

RIQAA Final Conference / EQAR Members' Dialogue

Palermo, 21-22 October, 2014

Welcome/Introductory Address

Prof. Andreas G. Orphanides, President of EQAR

Dear Members, Registered QA Agencies and Partners

Dear Colleagues

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this year's EQAR Members' Dialogue here in Palermo.

This is actually a special edition of our annual Members' Dialogue, since it is also the Final Conference of EQAR's Project on Recognition of International Quality Assurance Activity (RIQAA). This is the reason why this year's event is open also to registered agencies and other interested stakeholders, in addition to EQAR's governmental and stakeholder members.

EQAR has been able to steadily increase both the number of registered agencies and of governmental members over the past years. It is a pleasure to express a special welcome today to the United Kingdom, that became a Governmental Member recently. Although we now have on board 31 of the countries participating in the Bologna Process, I would like to encourage the 16 remaining countries to also be actively engaged with EQAR and support its function and operation. After all, EQAR has been established as a cornerstone of the European Higher Education Area's quality assurance framework, so I believe it is *sine qua non* all countries to become governmental members of EQAR.

The topics today and tomorrow deal with quality assurance agencies crossing borders. When EQAR was founded, in order to enhance transparency and information on credible quality assurance agencies operating in Europe, this was – and continues being so -- one of the major objectives; that is, to facilitate recognition of agencies and their decisions in other countries, and to allow higher education institutions to work with a suitable registered agency from abroad. The Bucharest Communiqué has put this aim more prominently at the forefront of the Bologna agenda.

As shown in the findings of the RIQAA project report, quality assurance agencies have rapidly expanded their international activities, and higher education institutions are keen to profit from the additional benefits and opportunities that are in it for them: an international profile, a more international experience and quality assurance that suits best their own mission and profile.

Yet, the national frameworks are lagging behind: the number of countries that allow their higher education institutions to work with a suitable agency from abroad listed in EQAR, is unfortunately not impressive.

Some countries argue it should be enough if institutions can opt for an additional international evaluation or accreditation in addition to the mandatory national one – but this leads to unproductive duplication and it is not in the spirit of a real coherent European Higher Education Area.

While we all have our national standards according to the European Standards and Guidelines, we should wonder whether we sometimes forget how much we have in common by looking at the European Standards and Guidelines; especially at their revised version, which will make our common denominator larger and stronger. The European

Standards and Guidelines are a secure, clear and solid basis for trust and confidence, and we should be able to systematically recognise others who have demonstrated that they have been working on this common basis.

I am looking forward to discussing with you today and tomorrow, especially with a view to what steps need to be taken to allow more higher education institutions across the EHEA to benefit from a cross-border review. In particular, we need to formulate and put forward a clear message to the European Ministers of higher education, when they meet next May in Yerevan, making explicit what steps governments need to take to allow for more cross-border quality assurance in Europe.

With the impressive and diverse participation we have at this EQAR Members' Dialogue – almost 100 participants from 35 countries – I am confident that we can have excellent and productive discussions and conclusions.

I would like to express our gratitude to the University of Palermo and its Rector, Roberto Lagalla, for hosting us in such an exceptional venue. I would also like to thank the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, and the Director General, Daniele Livon, and of course Marzia Foroni, for their support in organising this event. And of course, special thanks are due to Colin, Annelies and Melinda for the time and effort they put in to organise this event.

I wish all a fruitful and successful conference and dialogue.