

To:

- All EQAR-registered agencies
- Coordinators of external reviews for EQAR registration
- Quality assurance agencies with a potential interest in registration

Brussels, 12 June 2015

Transition to the Revised European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)


Dear colleagues,

In May 2015, European Ministers responsible for higher education – at the Yerevan Ministerial Conference – approved the [revised version of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#) (European Standards and Guidelines, ESG).

Since the presentation of the proposal by the E4 Group in cooperation with BusinessEurope, Education International and EQAR in early 2014, the Register Committee has been preparing for the transition to the revised ESG.

As a result, I am glad to now present you with a number of (new or updated) reference documents for the European register of quality assurance agencies: a new, general policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG, an update of the Policy on Transition to the Revised ESG, as well as an amended version of the EQAR Procedures for Applications.

The Guide for Applicants and updated forms and templates for applications will be available shortly. The following table provides an overview of the main reference documents and their status:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedures for Applications 	General, formal rules	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies 	General explanation and interpretation of the ESG	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific policies, including: Transition to the Revised ESG Complaints Mergers 	Addressing specific issues or circumstances	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide for Applicants 	Explanatory document, no formal status	

European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) aisbl

Avenue d'Auderghem/
Oudergemselaan 36
1040 Brussels – Belgium

Phone: +32 2 234 39 12
Fax: +32 2 230 33 47

info@eqar.eu
www.eqar.eu

VAT BE 0897.690.557

The following sections summarise the changes brought about by the new ESG, our updated application process and the Transition Policy.

1. Revised Version of the ESG

The revised ESG bring along important changes for quality assurance agencies (see [comparison](#)):

- The ESG's focus remains on quality assurance in learning and teaching, but the inclusion of the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation enlarges the scope of the ESG.
- The ESG clearly stipulate that they apply to all higher education offered in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery, including transnational and cross-border provision.
- Part 1 of the ESG, relating to internal quality assurance, has been revised substantially.
- The new wording of ESG 2.1 underlines that the standards of Part 1 of the ESG need to be addressed in the processes and criteria used by quality assurance agencies when reviewing higher education institutions and programmes.

Parts 2 and 3 of the revised ESG further clarify and emphasise:

- the importance of involving stakeholders in the work of agencies (ESG 2.2 & 3.1);
- the expectation to involve students on expert panels (ESG 2.4);
- that the full reports by the experts have to be published, whether the outcome is positive or negative (ESG 2.6);
- that complaints and appeals processes need to be available in external quality assurance (ESG 2.7);
- the importance of agencies being independent and having full responsibility for their operations (ESG 3.3);
- the need to assure the integrity of agencies' activities (ESG 3.6).

Most elements that are part of the revised ESG were already contained in the 2005 version (such as the involvement of stakeholder perspectives and the publication of reports), and are now spelled out more clearly. We therefore expect that these principles are now clearly and unequivocally enshrined in quality assurance agencies' work.

» [European Standards and Guidelines \(ESG, 2015 version\)](#)

» [Comparative table ESG 2015 vs ESG 2005](#)

2. Use and Interpretation of the ESG

The policy "[Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies](#)" provides *ex ante* transparency of the official EQAR interpretation of the ESG to all those concerned: quality assurance

agencies, external review coordinators and external review panels, as well as other stakeholders.

The policy also aims to ensure the consistency of the Register Committee's decisions and facilitate the understanding of the decisions. It replaces the document on "Practices and Interpretations" published in 2013.

Agencies demonstrate substantial compliance with the ESG through an external review by a panel of independent experts, coordinated by another organisation than EQAR. In order to ensure that these reviews are a sufficient and robust basis for the Register Committee's decisions, it is vital that coordinators are aware of the Use and Interpretation of the ESG, and ensure that the panel undertaking a review takes them into account.

[» Use and Interpretation of the ESG \(June 2015\)](#)

3. Application Process

In conjunction with the transition to the revised ESG, we have introduced some important changes in our application process for inclusion on the Register or renewal of registration. The following table summarises the changes, which are explained in detail below.

	Old	New
Application deadline:	15 Mar & 15 Sep	Any time
Check of eligibility:	Prior check optional	First step of process
External review:	Before application	After eligibility check
Review report submission:	With application	15 Mar & 15 Sep
Flags:	In approval decision	No longer used
Publication:	Decision only	Full documentation

3.1 Application before the external review

In a number of cases there have been different understandings between the agency, the external review panel and the EQAR Register Committee as to which activities of the agency are within the scope of the ESG and, consequently, should be addressed in the external review of the agency to demonstrate that these activities comply with the ESG.

In the future, the applicant agency's activities need to be clarified with EQAR before the external review of the agency. **The agency needs to apply for inclusion on the Register (or renewal of registration) before initiating the external review.**

In this first step of the application process, the applicant agency has to identify the review coordinator, submit the draft terms of reference for the review and provide a description of its different areas of activities. The agency will indicate which of its activities it considers itself to be within the scope of the ESG (see §1.3 of the Procedures), and which not.

The **application can be made at any time, without fixed deadlines**. EQAR will respond within three weeks and confirm which activities are considered within the scope of the ESG and, thus, relevant to the application.

The agency is then expected to forward this information to the review coordinator and to make sure that (at least) all those activities will be addressed in the external review.

After the external review, the agency is expected to submit the external review report, a declaration of honour by the coordinator as well as – optionally – its statement on the external review report. There are **two annual deadlines for submitting external review reports**: 15 March and 15 September (previous application deadlines).

The EQAR Register Committee will then consider the application and make a decision on admission of the agency to the Register or renewal of its registration, respectively.

3.2 No more “flags” in decisions

Since the first decisions taken in 2008, the Register Committee has flagged certain issues for particular attention when considering a potential application for (further) renewal of inclusion on the Register.

Given the binary nature of decisions (registered or not registered, without possible conditions or similar) the status of a “flag” was, however, difficult to understand in practice.

The practice of flagging will therefore be discontinued for future decisions. Existing flags remain valid; agencies concerned will receive an individual letter in due course that “translates” these flags to the revised ESG.

3.3 Publication of full documentation

In order to enhance transparency of EQAR’s decisions the **full documentation of an application will from now on be published**.

This includes clarification received from applicant agencies or review panels, additional representation made by agencies, as well as any other documents submitted with the application.

Also **Substantive Change Reports by registered agencies will be published** in the future.

The formal rules for the application process are set out in the Procedures. These will be complemented by an explanatory Guide for Applicants shortly.

[» Procedures for Applications \(June 2015\)](#)

4. Policy on Transition to the Revised ESG

The EQAR Policy on Transition to the Revised ESG has been updated in order to reflect the adoption of the revised ESG as well as to address questions related to substantive changes and third-party complaints.

The arrangements for initial applications and for renewal of registration remain as in the initial version of the policy of October 2014.

We assume that any changes implemented by agencies after the adoption of the revised ESG will be designed with a view to the new standards. **Reports on substantive changes implemented by registered agencies after May 2015 will therefore be analysed in light of the revised version of the ESG.**

In general, the Policy on Transition to the Revised ESG is built on the presumption that agencies will implement the necessary changes for implementation of the revised ESG by the end of 2015. **Third-party complaints against registered agencies are therefore considered based on the revised ESG as from 1/1/2016.**

If you are a registered agency and have your **registration expiring during 2015/16, please remember to contact us for a provisional extension** of your registration, unless you have already done so.

For further details and explanations, please consult the updated policy:

[» Policy on Transition to the Revised ESG \(June 2015\)](#)

We are confident that these measures and changes will further enhance transparency and reliability of the registration process.

We also understand that the transition to the new version of the ESG is an important and challenging process for agencies that also involves additional effort and workload. We would be pleased to assist you where possible and we welcome your feedback and questions – please do not hesitate to contact the EQAR Secretariat.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Froment'.

Eric Froment
(Chair of the Register Committee)

- Attached:**
1. [European Standards and Guidelines \(2015 version\)](#)
 2. [Comparative table: ESG 2015 vs ESG 2005](#)
 3. [Procedures for Applications](#) (v3.0, June 2015)
 4. [Use and Interpretation of the ESG](#) (v1.0, June 2015)
 5. [Policy on Transition to the Revised ESG](#) (v2.0, June 2015)