

Guidelines for International Certification Procedures

Specification of procedural principles

Instructions for the preparation of the self-assessment report

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I Overview

1 ACQUIN

Since its foundation in 2001, the German Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN) has been carrying out assessments, accreditations, and certifications in the higher education sector. The main aim of ACQUIN is to contribute to the shape of the European Higher Education Area and to ensure the comparability of the quality of higher education qualifications. ACQUIN performs programme and system accreditation in Germany and international programme and institutional accreditations abroad as well as certifications in all subjects and at all types of higher education institutions. ACQUINs' staff has intercultural and multilingual competences and offers native language proficiency in English, French, German, Greek, Kazakh, Portuguese, Russian and Ukrainian.

As our society changes, so do the demands on work and everyday life place on everyone. To match these challenges, people turn to lifelong learning, that is, the personal willingness to face changed conditions in all areas of life, to remain curious and to actively shape the personal and social environment. Due to the constantly changing market conditions, companies are dependent on the best possible trained staff, which makes continuous training important for the economy.

This Certification Guideline is intended to serve as an orientation for providers of further education. It offers advice for the compiling of documents for the certification of further education programmes and individual modules that do not lead to an academic degree, whereby the offered programmes/modules are based on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (levels 6-8). The following chapters introduce the objectives, criteria and process of the programme accreditation.

As an external quality assurance instrument, certification aims both at assessing the programme's/module's existing quality and at recommending improvements. Accountability and enhancement are at the core of the certification. Peer-review experts evaluate and assess the programmes/modules. To guarantee impartiality, the experts scrutinize the programmes against a set of criteria. The competence of the experts in their respective field of expertise assures the quality of the external audit.

2 Certification criteria

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. 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 certification procedures. Part 3 specifies the standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies.

These principles provide a framework for quality assurance processes, which may also integrate national and/or 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 peer-review experts will address this issue in the assessment report and the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN will consider this when making a decision.

3 Process

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

- ACQUIN and the HEI define the design and scope of the programme's certification 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. ACQUIN passes the report the expert group that conducts an onsite visit which includes discussions with all relevant stakeholders, e.g. lecturers and students resulting in an assessment report by the experts with clearly defined follow-up measures. (ESG 2.3)
- The external audit is performed as a peer-review procedure. ACQUIN composes a group of experienced and trained experts in consensus with the HEIs. The experts are both qualified in matters of accreditation and the subject of the respective programme. The expert group typically 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 groups evaluate the programmes by pre-defined and published criteria and scientific standards. Depending on the level of compliance with these standards, experts propose conditions, recommendations, and suggestions. (ESG 2.5)
- The expert group compiles an assessment report which includes general information about the certification procedure and the experts as well as a context description of the HEI. It states the evidence, analysis, findings, and conclusions regarding the programme. 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. ACQUIN publishes the assessment report of the expert group. (ESG 2.6)
- The HEI has the right to complain and appeal at any given step of the certification process. The HEI may object to one or more experts chosen by ACQUIN if reasonable evidence is brought forward (e.g. suspicion of bias, conflict of interest). Finally, the HEI may appeal against the certification decision. 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 certification procedure at a glance

Phases	ACQUIN	Peer-review experts	Higher Education Institution (HEI)
Contract between HEI and ACQUIN			
Nomination of the peer-review experts			HEI sends preliminary information about the programmes (profile information)
	ACQUIN appoints experts		
			HEI accepts the peer-review experts
Self-assessment report			HEI prepares and submits self-assessment report
	ACQUIN checks validity and completeness of the self-assessment report		
Organising the site visit	ACQUIN programme manager as a contact person accompanies and supports the HEI in organising the site visit		HEI organises the site visit in coordination with the programme manager
	ACQUIN programme manager provides experts with the essential information and prepares them for their task		
Site visit and reporting	ACQUIN Programme manager coordinates and accompanies the on-site visit	Experts discuss with HEI representatives	HEI management, teaching staff, and students provide comprehensive insight in programme(s)
		Experts compile an assessment report	
Certification decision			HEI gives a statement on the report – if necessary
	Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN decides about the certification		
	ACQUIN publishes the assessment report including the formal certification decision		HEI is informed about the decision and receives certificates and documents

III Comments on the certification procedure

1 ACQUIN's programme managers

The programme manager is responsible to the experts and HEI's representatives concerning all questions regarding the course of the certification procedure, the interpretation of formal and subject-specific criteria, deadlines etc. The programme manager accompanies experts during the 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.

2 Certification procedure

The certification procedure is the entire process of the certification from conclusion of a contract between the HEI and ACQUIN up to the decision by the Accreditation Commission.

3 Self-assessment-report

The self-assessment report of the HEI is the basis for the evaluation of the programme by peer experts. Prior to the on-site visit, the HEI prepares and submits the self-assessment report to ACQUIN. The self-assessment report indicates the ways in which the programme complies with ESG standards. If applicable, the HEI can address national criteria in the report. Experts are asked to review the self-assessment report prior to the visit.

4 Peer-review experts

A group of experts consists of professors, professional practitioners, and students. The number of experts (per subject area) depends on the number of programmes being evaluated and/or the subject-specific clustering of the programmes. Experts usually have broad international experience; if appropriate, national expertise is embedded (by bringing in one or more national experts). In case of cluster certification procedures (two or more programmes), the number of appointed experts from universities, from non-university background and board of students may increase. The Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN officially appoints expert group. ACQUIN informs the HEI about the officially nominated experts.

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

5 On-site-visit

The purpose of the on-site visit is to assess compliance with the ESG standards, as well as to clarify information provided in the self-assessment report. The on-site visit to the HEI typically lasts two to three days. It starts with a preliminary meeting of the expert group with the programme manager of ACQUIN. The programme manager introduces the experts to technicalities of the visit and the role of experts during the discussions with the HEI's representatives. A spokesperson will be selected among the experts. This role may be rotating during the talks. The spokesperson mainly chairs the discussions during the visit – she or he is *primus inter pares*. The programme manager will protocol the discussions and remains in the background to not interfere with the experts' judgement. The on-site visit consists of meetings with the representatives of the HEI (teaching staff, HEI management, students and alumni) and observation of the facilities.

6 Assessment report by the expert group

Following the on-site visit, members of the expert group compile the assessment report. The report includes information on the fulfilment of accreditation criteria, as well as positive and negative observations and findings concerning the programme(s). The HEI may comment on the report for the purposes of correcting or clarifying factual matters relevant to the accreditation of the programme.

7 ACQUIN's Accreditation Commission

ACQUIN's Accreditation Commission is an independent decision-making body, which makes official decision on the certification of a 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 fulfilment of specific conditions or recommendations. This procedure guarantees an independent, comprehensible and balanced certification result.

8 Reporting

ACQUIN publishes the decision accompanied with the full assessment report. The reports are publicly available on our website. In addition, the report, certificate of certification and a letter confirming the decision of the Accreditation Commission are sent to the HEI. Furthermore, the full assessment report and the result of the procedure are published on the website of Database of External Quality Assurance Reports (DEQAR).

IV 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 certification procedure may check the compliance of 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) .

V Possible outcomes of the Procedure

In the assessment of each standard, peer-review experts distinguish between “(full or substantial) compliance”, “partial compliance” and “non-compliance”. Depending on the level of fulfilment, the procedure of programme certification can have three different results:

1 Unconditional accreditation: Compliance with the ESG standards

The programme fulfils all criteria of the ESG. The accreditation is valid for five years. In case of substantial compliance, the peer-review experts may express recommendations for further improvement. These recommendations may be considered by the HEI with regard to the further improvement of quality.

2 Certification with conditions: Partial compliance with the ESG standards

The programme does not completely fulfil at least one criterion of the ESG. Certain aspects must be revised to ensure compliance with the ESG standards. Unfulfilled criteria are likely to be met and must be fulfilled within a specified period. As soon as condition(s) are fulfilled, the certification is granted for the complete certification period.

3 Refusal of certification: Non-compliance regarding one or more ESG standards

The programme does not fulfil one or more ESG standards. Major deficiencies and weaknesses are so significant that they are unlikely to be rectifiable within a reasonable period. In this case, the Accreditation Commission refuses the certification.

The HEI can suspend the procedure to extend the timeframe for rectifying the major deficiencies.

VI Structure of the self-assessment report

The HEI's self-assessment report is the essential document for the discussions during the site visit and the evaluation by the peer-review experts. 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 three parts which 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 programme) with the following information:

- Provider of the programme (HEI, department / faculty)
- HEI site(s) where the programme is provided
- Title of the 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 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. 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:

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 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 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 consider 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

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 students' expectations, their 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).



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