Report of TPG C

Daniela Cristina Ghițulică (Co-Chair, Romania) provided an update of the TPG C's activities, including meetings, PLAs, and assignments, highlighting the main outcomes, conclusions, and recommendations. She also introduced the upcoming International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) conference, organized by ARACIS and the Politehnica University Bucharest, scheduled for November 11 and 12 in Bucharest and invited the members to join. Additionally, the schedule for staff mobility programs, from June 2023 to February 2024, was mentioned. The Working Group on micro-credentials is set to convene two meetings, one on January 17, 2024, online, and the fifth meeting on April 29-30 in Brussels. The final workshop on the digitalization of QA processes is planned to be held in Brussels by the end of the year, focusing on the outcomes of the WG's work.

9.2 Contribution to Tirana Communiqué

Daniela Cristina Ghițulică stated that Thematic Peer Groups were called upon to contribute to the Tirana Communiqué. Members were urged to submit their comments in writing for inclusion in the contribution to the Drafting Committee.

Liesbeth Hens (Co-Chair, Belgium Flemish Community) elaborated on the initial draft 0.1, underscoring the significance of QA as a key commitment. The Drafting Committee was queried about the tasks accomplished as a TPG and the subjects to be addressed in the upcoming working period. Three areas for further exploration were identified, including cross-border QA, the European approach to joint degrees, and effective transnational QA.

Following this, a group discussion ensued, with proposals for amendments to the Tirana Communiqué. The EC representative suggested incorporating green transition and European universities into the Communiqué while indicating that the EC would offer its feedback separately.

It was also emphasized the importance of transnational QA beyond the EHEA and the involvement of European institutions and agencies in QA efforts. He highlighted the connection between QA's work and the external dimension of the EHEA and the recognition of prior learning or non-formal learning, encompassing aspects such as labour market access and higher education access for migrants.

Participants were encouraged to submit written contributions within two weeks, focusing on the topics proposed for the Communiqué, to propose these suggestions to the Drafting Committee.

10. AOB

Anna Gover (ENQA) extended an invitation to all TPG C members for the Africa-EHEA dialogue on recognition and QA, scheduled for January 18th and 19th in Barcelona. Co-organized by the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue (CG on GPD) and the HAQAA initiative, which promotes harmonization in higher education QA in Africa, the event will involve EQAR as an implementing partner in the HAQAA initiative. Attendees will have the opportunity to engage with high-level African stakeholders and CG on GPD members, with a hybrid option available for online participation.

Julie Anderson (European Commission) introduced the upcoming call for evidence regarding European degree initiatives, QA, and recognition initiatives, expected to circulate within weeks. Stakeholders and member states were encouraged to participate and submit their views.

Daniela Cristina Ghițulică announced the Commission's plan to launch a new call in June 2024 for the Bologna Process dedicated projects, enabling the group to continue its work. The meeting concluded with gratitude extended to all participants for their engagement and contributions.