

ECA Strategic Update 2018-2023

Approved at ECA Annual Meeting 28 June 2018

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 were based on the ECA Agreement of Cooperation, renewed every three years. From 2003 to 2015, three project phases have then seen a constant development and expansion of ECA membership, objectives and services.

In 2013 a strategic management plan and a supporting business plan had been drawn up by the Board, discussed with European stakeholder groups and adopted by ECA members. It has served the purpose of developing ECA from a network of agencies into an association under Dutch law. Since the incorporation as an association in 2014 it is possible for ECA to be a project partner or coordinator of European projects; this was not possible when ECA was not a legal entity. Also the award of the ECA Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation made it necessary to become a legal entity. As a result, the strategic plan had established an encompassing, detailed and public documentation of ECA's vision, mission, values and strategic goals.

In 2016, the Board initiated a reflection and revision of ECA's strategy. After consultation with the Working Groups it had become evident, that while the general strategic positioning was still recognised as valid, the strategy did no longer provide sufficient guidance for mid-term strategic development. Hence, it was decided to build on the 2013 strategic plan and develop a *strategic update* for a mid-term period of 3 to 5 years.

2. Vision, Mission, and Objectives

ECA recognises its *mission, vision and overall objectives* as developed in the 2013 Strategy Plan as still being valid:

Vision: The vision of ECA is to act as an internationally recognised driver of innovation in quality assurance (QA). 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 in-

ternationalisation of higher education and creates transparency in QA to the benefit of students, HE institutions and society.

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.

3. Strategic Update: Goals and Priorities

Taking up the strategic goals of the 2013 strategic management plan, ECA sets the following goals for the period of 2018-2023:

- monitoring developments in international quality assurance, based on input from members and stakeholders of higher education in- and outside the EHEA, and developing innovative positions on emerging challenges;
- achieve mutual recognition agreements in QA, based on evidence and trust; support recognition of qualifications and quality assurance decisions within the EHEA;
- develop and implement instruments that stimulate the internationalisation of higher education institutions and of students and staff;
- providing a platform for mutual learning and methodological exchange between ECA members and provide projects that serve the purpose of internal capacity building of ECA member agencies;
- collaborate with external partners in order to promote ECA goals throughout Europe and beyond these regional borders.

These strategic goals not only belong to the legacy of ECA but also point out the main current and future characteristics of ECA. In addition, they also highlight the special profile of ECA vis-à-vis other networks. However, the innovative mission of ECA implies that the topics that ECA focuses on have to be prioritised anew in view of the current context and trends in QA systems in the EHEA and the ESG 2015. After a process of strategic meetings and discussions the following strategic priorities are foreseen for the coming years. This list of priorities is not meant to be exhaustive but it does present the major topics that ECA wants to focus on in the coming years:

Strategic priorities:

- 1) Internationalisation and transnational higher education
 - QA of transnational education
 - automatic recognition of qualifications
 - enhancing and certifying internationalisation (e.g. Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation, eQuatic project)
 - joint programmes (e.g. implementation of European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes)
 - implications of QA for European Universities.
- 2) Relating the world of work and higher education
 - QA of work-based learning (including relations with Vocational Education and Training, VET)
 - entrepreneurial (higher) education
 - employability and QA

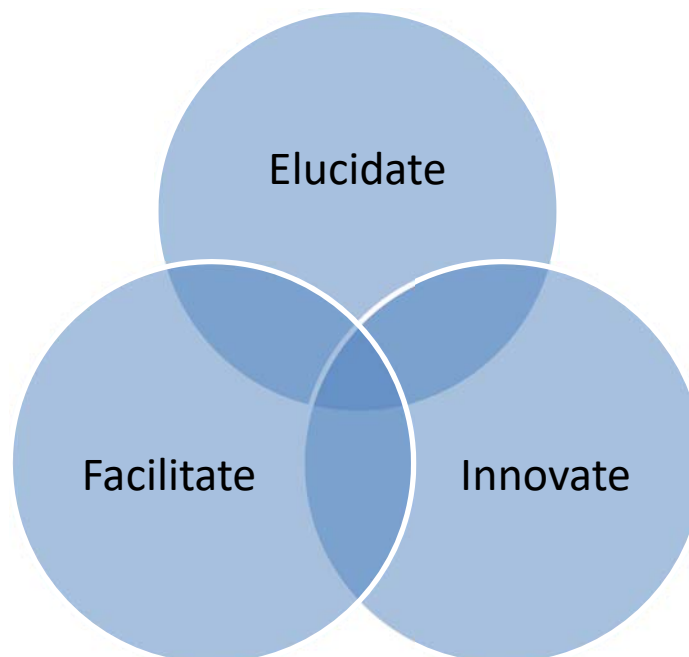
- 3) Innovation of QA of learning and teaching
- QA and recognition of online learning, blended learning and other innovative forms of formal and non-formal higher education
 - Student-centred learning and new learning and teaching modes
 - Learning and teaching in institutional reviews, including risk-informed analyses
 - new developments and policies regarding equity, research and innovation: implications for QA .

These strategic priorities are fitting to ECA’s vision of being at the foreground of QA developments, contributing to the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), promoting internationalisation of higher education and assuring “state of the art” activities of its members.

In developing the priorities the proposed pathway of detecting needs through the functions of think tank and developing internal and external services will be taken into account.

4. Strategic Update: Tasks & Approaches

ECA’s tasks should be aligned with the strategic priorities and enable an action oriented approach. Three closely interrelated tasks illustrate the way in which ECA approaches its priorities:



Elucidate – ECA sees itself as a *think tank* that detects upcoming developments and challenges in quality assurance in higher education, either through its own network of agencies or through input from outside stakeholders and cooperating organisations. By identifying, appraising and relating these developments to the needs of stakeholders, ECA brings clarity, explanation and judgment to developments and practices of QA. An exemplary outcome of this task might be a position paper on an issue that ECA has reflected on or giving a problem description in a European context. Hence, this

task supports innovation in international quality assurance of higher education and will also enhance the external visibility and influence of ECA.

Facilitate – ECA facilitates the *networking* function of ECA with members investing intellectual and personal work in ECA and engaging in mutual learning in working groups and committees. Through its networking activities ECA acts as a *provider of internal services* for its members: Workshops and Seminars, a database of international experts (EEEP), and staff trainings are examples of such services. This task benefits member agencies, its staff and leadership and supports good practices in QA work.

Innovate – ECA provides innovative services for its members as well as for HEIs and students. This includes, among others, CeQuInt, mutual recognition and implementation of QA of joint programmes, trainings aimed at these services, and projects related to the strategic priorities. It may also include initiatives for capacity building with partners in- and outside the EHEA. This task transfers the outcomes of the elucidating and facilitating functions into significant and tangible activities, tools and services that benefit all stakeholders in higher education.

These three tasks closely fit the key missions of ECA, but also provide structural flexibility and thematic openness. They endorse the values of ECA, especially cooperation, quality enhancement and international outreach. The three functions are interlinked and mutually stimulating. This can provide a path for developing identified needs in quality assurance in higher education, from initial reasoning to internal exchange and support up to the development and provision of external services. Yet, they can also produce valuable results and benefits in themselves.

5. Strategic Update: Implications for Organisation and Communication

The strategic priorities are dealt with through ECA's well-established structure of working groups and committees that can cover all three tasks. The working groups function as ECA's think tanks (elucidate), embed a community of learning in which good practices can be discerned and shared (facilitate), and act as a force of proposition to establish opportunities for further development and exploration (innovate). The latter may lead to proposals for developing new projects (externally or internally funded), or to services offered to ECA member agencies or to external stakeholders (HEIs or students). In case of services offered to stakeholders, a special or standing committee (such as the Certification Group) to which the ECA members can designate special tasks may be a suitable structure. It is important that all the work of ECA is communicated clearly, both to ECA members and to the outside world.

Guaranteeing sufficient progress on implementing the ECA strategy as well as effective communication on the strategic activities requires some structural changes:

1. Each of the three *strategic priorities* is covered by an existing or newly established working group. The specifications are agreed by the members in the work plans.
2. For specific internal services such as trainings a *Trainings Committee* and for communication and online services (EEEP, ECApedia, QAZette) a *Communications Committee* will be set up and monitored by the Board. Trainings, online services and communication such as newsletters will need a broader involvement and input of members to enable professionalisation.
3. Each *Working Group and Committee* will draw up a *work plan* for the next 3 years. These work plans include the topics to be discussed, explored, and potentially developed into an

externally or internally funded project and/or offered service. The work plans include responsibilities (e.g. if a subgroup will be working on a certain topic or project proposal) and timelines (taking into account deadlines for submission of projects). The *Board* will discuss each work plan taking a comprehensive view of the ECA strategy and decide whether a proposed *internal project* is eligible for funding by ECA. The *final work plan* for the whole of ECA (consisting of the work plans for all working groups and committees) will be presented, discussed and approved in the Annual Meeting.

4. To ensure good communication between board and working groups/committees a Board member will act as a liaison to the working group/committee. This liaison can be the chair of a working group/committee if this person has a seat in the Board. The liaison to the working group/committee will *report* on the progress made concerning the work plan in the Board meetings.
5. To further encourage communication between members/groups the current practice of combining meetings at one location will be maintained. The aim will be to have at least 3 of these combined meetings (which can be combined with thematic seminars and may be open for stakeholders) and to plan these one year ahead (February, June/Annual Meeting, October).
6. Within three weeks after each Board meeting the Secretariat will inform the ECA members of the outcomes of what has been discussed and decided by the Board, including the reports on the progress made by the working groups and committees.
7. Each working group and committee has the opportunity for a closed *blog* on the ECA website, and will be invited by the Secretariat to write on the progress made in a *newsletter* to all contacts of ECA (the newsletter will be published three times a year).