The Research on Development, Operation and Characteristic of EQAR

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Abstract

In the Bologna process, the E4 Group proposed and created the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). EQAR guarantees the quality of quality assurance agencies (QAAs) and promotes cooperation and mutual trust between QAAs through a registration system. EQAR has an independent organizational structure, a comprehensive inclusion Criteria, a system application process and a long-lasting monitoring path. In the process of development and operation, the following characteristics are presented: Openness is the premise, independence is the fundamental, stakeholder coordination is the foundation, specialization and standardization are the paths, and quality culture construction is mission.

Key words: European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education; Quality assurance agencies; Registration; Quality

INTRODUCTION

Accountability, quality and productivity are the key words of the global higher education reform in the twenty-first century (Hassan,2013). Quality as the lifeline of higher education is not only a response to the requirements of accountability, but also the key to improving the productivity of higher education. The quality of higher education needs to be maintained through internal and external quality assurance activities. Internal quality assurance is the basis, and external quality assurance is the promotion. Effective external quality assurance activities can promote the development of internal quality assurance activities; respond to stakeholders' accountability and continuous improvement the quality of higher education institutions, which is an integral part of the quality assurance process of higher education. Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs) as the main body to implement the external quality assurance activities of higher education, their own quality directly affects the effectiveness and reliability of higher education quality assurance activities. Therefore, in order to enhance the reliability and effectiveness of external quality assurance activities and to promote the quality of higher education, since the early 1990s, European countries have continuously dedicated themselves to promoting the quality of QAAs. With the internationalization of higher education and the advancement of the Bologna process, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) has emerged to ensure the quality of QAAs. After ten years of development, EQAR has become an integral part of the quality assurance framework for higher education in Europe. Through the registration system, EQAR has played an important role in ensuring the quality of QAAs, reducing "accreditation mills", enhancing trust and cooperation among QAAs. By introducing the development history and organizational operation of EQAR and exploring its characteristics, it will help provide a new perspective and enlightenment for ensuring the quality of QAAs in the world.

1. THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF EQAR

In order to cope with the internationalization of higher education and promote the certification and flow of talents among different countries, the evaluation of higher education is gradually becoming internationalized. In

this context, cooperation and exchanges between QAAs in Europe have also been strengthened. In 1998, the European Council issued' European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education', which encourage the cooperation between different countries, regions, higher education institutions, and higher education association in quality assurance and quality evaluation activities (European Community,1998). At the same time, in order to enhance competitiveness and attractiveness of European Higher Education and promote mutual recognition of higher education in different countries, European governments have been working closely together. In 1999, 29 European countries signed the Bologna declaration together to reach a consensus on the desire to jointly build the European higher education area (EHEA). Quality assurance, as the cornerstone of the Bologna process, has always been one of the themes of the Bologna process. Based on the consensus on quality cooperation development reached in 1990s and the Bologna declaration, European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was established in 2000. Its mission is to build quality assurance system for diversified EHEA.

Although European countries have reached consensus on quality assurance, how to ensure the quality of QAAs is always a problem. So, in the Berlin communiqué of 19 September 2003, the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states invited ENQA "through its members, in cooperation with the EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB, to develop 'an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance' and to 'explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Bologna Follow-Up Group to Ministers in 2005" (2005). ENQA and its partners responded to this request. They believe that the QAAs peer review system should include not only the peer review process itself, but also carefully consider and formulate the evaluation criteria, so as to ensure the transparency, objectivity and comparability of QAAs review. Based on this, ENQA is committed to working with stakeholders to develop a QAAs registration agency in Europe to ensure the professionalism and reliability of QAAs. At May 2005 of Bergen communiqué, ENQA submitted "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher European (ESG2005)". On the one hand, ESG2005 stipulates standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance activities in European higher education; on the other hand, it formally proposes the idea of creating a Quality Assurance Register for QAAs. Ministers responsible for higher education in the Bologna signatory states welcomed the principle of a European Register of QAAs based on national reviews. They required ENQA, in cooperation with EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, to develop the practical aspects of the register and report back through the Bologna Follow-up Group(ENQA,2007). In 2006, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union also expressed their support of the idea to establish a European register of quality assurance agencies in a joint recommendation "Recommendation of the European parliament and of the council on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education"(European Parliament and Council,2006). At this point, the idea of establishing the European Register of QAAs is fully accepted.

"E4 group" presented the operational model to ministers in the" Report to the London Conference of Ministers on a European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies" in London Communiqué. The ministers declared, "welcome the establishment of a register by the E4 group, working in partnership, based on their proposed operational model" (EQAR,2018).

According the, from May 2007 to March 2008, the E4 group set up a working group, hired a full-time project manager, and a series of measures were adopted to put the envisaged operation mode into practice. This includes further improving the structure of the organization, drafting the articles of association, making business plans, making financial forecasts, and determining the EQAR application and the appeals procedure. In March 4, 2008, the chairman of the E4 group held a ceremony for the establishment of EQAR at the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences in Brussels, which meant the formal establishment of EQAR. In May 2008, EQAR published the "EQAR statute", which means that ENQA has acquired a complete legal status.

In June 2008, EQAR officially held its first General Assembly in Sarajevo; they discussed the "Procedures for Applications", which provides a clear reference for the QAAs registration application, indicating that QAA can formally carry out the application works. In August 2008, EQAR began to formally invite QAAs to apply for registration, and 10 QAAs had applied for registration. After external review, EQAR registered 3 QAAs, which includes the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain, Agency for Quality Assurance in the Catalan University System, Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders. After the registration work began, some of the Bologna process countries have begun to discuss how to use EQAR as the National Regulatory Quality Assurance Agency reference. By the end of the year 2009, there are 17 QAAs had been registered in the EQAR.

In the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, of 2009, the European ministers asked the E4 group "to ensure that after two years of operation, the register is evaluated externally, taking account of the views of all stakeholders" (EQAR, 2011). The evaluation is coordinated by a Steering Group working under the auspices and with the support of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). In August 2011, the evaluation group released the external evaluation report.

It is believed that in the two years of ENQA's operation, although its staff members and funds are relatively scarce, the number and quality of the registration agencies indicate that EQAR has made great progress (EQAR, 2011). At the same time, the panel also suggested that EQAR should develop its strategic role in the quality assurance of higher education in Europe. The external evaluation plays a connecting role in the development of EQAR. On the one hand, it summarizes the operation of ENQA in the first two years, and on the other hand, it opens a new chapter in the further development of ENQA.

In order to respond to the external review report's suggestions, EQAR published the "Strategic Priorities and Follow-Up of the External Evaluation of EQAR"in March 2012. This report agrees on two strategic priorities, which should guide EQAR's future activities during the coming years: International trust and recognition, Transparency and Information (EQAR, 2012). According the Strategic Priorities EQAR published "Strategic Plan 2013 – 2017", which further describes the the actions and monitoring indicators to achieve the two priority strategic goals, and commitment to undertake a comprehensive self-evaluation exercise in 2015/16, involving all bodies of EQAR, in order to assess progress made and to consider a revised Strategic Plan in 2017 (EQAR,2012).

EQAR believes that the implementation of these two priority strategies needs active support from all EHEA national governments, EQAR members and stakeholder organizations, not just EQAR itself. Therefore, in the Bucharest communiqué of 2012, ministers committed to "allow EQAR-registered agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements" (EQAR, 2018). In the Yerevan communiqué of 2015, Ministers further committed 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 outcomes", and published "European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmers" (EQAR, 2018). This means that EQAR has taken a new step in enhancing the international mutual trust and recognition of QAAs. According to the self-evaluation in 2016, the self-evaluation group believes that ENQA can greatly reduce the "accreditation mills", provide reliable QAAs for the public, and indirectly promote the mobility of students. And 80% QAAs and 70% EQAR members believe that the activities that EQAR do have effectively promoted the realization of its mission (EQAR, 2016).

2. THE ORGANIZATION AND OPERATION OF EQAR

2.1 Independent Organizational Structure

EQAR's vision is a coherent quality assurance framework for 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 recognized (EQAR, 2018). Based on this, EQAR's organizational structure has been designed to enable the independent Register Committee to manage the Register of quality assurance agencies, and to ensure independence and integrity by appropriate checks and balances (EQAR, 2018). EQAR is an International Non-Profit Association under Belgian law and is jointly managed by all stakeholders.
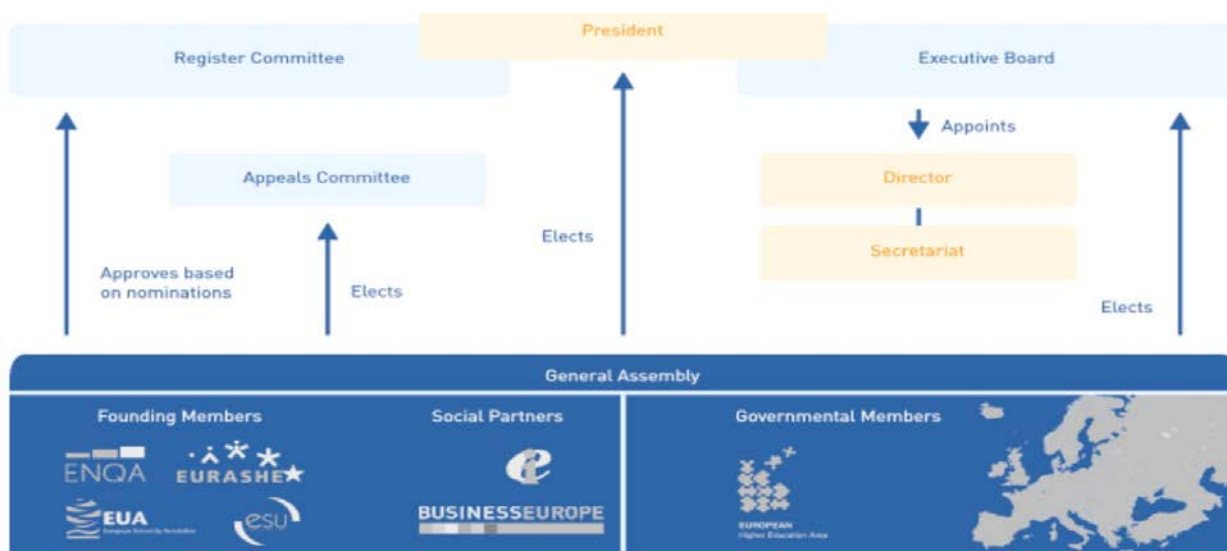
Figure 1
The Organizational Structure of EQAR

Its co-managers (members) consist of three parts: one is the founding member (include ENQA，ESU，EUA，EURASHE), which represents the interests of the relevant organization; the second is the social forces, including BUSINESS EUROPE and Education International, who represent the interests of employers and employees; The third is government members, who represent the interests of government agencies. All signatories of the Bologna process and intergovernmental organizations involved in the Bologna process can become members of the government (EQAR, 2018). These three parts negotiate related work through general assembly, which include the budget, approves the accounts, elects the Executive Board and Appeals Committee and president, approves the Register Committee. In addition to the three parts, the Assembly has four permanent observers: the European Commission, the Bologna Process Secretariat, the European Commission and the UNESCO CEPES. They only have the right to participate and have no voting rights. The Organizational structure of EQAR can be illustrated as depicted in Figure 1.

2.2 Comprehensive Inclusion Criteria

As the cornerstone of the European Quality Assurance Framework for Higher Education, ESG regulates the EHEA's internal and external quality assurance activities and QAAs' Standards. The idea of creating the EQAN was proposed in the ESG. Its fundamental purpose was to make the QAAs to use the same procedures and principles at the European level to promote the transparency of EHEA's higher education quality assurance. Therefore, EQAR always regards ESG as the Criteria for inclusion. Quality assurance agencies that wish to be included on the Register need to demonstrate that they operate in substantial compliance with ESG. The standards are divided into three parts: Part 1, standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance, which is the standard for internal quality assurance activities of higher education institutions；Part 2, standards and guidelines for external quality assurance (2.1-2.7), which is the standard that QAAs should follow when carrying out external quality assurance activities；Part 3, standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies (3.1-3.7), which is the basic standards that QAAs should comply with. Part 2 and Part 3 of the ESG are those with direct relevance to QAAs and thus serve as（Table 1）. QAAs need to consider the effectiveness of internal quality assurance activities in higher education institutions in conducting external quality assurance activities (whether evaluations, certifications or audits), so during the registration process, the part 1 will also be considered more or less. The registrater committee decides whether to accept its registration application based on the degree of agreement between the QAAs and the ESG.

Table 1
The Main Criteria for Inclusion on the Register

Standard for external quality assurance	Standards for QAAs
2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance	3.1 Activities, policy and process for quality assurance
2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose	3.2 Official status
2.3 Implement process	3.3 Independence
2.4 Peer-review experts	3.4 Thematic analysis
2.5 Criteria for outcomes	3.5 Resources
2.6 Reporting	3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct
2.7 Complaints and appeals	3.7 Cyclical external review and agencies

2.3 System Application Process

There are five steps of the registration process. The first step is verification of eligibility.

Agencies applying for inclusion on the Register (or renewal of registration) need to undergo an eligibility check before initiating their external review. The eligibility requirements cover two main dimensions: if and which of the applicant's type of activities fall under the scope of the ES G and whether the planned external review adheres to all requirements(EQAR, 2018). If the verification is not passed, the application will be rejected directly without reason. If the verification is passed, the next step is the external review of the applicant. The purpose of this step is to judge the extent to which the applicant organization follows the ESG and form an external review report. Since the external review report is the main basis for the decision made by the register committee, the external review will be hosted by a third party organization that is not directly under the jurisdiction of ENQA to maintain the reliability and validity of the external review. After external review, the applicant will be required to submit the application forms and documents, which at least include the eligibility verification documents and review documents (include the self-evaluation report and external review report). Then, the register committee judges whether the applicant complies with the ESG based on the review documents submitted by the applicant organization. If the applicant substantially compliant with the ESG, the applicant will be includes on the register. If not, the applicant will not be includes on the register. The last step is publication of decision. EQAR will publish all relevant application documents of the applicant organization in addition to the decision to accept or reject to enhance transparency and objectivity and avoid any misunderstanding of the register committee's decision by the public. The application process can be illustrated as depicted in Figure 2.

**Figure 2
Steps of the Application Process**

2.4 Long-Lasting Monitoring Path

In order to continuously monitor the registered agencies and ensure that the agencies can continue to strictly abide by ESG, all registered agencies are expected to notify EQAR about changes to their legal form, status, statutes and substantial changes in their process or methodology. It is the registered agency's responsibility, so that EQAR will become aware of situations where an agency's current practice differs substantially from the situation when it was reviewed against the ESG and admitted to the Register. In order to enable the registration agency to report effectively, ENQA lists three main issues and related issues to assist the registration agency to explain the changes: Has the organisational identity of the registered agency changed? Has the organisational structure changed? Have the external quality assurance activities implemented by your agency changed (EQAR, 2015)?

At the same time, EQAR requires the QAAs to conduct an external review at least every five years. Based on this, the validity period of ENQA registration is within 5 years after the submission of the external review report. 5 years later, the registration agency must update the registration based on a new round of external review.

3. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EQAR

EQAR has formed an independent organizational structure, a Comprehensive inclusion Criteria, a system application process, and a long-lasting monitoring path. It has a strategic role in the European framework for the quality assurance of higher education. In the process of EQAR's development and operation, the following characteristics are presented, which are worth learning and drawing lessons from.

3.1 Openness is the Premise

In the context of the internationalization of higher education, higher education and QAAs in different countries and regions have become increasingly close. In order to enhance the competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education, EHEA is not limited to the "European dimension" but also to the "World dimension" in the development process. As part of the EHEA quality assurance framework, EQAR enhances the reliability and mutual recognition of external quality assurance activities and promotes mutual trust and mobility among higher

education. In order to achieve this goal and respond to the diversity of higher education and its quality assurance activities, EQAR always takes openness as a precondition in the development process, and conducts registration and quality assurance activities in an open posture.

On registered objects, EQAR is open to all QAAs, whether which type of quality assurance activities it develops, whether it is public or private, whether it is in Europe or not. If the QAA really carry out the external quality assurance of higher education activities, are eligible to apply for registration. On registration criteria, EQAR uses ESG as the standard for registration. As a universal higher education quality assurance standards and guidelines, ESG provides only a general sense of the standard, rather than a narrow and highly unified implementation process. In the registration process, EQAR has given great autonomy to QAAs, QAAs can voluntarily decide whether to apply for registration, submit the external review plan to determine the objectives and framework of external review, submit supplementary documents to explain its own characteristics. In the process of continuous monitoring of the registered agencies, EQAR will not make any corrections and comments on the development path of QAAs as long as QAAs does not have substantive change and follow the ESG standard. Although every 5 years will carry out external examination of registered agencies, the external examination is just to confirm that the QAA is following and will follow ESG, and does not interfere with the development path of QAA. It is because of the openness of EQAR, which makes more and more QAAs to apply for registration, more and more governments declared that the QAAs registered in EQAR has officially recognized, more and more higher education institutions choice the registered QAAs to do external quality assurance activities; More and more QAAs are carrying out cross-border cooperation and communication.

3.2 Independence is the Fundamental

EQAR and QAA are, in essence, organizations that carry out external quality assurance activities. EQAR is to ensure the quality of QAAs, and QAAs is to ensure the quality of higher education. The common goal of the two is to ensure the quality of higher education and promote the mobility of higher education. As an organism with its own logic of development, higher education institutions need independent quality assurance institutions to ensure that university autonomy is not interfered by other interest

groups. At the same time, the independence of QAAs is also the premise of evaluation activities based on professional knowledge, and maintaining the reliability and effectiveness of evaluation results. Therefore, EQAR is not only committed to maintaining its own independence, but also to maintain the independence of QAAs.

Independence includes substantive independence and formal independence. Substantive independence is the independence of inner consciousness, which is manifested as professionalism and impartiality in the process of practice. Formal independence refers to the independence of external forms, such as organizational relationship and independence of economic sources. EQAR has adopted the association organization form, jointly managed by a stakeholder entity with an independent legal person status, and built a source of financial support, including government, members and registration agencies. Dividing power into balance ensures the formal independence. For substantive independence, EQAR has clear criteria for inclusion, system application process appeal, and information publication ways. EQAR's external review activities for the application agencies are carried out by the third party organizations that are not within their jurisdiction. The review coordinators, the review panel and the application agencies in the process of evaluation are completely independent and have no interest conflicts. In this way, the implementation of the entire registration activity of EQAR is not interfered with by other interests and guarantees the substantial independence of the operation process.

On the basis of ensuring its own independence, EQAR also guarantees the independence of QAAs through the registration criteria. EQAR's registration criteria explicitly require that "the quality assurance agencies should be independent, their behavior and results are not affected by the third parties" (ENQA, EUA, ESIB, EURASHE, 2005). That is to say, if we want to register in EQAR, QAAs must have at least three conditions: organizational independence, operating independence, and result independence.

3.3 Stakeholder Coordination is the Foundation

As higher education goes to the society and the market, it has become the "destiny community" of the different stakeholders. Especially the external quality assurance of higher education, it is not only a matter of the higher education institution itself, but also a way to respond to the government's supervision and social accountability, involving many stakeholders. As Derek Bok said, "there is a huge and complex network that connects universities and other major institutions of society". Different stakeholders have different demands on external quality assurance activities. Although the appeals of different stakeholders are different, in the development of EQAR, their common goal is to enhance the effectiveness and reliability of external quality assurance. The realization of

this goal is the basis for the compatibility of the different stakeholders.

In order to respond to different demands and avoid conflicts, EQAR further promotes the coordination of stakeholders during the operation. On the one hand, EQAR through the system design to balance the conflict of interests. EQAR is jointly managed by different interest-related organizations, and the corresponding rights and obligations of different stakeholders are granted through legislation or regulations. On the other hand, it promotes the alignment of stakeholders through communication and dialogue. Quality assurance is an ambitious project. It is difficult to rely solely on EQAR's own strength to really promote the effective implementation of quality assurance activities. Therefore, EQAR clarify its development goals and tasks at various stages based on the Bologna process, and enhance the cooperation between government departments, EQAR members, registered QAAs and other interests through various channels such as holding meetings, organizing forums, and implementing cooperative projects. That will bring different stakeholders work together to achieve to build a cultural atmosphere of mutual respect and mutual trust.

3.4 Specialization and Standardization are the Paths

The activity of quality assurance of higher education is a professional activity, which requires professional staffs to make value judgments based on professional standards and professional ethics. Specialization is the foundation of the development of QAAs, without professional, the QAAs will like a river without water. At the same time, with the internationalization of higher education, quality assurance activities are beginning to internationalize. In order to promote the mobility of higher education, mutual recognition and cooperation among QAAs become more and more popular. Therefore, on the basis of guaranteeing the professionalism, it is necessary to carry out activities in accordance with the common standard framework for the sustainable development of QAAs. Specialization and standardization are the two sides of the coin, which complement each other and jointly promote the development of QAAs. Among them, specialization is the basis of standardization, and standardization is further promoted to specialization.

As the cornerstone of the European quality assurance framework, ESG stipulates the quality assurance standards of higher education from the European level. EQAR takes ESG as the registration standard. This is not only to judge the professionalism of QAA, but also to provide a European standard framework for the development of QAAs. In order to continuously protect the professionalism and standardization of QAAs, EQAR requires QAAs to make substantive change reports at any time, and carry out external evaluation and registration update every five years. So that registered QAAs will

continue to carry out activities in accordance with the common quality framework. At the same time, the documents such as "Procedure for Applications", "Appeals Procedure", "Use and Interpretation of the ESG" issued by EQAR have made QAAs more standardized to carry out its own internal quality assurance activities. The professionalism of QAAs promotes the reliability and effectiveness of its external quality assurance activities. It enables higher education institutions or governments to choose QAAs from registered catalogues to carry out evaluation activities and reduce the probability of "certification mills". The standardization of QAA provides a basis for the interaction and cooperation of different QAAs, and lays the foundation for mutual trust between higher education institutions and promotes student mobility. EQAR provides a consistent quality assurance framework for European Higher Education by promoting QAAs specialization and standardization. It enables higher education institutions to freely choose EQAR registered agencies for external quality assurance activities.

3.5 Quality Culture Construction is Mission

As a vital cultural organization, a purely technical route cannot guarantee the continuity of its quality assurance activities. Quality should not be rigid "control" but should be "production". Therefore, in effective quality assurance activities, quality must go beyond assessment, resulting from a broader cultural perspective. Quality culture implies collective responsibility. It needs to strike a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches. The emergence and development of EQAR is the result of the top-down initiative of interest-related organizations and the top-down promotion of the Bologna process contracting government. It is itself a trial of quality culture. As a product of quality culture, EQAR has innate sensitivity to promote the construction of quality culture. Whether it is its own quality assurance process or the implementation of QAAs registration activities, it is rooted in the construction of quality culture and takes the development of quality culture as its fundamental mission.

Quality culture includes organization and management structure, such as strategy, tool, process and method, as well as cultural and psychological factors, such as personal and collective values, beliefs and commitments. These two should be linked through elements such as communication, management and trust (Bendermacher et al. , 2017). In the process of development and operation, EQAR has established an independent organizational structure, formulated detailed behavior guidelines, which guaranteed the operability of quality culture construction at the technical level. At the same time, EQAR pays attention to the coordinated development of stakeholders, promotes exchanges and cooperation among various members through various channels, and actively conducts self-assessment activities, which made the concept of

quality is deeply rooted in the cultural level. Technology and culture complement each other and jointly promote the construction of EQAR's own quality culture. On this basis, EQAR integrates the quality culture into the registration work to ensure the transparency and fairness, which has greatly enhanced the trust of QAAs, universities, governments, markets, and other stakeholders in EQAR, and has promoted the development of higher education quality culture in Europe.

SUMMARY

Through the registration system, EQAR guaranteed the quality of QAAs, promoted the cooperation between QAAs and mutual trust, reduced the "certification mills", and enhanced the mobility of EHEA. EQAR has become an integral part of European higher education quality assurance framework. After ten years of development, its influence in Europe and even in the world. In 2016, the 44 EQAR registered agencies carried out a total of 9 764 external quality assurance activities of which 6% at institutional level, 93% at programmed level and 0.3% at joint programmer level (EQAR, 2018). It activities were spread across 30 EHEA and 20 non-EHEA countries. EQAR has been a beautiful landscape in the process of ensuring the quality of higher education in the world. Therefore, in order to ensure the quality of QAAs, to regain public confidence in the quality assurance activities, we can learn some experience from EQAR.

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