Starting your second mandate as EQAR President, you have witnessed first-hand the changes in the European Higher Education Area...how would you define this new landscape?

I have enjoyed my first term as EQAR-president immensely! Seeing the differences within the European Higher Education Area has been enriching and I have become very impressed by the developments in higher education and in the field of quality assurance. I am impressed as well by the will towards cooperation between the QA-agencies and the trust that exists between them. But of course there are also worries: the different possibilities for the further development of qualitative good education; the threats towards academic freedom and the possible consequences for mobility; the growing cleavage in mobility, towards the Northwest; the legal obstacles that hinder recognition and cooperation;...

As a convinced European I am very much in favour of strengthening the European idea of “unity in diversity”. We have all been witnesses of the cracks in international cooperation that the Corona-virus has shown. Even more than before I am convinced that education and certainly higher education has to play the most important role in bringing people together. We need common understanding, we need tolerance, we need solidarity, but above all we need empathy and true interest in different cultures, histories and opinions. Without this basic attitude of curiosity we are not as effective as we should be!

How do you see the role of the quality assurance agencies in this (new) picture landscape?

The next term of my presidency will be characterised by the need for stronger cooperation between countries, higher education systems and universities. The initiative taken by president Macron to establish European universities has taken firm ground with 41 alliances approved. These alliances will have to be facilitated, not only through grants, but also through quality assurance. It wouldn’t be understandable if each and every member of these alliances has to be ‘accredited’ according to national rules and regulations. We, the QA-community, have to come forward with solutions and we will have to convince the national legislators to trust the QA-agencies in order to find workable solutions for accreditation of the alliances. I hope the EUniQ-pilots will show us a way forward!

But it is not only about the alliances! We have to look for a better balance in inward and outward mobility, we have to look for better possibilities for the youth in countries with high unemployment, we have to look for solidarity between countries, HE-systems and universities! Quality assurance is following, not leading the direction of universities and systems. We have to be modest in our roles, but we can play a role in facilitating new ways of QA, in building trust between countries and systems, in bringing forward an improving quality in teaching and learning, in opening up for short courses and microcredentials. And therefore we need cooperation, openness and respect in our work!
What challenges and what role for EQAR?

And EQAR? The register will become more important in showing the quality of the work of the agencies, the register will have to play a more political role in addressing legal obstructions for cooperation in the existing laws and regulations, and the register will use its new tool DEQAR to give information about accredited universities and programs! A modest role? Yes, but a vital! And that is what is going to drive me in my second term!”

Karl Dittrich (1952) has been educated as a Political Scientist at Leiden University (BSC, MSc, PhD). He has been assistant professor in Leiden and Maastricht. He became member (1986) and later (1994) president of the Executive Board of Maastricht University. From 2005 onwards he was chairman of the Dutch and Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO). In 2012 he was appointed as chair of the Dutch Association of Universities (VSNU). In 2017 he became the first president of EQAR and is currently also interim-chair of the Dutch Open University and has a number of supervisory roles in Dutch higher education.