



ACQUIN  
Guidelines  
for  
Programme Accreditation Procedures

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### I OVERVIEW

The ACQUIN Guidelines for Programme Accreditation apply to the structured external audit of study programmes on a tertiary level. These guidelines describe the contents, the criteria and the process of the external quality audit. Furthermore, they assist the Higher Education Institution (HEI) to facilitate the provisions of the external audit, e.g. specifying further information gathering. The following chapters provide a short introduction to objectives, criteria and process of the programme accreditation.

As an external quality assurance instrument, the programme accreditation aims both at assessing the study programmes' existing quality and at recommending improvements. Accountability and enhancement are at the core of the accreditation. The accreditation is performed by external reviewers who evaluate and assess the study programmes. To guarantee impartiality, the reviewers scrutinize the study programmes against a set of criteria. The competence of the reviewers in their respective field of expertise assures the quality of the external audit.

ACQUIN's accreditation procedures comply with the "*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*" (ESG). The ESG define both assessment criteria and criteria for the accreditation process. These will be described in the following chapters.

#### 1 Accreditation criteria

The ESG represent the essential basis for ACQUIN's approach covering three areas: internal quality assurance, external quality assurance and quality assurance agencies. While part 1 describes the standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance, part 2 defines the approach of the external quality assurance and is therefore relevant for ACQUIN's international programme accreditation procedures.

These principles provide a framework for quality assurance processes, which may also integrate national or more subject-specific standards. Hence, they are universally applicable – even outside the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Under certain circumstances, incompatibility between national standards and the ESG can occur. The experts will address this issue in the evaluation report, and the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN will take this into account when making its decision.

#### 2 Process

ACQUIN's accreditation process follows the structure according to the ESG:

- ACQUIN and the HEI define the design and scope of the study programmes' accreditation based on the criteria mentioned above and in accordance with legal requirements. (ESG 2.1, 2.2)
- The HEI submits a self-assessment report to ACQUIN. In addition, ACQUIN conducts an on-site visit with discussions of all stakeholders, e.g. lecturers and students, which results in an evaluation report with clearly defined follow-up measures. (ESG 2.3)

- The external audit is performed as a peer-review. ACQUIN composes a group of experienced and trained reviewers in consensus with the HEIs. The reviewers are both qualified in matters of accreditation and the subject of the respective study programmes. The usual expert group consists of professors, professional practitioners and students. It may include national and/or special experts if necessary, e.g. from national institutions of the HEI's country. (ESG 2.4)
- The expert group evaluates the study programmes by pre-defined and published criteria and scientific standards. Depending on the level of compliance with these standards, the experts postulate conditions, recommendations and suggestions. (ESG 2.5)
- ACQUIN publishes the report of the expert group. The report includes evidence, analysis, findings, and conclusions regarding the study programmes as well as a context description of the HEI and general information about the accreditation procedure and the experts. The HEI may point out factual errors before the report is finalised. The Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN supplements its appraisal to the experts' recommendations for follow-up actions based on the HEI's statement to the report. (ESG 2.6)
- The HEI has the right to complain and appeal at any given step of the accreditation process. The HEI may object to one or more experts chosen by ACQUIN if reasonable evidence is brought forward (e.g. suspicion of bias). The HEI may request rectification of inaccuracies, analyses and conclusions in the experts' report. Finally, the HEI may appeal against the accreditation decision. The Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN takes a decision on the appeal. If the HEI does not agree with the result of this revision, it may turn to ACQUIN's Appeals Commission. (ESG 2.7)

II THE PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION PROCEDURE AT A GLANCE

Phases	ACQUIN	Expert group	Higher Education Institution (HEI)
Contract between HEI and ACQUIN			
Nomination of the expert group			HEI sends preliminary information about the study programmes (profile information)
	ACQUIN chooses experts		
			HEI accepts the expert group
Self-assessment report			HEI prepares and submits self-assessment report
	ACQUIN checks validity and completeness of the self-assessment report		
Organising the on-site visit	An ACQUIN programme manager as contact person accompanies and supports the HEI in organising the on-site visit		HEI organises the on-site visit in coordination with the programme manager
	ACQUIN programme manager provides the members of the expert group with the essential information and prepares them for their task		
On-site visit and reporting	Programme manager coordinates and accompanies the on-site visit	Expert group discusses with HEI representatives	HEI Management, teaching staff, and students provide comprehensive insight in study programme(s)
		Expert group compiles report	
Accreditation decision			HEI gives a statement about the report – if necessary
	Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN decides about the accreditation		
	ACQUIN publishes the report		HEI is informed about the decision and receives certificates and documents

**ACQUIN's programme managers**

The programme manager is responsible to experts and HEI representatives with respect to all emerging questions relating to the course of the procedure, to the interpretation of formal and subject-specific criteria, to deadlines etc. The programme manager accompanies the expert group during the on-site visit and is responsible for all organisational issues regarding the visit as well as for the flow of information between the HEI, the experts and ACQUIN. They do not act as experts during the accreditation

procedure. As contact persons, they are available for the experts and the HEI regarding all types of technical and formal issues.

### Expert group

The expert group consists of scientific peers (professors), experts with professional background and representatives of students. The number of experts (per subject area) depends on the number of study programmes being evaluated and/or the subject-specific clustering of the study programmes. The expert group exhibits international experience; if appropriate, national expertise is embedded (by bringing in one or more national experts). In case of cluster accreditation procedures (two or more study programmes), the number of appointed university, non-university and student experts increases.

Experts are prepared for their role in the accreditation procedure by individual training or workshops and by an extended preliminary meeting and discussion with a programme manager of ACQUIN preceding the on-site visit.

### On-site visit

The on-site visit usually lasts several days. It starts with the preliminary meeting of experts and the ACQUIN programme manager. The programme manager introduces the experts to technicalities of the on-site visit and the role of experts during the discussions with the HEI's representatives. A spokesperson will be chosen among the members of the expert group; this role may be rotating in the course of the talks. The spokesperson mainly chairs the discussions during the on-site visit.

The expert group talks with representatives of the HEI (teaching staff, HEI management, students and alumni) and inspects the facilities. The accreditation procedure in general and the experts' evaluation of the accreditation criteria in particular are based on the examination of the submitted self-assessment report of the HEI and on discussions during the on-site visit. Accreditation procedures are collegial assessments guided by formal accreditation criteria and based on constructive criticism.

### Assessment report

The members of the expert group compile the assessment report. It contains information on the fulfilment of accreditation criteria as well as on all found positive and negative aspects of the study programme(s) relating to the HEI's self-report and the dialogue of the on-site visit.

### **ACQUIN's Accreditation Commission**

ACQUIN's accreditation commission is the decision-making body, which at the end decides upon the accreditation of a study programme. Thus, the expert group's judgement is in a way a preliminary result. Based on the experts' report, the responding statement of the HEI, the decision of the accreditation

commission may differ concerning specific conditions or recommendations. This procedure guarantees an independent, comprehensible and balanced accreditation result.



### III ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

According to the ESG, the following ten criteria of internal quality assurance are evaluated:

ESG Standard 1.1 – Policy for quality assurance

ESG Standard 1.2 – Design and approval of programmes

ESG Standard 1.3 – Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

ESG Standard 1.4 – Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

ESG Standard 1.5 – Teaching staff

ESG Standard 1.6 – Learning resources and student support

ESG Standard 1.7 – Information management

ESG Standard 1.8 – Public information

ESG Standard 1.9 – On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

ESG Standard 1.10 – Cyclical external quality assurance

Within the ESG framework, the accreditation procedure may check the compliance of study programmes with national legislation, as well as national and international scientific standards such as qualification frameworks or the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

The currently valid version of the ESG (including additional information and supplementing commentaries) is available in several languages on the website of the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA) [www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu).

#### IV POSSIBLE RESULTS OF THE PROCEDURE

In the assessment of each standard, the expert group distinguishes between (*full or substantial*) *compliance*, *partial compliance* and *non-compliance*. Depending on the level of fulfilment, the procedure of programme accreditation can have three different outcomes:

##### Unconditional Accreditation: Compliance with the ESG Standards

The study programmes fulfil all criteria of accreditation. In case of substantial compliance, the experts may express recommendations. These recommendations may be taken into account by the HEI with regard to the further improvement of quality.

##### Accreditation with Conditions: Partial Compliance with the ESG Standards

The study programmes do not completely fulfil all criteria of the ESG. Certain aspects must be revised to ensure the compliance with the ESG. An accreditation with conditions does not imply any disqualification of the institutional setting. The HEI must fulfil the conditions within a defined period.

##### Refusal of accreditation: Fundamental flaws regarding one or more ESG Standards

The study programmes do not fulfil all criteria of accreditation. The flaws are so significant, that compatibility with all ESG Standards cannot be achieved in a reasonable period. In this case, the Accreditation commission refuses the accreditation.

The HEI can suspend the procedure in order to extend the timeframe for eradicating the flaws.

## V STRUCTURE OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

The HEI's self-assessment report is the essential document for the discussions during the on-site visit and the evaluation by the expert group.

The structure of the self-assessment report should follow the ESG. Additional (national) criteria can be integrated in the assessment, if appropriate.

The self-assessment report should contain the following parts

1. General information: Cover sheets, brief background of the institution, basic information on the assessed programmes
2. Description of internal quality assurance: ESG Standards Part 1
3. Appendix (official / legal / supplemental documents)

The requirements on the composition of these three parts will be described in more detail in the next chapters.

### 1 Part 1: General information

#### 1.1 Cover sheet

The self-assessment report should contain a cover sheet (for each study programme) with the following information:

- Provider of the study programme (HEI, department / faculty)
- HEI site(s) where the programme is provided
- Title of the study programme
- Degree
- Date or planned date of introduction
- Subject field (multiple classifications possible)
- Regular study duration
- Number of ECTS credits
- Matriculation periods (e. g. winter semester / summer semester)
- Frequency of the offered programme (e. g. annually / semi-annually)
- Capacity per year (number of students to be admitted)
- Number of students currently enrolled

- Average number of graduates per year
- Tuition fees
- Type of studies (e. g. full-time / extra-occupational / distance learning / part-time)

#### 1.2 Overview of the curriculum

- Modules / course / academic schedule (preferably as graphic representation or table)

#### 1.3 Short portrait of the HEI

- History and profile
- Numbers of faculties / departments
- Numbers of students, teaching staff, administrative staff

#### 1.4 Additional information on the assessed study programme(s)

- History / purpose / aims / development etc.

### 2 Part 2: Description of internal quality assurance

The ESG provide ten standards and corresponding guidelines for internal quality assurance. Each standard should be described in detail regarding the explanation stated in the corresponding guideline.

The following part mirrors the ten standards and guidelines by pointing out exemplary documentation for the verification of fulfilment for each single standard.

Supporting records or otherwise supplemental documents should be listed as appendices. Although some documents may apply to more than one standard, it should be attached only once.

#### 2.1 Policy for quality assurance

**ESG Standard 1.1:** *Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.*

#### Guidelines:

Policies and processes are the main pillars of a coherent institutional quality assurance system that forms a cycle for continuous improvement and contributes to the accountability of the institution. It supports the development of quality culture in which all internal stakeholders assume responsibility for quality

and engage in quality assurance at all levels of the institution. In order to facilitate this, the policy has a formal status and is publicly available.

Quality assurance policies are most effective when they reflect the relationship between research and learning & teaching and take account of both the national context in which the institution operates, the institutional context and its strategic approach. Such a policy supports

- the organisation of the quality assurance system;
- departments, schools, faculties and other organisational units as well as those of institutional leadership, individual staff members and students to take on their responsibilities in quality assurance;
- academic integrity and freedom and is vigilant against academic fraud;
- guarding against intolerance of any kind or discrimination against the students or staff;
- the involvement of external stakeholders in quality assurance.

The policy translates into practice through a variety of internal quality assurance processes that allow participation across the institution. How the policy is implemented, monitored and revised is the institution's decision.

The quality assurance policy also covers any elements of an institution's activities that are subcontracted to or carried out by other parties.

Exemplary documentation for appendix:

- Official and published documents that define the HEI's quality assurance system, both internally and externally.

## 2.2 Design and approval of programmes

ESG Standard 1.2: *Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.*

Guidelines:

Study programmes are at the core of the higher education institutions' teaching mission. They provide students with both academic knowledge and skills including those that are transferable, which may influence their personal development and may be applied in their future careers.

## Programmes

- are designed with overall programme objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy and have explicit intended learning outcomes;
- are designed by involving students and other stakeholders in the work;
- benefit from external expertise and reference points;
- reflect the four purposes of higher education of the Council of Europe (cf. Scope and Concepts);
- are designed so that they enable smooth student progression;
- define the expected student workload, e.g. in ECTS;
- include well-structured placement opportunities where appropriate;
- are subject to a formal institutional approval process.

## Exemplary documentation for appendix:

- Guidelines for designing study programmes
- Learning outcome matrix
- Curricular overview
- Syllabi
- Internship regulation
- Diploma Supplement

## 2.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

**ESG Standard 1.3:** *Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.*

### Guidelines:

Student-centred learning and teaching plays an important role in stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process. This means careful consideration of the design and delivery of study programmes and the assessment of outcomes.

### The implementation of student-centred learning and teaching

- respects and attends to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths;

- considers and uses different modes of delivery, where appropriate;
- flexibly uses a variety of pedagogical methods;
- regularly evaluates and adjusts the modes of delivery and pedagogical methods;
- encourages a sense of autonomy in the learner, while ensuring adequate guidance and support from the teacher;
- promotes mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship;
- has appropriate procedures for dealing with students' complaints.

Considering the importance of assessment for the students' progression and their future careers, quality assurance processes for assessment take into account the following:

- Assessors are familiar with existing testing and examination methods and receive support in developing their own skills in this field;
- The criteria for and method of assessment as well as criteria for marking are published in advance;
- The assessment allows students to demonstrate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Students are given feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the learning process;
- Where possible, assessment is carried out by more than one examiner;
- The regulations for assessment take into account mitigating circumstances;
- Assessment is consistent, fairly applied to all students and carried out in accordance with the stated procedures;
- A formal procedure for student appeals is in place.

Exemplary documentation for appendix:

- Study and examination regulations
- Syllabi
- Blended Learning concepts
- Project guidelines

## 2.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

**ESG Standard 1.4:** *Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student “life cycle”, e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.*

### Guidelines:

Providing conditions and support that are necessary for students to make progress in their academic career is in the best interest of the individual students, programmes, institutions and systems. It is vital to have fit-for-purpose admission, recognition and completion procedures, particularly when students are mobile within and across higher education systems.

It is important that access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner. Induction to the institution and the programme is provided.

Institutions need to put in place both processes and tools to collect, monitor and act on information on student progression.

Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility. Appropriate recognition procedures rely on

- institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention;
- cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies and the national ENIC/NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country.

Graduation represents the culmination of the students' period of study. Students need to receive documentation explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed.

### Exemplary documentation for appendix:

- Admission regulations
- Recognition regulations
- Mentoring/Tutoring guidelines
- Graduation certification
- Diploma Supplement
- Transcript of Records

## 2.5 Teaching staff

*ESG Standard 1.5: Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.*

Guidelines:

The teacher's role is essential in creating a high quality student experience and enabling the acquisition of knowledge, competences and skills. The diversifying student population and stronger focus on learning outcomes require student-centred learning and teaching and the role of the teacher is, therefore, also changing (cf. Standard 1.3).

Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their staff and for providing them with a supportive environment that allows them to carry out their work effectively.

Such an environment

- sets up and follows clear, transparent and fair processes for staff recruitment and conditions of employment that recognise the importance of teaching;
- offers opportunities for and promotes the professional development of teaching staff;
- encourages scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research;
- encourages innovation in teaching methods and the use of new technologies.

Exemplary documentation for appendix:

- Staff recruitment policy (including level of competence)
- Staff development policy
- Overview of the faculty staff

## 2.6 Learning resources and student support

*ESG Standard 1.6: Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.*

Guidelines:

For a good higher education experience, institutions provide a range of resources to assist student learning. These vary from physical resources such as libraries, study facilities and IT infrastructure to human support in the form of tutors, counsellors and other advisers. The role of support services is of particular importance in facilitating the mobility of students within and across higher education systems.

The needs of a diverse student population (such as mature, part-time, employed and international students as well as students with disabilities), and the shift towards student-centred learning and flexible modes of learning and teaching, are taken into account when allocating, planning and providing the learning resources and student support.

Support activities and facilities may be organised in a variety of ways depending on the institutional context. However, the internal quality assurance ensures that all resources are fit for purpose, accessible, and that students are informed about the services available to them.

In delivering support services the role of support and administrative staff is crucial and therefore they need to be qualified and have opportunities to develop their competences.

Exemplary documentation for appendix:

- Resource overview:
  - Infrastructure
  - Equipment
  - Finances
  - IT infrastructure
  - Libraries
  - Study facilities
- Support Staff overview

## 2.7 Information management

ESG Standard 1.7: *Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.*

Guidelines:

Reliable data is crucial for informed decision-making and for knowing what is working well and what needs attention. Effective processes to collect and analyse information about study programmes and other activities feed into the internal quality assurance system.

The information gathered depends, to some extent, on the type and mission of the institution. The following are of interest:

- Key performance indicators;
- Profile of the student population;

- Student progression, success and drop-out rates;
- Students' satisfaction with their programmes;
- Learning resources and student support available;
- Career paths of graduates.

Various methods of collecting information may be used. It is important that students and staff are involved in providing and analysing information and planning follow-up activities.

Exemplary documentation for appendix:

- Evaluation regulations
- Data collection policy

## 2.8 Public information

ESG Standard 1.8: *Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.*

Guidelines:

Information on institutions' activities is useful for prospective and current students as well as for graduates, other stakeholders and the public.

Therefore, institutions provide information about their activities, including the programmes they offer and the selection criteria for them, the intended learning outcomes of these programmes, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, the pass rates and the learning opportunities available to their students as well as graduate employment information.

Exemplary documentation for appendix:

- Information materials (e.g. flyer, website)
- Annual report
- Publicly accessible information on study programme(s) (e.g. admission criteria, learning outcomes, qualification awarded, teaching, learning and assessment procedures, pass rates, learning opportunities, graduate employment information)

## 2.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

ESG Standard 1.9: *Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews*

*should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.*

Guidelines:

Regular monitoring, review and revision of study programmes aim to ensure that the provision remains appropriate and to create a supportive and effective learning environment for students.

They include the evaluation of:

- The content of the programme in the light of the latest research in the given discipline thus ensuring that the programme is up to date;
- The changing needs of society;
- The students' workload, progression and completion;
- The effectiveness of procedures for assessment of students;
- The student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme;
- The learning environment and support services and their fitness for purpose for the programme.

Programmes are reviewed and revised regularly involving students and other stakeholders. The information collected is analysed and the programme is adapted to ensure that it is up-to-date. Revised programme specifications are published.

Exemplary documentation for appendix:

- Quality management:
  - Quality management policy
  - Quality management manual
  - Quality management report
- Evaluation regulations

## 2.10 Cyclical external quality assurance

ESG Standard 1.10: *Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.*

### Guidelines:

External quality assurance in its various forms can verify the effectiveness of institutions' internal quality assurance, act as a catalyst for improvement and offer the institution new perspectives. It will also provide information to assure the institution and the public of the quality of the institution's activities.

Institutions participate in cyclical external quality assurance that takes account, where relevant, of the requirements of the legislative framework in which they operate. Therefore, depending on the framework, this external quality assurance may take different forms and focus at different organisational levels (such as programme, faculty or institution).

Quality assurance is a continuous process that does not end with the external feedback or report or its follow-up process within the institution. Therefore, institutions ensure that the progress made since the last external quality assurance activity is taken into consideration when preparing for the next one.

### Exemplary documentation for appendix:

- Quality management:
  - Quality management policy
  - Quality management manual
  - Quality management report

### 3 Part 3: Appendix

Particularities, amendments, supporting materials (if needed official, legal or otherwise supplemental documents) should be placed in this section. It is important to structure this section comprehensibly (e. g. proper naming of the files).

