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Strategic Management Plan of the
European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA)

October 2013

1. Background

ECA was established as a project organisation in 2003 with the aim to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation results and decisions for the primary benefit of students (facilitation of trans-border recognition processes). ECA's activities are based on the ECA Agreement of Cooperation which is renewed every three years (1).

Due to intensive collaboration among the involved agencies and strong commitments to achieve the set goals, bilateral MR agreements between ECA member organizations have been signed in 2007. This marked the end of the first project phase (2). Commonly elaborated guidelines, codes and instruments provided the consortium with the trust needed to continue with the second project phase (2008-2011). In this phase ECA developed a number of projects (3), based upon prior achievements of the Consortium and following the political pathways of the Bologna Ministers and the European Commission. The application of MR agreements was successfully tested in the area of joint programmes (JOQAR). Multinational mutual recognition agreements (MULTRA) have been set up with the special target to simplify the accreditation of joint programmes. A database driven website was established (www.Qrossroads.eu), providing transparent and standardised information about all accredited study programmes and institutions. In order to enhance consistency of accreditation decisions, a European training programme for experts and for QA staff was organised (E-TRAIN). Finally the fundament was laid down for a new project, the internationalisation certificate (CeQuInt) which awards good and excellent performances of HEIs in the area of internationalisation, and which is focused rather on quality improvement than on fulfilling minimal standards. All these ECA projects got European funding and support from the European Commission. The results helped to create a considerable degree of reputation of ECA in the international HE and QA world.

In order to continue the projects and to further use the elaborate core competencies of ECA and its members in a row of domains, ECA entered into a third project phase (2012-2015). Ten principles are guiding ECA in this phase of work (4). In this phase, the ECA projects have been opened to partners outside the ECA member community. Higher education institutions moved more into the centre of the ECA activities. The political fundament of the work of ECA remained stable over time and the latest Bologna communiqué (Bucharest 2012) fits optimally to the past and current ECA activities (5).

In the fall of 2012 a SWOT analysis was carried out by the ECA Management Group, resulting in the discussion about the future strategy of the Consortium. Potential cornerstones of a new strategy have subsequently been discussed at the ECA seminar with the Consortium

members (6) and resulted in the establishment of two documents: the "Strategic Management Plan of ECA" (this paper) and the "Business plan of ECA" (a separate paper). These papers serve as the guidelines for the activities of ECA in the forthcoming years and have been discussed with members at the ECA Workshop on 19th June 2013 in Madrid. The strategic management plan has been supported by the members with some revisions that are included in this draft. The ECA strategic management plan is publicly available and has been discussed with the major European HE stakeholder groups.

2. Vision, Mission and Aims

Vision: The vision of ECA is to act as an internationally recognised driver of innovation in quality assurance. With its expertise, networking and services ECA contributes to the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), promotes internationalisation of higher education and assures "state of the art" activities of its members.

Mission: ECA is a professional organisation that strives for continuous progress in the area of accreditation and external quality assurance, facilitates mutual recognition of qualifications, promotes internationalisation of higher education and creates transparency in QA to the benefit of students, HE institutions and society.

Aims: The overarching aims of ECA are (1):
- to promote mutual recognition initiatives in QA
- to stimulate and enhance internationalisation of HE institutions and students
- to contribute to transparency in the European Higher Education Area
- to promote an intensive mutual learning experience among its members in order to support them in the establishment and maintenance of modern accreditation and external QA systems.

3. Objectives and Goals

Objectives: The overarching objective of ECA is to contribute to the implementation of the EHEA and to international QA developments through innovative project work. ECA offers solutions to recently identified gaps in QA and develops tools and services that are beneficial for HE institutions and students. The work of ECA is oriented on the principles of good practices in external quality assurance and based upon mutual trust among its members (4).

Goals: In order to achieve its mission and objectives, the ECA members agree on the following specific goals:
- achieve bilateral and multinational mutual recognition agreements in QA, based on evidence and trust; work towards automatic recognition of qualifications within EHEA
- develop and implement instruments that stimulate the internationalisation of higher education institutions and of students and staff
- provide society and interested stakeholders with transparent and standardised information about the quality of accredited and assessed institutions and programmes
- establish a platform for mutual learning and methodological exchange between ECA members and provide projects that serve the purpose of internal capacity building (benefit for staff of ECA member agencies)

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- collaborate with external partners in order to promote ECA goals throughout Europe and beyond these regional borders.

4. Strategic action lines

ECA carries out projects and activities in the domain of external quality assurance that serve its stated mission and objectives. On a mid-term basis, ECA concentrates its activities to the following content areas (6):
- MR activities (within Europe and beyond), as alternative/pathway to automatic recognition of qualifications
- activities and coordination in the area of accreditation/recognition of joint programmes
- provision of a European certificate for excellence in internationalisation of HE
- mutual learning between member agencies; development of modern accreditation systems.

In order to carry out its tasks in a professional way, ECA will need to maintain and develop:
- transparency tools (e.g. Qrossroads, ECApedia)
- special trainings for experts participating in the internationalisation certificate or in joint programme procedures.

In acting in this way the „original goals" of ECA will be maintained and are supplemented by new objectives and innovative projects (4-7).

Mutual recognition remains in the focus of ECA activities as it has political potential (trust-based pathway to facilitate automatic recognition of qualifications) and as such agreements are an important sign of mutual trust among committed agencies. The MR initiative of ECA has introduced a strong and sustainable European dimension into the EHEA and found its practical application in single accreditation procedures for joint programmes. The MR approach of ECA has been acknowledged internationally and can be applied in other regions of the world and in trans-regional education projects.

The provision of a ECA certificate in the domain of internationalisation of HE corresponds to a need of higher education institutions. It carries along innovative capital (first time that accreditation is focusing on excellence) and can be offered as a ECA service on a paid basis, within and outside of Europe. The ECA transparency tools are widely used by the different stakeholders in HE and can be brought to a new level of dissemination in combined efforts with other QA/HE key players in Europe (such as links to EQAR, etc.).
Other services of ECA may also find its interests in the international HE and QA community: wiki-type handbook of good practices, counseling and query services, training courses, capacity building services, etc.

ECA strives to create an added value for all members. The work of ECA is based on the principles of subsidiarity, placing joint activities as enriching supplement to existing national expertise and efforts in external quality assurance. The achievements of ECA help member organisations to enhance visibility. The intensive mutual exchange helps them to be fit for the needs of an increasingly international higher education area.

ECA operates in close interchange with international QA initiatives and developments. ECA takes a proactive role in the collaboration with regional networks and other partners. ECA promotes its achievements in Europe and other parts of the world.

5. Profile of ECA

ECA is a bottom up organisation and independent in its activities. It is based on the initiatives of its member agencies. The project orientation of ECA is an important success factor and guarantees the necessary flexibility to respond to current developments and needs, and to act as innovative driver for new developments in external QA. The homogeneity of its members (similar stages of development) and the achieved mutual trust allow ECA to plan and carry out projects in timely manner. The relatively small size of the organisation and the trustful and cordial atmosphere guarantee sustainability of ECA's activities.

The project orientation and the focus on methodological issues centered around accreditation and accreditation-like practices gives ECA a profile which is clearly distinguishable from the profiles of other European networks in the area of external quality assurance (e.g. ENQA and EQAR).

Under the outlined strategy and activities, the profile of ECA can be best described by keywords such as „expert and service organisation", "innovative think tank", „project and excellence oriented network", "international driver in QA"(6).

ECA work is output oriented and uses proactive communication mechanisms to bring its goals and its achievements onto the radar of the relevant stakeholder groups and society. It is evident that the result of ECA work should have a potential influence on national and European policies (e.g. MR agreements). However, ECA does not intend to be a political actor in the narrow sense of the word.

ECA members share a common vision; they are acting on a par with each other and they share successful project work from the past. The achieved mutual trust between member agencies is a unique richness of ECA and provides the basis to act as a think tank, to create new ideas and to test out innovative projects and practices in accreditation and quality assurance. All of this provides a solid fundament for a continuous cooperation between the members of the Consortium.

6. Values

ECA as an organisation:
- strives for professionalism and excellence in its own work
- respects cultural diversity
- endorses the responsibility of HEIs in quality assurance
- promotes the operational independence of its members and independent decision making
- uses mutual trust among its members as basis for development
- displays a cooperative attitude and promotes mutual exchange of ideas and information
- thinks and works with orientation towards quality enhancement and innovation
- looks for practical application of its project work and acts with service orientation
- cares about proactive dissemination and international outreach of its outcomes.

7. Target groups and Partners of ECA

Target groups: With its activities and services ECA addresses more than just one target audience (6):

Target group HEIs and students
Students and HEIs profit from the enhancement oriented internationalisation certificate, from the Coordination Point in the area of joint programmes, from the MR agreements (less mobility barriers), from the transparency tools of ECA, from a closer dialogue with ECA in order to determine their needs and from eventual new projects (e.g. accreditation for PhD programs).

Target group QA/accreditation agencies
QA and accreditation agencies profit from the offered trainings for experts and staff; from the mutual learning experiences and exchange of good practices with advanced partner agencies; from the debates about modern QA and accreditation methods; from an increase in visibility through participation in the project work; from enhanced partnerships with governments, HEIs and students; and from the gained mutual trust.

Target group governments and recognition authorities
The national ministries, European Commission and recognition authorities can profit from strong national QA/accreditation bodies; from the instruments developed to facilitate trans-border recognition of qualifications; from the transparency tools of ECA; from the policy support on national and European level by ECA members activities; from the European dimension added in all ECA activities and the contribution to the EHEA modernisation agenda.

Partners: It appears logical that the mentioned target groups will also become important strategic partners of ECA. A close cooperation would guarantee that the work of ECA fits its real purpose and that reality is mirrored in it. Therefore, it will be important to maintain and further strengthen the relationship between ECA and its primary partners, especially the HEIs, the students, the ENIC-NARICs, the nationalministries, the European Commission. A systematic interlinkage between ECA and ENQA is demonstrated by the fact that the latter organisation is providing an affiliate membership status to ECA.

Furthermore, ECA should create and initiate collaborative projects with QA partners and networks within and outside of Europe (in alphabetical order: APQN, CEENQA, ENQA, EQAR, INQAAHE, RIACES). When appropriate a memorandum of cooperation shall be signed with these partners. Such partnerships guarantee close interchange with international QA initiatives and assure that the different QA actors are working in the same line.

8. Organisation of ECA and Finances

In order to accomplish the stated activities and to implement the new strategy it has become unavoidable to enhance professionalisation within ECA. A legal status is necessary to achieve the legitimacy needed to deliver and sustain the intended services (e.g. ECA internationalisation certificate). The legal basis will also open up new funding possibilities for the Consortium, especially on European and international level (6).

The favourable legal entity for ECA might change over time, depending on the mission and strategy of the consortium. Under the given strategy the association is the preferable solution. The association helps ECA to maintain its membership character and to pursue a common purpose. Additionally it assures that power continues to be concentrated in the general meeting of the consortium.

As a legal entity ECA will continue to carry out its new projects under the leadership of its trusted members. The management group (to be called Board following the legal terminology of association) will facilitate the strategic steering of ECA. The working groups will continue to play their important role as methodological think tanks and as creators of innovative projects on the European level. Representatives of HEIs (e.g. IQA staff) shall be integrated into the WGs if suitable in order to guarantee closeness to the institution's needs. A communication platform will have to be established to bring the different actors together and communication lines both for ECA and its individual members should be created.

Under the new ECA strategy the Consortium will continue to generate income via membership fees and EU project funding. More EU funding opportunities are available for ECA as a legal entity. In addition to that ECA will generate additional income by offering its products as paid services on the HE market (e.g. internationalisation certificate). Other services which directly benefit ECA members can be offered on a cost-covering regime (e.g. training for experts or staff of QAAs). In order to cope with these new financial mechanisms ECA has developed a business plan for ECA. The business model allows ECA to deliver its quality assurance services with high quality, on a financially sustainable basis and in ways that benefit ECA members and other stakeholders.

9. Success criteria

ECA is project and outcome oriented. Performance indicators will be established for all work of ECA. Annual work plans in all working groups of ECA set the basis to evaluate whether the planned outcomes have been reached. Major projects of ECA shall roll out under defined road maps, with specific milestones and timeframes. ECA will periodically evaluate whether it has reached its goals.

References

(1) ECA Agreement of Cooperation:
http://www.ecaconsortium.net/admin/files/assets/subsites/1/documenten/1341929050_1340721759-agreement-of-cooperation-2012-2015-13.06.2012.pdf

(2) *The Benefits of mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions*, ECA, The Hague, 2008: http://www.ecaconsortium.net/main/documents/publications

(3) All ECA projects are published on the ECA website:
http://www.ecaconsortium.net/main/projects

(4) *Principles of ECA III (end of 2011-2015)*, 4th draft, June 2011, prepared for the ECA meeting in Barcelona and accepted by the MG at the meeting of 4th May 2011

(5) *The Bucharest Communiqué 2012 and the work of ECA: ECA policy paper*, Draft prepared for the ECA Workshop 13 June 2012 in Madrid

(6) *Future strategy of ECA – Results of a workshop of the Management Group*, Summary from strategic workshop of ECA management group, 30-31 October 2012, Amsterdam (discussed with Consortium members at ECA Seminar in The Hague, 17 January 2013).

(7) *The Benefits of mutual recognition of accreditation decision,* Paper of working group 1, ECA, The Hague, 2010