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

5th Meeting, Hosted by ARACIS,

Constanta, Romania,

Hybrid Meeting

13-14 June 2024

<u>Minutes of Meeting</u>

List of Participants

Country/Organization	First Name	Last Name
Albania	Alma	Arapi
Albania	Muhamed	Prezja
Armenia	Varduhi	Gyulazyan
Austria	Jürgen	Petersen
Azerbaijan	Heydar	Rzayev
Belgium Flemish Community (Co-chair of TPG C)	Liesbeth	Hens
Belgium French Community	Gervaise	Picron
Belgium French Community	Elodie	Stroobant
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Maja	Macan
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Irena	Šiško
Bulgaria	Eliza	Stefanova
Co-chair WG on FV	Cezar	Hâj
Co-chair of TPG B	Chiara	Finocchietti
Cyprus	Yiannis	Kasoulides
Czech Republic	Tereza	Křepelová
ENQA	Elena	Cirlan
EQAR	Blazhe	Todorovski
EQAR	Aleksandra	Zhivkovikj
ESU	Horia	Onița
ESU*	Tamara	Tamara
EUA	Cecilia	Biaggi
EURASHE	Jakub	Grodecki
European Commission*	Kinga	Szuly
Finland	Helka	Luodelahti
France	Sophie	Guillet
Georgia (Co-chair of TPG A)	Khatia	Tsiramua
Greece	Christina	Besta
Hungary	Péter Levente	Lakatos
IMINQA expert, ARACIS	Ștefania Maria	Armășelu
IMINQA expert, ARACIS	Ioana Georgiana	Popescu
IMINQA expert, ARACIS	Ana Maria	Bâtfoi
IMINQA expert, ARACIS	Iordan	Petrescu
IMINQA expert, ARACIS	Petrișor Laurențiu	Țucă
Ireland	Bryan	Maguire
Italy	Marilena	Maniaci
Latvia	Jolanta	Silka
Liechtenstein*	Belgin	Amann

Lithuania	Almantas	Šerpatauskas
Luxembourg*	Patricia	Marx
Malta	Giacomo	Annese
Montenegro	Dunja	Bulajic
Montenegro	Milica	Kavedzic
Netherlands	Marianne	van Exel
Republic of Moldova	Alexandrina	Druta
Republic of Moldova	Lilia	Parhomenco
Romania (Co-chair TPG C)	Cristina	Ghițulică
Romania	Mădălina	Matei
Slovak Republic	Peter	Ondreicka
Sweden	Maria	Wikse
BFUG Secretariat (Head of Secretariat)	Edlira Adi	Kahani Subashi
BFUG Secretariat	Blerina	Caslli

*Online participation

Croatia, Estonia, EI – ETUCE, Germany, Holy See, Iceland, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, San Marino, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, and United Kingdom (Scotland) did not participate in the meeting.

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

Daniela Cristina Ghițulică (TPG C Co-Chair, Romania) and Lisbeth Hens (TPG C Co-Chair, Belgium Flemish Community) welcomed participants to the 5th TPG C meeting on QA. Ms. Ghițulică expressed gratitude and outlined the agenda. She confirmed the group's continuation and stressed the importance of reflecting on past work to enhance future relevance. The agenda was approved without changes.

For more information, please see: *Agenda of the meeting*

2. Tour de table and implementation of countries' action plans

A tour de table followed, where all participants introduced themselves and their positions. They presented the progress of QA action plans in their countries. Key takeaways included aligning higher education with labor market needs, providing training for institutions, and enhancing international cooperation. The session emphasized collaboration, sharing best practices, and addressing common challenges in quality assurance across different countries.
For more information, please see: Implementation of the countries action plans

3. State-of-play and work plan of TPG C

Liesbeth Hens (TPG C Co-Chair, Belgium Flemish Community) updated on TPG C's current status of implementation and future plans. The IMINQA project, supporting TPG C, has seven work packages, including a staff mobility scheme - two calls on staff mobility were completed, attracting 48 participants from 72 applications. Topics included internal QA, ESG, stakeholder engagement, cross-border QA, and digitalization of QA processes. Three peer learning activities (PLAs) were organized, with thematic analyses completed for the first two. The working group on QA of micro-credentials worked on the inclusion of micro-credentials in DEQAR and will meet on September 18 (online). The working group on QA of European Universities plans to shift from surveys to focus groups, being considered more relevant for the scope of this activity. A workshop on digitalization of QA processes will be held during the TPG C meeting in November, that will take place between 28-29 in Ghent, Belgium.
For more information, please see: IMINQA progress

4. Digitalisation of QA processes – results of the survey

Iordan Petrescu (IMINQA expert, ARACIS) presented the 2023 survey results on the degree of digital transformation in QA processes among QAAs in EHEA countries. The survey, distributed to QAAs in 46 countries, received 32 responses from 26 countries. It focused on internal workflow, external QA procedures, data sharing, and security measures. Results showed, among other, that only 43-44% of agencies have a strategic plan for digitalization, addressing both internal and external QA procedures, with most having a multi-annual plan averaging 3.67 years. Key considerations for digitalization included internal efficiency, enhanced external evaluations, and effective information management, but major challenges are resource constraints, staff competencies, system interoperability, and resistance from HEIs.

Digital tools aim to increase efficiency, improve assessment outcomes, optimize external evaluations, and enhance data management and real-time data collection. Necessary security measures include security policies, limiting external access, and staff training on security practices and data protection. Agency websites were the primary channels for sharing key information. Risks in digitalization involved cybersecurity, personal data protection, user access, technology costs, and system updates. Agencies with strategic plans showed better data collection and internal efficiency.

Preliminary recommendations included enhancing internal efficiency and data management, staff training, securing funds for new technologies, implementing specialized tools for on-site visits and online collaboration, focusing on data security and compliance, and using artificial intelligence (AI). The final report with recommendations on digital tools in QA procedures will be presented at the November meeting.

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

5. Tirana Ministerial Communiqué

Liesbeth Hens, as a member of the Drafting Committee, presented an overview of the Tirana Communiqué that reaffirmed commitments to academic freedom, integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation, and public responsibility for higher education, urging full implementation by all countries. It highlighted the "three I's" (Inclusive, Innovative, Interconnected EHEA) and the social dimension of higher education, with a focus on recognizing qualifications and integrating refugees. Emphasis was placed too on digital and green transitions, lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling, investments in mobility for students and staff, professionalization of higher education staff, working conditions, and the use of AI. Future plans include adopting new EHEA rules and procedures and establishing a long-term secretariat. The next Ministerial Conference and Secretariat would be co-hosted by Romania and Moldova for the working period 2024-2027.

For more information, please see: [Tirana Ministerial Communiqué](#)

6. ENQA's and EQAR's message to the EHEA ministers

Elena Cîrlan (ENQA) gave a brief presentation on ENQAs' contribution to the Ministerial Conference, focusing on three key messages for the ministers of education in the EHEA:

- Ensure Compliance with ESG: National legislative frameworks should enable QAAs to operate in compliance with the ESG. This recommendation is based on discussions indicating that legislation can both enable and hinder QA developments, with particular challenges around independence and complaints/appeals processes.
- Enable International Cooperation: National barriers to QA in higher education should be reduced to facilitate international cooperation and enhance transparency. This includes supporting cross-border QA and the European approach for joint program QA. Despite ongoing discussions, many countries have yet to fully embrace these initiatives.
- Maintain Relevance of External Quality Assurance: QAAs should be allowed to implement flexible, enhancement-oriented approaches. As systems mature, there is a need for procedures to evolve to better meet the needs of institutions. However, restrictive legislation can limit the ability of agencies to adopt these flexible approaches.

For more information, please see: [ENQA's message to the EHEA ministers](#)

Blazhe Todorovski (EQAR), presented the message of EQAR to the Ministers, highlighting its achievements over 16 years as the only official organization emerging from the Bologna Process. EQAR emphasized its role and progress as a body that has significantly contributed to quality assurance in higher education. EQAR has recommended ministers to continue fulfilling commitments related to quality assurance, removing barriers to cross-border recognition, implementing the European approach to joint programs, and promoting automatic recognition of qualifications. Also was encouraged the use of DECAR for transparency in publishing external quality assurance results. Meanwhile, EQAR committed to continuing its active role in EHEA structures, providing expertise in automatic recognition and quality assurance, and supporting ministries in fulfilling their commitments.

7. Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the EHEA

Tamara Ciobanu (ESU) delivered a presentation on the indicators and descriptors for the EHEA's Social Dimension Principles of the EHEA. The proposed framework comprises three core elements: principles, guidelines, and indicators.

Additionally, it highlights the importance of an effective monitoring system and reliable data to assess and improve the social dimension of higher education, along with effective counselling and guidance for the countries. Sustainable funding and financial autonomy for HEIs are deemed essential for supporting social dimension initiatives, scholarships, and equitable resource distribution. The framework also emphasizes fostering an inclusive institutional culture, promoting international mobility, engaging with the community, and facilitating policy dialogue. It encourages stakeholders to prioritize and invest in the social dimension of higher education, providing support and advice for implementation. The indicators are not prescriptive but serve as a toolbox approach, allowing countries to implement them according to their specific higher education systems.

For more information, please see: [Indicators and descriptors for the principles of the social dimension in the EHEA](#)

8. **Statements on the EHEA fundamental values of higher education and Technical Policy Framework of Indicators for the fundamental values**

Mihai Cezar Hâj (Co-Chair, Working Group on Fundamental Values) provided a presentation regarding the fundamental values landscape within the EHEA and the connection to QA. Fundamental values were initially introduced in the Paris Communiqué and further defined in later documents. A framework to measure and assess these values was developed, including a pilot study in four countries. This framework classifies fundamental values into rights and freedoms, and obligations and duties, evaluating both de jure and de facto perspectives. The monitoring process involves self-reporting by public authorities, input from national experts, and feedback from national stakeholders. A traffic light system is used to assess the protection and promotion of these values, with indicators measuring legal protection, promotion efforts, and future outlook. Initial indicators address various dimensions of fundamental values and will be refined based on the pilot results. The monitoring framework evaluates adherence to commitments related to academic freedom, institutional autonomy, academic integrity, participation in governance by students and staff, and public responsibility. It aims for long-term assessment, acknowledging that full compliance may not be immediately achievable and focusing on gradual improvement. The presentation underscores the necessity of integrating fundamental values into QA systems, questioning whether quality can be achieved without fulfilling these commitments. Mr. Hâj advocated for ongoing efforts to incorporate fundamental values into QA and monitoring processes, with an emphasis on long-term enhancements and adherence to commitments.

For more information, please see: [Fundamental values in the EHEA](#)

9. **Proposals for the work of TPG C in the next working period**

Daniela Cristina Ghițulică (Co-Chair, Romania) gave a presentation on the future priorities of the TPG C for the 2024-2027 working period. She first highlighted the priorities from the past working period and detailed the numerous activities conducted. Then she presented commitments relevant for QA included in the Tirana Communiqué, that includes to reflect on the Bologna process tools, and the need to address fraudulent qualifications and academic cheating, The Communiqué emphasized also the need for all countries to develop a national action plan that includes Bologna process-related activities and knowledge-sharing efforts.

She then presented the results of a survey, noting that 27 countries out of 28 respondents had committed to join TPG C in the next working period Survey results showed high ratings for working groups, TPG meetings and staff exchanges but indicated low engagement with action plans. Future proposals included more common activities with the other TPGs and practical workshops.

Key priorities identified were the European approach, transnational education, online education, academic integrity, and ESG compliance. Additional priorities included QA and recognition, digitalization, and addressing fraudulent activities. The value of including both ministry and QAA representatives in the group, to enhance policy changes, was emphasized, while acknowledging that large group meetings do not facilitate in-depth discussions.

Discussions among participants highlighted various issues, leading to the proposal of a pilot project to explore the European approach, involving ministries and agencies. The need for collaboration between ministries and with other thematic groups was emphasized, with proposals for joint workshops and staff exchanges. A conference with stakeholders, including ministries, was suggested as part of the project. It was also highlighted the need for a centralized source of information on joint program recognition across different countries. The focus was on practical implementation, showcasing real case studies and solutions from HEIs. Emphasis was placed on the importance of internal dialogue within countries between ministries and agencies to effectively implement the European approach and other priorities.

The TPG C committed to engaging in the revision process of the ESG, ensuring stakeholder consultation and practical discussions. Strong support was expressed for focusing on the QA of transnational education as a priority, underscoring its relevance and the challenges faced in current systems.

For more information, please see: Priorities 2024-2027 work plan

10. Micro-credentials in Higher Education-joint publication by TPG A, TPG B, TPG C

Chiara Finocchietti (Co-Chair, TPG B on LRC) presented the joint document on micro-credentials, alongside Khatia Tsiramua (Co-Chair, TPG A on QF) and Elena Cîrlan (ENQA).

Khatia Tsiramua highlighted the importance of microcredentials in attracting diverse learners, supporting lifelong learning, offering flexible pathways, and meeting labor market demands. Effective learning outcomes require collaboration among academic actors, employers, and learners. Assigning National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) levels and defining workload was challenging, and the publication suggests including micro-credentials in NQFs while maintaining flexibility. A range of 1-15 ECTS credits for micro-credentials was recommended, stressing the importance of clear learning outcomes.

Elena Cîrlan emphasized that micro-credentials typically have a maximum of 15-17 credits, though some may exceed 30 credits. They are created by unbundling existing programs and rethinking teaching approaches and learning outcomes. Offered as part of lifelong learning, they reskill, or upskill learners and are evaluated through internal and external QA processes. The focus is on maintaining the unique characteristics and flexibility of micro-credentials.

Chiara Finocchietti noted that transparency of information is crucial for micro-credential recognition. Standard elements and fair assessment are essential, as recommended by the EU. Recognition procedures can utilize the following approach: using the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) for transparent and complete information, NUFFIC's evaluation methodology for insufficient information, and the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) procedure for smaller micro-credentials. Digitalization supports the portability and interoperability of credentials, requiring secure, transparent, and trusted data provision and platforms.

For more information, please see: Joint document on microcredentials

11. Main outcomes of TPG A work

Khatia Tsiramua (Co-Chair, TPG A on QF) presented on the work and achievements of TPG A. The group focused on self-certification, ECTS User's Guide implementation, short cycle in higher education, multiple purposes of Qualifications Framework, and new topics such as micro-credentials, learning outcomes databases, and digitalization. The QUATRA umbrella project supported this group, aiming to facilitate peer-to-peer collaboration among countries regarding Qualifications Frameworks. The project concentrated on three main topics: microcredentials, learning outcomes, and self-certification. Seven meetings were held in various member countries and online, with the largest group focusing on integrating micro-credentials into NQFs. Georgia and Bulgaria also concentrated on countries yet to complete self-certification, developing guidelines for the process and recommendations for regular updates. The project emphasized the importance of country-specific cases and field experiences. Future plans included working group meetings in September and a final conference in Riga in February 2025.

For more information, please see: TPG A on Qualifications Framework

12. Main outcomes of TPG B work

Chiara Finocchietti (Co-Chair, TPG B on LRC) reported on TPG B's work and accomplishments. The group worked to achieve full compliance with the Bologna Implementation Report's scorecard for recognition by implementing the LRC principles, recognizing refugees' qualifications, and promoting automatic recognition among countries. They observed key indicators, including LRC Principles, which emphasize fair assessment rights, learning outcomes, and the right to appeal; recognition of refugees' qualifications; and the implementation of automatic recognition systems. Although improvements were noted, further progress was needed. The group comprised members from HEIs and ministries, focusing on a balanced approach between policy-making and practical perspectives. Key priorities included digitalization, recognition of alternative pathways, automatic recognition, fair recognition for refugees, and LRC legislation. The group enhanced cooperation among TPGs and published work on micro-credentials, digitalization, quality in recognition, and the European degree. Challenges included staff mobility programs and balancing participation. Recommendations called for increased efforts to fully implement the LRC at the system level, strengthening links between recognition and QA,

fostering cooperation among stakeholders, and using digital infrastructure to improve recognition processes.

For more information, please see: [Up-date from TPG B](#)

13. The European QA and recognition system and the blueprint for a European degree

Kinga Szuly (European Commission) presented the higher education package launched by the European Commission, which contains three components: academic career, QA and recognition, and the blueprint for European degrees. She emphasized that the 2024 European Degree Package outlines three initiatives: the Communication Blueprint, legislative proposals for the European QA and Recognition System, and attractive and sustainable careers in higher education. These initiatives were highlighted in the 2022 European Strategy for Universities and the Council Recommendation.

Six policy experiments involving 170 universities and various stakeholders worked on European degree criteria and feasibility. The Commission's Communication Blueprint outlined plans for developing European degrees without implying their full establishment yet. The European Degree signifies a unified diploma, part of national frameworks or international legislation. The goals of the European Degree include enhancing student employability, encouraging joint programs, and boosting competitiveness in the European higher education sector. Benefits include increased employability, enhanced European identity, greater student mobility, assurance of multilingual graduates, resource pooling, reduced bureaucracy for universities, and expanded internationalization. Challenges include the complexity of creating joint programs and existing national requirements. The European Degree concept is voluntary, based on Bologna tools, and focuses on student mobility, interdisciplinarity, and European values. Support structures include the European Degree Policy Lab and the European Degree Forum.

The European QA and Recognition System aims to strengthen institutional QA and automatic recognition. Next steps involve further discussions through European Degree Policy Labs and Forums, addressing concerns, and ensuring effective implementation. The proposal suggests that European criteria for programs should be checked by local QA procedures. The aim is to integrate the European degree policy into existing national systems rather than adding a new system. HEIs should be inspected by external review agencies to ensure compliance, and institutions that self-accredit their programs should also be checked by these agencies.

14. Closing of the meeting

The hosts thanked the participants for their contributions and fruitful discussions and invited them to the next meeting in November 2024. As no other business was brought forward, the meeting was closed.