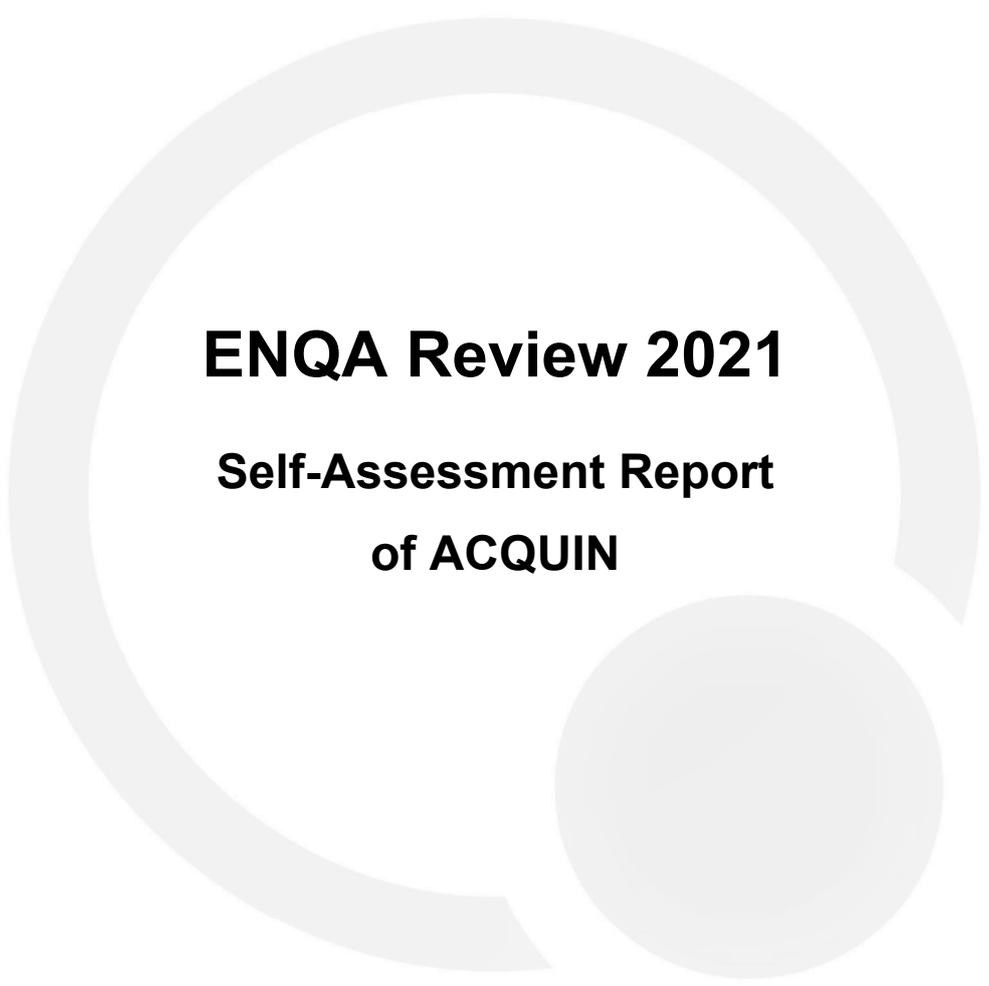


**ACQUIN**

Akkreditierungs-,  
Certifizierungs- und  
Qualitätssicherungs-  
Institut



# **ENQA Review 2021**

## **Self-Assessment Report of ACQUIN**

Bayreuth, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020



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## Table of Content

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Development of the self-assessment report</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Higher Education and Quality Assurance System of Higher Education in the context of the agency</b> .....	<b>6</b>
	3.1 Higher Education System .....	6
	3.2 Quality Assurance .....	8
<b>4</b>	<b>History, profile, and activities of the Agency</b> .....	<b>9</b>
	4.1 Structure of ACQUIN .....	10
	4.2 National Activities .....	12
<b>5</b>	<b>Higher Education quality assurance activities of the agency</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Processes and their methodologies</b> .....	<b>14</b>
	6.1 Assessment procedures in Germany within the scope of the Interstate Treaty .....	15
	6.2 International programme accreditation .....	21
	6.3 International institutional accreditation .....	22
	6.4 Certification of continuing education programmes .....	25
<b>7</b>	<b>ACQUIN's internal quality assurance</b> .....	<b>25</b>
	Quantitative feedback: .....	28
	Qualitative feedback: .....	28
	Internal feedback mechanisms .....	28
	External feedback mechanisms .....	28
	Internal quality assurance at strategic level: .....	29
<b>8</b>	<b>ACQUIN's international activities</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines Part 3</b> .....	<b>31</b>
	9.1 ESG Standard 3.1 Activities, policies and processes for quality assurance .....	31
	9.2 ESG Standard 3.2 Official status .....	33
	9.3 ESG Standard 3.3 Independence .....	34
	9.4 ESG Standard 3.4 Thematic analysis .....	36
	9.5 ESG Standard 3.5 Resources .....	38
	9.6 ESG Standard 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct .....	40
	9.7 ESG Standard 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies .....	43
<b>10</b>	<b>Compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines Part 2</b> .....	<b>43</b>
	10.1 ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance .....	43
	10.2 ESG Standard 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose .....	45
	10.3 ESG Standard 2.3 Implementing processes .....	48
	10.4 ESG Standard 2.4 Peer-review experts .....	50
	10.5 ESG Standard 2.5 Criteria for outcomes .....	51
	10.6 ESG Standard 2.6 Reporting .....	53
	10.7 ESG Standard 2.7 Complaints and appeals .....	56
<b>11</b>	<b>Information and opinion of stakeholders</b> .....	<b>58</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>Recommendations of the main findings of the last review and follow up of the agency</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>SWOT Analysis</b> .....	<b>64</b>

**14 Current challenges and areas for future development..... 68**  
**Glossary of Terms ..... 69**  
**Annexes..... 70**



## 1 Introduction

This self-assessment report (SAR) has been prepared for the fifth external evaluation of the Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN). ACQUIN has been a member of ENQA since 2003 and undergoes cyclical review every five years. The previous external evaluations of the agency have been coordinated by the German Accreditation Council (GAC) and took place in 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016.

In 2016, the external evaluation was conducted by GAC jointly with ENQA. The agency had been assessed according to the “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” (ESG; 2015) and the German Accreditation Council’s criteria. Based on the review report, the agency was granted a reaccreditation with conditions, after the fulfilment of those, received the status of a reaccredited agency until 30 June 2021. The ENQA membership was consequently reconfirmed on 14 February 2017 after an appeal procedure. ACQUIN is registered in EQAR until 30 June 2021.

The aim of ACQUIN is to contribute to shaping the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to ensure the comparability of the quality of higher education qualifications. ACQUIN carries out national assessment and international accreditation procedures in all disciplines and across all types of higher education institutions with the purpose to ensure a high quality of study programmes, create market transparency, increase the attractiveness of higher education institutions for students and promote the comparability of academic degrees. ACQUIN is also conducting assessment procedures of quality management systems in this higher education area mostly in the areas of study and teaching but in research and administration as well..

ACQUIN sees itself as a partner of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Scientific freedom and university autonomy are the guiding principles of its activities and decision-making processes. ACQUIN’s work should promote the quality of higher education as well as support the establishment of a quality culture at higher education institutions in Germany and abroad. The agency defines its activities as a contribution to academic quality and support in the development of higher education institutions. Being a member of various networks like ENQA, CEENQA, INQAAHE, ACQUIN is committed to play an active role in the further development of the European Higher Education Area.

## **2 Development of the self-assessment report**

The work on the SAR has been an occasion for the agency to analyse its actions and activities from the last five years, to identify the challenges and to implement initiatives that support the agency's continued development. The SAR is a collaboration project, involving the board, the Accreditation Commission and the staff of the secretariat, thus drawing on the expertise and knowledge of colleagues from all parts of the agency for feedback. Members of ACQUIN (HEIs and other stakeholders outside of the bodies of ACQUIN) were not involved in the preparation of the SAR.

The management of ACQUIN together with the senior staff and the quality management team (QM team) prepared the initial report based on an analysis of the evidence and an assessment of the progress made since the previous review. Several working groups within the secretariat of ACQUIN supported the editorial work. A draft of the SAR has been shared with the employees, the executive board and the Accreditation Commission.

## **3 Higher Education and Quality Assurance System of Higher Education in the context of the agency**

### **3.1 Higher Education System**

There are currently 390 Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Germany with an overall-student population of approximately 2,9 million. 120 of these HEIs are universities or similar institutions, 213 are universities of applied sciences, 57 colleges of art or music.<sup>1 2</sup>

HEIs are either state or state-recognized Institutions. In their operations, including organization of studies and the designation and award of degrees, they are both subject to higher education legislation.

Universities including various specialized institutions offer a wide range of academic disciplines. In the German tradition, universities focus in particular on basic research, so that advanced stages of study have mainly theoretical orientation and research-oriented components. Universities have the right to confer doctoral degrees and provide the basis for the education and training of the next generation of academics.

Universities of applied sciences focus with their study programmes on engineering and other technical disciplines, business-related studies, social work, and design areas. The common mission of applied research and development implies a distinct application-oriented focus and professional character of studies, which include integrated and supervised work assignments

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-06-Hochschulsystem/Statistik/2020-08-27\\_Statistikfaltblatt\\_Deutsch\\_2020\\_Hochschulen\\_in\\_Zahlen.pdf](https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-06-Hochschulsystem/Statistik/2020-08-27_Statistikfaltblatt_Deutsch_2020_Hochschulen_in_Zahlen.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrk.de/activities/higher-education-system/>

in industry, enterprises or other relevant institutions. About 38 percent of all students attend universities of applied sciences.

The third major group comprises the colleges of art and colleges of music offering studies for artistic careers in fine arts, performing arts and music; in such fields as directing, production, writing in theatre, film, and other media as well as in a variety of design areas, architecture, media and communication. A central characteristic is the uniting of arts teaching, artistic practice, and research. There is a clear difference between teaching of arts subjects and teaching at universities and universities of applied sciences. Their core objective is to allow students to develop as artistic individuals. Two per cent of all students attend colleges of arts or music. Almost all colleges of art and music have the right to confer doctoral degrees and the post-doctoral 'Habilitation' qualification for the title of 'professor'.

In total, there are approximately 10,500 different undergraduate programmes and further 9,500 postgraduate degree programmes at HEIs throughout Germany. There are essentially two university-level academic qualifications, Bachelor's degree and Master's degree. In addition, there are some disciplines, in which courses lead to state-certified exams, for example, medicine, law and training of teachers. Finally, there are still some remaining degree programmes that lead to a 'Diplom' qualification.

HEIs are either government-funded or government-accredited.

In spite of the increasing presence of private HEIs, a large number of which have been established in the last few years, public HEIs remain clearly in the majority. There are 279 government-funded institutions of higher education, compared to 108 private institutions. These are predominantly small institutions offering only a very limited range of subjects, e.g. Business Administration, Media Studies, Design. Almost 94 per cent of all students are enrolled at public HEIs.

Due to the federal system in Germany, individual states ("Laender") have the primary responsibility for education. The states are responsible for funding, legislation and organisation of higher education and HEIs. Each state has its own laws governing higher education, and the actual structure and organisation of the various systems of higher education may differ from state to state including its management structures.

In order to facilitate mobility between states and to ensure equal treatment of students, some basic principles have been agreed upon by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK).

### 3.2 Quality Assurance

In Germany, there was a fundamental reform in the accreditation system, which came into force on 1 January 2018.

Until 31 December 2017, the German accreditation system was organised in a decentralised manner. The accreditation of study programmes respectively of internal quality assurance systems in teaching and learning of HEIs was carried out by accreditation agencies, who in turn were periodically accredited by a central accreditation body, the German Accreditation Council of the Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany (GAC). The GAC defined the basic requirements of the process and insured that any accreditation was carried out on the basis of reliable and transparent criteria. A contract between agency and GAC defined the rights and obligations of the agency and the GAC. As part of their contract agreements, the agencies committed themselves to the deployment of the resolutions of the GAC as well as to taking the Common Structural Guidelines of the Laender into consideration, which were the legal basis for the accreditation of study programmes. The GAC monitored the accreditations granted by the agencies.

In 2018 a crucial change took place in the German accreditation system. With the Interstate Treaty<sup>3</sup> coming into force on 1 January 2018, a new legal basis has been established for the accreditation system in Germany, following the resolution of the Federal Constitutional Court on 17 February 2016. The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) has then agreed on the corresponding specimen decree (Specimen decree pursuant to Article 4, paragraphs 1 – 4 of the interstate study accreditation treaty, resolution of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Laender in the Federal Republic of Germany of December 7, 2017<sup>4</sup>).

Key feature of the new system is the altered status of the GAC. The Foundation Accreditation Council (GAC) is a joint institution of the states for accreditation and quality assurance in teaching and learning at German HEIs. One of the main responsibilities is the accreditation and re-accreditation of study programmes and internal quality assurance systems of HEIs as well as other quality assurance procedures by awarding the foundation's seal. Further, the foundation authorises agencies being active in Germany. As a requirement for the authorisation, the agency must prove that it is reliably able to exercise the tasks of the assessment and the preparation of the review report; this is refutably assumed for agencies that are listed on EQAR.

In the new system, agencies are now solely conducting assessment procedures without taking any decisions based on a self-assessment report of the HEI. Using a binding template, which

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/fileadmin/Seiteninhalte/Sonstige/en/161208\\_Interstate\\_Study\\_Accreditation\\_Treaty.pdf](https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/fileadmin/Seiteninhalte/Sonstige/en/161208_Interstate_Study_Accreditation_Treaty.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/fileadmin/Seiteninhalte/Sonstige/en/171207\\_Specimen\\_decree.pdf](https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/fileadmin/Seiteninhalte/Sonstige/en/171207_Specimen_decree.pdf)

is provided by GAC, agencies prepare an accreditation report of peer experts. The report includes additional findings gained in a site visit.

The accreditation agencies and their Accreditation Commissions have no longer the authority to decide on the final outcome of the accreditation of national study programmes nor on the accreditation of quality management systems of national HEIs. For accreditation they now apply directly to the GAC by submitting the accreditation report as well as the self-assessment report through a digital application system<sup>5</sup>. The accreditation decision is taken by the GAC and is an official administrative act. The GAC now also handles the publication of the accreditation report together with the accreditation decision. The accreditation is granted for eight years, whereas in the previous regulations the accreditation period for study programmes was five years for a first accreditation and seven years for the reaccreditation. Respectively, the period for system accreditation was six and eight years.

The former rules were still applicable to accreditation procedures for which the contract between ACQUIN and the HEI was signed prior to 31 December 2017. Thus in 2018, ACQUIN predominantly carried out procedures according to the earlier rules. This changed in 2019 with ACQUIN having about 40 percent of the assessment procedures conducted according to the new rules. In the year 2020, only a few programmes are still assessed with the use of the previous criteria of the GAC and it is expected that in 2021 the Accreditation Commission will take the last few accreditation decisions for national accreditation procedures.

Currently there are ten agencies authorized to assess study programmes and quality management systems in teaching and learning in Germany. Eight German agencies (ACQUIN, AHPGS, AKAST, AQAS, ASIIN, evalag, FIBAA, ZEvA), one agency from Austria (AQ Austria) and one from Switzerland (AAQ).

In this respect, all further information on ACQUIN's activities refers to the new regulations in Germany.

#### **4 History, profile, and activities of the Agency**

The Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute ACQUIN e.V. was established on 26 January 2001. The resolution of the Bavarian Rectors' Conference from May 2000 was a pivotal step in the creation of an independent agency for the accreditation of Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes. The initiative of the Bavarian universities was supported by representatives from universities and from universities of applied science from Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Saxony, and Thuringia.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://antrag.akkreditierungsrat.de/>

ACQUIN is a registered non-profit association with recognised charitable status. Currently its members include more than 150 HEIs mainly from Germany but also from Switzerland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Lebanon, Liechtenstein and Mongolia. Other members are research-oriented, professional and trade associations in Germany.

#### 4.1 Structure of ACQUIN

The executive board, the general assembly and the Accreditation Commission are the main bodies of the association. Expert groups and the complaints and appeals commission are two other committees of the agency anchored in the statutes<sup>6</sup>.

The *general assembly* takes place once a year and takes decisions on changes in the statutes, appoints the executive board, elects the Accreditation Commission and the members of the complaints and appeals commission.

The *executive board* consists of five experts: four representatives of HEIs (two from universities and two from universities of applied sciences) and one representative of the labour market. The executive board is responsible for decisions concerning the strategy of the agency as well as decisions on all major operational and administrative matters (e.g. admission of new members, cooperation agreements with other quality assurance organisations). The executive board also decides on staff issues and nominates the management of the secretariat.

The agency has two managing directors who are responsible for the routine business of the agency and implementation of the board decisions. Within the specific areas of activity senior staff members (heads of departments) are appointed and are responsible for coordination of their respective areas: national programme assessment procedures, national assessment procedures of quality management systems of HEIs, international accreditation and certification activities as well as the internal quality management of ACQUIN. Due to the size of the agency there is no fixed allocation of the employees to the individual specific areas, the heads of departments are in coordinating the respective activities together with the management.

The *Accreditation Commission* as the decision taking body of the agency consists of nine representatives of HEIs (four experts representing universities, four experts representing universities of applied sciences and one expert representing colleges of art and music). In addition, this panel is completed by two representatives of the labour market and two students.

The *complaints and appeals commission* consists of five members: one student, three representatives of HEIs (university, university of applied sciences, college of art or music) and one

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ACQUIN\\_Satzung\\_MV2020.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ACQUIN_Satzung_MV2020.pdf)  
[https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Statute\\_MV2020\\_EN-1.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Statute_MV2020_EN-1.pdf)

expert from the labour market. It deals with objections against assessment procedures and decisions of the Accreditation Commission.

All members of the board and committees work on a voluntary basis.

As stated above, the role of the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN within the national assessment procedures has changed in the new legal framework. No longer being responsible for the decisions on accreditation procedures in the national context, the Accreditation Commission is now able to provide the GAC – the new decision-making body in charge – with additional and supportive perspective of assessment procedures.

However, in international assessment and accreditation procedures the Accreditation Commission still takes decisions on the accreditation of study programmes as well as of HEIs (institutional accreditation). It is also still involved in certification procedures and decides on certification of continuing education programmes.

In addition, the Accreditation Commission decides also on assessment criteria and procedural principles of the agency and is responsible for the nomination of peer experts. Before, this nomination was a responsibility of the so-called standing expert committees of the agency. These committees were abolished in 2020, since their function is no longer required in the new regulatory setting. The decision was taken by the general assembly on 23 July 2020 and anchored in the statutes.

The standing expert committees have been a part of the ACQUIN's structure since the very foundation of the agency and played an important role in the accreditation process. The tasks of the nine standing expert committees (structured into different disciplines) were to approve the peer group composition, to supervise the implementation of the assessment procedure, to prepare a statement on the procedure for the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN, which contained an accreditation recommendation, based on the expert group suggestion and the statement provided by the HEI. In cases of accreditation with conditions, the standing expert committees also assessed the documents submitted by the HEI as a proof of the conditions' fulfilment, and consequently provided a decision proposal to the Accreditation Commission.

Since there were considerable uncertainties in the new system concerning the involvement of agency's committees in assessment procedures conducted according to the new regulations, ACQUIN, at the end of 2019, contacted the GAC concerning this issue. The GAC stated that the involvement of the agency's bodies such as standing expert committees is no longer required or even appreciated. According to the GAC's interpretation of the new regulations in Germany the evaluation of the expert panels should be the solely basis for decisions of the GAC. Therefore, ACQUIN decided to abolish its standing expert committees.

ACQUIN is currently discussing the ways that would allow preserving the expertise of the members of the standing expert committees in its assessment procedures. The expert committees' members are not only high-qualified experts in their field and related areas, but also have a rich experience in quality assurance. The interdisciplinary composition of the expert committees put discussion of the assessment procedures in a wider context, beyond respective disciplines. This provided in a major contribution not only to the quality of study programmes and to their development, but also to ACQUIN's accreditation decisions as well. In the next months, a series of discussions with the heads of the former expert committees will take place on how to integrate the expertise of the former committee members into the new system. The idea is to transfer interested members of the committees into an expert network as a committee of the Accreditation Commission with slightly different tasks.

These experts could bring their comprehensive expertise in the assessment procedures by participating in them as peer reviewers. Experiences and lessons learned from the assessment procedures could be presented to other network members and the Accreditation Commission with regard to subject-community debates for improving the assessment procedures.

Additionally, in the case of a disagreement between the expert panel and the HEI, they could provide an additional assessment of the respective facts, taking into account the expert report and the statement of the HEI. In this case, they would act as impartial counsellors without having an active role in the peer review and without having any decision-making authority. This would be of interest for assessment procedures in which very divergent assessments are given or a conflict between the HEI and the expert panel occur. These assessment procedures are still examined and discussed by the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN. The results of the discussions will be documented in the accreditation report as a reference to the GAC for its final decision-making.

With regard to funding ACQUIN has to cover its expenses on its own, there are no grants provided by public authorities. The income of ACQUIN is generated to almost 100 percent from its external quality assurance activities.

## **4.2 National Activities**

ACQUIN defines its role as a partner of HEIs, supporting them in achieving high quality in teaching and learning as well as on institutional level. All quality assurance activities of ACQUIN are within the scope of the ESG, therefore the implementation of ACQUIN's quality assurance procedures follow the ESG. For national assessment procedures of bachelor and master study programmes the regulations of the specimen decree have to be applied, which are in accordance with the ESG.

The national and international activities of ACQUIN are listed and described in chapter 5.

As a subsidiary of ACQUIN, the ACQUINUS GmbH is an independent and self-supporting limited liability company that provides consulting services to HEI. The ACQUINUS consulting services are strictly separated from the assessment procedures carried out by the agency. ACQUIN makes a clear distinction between the areas of activity and responsibility of ACQUIN e.V. and the ACQUINUS GmbH. The ACQUINUS GmbH provides consulting services to HEIs and university-related institutions in the areas of education, research, and services. During the period under review, ACQUINUS focused its activity on providing consultancy services to German universities in the area of strategic development and preparing HEIs for the system accreditation. If ACQUINUS has conducted consulting activities at a university, ACQUIN does not conduct an assessment procedure. This is also a resolution of the board and regulated in the assessment contracts.

## **5 Higher Education quality assurance activities of the agency**

ACQUIN carries out

- Programme assessment in Germany (according to the new German rules the final accreditation decision is taken by the Accreditation Council)
- Assessment of quality management systems (so-called system accreditation) in Germany (according to the new German legislation the final accreditation decision is taken by the Accreditation Council)
- Assessment of joint programmes in Germany (joint programmes between a German HEI and a HEI abroad)
- International institutional accreditation (Lebanon, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Turcs and Caicos Islands)
- International programme accreditation (mainly Egypt, Kazakhstan, Oman, Russia)
- Certification of continuing education programmes

Since 2016, ACQUIN has accredited 1920 national and international study programmes, as well as 14 quality management systems of German HEIs in total. Beyond this, three foreign HEIs were institutionally accredited by ACQUIN.

The following table provides an overview of the number of accreditation procedures since 2016:

Type of procedure	Number of study programmes/audits					
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	In total
National study programme accreditation (according to the rules of the GAC)	498	466	376	301	78	<b>1719</b>
National system accreditation (according to the rules of the GAC)	3	5	3	1	3	<b>15</b>
National certification of continuing education programmes	2	0	10	0	1	<b>13</b>
National programme assessment procedures (according to the rules of the Specimen Decree)				206	216	<b>422</b>
National assessment of quality management systems (according to the rules of the Specimen Decree)					2	<b>2</b>
International study programme accreditation	104	58	58	6		<b>226</b>
International institutional accreditation	0	1	0	2	0	<b>3</b>
Audits of quality management systems in Austria	0	0	0	0	0	0
Institutional accreditation in Switzerland	0	0	0	0	0	0
International certification of programmes		1	4	7		12

\* Until 30 September 2020

## 6 Processes and their methodologies

For all activities within the scope of the ESG ACQUIN has defined clear processes and methodologies. In Germany ACQUIN conducts programme assessment procedures, assessment procedures of quality management systems in teaching and learning of HEIs (system accreditation) and certification of (continuing education) programmes.

In the international context, ACQUIN conducts certification and accreditation procedures of study programmes, certification of continuing education programmes as well as institutional accreditation procedures, including audits in Austria and institutional accreditation procedures in Switzerland.

All assessment, accreditation and certification procedures of ACQUIN follow clearly defined processes based on the same core elements:

- Contract between HEI and ACQUIN with definition of the framework conditions;

- Submission of the self-assessment report by the HEI;
- Composition and appointment of the expert panel by ACQUIN;
- Training of experts by ACQUIN;
- Site visit;
- Assessment report by the experts;
- Accreditation / certification decision (either taken by third parties like the GAC or the Swiss Accreditation Council (SAC) or by ACQUIN);
- Publication of the experts' assessment report and the decision;
- Follow-up procedure;
- Obtaining feedback from the expert panel and the institution.

After completion of the assessment procedure ACQUIN collects and analyses the feedback of the members of the expert panel as well as of the members of the HEI respectively the provider of the programme to identify areas for improvement. The findings are discussed within the agency on senior staff level as well as during regular staff meetings. The Accreditation Commission and the board are informed about the results in form of the annual quality report.

The following chapters provide further information on the core elements.

### **6.1 Assessment procedures in Germany within the scope of the Interstate Treaty**

The legal basis for the national assessment procedures for study programmes and quality management systems of HEIs is the Interstate Treaty together with the specimen decree of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Laender, in which the binding criteria for the assessment and accreditation of study programmes as well as of quality management systems in teaching and learning are defined.

The new accreditation system in Germany follows a two-step procedure: The quality assurance agency organises and coordinates the assessment procedure. It is responsible for the nomination of the expert panel, the training of experts as well as the expert report. The HEI submits an application for accreditation to the GAC and provides the GAC the agency's accreditation report and its self-assessment report. The accreditation decision is taken by the GAC.

### 6.1.1 Assessment of study programmes in Germany (including assessment of joint programmes)

#### Self-assessment report

The basis for the assessment of a study programme is a self-assessment report elaborated by the HEI. ACQUIN provides them with guidelines for the preparation of the self-assessment report<sup>7</sup> as well as general information about the procedure<sup>8</sup>.

After submission to ACQUIN, the project manager checks the documents for their completeness and may request further information, if necessary. The documents are sent to the expert panel, along with other documents related to the procedure for preparation of the site visit.

#### Compilation, appointment, and impartiality of the expert panel

The selection of the expert panel plays a crucial role for the assessment. Therefore, the expert panel has to comprise relevant professional expertise and be actively involved in the "academic community" in their field. Experts should have expertise in the area of the programme development and should be experienced in organization, implementation and monitoring of study programmes. The "HRK Guidelines on the nomination of experts and the compilation of expert panel for accreditation procedures"<sup>9</sup> are consistently applied in compiling and appointing of the expert panels in national and international procedures. In the assessment of joint programmes the expert panel must have international experience.

In order to ensure consistency in the assessment in reaccreditation procedures, ACQUIN always tries to involve a member of the expert panel from the previous assessment procedure.

According to the "HRK-Guidelines" all relevant stakeholders are represented in expert panels: An expert panel consists of at least two professors, a student and a representative of the labour market. In the case of an assessment of a cluster of study programmes, the size of the expert panel has to be appropriately increased. If the HEI offers teacher training programmes, a representative of the highest state authority responsible for the school system is nominated as representative of the labour market. In case of study programmes with the subject Protestant or Catholic theology/religion a representative of the locally responsible diocese or "Landeskirche" also joins the expert panel.

In the peer-review process, the impartiality of the experts is vital and guarantees the appropriate non-biased assessment. ACQUIN ensures strict compliance with the defined impartiality

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Handreichung\\_Erstellung\\_Selbstbericht\\_fi-nal\\_v1.3\\_20201117.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Handreichung_Erstellung_Selbstbericht_fi-nal_v1.3_20201117.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Information\\_Programmakkreditierung\\_v1.3\\_fi-nal\\_20201117.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Information_Programmakkreditierung_v1.3_fi-nal_20201117.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-01-Beschluesse/HRK\\_MV\\_Entschliessung\\_Benennung\\_Gutachter\\_Akkreditierungsverfahren\\_2017\\_2018.pdf](https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-01-Beschluesse/HRK_MV_Entschliessung_Benennung_Gutachter_Akkreditierungsverfahren_2017_2018.pdf)

criteria in the selection of experts. Reasons for bias can be, for instance, family or close personal connections to members of the higher education unit, the faculty or the department, a doctorate / habilitation and / or work at the institution concerned for up to five years, close scientific cooperation in the last five years or advisory activities regarding the subject of assessment in the last five years. Nominated experts have to sign an impartiality, confidentiality and data protection agreement, so that the agreement for processing of the personal data during the assessment procedure and for publication of the accreditation report is ensured. These rules are applied in all assessment, accreditation and certification procedures of ACQUIN.

The expert panel is appointed by ACQUIN's Accreditation Commission and its final composition is communicated to the HEI. It is entitled to provide feedback within a two weeks period and has the opportunity to raise objections due to a possible bias, which will be examined by ACQUIN. In case of objections to individual members of the expert panel, this will first be checked internally in the office before the Accreditation Commission decides upon necessary changes in the composition of the expert panel.

#### Training of the expert panel

From the very beginning, ACQUIN strives to train peer experts in assessment procedures in the best possible way. The expert panel is prepared in a multi-stage process, starting weeks before a site visit. In 2020, ACQUIN started to offer digital expert training courses. In addition, experts are also individually prepared for the procedure. Along with the self-assessment report of the HEI, the expert panel receives relevant specifications, a template for the expert report (template of the GAC<sup>10</sup>) containing guiding questions for the review, and a handout about its role and tasks. Information is sent in a digital form, at least four weeks before the site visit. The expert panel has also an option of individual preparation in a form of one-on-one conversation with the responsible project manager of ACQUIN, either by telephone or in digital format.

The obligatory preparation of the expert panel before the site visit is a required step that takes place a few days before the site visit either in online format or directly before the site visit in a face-to-face event. The purpose of this preparation is the clarification of the tasks of the experts, division of tasks within the expert panel and between the experts and the project manager of ACQUIN. Also, discussions on the first impressions and questions coming up after reading the self-assessment report, the preparation of the discussion rounds for the site visit, as well as the time frame for the preparation of the expert report are part of the preparation of the expert panel. And, of course, role and behaviours of experts are addressed as well.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://akkreditierungsrat.de/sites/default/files/downloads/2020/Raster%2001%20Programm%20Einzel%20Fassung%2002.2.pdf>

<https://akkreditierungsrat.de/de/antragstellung/antragstellung>

The project manager takes part in the site visit. However, she/he does not act as an expert in the course of the site visit but is responsible for the appropriate implementation of the site visit, pays attention to the consistent application of the criteria and is the preparation and follow-up of the review process.

### Site visit

The site visit offers the experts an opportunity to verify the information from the HEI's self-assessment report and to obtain further information in order to be able to get a comprehensive view of the quality of a study programme. During the site visit, there are discussions with teaching staff, students, HEI's management and a tour through the facilities. In joint degree programmes also discussions with the teaching staff and students of the international partner HEI of the German HEI are carried out.

### Expert report (accreditation report)

According to the new regulations in Germany, the expert report (accreditation report) must be prepared using the GAC standardised template, which is structured into a so-called formal-criteria report and a content-related report (academic criteria). In the formal-criteria report the agency checks the fulfilment of formal criteria that are specified in the specimen decree. This report is provided to the HEI prior to the site visit in order to give an opportunity to do the necessary improvements if formal criteria are not met. The assessment of the content-related criteria is the core task of the expert panel. The findings of this assessment results in a report, which contains recommendations for the accreditation of the study programme.

The ACQUIN project manager in charge drafts the preliminary report based on the work of the expert panel, including the accreditation recommendation of the experts. After final approval by the experts, the HEI receives the report and has the opportunity to suggest factual corrections in form of a statement. In a case of non-fulfilment or partial fulfilment of some of the criteria, the HEI has also the possibility to submit documents that prove that deficiencies have been corrected. The expert panel reviews these documents and if the panel comes to a new conclusion the report can be adapted accordingly. The final report, with the assessment of the formal and content-related criteria, as well as the accreditation recommendation of the expert panel, is sent to the HEI for submission to the GAC and application for accreditation.

### Publication

The decision of the GAC and the accreditation report are published by the GAC on its website. These data are automatically transferred to the Database of External Quality Assurance Reports (DEQAR).

### Follow-up

According to the new regulations, the formal accreditation decision is taken by the GAC. It is also the responsible body for the follow-up process, the GAC decides on the fulfilment on conditions and an involvement of agencies is not envisaged.

### **6.1.2 Assessment of internal quality management systems of HEIs in Germany (system accreditation)**

The procedural steps for assessing the internal quality management system at a HEI are essentially identical with the steps for the assessment of study programmes.

#### Self-assessment report

ACQUIN provides HEIs with guidelines for the preparation of the self-assessment report<sup>11</sup>. The HEI must demonstrate in the self-assessment report its compliance with the formal and academic criteria of the specimen decree, the size of the report should not exceed 50 pages (without annexes). ACQUIN checks the report for completeness and, if necessary, requests additional documents.

#### Compilation and appointment of the expert panel:

The expert panel consists of at least five members: at least three professors with relevant experience in quality assurance of teaching and learning and higher education management, one representative of the labour market and one student representative. The majority of experts must have experience in system accreditation. In cases where the HEI offers programmes that also prepare students for a regulated profession (for example teacher training programmes or theology) the size of the expert panel has to be increased. Regulations and processes guiding the compilation and appointment of the expert panel as well as impartiality of experts and training of experts are identical with the programme assessment procedures.

#### Site visit

Two site visits are included in the assessment of internal quality management systems in teaching and learning.

#### First site visit

In the first site visit, the expert panel collects information on the HEI, its management and quality assurance system as well as its governance structures to gain an insight into the system and its procedures. During the first site visit, discussions with the management (rectorate/president) of the HEI, the quality management team, students and the internal accreditation decision body are taking place. At the end of this site visit, the expert panel decides whether the

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Handreichung\\_Systemakkreditierung\\_v2.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Handreichung_Systemakkreditierung_v2.pdf)

documents submitted by the HEI are complete and if there are documents, which have to be submitted additionally. The second site visit is scheduled in coordination with the HEI.

Furthermore, the experts agree upon the compilation of the random samples, which have to be selected in accordance with the regulations. During random sampling, the expert panel checks whether the effects intended by the quality management system have an impact on the level of the study programme. At least one study programme, which has passed through the internal quality management system of the higher education as well as some aspects of formal and academic criteria have to be selected. If the HEI offers study programmes that prepare students for a regulated profession, one of these must also be included in the random sample. In addition. Formal and academic criteria are mandatory items of the random sampling as well. They are cross-sectionally analysed over all offered study programmes.

### Second site visit

The second site visit is aimed at the detailed analysis of the internal quality management system, its implementation as well as gathering information on the samples. It last several days and the expert group conducts discussions with the university management, department management, deans, lecturers, students, committee members, administrative staff, equal opportunity officers, as well as external experts involved in the system and quality managers. At the end of the second site visit, the expert group agrees on its accreditation recommendation and gives the HEI a first feedback.

### Expert report (accreditation report)

As in programme accreditation, the template specified by the GAC is used for the preparation of the report<sup>12</sup>. In a first step, the formal criteria are checked by the agency, the content-related criteria by the expert group. The assessment of the content-related criteria is the core task of the expert panel. The basis for the “content-related” report including the accreditation recommendation is the information out of the SAR and the discussions during the site visit.

The ACQUIN project manager in charge prepares the preliminary report based on the work of the expert panel. After approval by the expert panel, the report is submitted to the HEI, which has the opportunity to suggest factual corrections in form of a statement. In the case of non-fulfilment or partial fulfilment of some of the criteria the HEI has the possibility to submit documents that prove the corrections of deficiencies. The expert panel reviews the statement and additional documents provided by the HEI and if the panel comes to a new conclusion, the report can be adapted accordingly. The final report with the evaluation of the formal and content-related criteria including the accreditation recommendation of the expert panel, is sent to

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<sup>12</sup> <https://akkreditierungsrat.de/sites/default/files/downloads/2020/Raster%2004%20System%20Fassung%2002.pdf>

the HEI for submission to the GAC and application for accreditation.

### Publication

The decision of the GAC as well as the accreditation report are published by the GAC on its website. These data are also automatically transferred to the Database of External Quality Assurance Reports (DEQAR).

### Follow-up

Due to the fact, that the formal accreditation decision is taken by the GAC, it also decides on the fulfilment of the conditions. An involvement of agencies is not envisaged.

## **6.2 International programme accreditation**

In a first step, the HEI applies for an international programme accreditation and submits first information about the programme. The documents are checked by ACQUIN with regard to whether the programme fulfils the minimum requirements for an accreditation. If there is a positive result, the procedure follows the procedures that apply to the assessment of programmes in HEIs in Germany (c.f. 6.1.1). Guidelines for the preparation of the self-assessment report should support HEIs in the elaboration of the self-assessment report<sup>13</sup>.

After submission of the self-assessment report it is checked for its completeness and further information will be requested, if necessary.

### Compilation, appointment, and training of the expert group

ACQUIN compiles and appoints an expert group, which consists of at least four experts: two members of academia, a representative of the labour market and at least one student representative. In cluster accreditation procedures the number of experts increases, if necessary, so that all disciplines can be evaluated thoroughly. The majority of reviewers must have experiences in programme accreditation, the expert panel should also have international experience. The training and preparation of experts follows the ACQUIN training concept described in 6.1.1. In the preparation of the expert group, relevant national framework conditions are also addressed, because national requirements have to be considered as well.

### Site visit, expert report and accreditation decision

During the site visit, discussions are held with the head(s) of the programme(s), lecturers, students and the HEI management. In addition, there is a tour through the institution to evaluate the physical resources and facilities.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Guidelines\\_Programme\\_Accreditation\\_International\\_v2.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Guidelines_Programme_Accreditation_International_v2.pdf)

After the site visit, the expert group writes an assessment report with a recommendation about the accreditation. ACQUIN provides the peers a template for the report with “guiding questions”. After finalization of the report and approval by the expert panel, the expert report is sent to the HEI, which has the possibility to submit a response to it. The expert report and statement of the HEI is the basis for the accreditation decision, taken by the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN. After successful accreditation, the ACQUIN label is awarded.

Possible accreditation decisions are accreditation without condition, accreditation with conditions (in cases where one or more criteria are only partially fulfilled), and refusal of accreditation. Experts can also suggest recommendations for the further development of the study programme. The accreditation is valid for six years.

### Publication

The decision about the accreditation and the accreditation report are published on ACQUIN’s website under [www.acquin.org](http://www.acquin.org) as well as in DEQAR.

### Follow-up

If a programme is accredited with conditions, the HEI has to submit documents proving the condition’s fulfilment within a period of 12 months. The decision is taken by the Accreditation Commission. The handling of recommendations is a part of the reaccreditation procedure.

## **6.3 International institutional accreditation**

The institutional accreditation procedure focuses on the organisation and functioning of the entire HEI. The areas of teaching and learning, research and internal HEI self-management are included into the assessment procedure. Analysis and assessment are carried out in terms of decision-making, institutional structures, resources, effectiveness of strategic management, internal quality assurance tools, application of teaching and learning methods, as well as research direction of the HEI.

The Standards and Guidelines of Part 1 of the ESG are the basis for evaluation for the institutional accreditation; additionally, the evaluation takes into consideration the criteria for the institutional accreditation of non-state HEI of the German Council of Science and Humanities (WR) („Guidelines for the accreditation of non-state HEIs” Section B.IV).

The international institutional accreditation procedure follows the procedures that apply to the assessment of programmes in HEIs in Germany (c.f. 6.1.1). ACQUIN provides guidelines to the HEIs for the elaboration of the self-assessment report<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN-Guidelines\\_Institutional\\_Accreditation\\_v2.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN-Guidelines_Institutional_Accreditation_v2.pdf)

### Compilation and appointment of the expert group

The expert group consists of at least five members: three representatives of HEI, one student representative and a representative of the labour market. The representatives of HEIs must have experience in the management of a HEI, in addition they should also have experience with international higher education systems and quality management in the higher education system. The experts are trained and prepared following the ACQUIN training concept as described in chapter 6.1.1. Relevant national higher education system and framework are addressed in the preparation of the expert group.

### Site visit, expert report and accreditation decision

The site visit lasts several days and discussions are held with the HEI management, board of trustees, representatives of the holding company, deans, committee members, heads of study programmes, teaching and administrative staff, students and alumni, equal opportunity officers and the persons responsible for the internal quality management system. Further, there is also a tour through the institution to get an impression about the facilities.

Based on a template, which is provided by ACQUIN, the expert group writes an assessment report, which includes a recommendation about the accreditation. The HEI has the opportunity to comment on the report in order to note factual corrections. The basis of the accreditation decision by the Accreditation Commission are the expert report and the statement of the HEI. Possible accreditation decisions are accreditation without condition, accreditation with conditions (in cases where one or more criteria are only partially fulfilled), and denial of accreditation. After a successful accreditation, the ACQUIN label is awarded. The accreditation period is six years.

### Publication

The decision about the accreditation and the accreditation report are published on ACQUIN's website under [www.acquin.org](http://www.acquin.org) and in DEQAR.

### Follow-up

If a HEI is accredited with conditions, it has to submit documents proving the fulfilment of the conditions within a period of 12 months. The decision about the fulfilment of the conditions is taken by the Accreditation Commission. The handling of recommendations is part of the re-accreditation procedure.

## **6.3.1 Institutional accreditation in Switzerland**

Since 8 June 2018, ACQUIN is approved by the Swiss Accreditation Council (SAC) to carry out institutional accreditation procedures in Switzerland according to the HEdA (Federal Act on Funding and Coordination of the Swiss Higher Education Sector (Higher Education Act,

HEdA)). The agency organises and coordinates the assessment process and applies the Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation of the Swiss Agency, which are proved by SAC<sup>15</sup> (in German). The procedure includes all above mentioned core elements like compiling a group of peer review experts, two site visits including meetings with the HEI's pertinent stakeholders, an expert report and the possibility of the HEI to submit a statement to the report.

The expert group consists of at least five persons including one student representative. The panel needs to have international experience in management and organisation of a HEI and skills in the areas of research and teaching as well. A non-academic perspective can be considered, if applicable. In addition, also appropriate knowledge in quality management systems of HEIs and knowledge of the Swiss higher education system is essential. The chair of the expert group should ideally be a member of a HEI management team. Active knowledge of the language of the proceedings is also mandatory.

The decision-making body is the Swiss Accreditation Council (SAC). Like in Germany HEIs apply for the accreditation to the Council. ACQUIN has not conducted an institutional accreditation in Switzerland yet but the first procedure has been initiated in the meantime.

### **6.3.2 Audits in Austria**

ACQUIN is authorised to carry out audits of quality management systems at universities and advanced technical colleges in Austria in accordance with § 22 Part 2 of the HS-QSG ("Hochschul-Qualitätssicherungsgesetz"). The certification of HEIs after audit according to § 22 of the University Quality Assurance Act HS-QSG covers the quality management system of a HEI. The procedure follows in general the international accreditation procedures. Assessment criteria as well as information about the audit process are described in ACQUIN's guidelines for audits in Austria (in German)<sup>16</sup>.

The expert group consists of at least five persons including one student representative. The majority of experts needs to have experience in management and organisation of a HEI as well as appropriate knowledge in quality management systems of HEIs and knowledge of the Austrian higher education system.

Based on the report of the expert group and the statement of the HEI, the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN takes the final certification decision (certification without condition / certification with condition / refusal of certification).

Publication and follow-up procedures follow the process described under international programme accreditation.

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_CH\\_Leitfaden\\_institutionelle\\_akk\\_2018\\_DE.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_CH_Leitfaden_institutionelle_akk_2018_DE.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Leitfaden\\_Auditverfahren\\_HS-QSG\\_v1.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Leitfaden_Auditverfahren_HS-QSG_v1.pdf)

ACQUIN has not yet undertaken an institutional audit in Austria

#### **6.4 Certification of continuing education programmes**

ACQUIN ensures in certification procedures that a comparable programme quality is also achieved in continuing education programmes. The assessment and certification of university and non-university continuing education programmes has the overall objective of examining such programmes with regard to their compatibility with higher education programmes, the comparability of competencies and their classification in the European Qualifications Framework. Assessment criteria in the evaluation of continuing education programmes are the ESG. Against the backdrop of the guiding principle of lifelong learning and the requirements on the creditability of competences, the certification of educational offerings should facilitate an assessment of the quality of these programmes for students and employers.

The assessment and certification of national and international continuing education programmes follows in general the same rules and procedures as the assessment of international study programmes. Guidelines<sup>17</sup> for the preparation of self-documentation should support HEI for writing the self-assessment report, in national certification procedures the guidelines are based on the specimen decree<sup>18</sup>.

Some elements vary in the procedure: A group of experts consists at least of three members (one professor, one representative of the labour market and one representative of the target group of the programme/student). The experts are both qualified in matters of quality assurance and the subject of the respective continuing education programmes. They have also appropriate knowledge of the later employment opportunities of the students. In international procedures experts usually have international experience; if appropriate, national expertise is embedded (by bringing in one or more national experts).

Differences arise also with regard to the actual assessment. Due to the limited size of continuing education courses, the assessment procedure is defined as a rule in reports in conjunction with an online conference between programme providers and experts. A site visit is carried out, provided that the expert group deems it necessary.

### **7 ACQUIN's internal quality assurance**

The internal quality assurance system (QA-system) of ACQUIN is the basis for continuous enhancement of quality of its work, and, simultaneously, supports the translation of the

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<sup>17</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Guideline\\_for\\_International\\_Certification\\_v1.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Guideline_for_International_Certification_v1.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Leitfaden\\_Zertifizierung\\_v1-1.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Leitfaden_Zertifizierung_v1-1.pdf)

agency's mission into day-to-day operations. The focus is thus not only on the agency's internal quality assurance but is also on supporting the agency's external quality assurance activities. The QA-system therefore has to ensure the development and implementation of documented work processes and outcomes, compliance with laws and regulations, maintaining a fluid system for communication with internal and external stakeholders, acquisition and analysis of qualitative and quantitative feedback.

Internal QA mechanisms of the agency are defined and conducted in accordance with the Quality Management handbook (QM handbook<sup>19</sup>). The QM handbook has been developed by the Quality Management team (QM team) in close collaboration with the other ACQUIN staff members, the management of the agency and is regularly revised and updated on the basis of the feedback received from the internal and external stakeholders.

Due to the transformation of the legal framework for accreditation in Germany ACQUIN now acts as an intermediary that is contracted to complete preparatory steps in the accreditation procedure, with the final decision being taken by the GAC.

Even though, with the introduction of the new law, the role of ACQUIN in the assessment and accreditation process in Germany has been formally changed, ACQUIN firmly reaffirms its commitment "to promote the quality of higher education and to support the establishment of a quality culture at HEIs in Germany and abroad" (ACQUIN's mission statement). Thus, the introduction of the "new law" has made it necessary for ACQUIN to review and redefine processes, which has been done through continuous collaboration and dialogue with internal and external stakeholders.

To summarise, the internal quality assurance mechanisms are targeted not only at controlling the fulfilment of the predefined requirements, but also at receiving quality feedback by active involvement and feedback of both internal and external stakeholders. Active involvement and feedback of both internal and external stakeholders allows fostering the further development of both internal quality culture of the agency and ACQUIN's competences in assisting and guiding the establishment of a quality culture at HEIs in Germany and abroad.

For the analysis of the current situation and to identify the areas and opportunities for improvement, an external team from the Harz University of Applied Sciences has carried out an evaluation project (duration 2019 – 2020). The results of the analysis have been presented by the team of Harz University of Applied Sciences in autumn 2020 and are expected to support the agency in its further development and enhancement of its internal processes.

The existing structure fosters employees' involvement in internal organisational processes: staff meetings are regularly taking place and cover a wide range of topics (as discussions of

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<sup>19</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_QM-Handbuch\\_Version\\_8.0.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_QM-Handbuch_Version_8.0.pdf) (in German only)

complex or unusual cases and their possible solutions, sharing the best practices, information exchange) and are documented in a protocol. The meetings can also act as a form of internal in-house workshops and training. Additionally, based on a special knowledge and experience, working groups are formed to address ongoing issues and tasks. Attendance and active participation of the employees in conferences and workshops is encouraged.

The QM team consists of two members working together, covering different areas of responsibility:

- *Quality Manager* (development and monitoring of implementation of documented work processes and outcomes, monitoring of compliance with laws and regulations, ensuring application of policies and mechanisms).
- *Process Manager* (maintaining a fluid system for communication with internal and external stakeholders, acquisition, collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative feedback).

The work of the QM team is based on close collaboration with all staff members and constant interchange of information. It is the task of the QM team to gather and accumulate, process and analyse formal and informal, internal and external feedback and information received, participate in and oversee the development of respective measures and follow-ups to them. The team is working in close collaboration with and is reporting to the managing directors and departments management. One member of the management usually also takes part in the QM team meetings. The QM team reports on a regular basis, at least every three months, to the whole management about the results of ACQUIN's internal management activities. If required, the management creates together with the QM team ad hoc working groups with employees to address specific tasks. The management also decides on measures to be implemented according to the results of the internal QM activities.

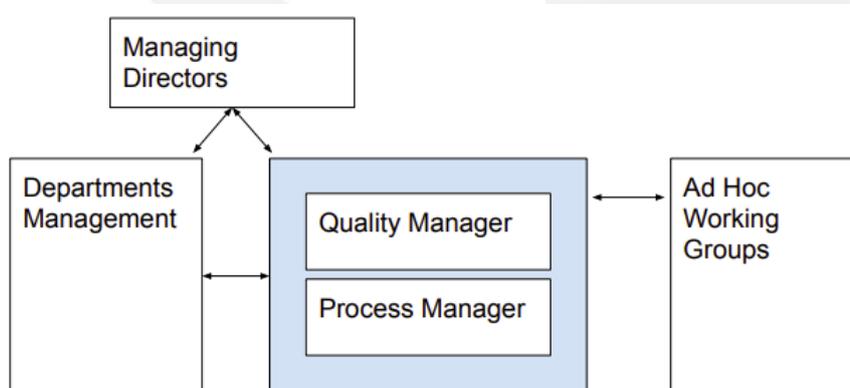


Figure 1: QM team

ACQUIN is gathering not only quantitative, but also qualitative feedback to ensure that the quality assurance is not reduced to only formal feedback loops.

**Quantitative feedback:**

- Administrative/operational data: the data is collected about agency's operation to assess how well the organization is achieving its intended goals. The data includes project management and personal management data (long and short-term workload planning, progress tracking, time recording). Importantly, the staff has an opportunity to give a timely feedback about running projects – if there are internal or external factors that cause changes in the planned operation. Thus, the analysis is not limited to regular ex post evaluation but aims at monitoring the status of the running projects.
- Standardised digital questionnaires are systematically used to receive feedback from internal and external stakeholders (HEIs, experts, ACQUIN committees and bodies).

**Qualitative feedback:**

- Feedback received from internal and external stakeholders in everyday operation and interaction as well as during planned meetings and events. An important prerequisite for a quality feedback is feedback seeking attitude.

**Internal feedback mechanisms**General Assembly:

- meets on a yearly basis;
- survey of the ACQUIN members is conducted yearly;

Accreditation Commission:

- meets on an a quarterly basis;
- survey of the Accreditation Commission members is conducted yearly;

Complaints and Appeals Committee:

- meets upon request;

Project managers and administrative staff:

- monthly staff meetings; weekly meeting head of departments with the managing directors;
- Internal project database reporting tool (for project managers) used on a daily basis.

**External feedback mechanisms**HEI:

- Survey upon completion of a procedure and/or yearly (for long-term projects);

- Informal feedback;

#### Experts:

- Survey upon completion of a procedure;
- Informal feedback;

#### GAC:

- Informal feedback;
- Feedback on accreditation reports;

#### ENQA:

- Periodical external evaluation procedures by ENQA.

The received informal feedback and information is discussed during the weekly joint meetings of the managing directors, heads of departments and QM team. Purpose of the meetings is not to only check the progress on short, medium, and long-term goals, but is also to review, improve, and update the used processes and criteria for continuous improvement. Results are also discussed with the whole ACQUIN team on a quarterly basis and with the Accreditation Commission and the board at least on a yearly basis.

#### **Internal quality assurance at strategic level:**

- Strategy meetings, on which strategy plan for the consequent period is discussed and consequently confirmed by board take place every two years. The strategic plan is communicated to the staff. Managing directors are responsible for the realisation of the strategy plan. They also meet with the executive board on a regular basis to report on the progress and receive feedback.
- The board and managing directors present the annual activity reports at the annual general assembly meeting. The reports are also available on the website of ACQUIN<sup>20</sup>.
- ACQUIN commits to continuous improvement of quality of its activities and participates every five years in an international external evaluation process to ensure the compliance of the agency with the ESG.

## **8 ACQUIN's international activities**

According to the overall concept of ACQUIN, the promotion and development of quality assurance in higher education is understood not as a nationally limited task but as a more far-reaching project. In accordance with the idea of the Bologna Process, ACQUIN is committed to

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.acquin.org/verein/>

actively contributing to the implementation and further development of quality assurance procedures in the European Higher Education Area and other parts of the world ACQUIN is authorized to perform accreditation procedures in the nearby regions Austria and Switzerland. In this context, ACQUIN participates regularly in conferences and workshops of the SAC (Swiss Accreditation Council). Furthermore, accreditation procedures in Liechtenstein have been performed and several procedures in Luxembourg are currently carried out.

One of the focal areas for ACQUIN has been the external quality assurance for study programmes and HEIs in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Arab world. ACQUIN is an active member of the European networks in order to achieve approximation of quality standards, comparability of quality assurance procedures and a mutual understanding with respect to various quality cultures within the European Higher Education Area.

These include the membership in the "European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education" (ENQA), "Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education" (CEENQA), "International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education" (INQAAHE) and "European University Association" (EUA). The participation in the activities of the networks depends on the reciprocal exchange of experience.

In addition to the membership in the respective networks, the registration in the "European Quality Assurance Register" and "National Register of Accreditation Agencies in the Republic of Kazakhstan" is an important prerequisite for the international activities of ACQUIN. Moreover, bilateral agreements foster cooperation and exchange between the agencies in some countries. Among the most important co-operation partners are the Russian agency "The National Centre for Public Accreditation" (NCPA) and the Kazakh Agency "Independent Kazakhstan Quality Assurance Agency in Education" (IQAA). Pursuant to article 26.8 of Mongolia's Law of Education, ACQUIN is also registered with Mongolia's National Council for Education Accreditation (MNCEA) and has conducted a workshop about international accreditation procedures in Mongolia with MNCEA in 2019. Together with MNCEA ACQUIN is currently carrying out a joint accreditation procedure with a national state university. Further exchange formats are planned but still have to be postponed until the pandemic situation will be changed.

## 9 Compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines Part 3

### 9.1 ESG Standard 3.1 Activities, policies and processes for quality assurance

**Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.**

The objective of the Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN) is to contribute to the shaping of the European Higher Education Area, to ensure the comparability of the quality of HEI degrees, to promote the quality of higher education programmes and to support the establishment of a culture of quality at HEIs<sup>21</sup>.

ACQUIN carries out assessment and accreditation procedures of Bachelor and Master programmes of all disciplines on a national and international level and across all types of HEIs as well as PhD programmes (on international level) and certification procedures of continuing education programmes in order to ensure a high quality of study programmes, create market transparency, enhance the attractiveness of higher education to students and to promote comparability of academic qualifications. In this sense, the assessment and accreditation of entire universities, their quality management systems in teaching and learning, as well as other performance areas contribute to the further promotion of the academic quality and to the support of the higher education development. ACQUIN sees itself as a partner of HEIs abroad that want to offer Bachelor, Master and PhD programmes at European level.

The implementation of all quality assurance procedures in Germany and abroad is based on the international standards of good practice, especially on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). In national procedures the goals, objectives and criteria are defined by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Laender in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK) and laid down in the binding specimen decree.

As a self-governing higher education organisation, ACQUIN is free from government interference and is independent in the spirit of academic standards and traditions. Academic freedom and autonomy of higher education institutions are guiding principles of all decision-making processes, this includes the respect towards the diversity of HEIs and their disciplines.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.acquin.org/ueber-acquin/>  
<https://www.acquin.org/en/about-acquin/>

All employees, peer experts, members of the board, commissions and committees of ACQUIN act professionally. This means that in addition to the sense of responsibility, accountability, integrity and exemplary behaviour, there is a pursuit of ACQUIN's principles of cooperation in ACQUIN's system of values. Moreover, ACQUIN strives for the principles of direct and open communication.

The purpose of the association and its committees are clearly defined in its statutes<sup>22</sup>. Stakeholders are involved on a regular basis in the Accreditation Committee of ACQUIN (decision-making body of ACQUIN, takes decisions on accreditation / certification of programmes and institutions outside the Interstate Treaty; approves all guidelines for ACQUIN's external quality assurance activities) and in the expert panels (representatives of HEIs, labour market and students). The Accreditation Commission is also responsible for the design and the processes of the external quality assurance activities by the agency in form of discussing and approving the processes, which are laid down in the guidelines for the agency's external quality assurance activities.

Stakeholders are involved in ACQUIN's work through participating as experts in reviews, but also being an active member in ACQUIN's committees (Accreditation Commission, board). ACQUIN members elect the Accreditation Commission, which consists of representatives of HEIs, students representatives and representatives of the labour market. Before a forthcoming election all members are asked in due time to submit nominations, this includes also member organizations of professional practice and students (via the student accreditation pool, which is the official organisation of students in accreditation procedures in Germany). According to the disciplines and the experience in quality assurance the board compiles an election list for the election of the new Accreditation Commission by the general assembly.

Peers as well as HEIs are asked for feedback after completion of an assessment procedure. Also committee members give feedback through face-to-face communication, during meetings and in a more formal way through the yearly survey. The general assembly gives ACQUIN the possibility to get feedback from its members for example through workshops during the general assembly, where actual topics and processes of quality assurance are discussed.

ACQUIN is also in regular contact with the student accreditation pool. The involvement of the pool in assessment procedures through the appointment of student reviewers is important for ACQUIN's work. The agency supports the self-administration of the pool with an annual contribution and the financing of a training seminar for student reviewers.

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<sup>22</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Statute\\_MV2020\\_EN-1.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Statute_MV2020_EN-1.pdf)  
[https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ACQUIN\\_Satzung\\_MV2020.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ACQUIN_Satzung_MV2020.pdf)

ACQUIN is also regularly invited to meetings of networks with relevance for the labour market like the peer expert network of the trade union or the accreditation association for study programmes in architecture and planning.

Processes for quality assurance are defined in the QM handbook of ACQUIN and are also described in ACQUIN's guidelines, which are available on the agency's website. ACQUIN ensures through its processes a clear distinction between the external quality assurance processes and other fields of work, e.g. consultancy services by its subsidiary ACQUINUS, which is an independent and self-supporting limited liability company. If ACQUINUS has provided consultancy concerning the implementation of an internal quality management system at a HEI, ACQUIN will not carry out the assessment procedure to ensure the independence of the procedure. This is also regulated in the assessment contracts.

The same applies to the selection of experts. Experts having a relationship with the HEI through e.g. common projects, consultancy, participation in committees, are not involved as experts in a quality assurance procedure at this HEI. These rules are communicated transparently to all relevant groups.

The processes for ACQUIN's external quality assurance activities are described in chapter 6.

## 9.2 ESG Standard 3.2 Official status

**Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.**

ACQUIN is registered in the register of the local court Bayreuth since 5 March 2001 as an association under No. 1323 (Annex 40). Each member of the board has sole power of representation in accordance with § 26 of the Civil Code (§ 7 part 2 of the statutes of ACQUIN).

### Non-profit status

According to § 2 of the statutes of ACQUIN, the purpose of the association ACQUIN has been recognised by the respective tax office Bayreuth as non-profit; this excludes any making of profit. The tax office Bayreuth audits the non-profit status annually after presentation of the financial statements and ad hoc basis for each amendment adopted by the general assembly. The financial statements include the appropriation of funds that proves the prompt allocation of resources for privileged purposes.

§ 4 of the statutes allows primarily state, state-approved and private HEIs in Germany and abroad to be members of the association. Further HEI associations, commercial enterprises, professional associations, chambers of commerce and public institutions can become members of ACQUIN. The statutes define four member groups that are elected into the Accredita-

tion Commission: the member group of universities, the member group of universities of applied sciences, the member group of art and music academies, and the member group of the labour market.

Meanwhile, the members of ACQUIN include more than 150 HEIs; they consist of mainly domestic HEIs as well as six non-university institutions. Of these, approximately one third is from the university member group and two-thirds belong to the member group of universities of applied sciences. As to the regional distribution of member institutions of ACQUIN, one should note that universities, universities of applied sciences, private universities, as well as art and music academies are represented from all federal states of Germany.

### Recognition of ACQUIN

ACQUIN was first accredited by the GAC in 2001 for a period of five years. Meanwhile ACQUIN has been reaccredited four times by the GAC. The agency was granted in 2016 a re-accreditation with conditions. After the fulfilment of conditions, ACQUIN received the status of a re-accredited agency until 30 June 2021.

ACQUIN has been a member of ENQA since 2003. In 2008, ACQUIN has been included into the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). Due to the combined review of the GAC and ENQA, ACQUIN is also registered in EQAR until 30 June 2021.

### 9.3 ESG Standard 3.3 Independence

**Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.**

The German association law defines the structure of ACQUIN. According to the statutes<sup>23</sup>, ACQUIN is free from state interference and is independent in the spirit of academic traditions. In accordance with § 6 part 1 of the statutes, the bodies of the association with its secretariat in Bayreuth are the executive board, the general assembly and the Accreditation Commission; committees are the expert groups and the complaints and appeals committee (§ 6 part 2). Even though the bodies of ACQUIN are defined by the German association law, ACQUIN is legally and organisational independent, there is no formal link to ministries and the GAC. Therefore, the agency is free from directives from third parties. It operates financially independent and has to generate its own income through its quality assurance activities, for which cost-covering fees are charged. It is accountable solely to its members, which are informed

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Statute\\_MV2020\\_EN-1.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Statute_MV2020_EN-1.pdf)

during the general assembly about the activities of the last year, planned future activities, financial statements and the yearly economic plan.

According to the rules of the German association law, the board of ACQUIN is elected by the general assembly every three years. It is independent from members and any outside influence in its decisions. Member of the board can be removed from office by a so-called dismissal only the general assembly, because it finally elected it (§ 27 civil law code).

The work of all members of the bodies and committees is provided on a voluntary basis. In their work they are bound by the statutes of ACQUIN, the Code of Ethics<sup>24</sup> and generally applicable legal regulations. The managing directors, who head the secretariat of the association, are appointed by the board to which they report. The agency is completely independent in staff recruitment and in management of its own staff. The decision to hire new staff is taken by the board, the operational implementation is carried out by the managing directors.

The legal form of the association, the internal organisation and decision-making structure as well as the non-profit character ensures the independence of ACQUIN. The recognition as a non-profit organization excludes a profit motive and is carried out by the tax authority Bayreuth.

The general assembly elects the Accreditation Commission every two years. The appointment of experts is done by the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN. The impartiality of the external experts and any possible conflicts of interest are taken into consideration when the experts are appointed. Experts are obliged to sign a statement of impartiality.

Sole decision-making body of ACQUIN is the Accreditation Commission, which takes its decisions for procedures outside of the Interstate Treaty and the specimen decree based on the expert report, which includes an accreditation / certification recommendation and the statement of the HEI. ACQUIN is a member-supported organisation; however, individual members (HEIs) cannot influence the accreditation and certifications decisions of the agency. The expert panels and committees of ACQUIN are independent and not subject to instruction from the outside in their decisions. The work of the expert groups and commissions is always determined by the application of the respective criteria; they act independently from each other. This is ensured by the internal structure and the procedural rules of ACQUIN.

Procedural rules and criteria for national accreditation procedures in Germany are defined by the specimen decree as the binding requirements for all agencies recognized by the GAC. ACQUIN has in this regard therefore no authority on the legal framework and has to follow these rules. The new regulations in Germany have significantly changed and restricted the role of the agencies through an explicit distinction of tasks between assessment and decision rec-

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<sup>24</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Mission-Statement\\_Code-of-Ethics\\_EN.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Mission-Statement_Code-of-Ethics_EN.pdf)

ommendation and final decision on accreditation. Agencies organise and carry out the assessment procedures applying the criteria of the specimen decree without having any decision-making power.

In the procedures, conducted according to the new law, in which the GAC has a role of the decision-making body, a clear distinction is always made between the accreditation recommendations of the expert panel (based on a distinct evaluation of the criteria) and the agency on the one hand, and the decisions taken by the GAC, on the other. These recommendations act as a reference point for the GAC decision: the GAC can agree with the recommendations or disagree and either delete or impose additional conditions. Any decision taken by the GAC is explained and documented in a form that allows to see the accreditation recommendations formulated in the report of the agency, final decision of the GAC and as well as justification for taking this decision. If the GAC does not agree to the experts' accreditation recommendation and come to a justified deviating decision, the HEI has the right to comment on this before the final decision is taken by GAC. Analysis of this process and the decision-making practice of the GAC is a topic of a thematic analysis conducted by ACQUIN. The accreditation report including the accreditation recommendation of the experts and GAC's decision are published separately in the database of the GAC. Through this procedure, the division of tasks is transparent for all involved stakeholder and the public.

Outside the framework of the specimen decree ACQUIN is free to define its own methodologies and procedures, in which the ESG are applied and in addition, national or further regulations are considered, if applicable. In these cases, the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN is the decision-making body.

#### 9.4 ESG Standard 3.4 Thematic analysis

**Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.**

ACQUIN has established a policy for the thematic analysis on the agency's activities, which covers gathering of empirical data, analysis and publications of measurements and results. As an association ACQUIN aims at providing informational support and guidance to its members concerning all aspects of the process of assessment and accreditation of programmes, systems and institutions. Based on the analysis of the experience gathered from the completed accreditation cases, identified best practices, possibly challenging themes for HEIs as well as developments in the field, changes in the legal framework and consequences of them, ACQUIN has been preparing and yearly conducting workshops for the member HEI. Workshops on the following topics have taken place:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Topic</b>
2015	Revision of the rules / guidelines by the GAC 2016
2016	Current issues/topics of accreditation (system accreditation; internationalization; degree programmes with a special profile)
2017	Changes in the ESG procedures and their consequences for the QA procedures
2018	Current issues/topics of accreditation: (paradigm change in program accreditation; changes in system accreditation procedures)
2019	Current topics of accreditation (quality assurance of joint programmes; quality assurance and digitalization)

At the workshops reports an overview of one or more topics have been presented, guest speakers - representatives of national and international organisations (ENQA, HRK, GAC as well as representatives of the HEIs sharing their experience (2016), or experts in a field (e.g. digitalisation of HEIs) are invited, working groups as well as open discussions sections are conducted. Presentations and protocols of the workshops are made available to the members of ACQUIN.

Although the workshops approximate thematic analysis in a sense that they represent a way to share the knowledge and practical experience of the agency with the stakeholders and are aimed at promoting shared understanding of quality and quality criteria, a systematic analysis of the results of ACQUIN's external quality assurance activities need to be conducted in a structured and repeated way. A recently established policy for a thematic analysis of procedures according to the new regulations in Germany draws attention to identifying good practices, areas for improvement and tracing developments, with the outcomes being later shared with a broader audience (e.g. via publication of the reports on the agency's website).

Working practices of the GAC have repeatedly been a topic at ACQUIN's workshops over the last years. In order to reflect its own work applying the new regulations in Germany, ACQUIN has carried out in 2020 a first thematic analysis on "The Decision-making practice of GAC" to review whether the criteria of the specimen decree have been applied by the expert panels in an appropriate way or whether changes are necessary due to different interpretations of the criteria between GAC and the experts. This ongoing thematic analysis is based on the analysis of assessment reports and the final decision taken by the GAC. The main purpose of the analysis is to identify cases, where GAC decisions differ from the decisions suggested by the expert panel, to examine the justification given for the GAC alternative decision, as well as to detect and analyse the emerging patterns and their implications and reflect the agency's work.

End of July 2020, first results of the analysis have been presented at the general assembly of the ACQUIN members in 2020. The presentation has been shared with the members of ACQUIN and will be available on the website of ACQUIN. This thematic analysis is conceptualised as an ongoing project, with built-in interchange of information between ACQUIN and internal as well as external stakeholders.

In 2017, ACQUIN has also carried out an analysis of quality assurance at Kazakh universities and the impact of external peer reviews: “Quality Assurance at Universities in Kazakhstan and the Impact of ACQUIN’s external peer reviews”. This analysis reviewed the challenges in conducting external quality procedures according to ESG standards in Kazakhstan and examined whether external quality assurance has a positive impact on the quality of study programmes. The report is available on the website of ACQUIN<sup>25</sup>. Other thematic analyses are planned in the area of long-term impact of external quality assurance on the development of internal quality assurance system of HEIs and quality enhancement.

### 9.5 ESG Standard 3.5 Resources

**Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial to carry out their work.**

The secretariat of ACQUIN is located in Bayreuth. A total of 630 m<sup>2</sup> of office space and 150 m<sup>2</sup> of secondary area is available. In addition, there are three basement rooms for archiving documents. There are two meeting rooms for meetings, workshops and in-house seminars. The office is equipped with a modern infrastructure and adequate technical equipment such as laptops. Several high-resolution cameras enable the participation in video conferences. Tangible assets of ACQUIN amounted to € 7,979 on 31 December 2019. It is composed of € 4,696 of office furniture and € 3,283 of office equipment (computers, telephone system etc.).

In order to sustain its capacity, ACQUIN has formed a reserve fund in the amount of € 468,000 for recurring payments such as salaries and rent for a period of approximately four months according to § 58 No. 6 Tax Code (AO). Thus, the continuous business operation is ensured if payments are late, etc. The provisions are set up at the end of the year. They amounted to a total of € 357,550 in 2019. If one takes into account the annual results of 2016 – 2019, total earnings amounted to approximately € 18,000 with the average turnover of approximately € 2.4 million for these four years.

ACQUIN is an independent organisation and thus does not receive any funding or donations from the government, ministries or third parties. The fees of assessment and accreditation procedures cover the agency costs; the cost calculation of the procedures breaks even and is

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.acquin.org/publikationen/>

non-profit. The generated funds are used only for the purposes of the association. The proper use of funds is presented annually by the auditing company check. At its annual meeting, the general assembly approves the economic plan for the coming year prepared by the management and the board of directors, taking into account the activities of the agency.

There are in total 20 employees working in the agency: two managing directors, twelve project managers, a process manager, two administrative staff members and three student assistants. Three employees work in part-time (1.7 full-time equivalent). There have been a number of staff changes over the last four years, but all vacancies have been filled. Decisions on recruitment of new staff members is done according to foreseeable assessment procedures. In 2019 and 2020, four new project managers joined the agency.

As has been previously noted, starting 2017 ACQUIN has been undergoing internal adaptation and restructuring as a response to the altering environment. It has been the stakeholders opinion that ACQUIN, while maintaining and strengthening the quality of its work and drawing on its rich experience, should use the situation as an opportunity to redefine itself, by extending the range of its services, positioning itself stronger on the market, and building a closer contact with its stakeholders, offering them a fast and efficient services, combined with advice and guidance aimed at the further development of the quality of higher education. Consequently, changes have been implemented, that are aimed at both strengthening position of the agency at the market (and thus reinforcing financial stability) and ensuring that the agency has sufficient human and operational resources to deliver services that are both tailored to needs of the stakeholders and are aligned with the national and international standards and requirements (e.g. ESG, specimen decree).

Thus, as a result of the analysis and revision of internal processes, ACQUIN has changed the internal organisation: three project managers are mainly involved in the organisation of assessment procedures, one of them also specifically responsible for publication of the accreditation results. These measures reduces the spectrum of diverse tasks for each employee and increase the efficiency of ACQUIN's work. Tools have been introduced that allow collection and analysis of administrative and operational data (mid-term planning, short-term workload planning, progress tracking etc.).

In this sense head of departments (internal quality management, national assessment procedures of quality management systems at HEIs, national programme assessment procedures, international accreditation and certification procedures), are responsible for the coordination of the respective activities.

The agency has a very committed and competent team; human resources are adequate and appropriate for activities of the agency. According to the financial planning and financial results in the last years, the financial resources are stable and sufficient. Because HEIs must start the

accreditation procedure in due time (at least one year before expiry of the accreditation period) the mid-term planning of ACQUIN is supported, which enables the agency to allocate its resources at an early stage. Nevertheless, ACQUIN monitors the market situation carefully, due to the fact, that there is an increase in system accreditation procedures in Germany, which results in a simultaneous decrease in programme assessment procedures. Against this background, ACQUIN will probably have to extend its portfolio, which will have to be further discussed with the board and its members.

## 9.6 ESG Standard 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

**Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.**

The objective of ACQUIN's internal quality management system is to continuously review its work, to ensure the compliance with national and international standards (e.g. ESG, specimen decree), and to safeguard and improve the quality of its own work and processes.

In detail, ACQUIN's internal quality assurance mechanisms are described in chapter 7 of the SAR. This section provides an overview of the agency's internal quality assurance with the emphasis on its role in defining, assuring and enhancing quality and integrity of the agency's activities.

As is previously described, the work of the QM-team is built up from two separate but complementary areas:

- Operational guidelines and policies: Development and monitoring of implementation of documented work processes and outcomes (including documentation management, internal communications, staff responsibilities and authority, work of agency's committees and bodies), monitoring of compliance with laws and regulations, ensuring application of policies and mechanisms.
- Monitoring and Reporting: Acquisition and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data (feedback received from internal and external stakeholders, process measurement and evaluation data), which provides a necessary basis for effective project, personal and resources management and planning, as well as further development of the processes quality.

Thus, the internal quality assurance ensures that clearly defined operational guidelines and policies are at place and are known to all members of staff as well as members of the agency's bodies and committees (through internal trainings, induction of new members of staff, committees and bodies, regular staff and committee meetings). The analysis of the respective process and performance data:

feedback from HEIs, expert panels, ACQUIN committees and bodies; feedback of the GAC (informal feedback and through completed accreditation procedures), administrative/operational data helps to see how well the organization is achieving its intended goals and identify areas for potential improvement.

Results of the internal quality assurance procedures are summarised in an internal annual quality report, which is discussed with the board and the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN on a yearly basis for further improvement of ACQUIN's work.

Regular team meetings give staff the possibility to discuss feedback from stakeholders, exchange experiences and discuss questions on practical work together with suggestions for improvements. For example, as a result, the guiding questions for experts, which ACQUIN provides to the review panels for the preparation of the expert report, were revised. This showed a positive impact on the quality of accreditation reports. In addition, after the specimen decree came into force, ACQUIN has also updated twice its guidelines for the self-assessment reports, as it was found that there was a lack of clarity regarding the differentiation of the assessment criteria in the new regulations.

As a result of the analysis of internal processes a new database was implemented in 2019 together with a digital time tracking to increase the efficiency of ACQUIN's work and to speed up processes. In the last months, ACQUIN has adapted its surveys and revised relevant documents such as questionnaires and the QM handbook, including key indicators.

Staff members receive regular feedback on the expert reports by the management; in addition, the decisions of the Accreditation Council are regularly analysed in order to be able to identify systematic deviations between experts' accreditation recommendations and decisions of the GAC and to initiate improvement measures if necessary. Even if there is no official link to the GAC, ACQUIN also receives informal feedback on its assessment procedures through queries, which supports ACQUIN in the quality enhancement of its activities.

Internal quality assurance in its function as a stakeholder feedback mechanism has played a crucial role especially during the period of the adaptation of the system and the agency to the legal framework change in Germany. The introduction of the new law has made it necessary for ACQUIN to review and redefine processes, which has been done through collaboration and dialogue with internal and external stakeholders (meetings with former standing committee members, Accreditation Commission, board, discussion with ACQUIN members at the general assembly).

#### Professional conduct

The Code of Ethics<sup>26</sup> of ACQUIN guides the actions of the committee members, experts and employees, which is available on the association's home page. The work of ACQUIN and the implementation of quality assurance procedures shall comply with these guidelines. ACQUIN does not tolerate any kind of discrimination and intolerance. All persons involved in the activities of ACQUIN have to act professionally and ethically. ACQUIN ensures the professional work of all committee members, experts and employees through targeted selection.

Members of the Accreditation Commission are elected by the general assembly, the board drafts an electoral list from the submitted proposals, which takes up the suggestions of the HEI members and adjusts them only when there are multiple nominations from one HEI. The qualification profiles and motivation letters of election candidates are provided to member HEIs for the election of members of the accreditation commission. HEI members of ACQUIN are invited in time to propose appropriate scientific representatives and student representatives as candidates for the Accreditation Commission. In addition the student accreditation pool is asked for nominations of students.

After the election, new members of the Accreditation Commission receive an information package to prepare them for their new role. A training of the new members is carried out by senior staff members before the first meeting of accreditation commission. Also the managing directors and an experienced member of the accreditation commission are available for questions. The same procedure is applied for new members of the complaints and appeals commission. During regular committee meetings, members are informed about recent developments and new regulations in quality assurance

Experts are provided with a handout, which describes their roles, tasks and the assessment process. The handout also refers to the ACQUIN Code of Ethics. These aspects are also addressed in the expert training.

New employees have to undergo an introductory programme in the first six months and have also a mentoring through a senior staff member; internal workshops give staff the possibility to discuss recent developments in quality assurance, also participation in conferences is encouraged. In-house training seminars should support staff in its daily work, current needs from work are here taken up, e.g. in 2020 an in-house training on online site-visits was conducted. Another already scheduled moderating seminar was postponed due to the corona pandemic, as the content is not suitable for an online format. The seminar will be held in 2021.

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<sup>26</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Mission-Statement\\_Code-of-Ethics\\_EN.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Mission-Statement_Code-of-Ethics_EN.pdf)

## 9.7 ESG Standard 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies

**Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years on order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.**

ACQUIN has to undergo every five years an ENQA Review for the assessment of its compliance with the ESG. Also, the process for the renewal of the EQAR registration is seen as an external cyclical review.

## 10 Compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines Part 2

### 10.1 ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

**External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG**

ACQUIN respects in all external quality assurance procedures the autonomy and HEI's responsibility for the quality of their programmes. ACQUIN's mission is to promote the quality of higher education and to support quality development as well as quality culture at HEIs. In its external quality assurance activities, therefore the internal quality assurance of HEIs plays an important role of ACQUIN's assessment procedures and is taken into consideration accordingly.

In national assessment procedures of study programmes (including joint programmes) and quality management systems (system accreditation) the assessment criteria are defined in the Interstate Treaty and the specimen decree. The GAC, as decision-making body for accreditations within this legal framework has made a mapping between the standards of the specimen decree and the ESG part 1. Agencies who are authorised by the GAC to conduct assessment procedures according to the German regulations have no authority on the legal framework and the criteria, which have to be applied. In international procedures Part 1 of the ESG is fully included in the assessment criteria. The evaluation report is modelled on the ESG criteria to lead the expert group along these criteria.

ACQUIN has developed guidelines for the programme and the institutional level for all its external quality assurance procedures, which provide information about the process and assessment criteria (including the corresponding ESG criteria) and which are available on ACQUIN's website.

The following table shows how the standards of ESG part 1 correspond to ACQUIN's assessment standards:

	national			international						
	programme accreditation <sup>27</sup>	system accreditation <sup>28</sup>	certification <sup>29</sup>	programme accreditation <sup>30</sup>	accreditation of PhD-programmes <sup>31</sup>	institutional accreditation <sup>32</sup>	certification <sup>33</sup>	Switzerland		Austria
								institutional accreditation <sup>34</sup>	programme accreditation <sup>35</sup>	Audit <sup>36</sup>
ESG 1.1	§ 14	§ 17	2.4	ESG 1.1	ESG 1.1	2.6	ESG 1.1	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.3, 5.1	4.1, 4.4	1, 2
ESG 1.2	§ 11, § 12, § 13	§ 17	2.1, 2.2, 2.3	ESG 1.2	ESG 1.2	2.3	ESG 1.2	3.1, 3.3, 5.2	1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2	2
ESG 1.3	§ 12, § 15	§ 17	2.2	ESG 1.3	ESG 1.3	2.3	ESG 1.3	3.2	2.3	2
ESG 1.4	§ 05, § 06 § 12, § 14	§ 17	1.2, 2.2, 2.4	ESG 1.4	ESG 1.4	2.3	ESG 1.4	3.4	2.3	2
ESG 1.5	§ 12	§ 17	2.2	ESG 1.5	ESG 1.5	2.5	ESG 1.5	4.2, 4.3	3.3	2
ESG 1.6	§ 12	§ 17	2.2	ESG 1.6	ESG 1.6	2.5	ESG 1.6	4.1	3.2	2
ESG 1.7	§ 14	§ 18	2.4	ESG 1.7	ESG 1.7	2.6	ESG 1.7	2.2	4.2	1, 2, 3
ESG 1.8	x <sup>37</sup>	§ 18 (4)	2.2.5	ESG 1.8	ESG 1.8	2.4	ESG 1.8	5.2	5.2 (inst.)	3
ESG 1.9	§ 14	§ 18	2.4	ESG 1.9	ESG 1.9	2.6	ESG 1.9	3.2, 5.1	2.2, 3.1, 4.1	2, 3, 4
ESG 1.10	§ 26	§ 26	n/a	ESG 1.10	ESG 1.10	2.6	ESG 1.10	1.4	1.4 (inst.)	1, 2

<sup>27</sup> Criteria defined by the specimen decree of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Laender. ACQUIN has no authority on the legal framework.

<sup>28</sup> Criteria defined by the specimen decree of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Laender. ACQUIN has no authority on the legal framework.

<sup>29</sup> Standards defined by ACQUIN under consideration of the criteria stated out in the specimen decree of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Laender.

<sup>30</sup> International programme accreditation procedures follow consequently the ESG criteria defined in part 1.

<sup>31</sup> In addition to the criteria defined by ESG part 1 the assessment of doctoral programmes follows the so-called Salzburg principles as they are specified in the Salzburg recommendations ("Salzburg II").

<sup>32</sup> In addition to the criteria defined by ESG part 1 the assessment of institutional structures follows most of the criteria for the institutional accreditation of non-state higher education institution of the German Council of Science and Humanities (WR) („Guidelines for the accreditation of non-state higher education institutions" Section B.IV).

<sup>33</sup> ACQUIN applies the criteria of ESG part 1 for continuing education programmes.

<sup>34</sup> According to the directive of the Swiss Accreditation Council ACQUIN has committed itself to use the guidelines of the swiss agency of accreditation and quality assurance (aaq).

<sup>35</sup> According to the directive of the Swiss Accreditation Council ACQUIN has committed itself to use the guidelines of the swiss agency of accreditation and quality assurance (aaq).

<sup>36</sup> ACQUIN has developed four quality standards based on HS-QSG's six assessment areas.

<sup>37</sup> Publication of examination regulations which contain information on study programmes is obligatory according to the higher education acts of the German states.

In national programme assessment procedures (including joint programmes), and international programme accreditation procedures the quality of a study programme, including the qualification objectives, the curriculum, resources and its quality management processes are part of the review. Beside the design of the curriculum, the extent to which internal QM measures have been implemented and how they have contributed to the improvement of a study programme is also part of the evaluation process.

The national assessment of quality management systems of HEIs (system accreditation) and audits in Austria as well as institutional accreditation procedures in Switzerland focus on the internal quality management related to the area of teaching and learning of an institution (whereby the last two even include research strategies and activities). In Switzerland ACQUIN applies the criteria set by the Federal Act on Funding and Coordination of the Swiss Higher Education Sector (Higher Education Act, HEdA) and the agency has committed itself to use the guidelines of the swiss agency of accreditation and quality assurance (aaq)<sup>38</sup>. The assessment criteria for institutional audits in Austria are defined by the “Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education (HS-QSG) and also described in the guidelines for audits in Austria<sup>39</sup>.

Measures of internal quality assurance are an essential part of assessment procedures on programme and institutional level (assessment of quality assurance systems of HEIs). At both, programme and institutional level, the functioning and effectiveness of the internal quality management system is part of the review, where this is addressed at a higher level of detail at the institutional level. In particular, in reaccreditation procedures, the extent to which the internal procedures have contributed to the improvement and further development in the area of teaching and learning is evaluated in the framework of the review.

## 10.2 ESG Standard 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

**External quality assurance should be designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.**

In all external quality assurance activities of ACQUIN, it is assessed whether a programme, an internal HEI quality management system or an institution complies with defined criteria. This leads to a formal decision by the agency or, for procedures within the scope of the Interstate Treaty, to a decision by the GAC. Criteria are described in the respective guidelines.

<sup>38</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_CH\\_Leitfaden\\_institutionelle\\_akk\\_2018\\_DE.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_CH_Leitfaden_institutionelle_akk_2018_DE.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Leitfaden\\_Auditverfahren\\_HS-QSG\\_v1.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Leitfaden_Auditverfahren_HS-QSG_v1.pdf)

In ACQUIN's activities outside the Interstate Treaty the Accreditation Commission is involved in the design of external quality assurance procedures; drafts of procedural principles and criteria are presented and discussed during its meetings and implemented after approval of the Commission. The Accreditation Commission also appoints all expert panels and approves the guidelines for the agency's external procedures. This guarantees through the composition of the panel a basic involvement of stakeholders.

ACQUIN's activities outside the Interstate Treaty are listed below:

1. International programme accreditation procedures

The accreditation of international study programmes is conducted according to the ESG criteria. If applicable, they can be combined with national criteria as well. In the procedure the qualification objectives, the programme concept and its realisation, including quality assurance processes are assessed.

2. Certification procedures of continuing education programmes

The certification of continuing education programmes focuses on the assessment of objectives, the curriculum, resources and quality management mechanisms of the respective programme. The ACQUIN guidelines for international certification procedures are based on the ESG whereas for national certification procedures the guidelines are structured according to the specimen decree to facilitate a possible recognition according to the Lisbon Convention in a national degree programme.

3. International institutional accreditation procedures

Institutional accreditation focus on the performance of a HEI in teaching and research and its accordance with scientific standards. The objective is therefore the safeguarding of the scientific performance of a HEI including its internal quality assurance system. Aspects to be assessed are the governance structure of a HEI, teaching and learning, research, resources and quality assurance. The criteria are defined in the "Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation" and integrate part 1 of the ESG as well as the criteria for the institutional accreditation of non-state HEI of the German Council of Science and Humanities (WR) („Guidelines for the accreditation of non-state higher education institutions" Section B.IV).

4. Audits in Austria and Institutional Accreditation in Switzerland

The focus of the assessment procedures in Austria is the quality management system of a HEI and whether it is adequately designed to ensure the quality of study, teaching and research. The criteria are based on § 22 of the University Quality Assurance Act HS-QSG.

The institutional accreditation in Switzerland focuses on the internal quality assurance system of HEIs. The internal quality management system should ensure the quality of their teaching as well as their research and the services. The quality standards cover the following areas:

quality assurance strategy; governance; teaching, research and services; resources; internal and external communication. The criteria are defined in Article 30 HEdA.

#### 5. Activities within the scope of the Interstate Treaty

Assessment procedures within the scope of the Interstate Treaty offer no degrees of freedom for agencies; procedures are predefined. The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Laender in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK) and the GAC respectively define objectives and criteria for all national assessment procedures (programme and system accreditation) as well as procedural steps and the structure of the accreditation report. Through the representation of all stakeholder in the GAC (academia, students, representatives of the federal states, German Rector's Conference, representatives of the labour market) a basic stakeholder involvement is assured. In addition, prior to the introduction of the new regulations all stakeholders were asked for feedback. A second feedback round is planned in future.

Agencies operating in Germany meet regularly to exchange experience about current accreditation procedures and assessment criteria. Through the representative of the agencies, participating in the meetings of GAC, they can provide their feedback to GAC. In addition, there is an annual meeting between the agencies and GAC, which is organised by GAC.

External quality assurance procedures for study programmes focus on the quality of a respective programme and assesses the fulfilment of defined criteria (formal structural criteria as well as content-related quality criteria). Assessment procedures of quality management systems in teaching and learning target towards the structure and processes of the HEI's quality assurance system while checking whether the system is designed in an appropriate way ensuring the fulfilment of all relevant criteria and therefore the quality of its study programmes.

Stakeholders have the possibility to give feedback on methodologies and processes of ACQUIN during the general assembly and through questionnaires after completion of procedures. Furthermore, stakeholders give also informal feedback through face-to-face communication. Thereby they contribute to the development of ACQUIN's external quality assurance activities. So far, there is in general a positive stakeholders' feedback on ACQUIN's procedures. What is still a challenge, especially for small HEIs with limited resources, is the compilation of the self-assessment report. This is still a burden because this ties up considerable resources. In addition, statistical data to be provided by HEIs can pose sometimes difficulties, as internal campus management systems not always are able to generate them in a meaningful way. However, it can be stated that, after initial uncertainties in the new legal system in Germany, it is apparent that both HEI and experts are now well acquainted with the new regulations and procedures.

### 10.3 ESG Standard 2.3 Implementing processes

**Standard: External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include**

- **a self assessment or equivalent**
- **an external assessment normally including as a site visit**
- **a report resulting from the external assessment**
- **a consistent follow-up**

In all procedures there is a four-step process which includes the examination of the self-assessment report documents submitted by the HEI to ACQUIN, the site visit by an expert panel with an expert report and a subsequent recommendation for a decision, and the decision either by the GAC in national assessment procedures or by ACQUIN's Accreditation Commission in certification and international accreditation procedures. In addition, there is a follow-up process after the final decision.

#### Compilation of self-assessment report

The HEI applies for an assessment / accreditation / certification procedure. ACQUIN informs the HEI about the procedure sequence and conducts a preliminary discussion at the request of the HEI. The aim of the preliminary discussion is to inform the HEI about the whole procedure and to explain the individual procedural steps, the duration and fees, as well as assessment criteria and the possible outcomes. This also clarifies queries of the HEI concerning the procedures and compilation of the self-assessment report. Additional preparation and support of HEIs is carried out through the provision of supporting materials (guidelines) and continuous feedback during the preparation of the compilation of the self-assessment. The self-assessment report of the HEI is reviewed upon receipt by ACQUIN for completeness and formal correctness. If appropriate, subsequent missing documents are requested.

#### Site visit

The experts receive the self-assessment report of the HEI at least four weeks prior to the date of the site visit. At the same time, the documents for preparation are sent to them, which explains the tasks and role of the experts as well as the context of the accreditation procedure and the assessment criteria. After forwarding the self-assessment report the project manager in charge contacts the experts in order to clarify questions about the documents and offers a discussion for the preparation for the visit.

Before the site visits begins, there is an obligatory preliminary meeting, in which the experts are prepared for their role and task in the specific procedure. In addition, open questions are discussed with regard to the programmes that are evaluated; moreover specifications and rules are explained. A template of the expert report, with assessment criteria and "guiding

questions” for the experts is used in the preliminary discussion as a guideline for the preparation of the discussion between experts and HEI representatives.

The site visit in programme assessment procedure includes discussions with teaching staff and programme directors, students, university management, as well as a visit to premises. The preparation for each following round of discussions is carried out between the meetings. The discussions are also logged by the project managers. These discussion notes are used in order to prepare for further discussions and the final discussion, later they are also used by the expert panels for support of the expert report. During the final internal meeting the expert group comes to an agreement on the recommended accreditation in accordance with the relevant criteria.

In system accreditation and institutional accreditation procedures the procedure is adapted to the subject of the review. In institutional assessment procedures within the scope of the Interstate Treaty and institutional accreditation procedures in Switzerland two site visits are conducted.

#### Expert report and decision

The expert report, which is elaborated following a defined structure, is created by the experts and edited by the agency. The report, the evaluation of binding criteria and the recommendation for a decision must be borne by the entire group of experts. The final report is submitted to experts for vote and correction before being sent to the HEI for a statement. The report must be consistent and must include the evaluation of each assessment criterion. The HEI has the opportunity to respond to the evaluations made by the expert group and to comment on factual corrections. Experts are informed about the factual corrections, which are included into the expert report. In national assessment procedures, the final report of the expert group is sent to the HEI to apply for accreditation at the GAC. In certification and international accreditation procedures, the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN takes the accreditation / certification decision based on the final report and the statement of the HEI. Deviations in the decision of the accreditation recommendation of the experts must be comprehensibly justified by the Accreditation Commission.

#### Follow-up measures

In national assessment procedures within the scope of the Interstate Treaty the accreditation decision is taken by the GAC which is therefore responsible for the follow-up process.

In procedures outside the scope of the Interstate Treaty ACQUIN informs the HEI about the accreditation / certification decision. In cases where an accreditation has been granted with conditions, there is an obligatory follow up. The HEI is informed about the deadlines for the fulfilment of conditions. Conditions have to be fulfilled within 12 months, for audits in Austria there is a timeframe of two years. The decision letters include the time limits within which the

HEI must prove the fulfilment of conditions. The Accreditation Commission decides also on the fulfilment of conditions.

The handling of recommendations by the HEI will be examined in the next accreditation / certification procedure.

After the decision, the full reports with the decisions of the Accreditation Commission are published on the website of ACQUIN. International programme accreditation decisions are also entered in the DEQAR database.

#### 10.4 ESG Standard 2.4 Peer-review experts

**External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).**

The quality of any assessment and accreditation procedure is crucially dependent on the quality of the appointed experts panels. In order to ensure the nomination of professionally qualified experts, the task of the expert selection and appointment lies with the Accreditation Commission. ACQUIN has clearly defined and binding procedure for selecting experts. The project manager in charge for the procedure compiles a list with potential experts on the basis of the self-assessment report. The HEI has the possibility to propose profile of experts, but has no right of proposal. Experts are selected according to their subject-related expertise, professional experience in higher education and quality assurance. ACQUIN decides without further influence of the HEI on the composition of the expert group, combined with a check for possible bias.

ACQUIN ensures the impartiality of the experts to avoid conflicts of interests. There are clear rules and processes for securing impartiality of experts. Beside the impartiality criteria (e.g. no personal relation to the respective unit, no close scientific cooperation projects within the last five years) ACQUIN avoids in national procedures appointing HEI representatives who are employed in the same federal state in which the HEI that is subject to evaluation has its registered office. Also so called "cross-evaluations" are avoided as well. The experts have to sign a statement of impartiality to ensure that individual biases are excluded. The HEI has the right to appeal and may object to the appointment of experts in writing within ten working days after the receipt of the expert list. Objections are justified in cases of a potential bias or lack of professional competence. The appeal is decided by the Accreditation Commission.

Together with the self-assessment report, experts are receiving additional information about the procedure (e.g. assessment criteria, a template of the expert report with criteria and guiding questions, a handout about their tasks and role in the procedure). In addition to the obligatory preparatory meeting of experts, the project manager offers an individual discussion after the expert panel received the documents for the procedure. During the complete process, there is

a regular communication between the expert panel and the project manager to discuss complex aspects of the procedure until the procedure is completed. Beside representatives of academia and the labour market student representatives are included in all expert panels. The composition of the expert groups for the individual procedures is briefly listed below (information about the composition of expert panels in ACQUIN's external quality assurance procedures are also described in chapter 6):

#### Assessment of national study programmes (including joint programmes)

The expert group consists of at least two representatives of science and at least one representative of both labour market and students respectively. Thus the minimum possible size is four persons. In joint programme assessment procedures the panel must have knowledge of the higher education system of the international partner of the German HEI.

#### Assessment of quality management systems at national HEIs

According to the regulations in the specimen decree, the peer panel consists of at least five members: three professors with relevant expertise in university management and internal quality assurance, one student and one member of the labour market.

#### Certification of continuing programmes

In certification procedures, the expert panel consist of at least one professor, one representative of the labour market and one student / a representative of the target group of the programme. In international programmes, the expert group must have international experience and knowledge of the relevant higher education system.

#### International institutional accreditation

In international institutional accreditation procedures the peer group has a size of five persons, including a student member. Experts must have experience in the management of a HEI and of quality assurance within an HEI. In all international institutional procedures, the expert panel must have knowledge of the relevant higher education system.

### **10.5 ESG Standard 2.5 Criteria for outcomes**

**Any outcomes or judgements made as a result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.**

ACQUIN applies the respective criteria consistently in all external quality assurance procedures. The guidelines for each procedure, that provide information about the process and the

applied criteria, have been published on ACQUIN's website. All guidelines have been approved by the Accreditation Commission<sup>40</sup>.

The criteria in national assessment procedures (on programme and institutional level) are defined by in the Interstate Treaty and are further specified in the corresponding specimen decree and published on the website of the GAC.

Guidelines for international programme and institutional accreditation procedures as well as certification procedures are based on the ESG. For audit procedure in Austria the guidelines contain the criteria defined in the "Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education" (Hochschul-Qualitätssicherungsgesetz HS-QSG) and for institutional accreditation in Switzerland they follow the criteria defined by the Federal Act on Funding and Coordination of the Swiss Higher Education Sector (Higher Education Act, HEdA).

ACQUIN provides experts with an accreditation report template, which contains information on the criteria as well as guiding questions for each criterion to ensure that all criteria are applied in a consistent way. In a course of an obligatory preparatory meeting as well as additional individual discussion, project manager provides the panel members with all the information necessary for participation in an accreditation procedure including explanations on assessment criteria and their application. The project manager stays in close contact with members of the panel to give consultation or discuss complex aspects of the procedure until the procedure is completed and gives also guidance for the interpretation of criteria. Members of the panel can consequently give feedback regarding how well they have felt themselves prepared to their role as reviewer. Even though the most of the received feedback is positive, the less positive comments are of most value, for they help identify the potential for further development. When the same procedure is evaluated from the viewpoint of a HEI, consistency of the criteria application is captured in series of questions concerning general impression from the expert panel, questions addressed and feedback given during the site visit, as well as the resulting evaluation report. Additionally, for HEIs the interpretation and application of the criteria is already relevant at the early stages of the assessment and accreditation procedure – when self-assessment report is being written. In this case, it is also responsibility of a project

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<sup>40</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Handreichung\\_Erstellung\\_Selbstbericht\\_final\\_v1.3\\_20201117.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Handreichung_Erstellung_Selbstbericht_final_v1.3_20201117.pdf)

[https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Handreichung\\_Systemakkreditierung\\_v2.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Handreichung_Systemakkreditierung_v2.pdf)

[https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Guidelines\\_Programme\\_Accreditation\\_International\\_v2.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Guidelines_Programme_Accreditation_International_v2.pdf)

[https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN-Guidelines\\_Institutional\\_Accreditation\\_v2.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN-Guidelines_Institutional_Accreditation_v2.pdf)

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[https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Guideline\\_for\\_International\\_Certification\\_v1.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Guideline_for_International_Certification_v1.pdf)

[https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Leitfaden\\_Zertifizierung\\_v1-1.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Leitfaden_Zertifizierung_v1-1.pdf)

manager to provide guidance and informational support to ensure that all criteria are appropriately addressed in the SAR, a step of the procedure that is also being evaluated after the completion of the procedure.

In the case of a non-fulfilment of a criterion and the formulation of a condition, the condition must refer to the criterion. It is the task of the project manager to ensure that judgements of experts are clearly based on the criteria. Recommendations serve the further optimization of a programme or an institution. ACQUIN has compiled a list of possible conditions for each of the criteria from its experience and results of its assessment procedures as a guide for the interpretation of the criteria. This helps experts as well as the agency in the interpretation of criteria and a consistent application. The “catalogue of conditions” is regularly reviewed and adapted based on the decisions of the Accreditation Council. It is also a task of the Accreditation Commission to ensure that the criteria are consistently applied in accreditation procedures outside the scope of the Interstate Treaty. Through its overarching view of all accreditation procedures, a uniform application of the criteria is thus also ensured. For accreditation procedures within the scope of the Interstate Treaty this task has now been taken over by the GAC.

The number of appeals against decisions can be seen as indicator for a consistent application of the criteria. In the last years there have been only a few complaints by HEIs (in 0,63 % of all accredited study programmes 2016 – 2020), which underlines, that criteria are applied consistently. After additional explanation by HEIs the Accreditation Commission rectified in most cases its first accreditation decision.

Generally, interpretation and application of the criteria in the context of the new legal framework in Germany remains a topic for an ongoing discussion involving multiple groups of stakeholders. In order to reflect its own work applying the new regulations in Germany, ACQUIN has carried out in 2020 a first thematic analysis on “The Decision-making practice of GAC” to review whether the criteria of the specimen decree have been applied by the expert panels in an appropriate way or whether changes are necessary due to different interpretations of the criteria between GAC and the experts (see chapter 9.4.).

## 10.6 ESG Standard 2.6 Reporting

**Full reports by the experts should be published, clear accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decisions based in the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.**

Responsible for the preparation of the first draft of an expert report is the project manager in charge, who compiles the draft report from the individual contributions of the experts and the

information provided by the HEI in the SAR and during the site visit. The draft is sent for revision to the expert panel. Experts can provide proposals for modification, comments on ambiguities, remarks to improve the report. It is important that the report is self-explanatory, with a comprehensible and consistent assessment by the expert panel, without any additional documentation available to external stakeholders. It is the task of the project manager to ensure that the report is consistent and written in an easily understandable manner. After finalization and approval by the expert panel the report is sent to the HEI which can give a statement within a defined period (two weeks on programme procedures, four weeks in institutional procedures) and suggest factual corrections. Factual corrections are usually required, when descriptions or figures are not correctly integrated into the report (for example the number of students who completed the study programme). The project manager has to differentiate precisely between factual corrections (by wrong or incomplete information) or misinterpretation and comments (explanations, different view of something, information about future changes etc.), which can, if required, be noticed in a footnote.

Prior to publication, factual corrections noted by the HEI will be examined and if justified incorporated into the report by the project manager to ensure that correct data are published.

The Accreditation Commission (for procedures outside the scope of the Interstate Treaty) also assesses the coherency and consistency of the reports and give feedback. Within the scope of the Interstate Treaty it is the GAC, which gives feedback if inconsistencies are identified in reports. ACQUIN takes this feedback very seriously and uses it as an opportunity for further improvement of its reports.

A standardised structure and outlay for the reports has been developed and is used by default, which ensures consistency and comparability of the reports. All reports follow a general structure. As a rule, reports for the procedures taking place in German-speaking countries are written in German language. Reports for the procedures that ACQUIN conducts outside of these countries are written in English language. Furthermore, an additional translation into a national language can be provided if previously agreed

#### National assessment procedures (including joint programmes)

In national assessment procedures within the scope of the Interstate Treaty all agencies are obliged to use the predefined report template of the GAC<sup>41</sup>. The accreditation report contains basic information on the study programme / a quality management system of the HEI, a short description of the profile of the programme / an overview of the quality management system, a summary of the final findings of the expert panel. For each criterion there is a description of

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<sup>41</sup> <https://akkreditierungsrat.de/de/antragstellung/antragstellung>

the facts, an expert panel analyses and assessment. Part of the report are also basic information about composition of the expert group, date of the site visit and information on the schedule. The report is structured along the criteria.

International procedures (programme accreditation, programme certification, institutional accreditation, audits)

Based on experience and feedback from stakeholders, ACQUIN has revised its templates with a clearer distinction between description, analysis and assessment of the experts and their accreditation / certification recommendations. The expert reports contain a description of the context and the respective procedure including the composition of the expert panel, information about the programme and the institution respectively. For each criterion there is a description of the facts, an expert assessment and conclusion about fulfilment with recommendations and/or conditions. Also follow-up measures are documented in the report in cases of an accreditation / certification decision with conditions.

Results of all national accreditation procedures (for both programme and institutional accreditation) are published in the central database of the GAC<sup>42</sup>. The database provides full information on HEIs and study programmes, data on previous as well as current accreditations thereof. As a requirement, full reports as well as accreditation decisions are published in the database and are made by that available to the broad public. All accreditation data and corresponding documents published in Elias are automatically transferred to DEQAR<sup>43</sup>, which is also freely accessible. Additionally, results of national accreditation procedures are published in a specialized section of the ACQUIN website<sup>44</sup>.

Due to the change of the legal framework for accreditation in Germany, publication of the results of accreditation procedures conducted according to the new law and the previous regulations in database of the GAC is organised differently. In accreditation procedures under the former law (i.e. program and system accreditation procedures that were contractually agreed with ACQUIN until 31 December 2017), the expert reports with the accreditation decision of the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN are published in the database of the GAC by ACQUIN. In accordance with the requirements of the renewed legal situation in Germany, the final accreditation decision is taken and published by the GAC. Correspondingly, accreditation reports of the agencies and final decisions of GAC are published.

Quality assurance results of study programmes or institutions that ACQUIN evaluates according to ESG outside the scope of the GAC are published in a special section of the ACQUIN's

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<sup>42</sup> <https://antrag.akkreditierungsrat.de/>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/search/by-report/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.acquin.org/en/programmeaccreditation/completedprocedures/>

homepage<sup>45</sup> and in the DEQAR database: expert reports with the integrated accreditation decision of the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN are published. At the moment, the data is entered in the DEQAR database manually. Participation of the agency in the ongoing DEQAR CONNECT project is aimed at establishing an automated connection between the ACQUIN and the DEQAR databases.

All platforms that ACQUIN is using for publishing (Elias, DEQAR, ACQUIN's webpage) allow search by the name of HEI, title of program and other criteria.

### 10.7 ESG Standard 2.7 Complaints and appeals

**Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to institutions.**

ACQUIN has established a clearly defined and transparent policy and respective procedures for both appeals and complaints.

All employees, experts, committees, and bodies are always open to queries and critical observations on potential shortcomings and flaws during a procedure in order to avoid reasons for subsequent objections and complaints to the extent possible. However, there is a formal complaints and appeals procedure as well.

In all cases where the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN takes a decision on certification or accreditation, HEIs may raise objections to this decision while filing an appeal. According to the specifications stated out in the "ACQUIN complaints, objections, and appeals procedures"-statutes, the HEI's appeal against a decision will be presented to the Accreditation Commission. The Accreditation Commission then thoroughly reviews all decision-relevant procedural, factual, and legal aspects, as well as the evaluation underlying the accreditation decision with a special emphasis on the grounds of the appeal. Subsequently, the Accreditation Commission will draw a conclusion about the certification or accreditation anew while taking a decision. If the Accreditation Commission finds the appeal justified, it will be rectified. Should the Accreditation Commission not allow the objection, the appeal from the HEI and the adverse vote of the accreditation commission are submitted to the complaints and appeals commission of ACQUIN for a final decision.

ACQUIN's complaints and appeals commission, acting by its own bylaws, consists of five members, with one member each from universities, universities of applied sciences, art and music academies, professional practice, and students. The members of the complaints and

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.acquin.org/en/international-activities/completed-procedures-international/>  
<https://www.acquin.org/zertifizierung/>

appeals commission shall not be members of the executive board and the Accreditation Commission, which is regulated by the statutes of ACQUIN. The complaints and appeals commission will hold its meetings, as necessary.

Besides appeals against certification or accreditation decisions, HEIs can furthermore lodge a complaint about possible formal and legal errors. The chairperson of ACQUIN's Board decides on it within a given amount of time and informs of it as the chairperson of the accreditation commission.

Since the Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN does not take any accreditation decisions for procedures carried out by the rules of the Interstate Treaty, in these cases – different from the procedural steps described above – the recipient of objections to accreditation decisions is GAC. Therefore, the respective instructions and the procedure are available on the website of GAC. Nevertheless, within the scope of these procedural regulations HEIs are given the opportunity by ACQUIN to make a statement on procedural, factual, and legal issues and file a complaint. If the issue may not be clarified by ACQUIN's office, the complaint shall be passed on to the Accreditation Commission for further processing. The Accreditation Commission may remedy the complaint, if it is justified. Otherwise, it rejects it and provides reasons for the decision. If the HEI disagrees with the decision of the Accreditation Commission on the complaint, it has the right to appeal against that decision within a month. In this case, the objection and the relevant facts are passed on to the ACQUIN complaints and appeals commission.

In addition to that, it is important to point out that no matter whether a procedure is carried out within or without the purview of the Interstate Treaty, HEIs may raise objections to the nomination of members of the expert group under any circumstances. Objections may concern a possible bias (lack of impartiality) or insufficient professional competence. The Accreditation Commission of ACQUIN reviews the substantiating complaint and decides on the replacement of individual members of the expert group.

In the recent years, there have been very few complaints against resolutions of the Accreditation Commission. Altogether more than 1700 study programmes were accredited by ACQUIN, only in eleven cases HEIs have lodged an appeal against the decision. The Accreditation Commission has revised its own decision in nine cases, in two cases there were legal restrictions and therefore the HEI was asked to get in contact with the responsible ministry.

The complaints and appeals procedure of ACQUIN was approved by the Accreditation Commission and is published on the agency's website<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup>[https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ACQUIN\\_Beschwerdeverfahren\\_29.09.2020\\_EN.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ACQUIN_Beschwerdeverfahren_29.09.2020_EN.pdf)

## 11 Information and opinion of stakeholders

ACQUIN sees itself as a partner of HEIs in ensuring the quality of higher education and supporting the establishment and development of a quality culture at HEIs. This partnership implies the necessity of in-depth information exchange. Namely, it is important that the feedback is not only limited to regular ex post operational evaluation, but that constant attempt is made to understand the challenges the HEIs are facing in the rapidly changing environment and to support them in the adaptation of the existing or the development of new quality oriented approaches.

The main stakeholders of ACQUIN are HEIs, members of expert panels, ACQUIN's committees and staff members. Over 150 HEIs form the members of ACQUIN. The most recent survey of the member institutions has been conducted shortly after the 2020 annual general assembly meeting and had the above-mentioned aspects in focus.

Between 80 and 95 percent of the participants have evaluated expertise, reliability and accessibility of the ACQUIN project managers, their communication with HEIs, the quality of the produced accreditation reports, and on-time delivery thereof as either good or very good. The cases in which a lower score has been given, are to be closely examined with a purpose to identify the opportunities for and ways to improvement.

Around 90 percent of the participants have evaluated the agency's profile, its orientation on the needs of the HEI and its function as a partner of HEI representing their interests before the GAC as good or very good. Around 82 percent have evaluated ACQUIN's adaptation to the current developments, or its price-performance ratio as good or very good. Again, the lower scores present the occasion for a self-critical reflection and analysis.

Open communication with the stakeholders and their critical feedback guides ACQUIN in its development and helps building partnership with HEIs based on common commitment to quality development. Thus some potential for improvement that has been named in the above mentioned survey have already been previously identified by other stakeholders in a different feedback format.

The research ideas that become later topics for thematic analyses come from the dialog with the stakeholders. The latest thematic analysis, results of which have been presented at the last general assembly and are now will be published on the ACQUIN's website, has been ranked by 95 percent of the survey participants as a topic of interest. ACQUIN will be conducting this analysis further because it has direct implication not only for ACQUIN's own work, but also is of great interest to its stakeholders.

Another important feedback source is the information received from the members of expert panels, which, as described previously, always include representatives of HEIs, students and employers. The reviewers evaluate procedures they have been a part of using standardised

questionnaires and have the opportunity to enter additional text comments. Stably, over 90 percent the respondents positively evaluate organisation of all stages of the procedures, consulting, support and informational materials provided by agency. 95 percent of the respondents indicate that they felt themselves well prepared for their role as reviewers. And the same percent of the participants express their readiness to work with the agency again as well as recommend ACQUIN to other potential reviewers.

ACQUIN is collecting formal and informal feedback from both internal and external stakeholders. In general, the stakeholders – HEIs, members of expert panels, ACQUIN's committees – show high level of satisfaction with the assessment and accreditation procedures conducted by ACQUIN. Results are discussed with the employees, committee members and the Accreditation Commission as well as the executive board to identify the areas for improvement. Subsequently measures are developed and implemented by ACQUIN staff.

Currently ACQUIN informs stakeholders about its activities through the website and at special events and meetings. Based on the results of the latest SWOT analysis, communication with the stakeholders has been identified as an area presenting opportunities for further improvement. Thus the development of a new strategy, policies and activities for stakeholder involvement, has been put as one of the key points of the ACQUIN 2019 strategy plan. Additional communication channels need to be conceptualised (like workshops, stakeholder-specific meetings), that facilitate further involvement of the stakeholders in an active dialog and support the development of mutual trust and understanding.

## **12 Recommendations of the main findings of the last review and follow up of the agency**

The following recommendations were made by the peer review panel in the last review of ACQUIN:

1. A schedule should be published analogous to the equivalence table of the German Accreditation Council for implementing the ESG Part 1 in the procedures outside of their fields of business (ESG standard 2.1).

Due to the change of the legal framework for accreditation in Germany this recommendation is not applicable anymore. In national procedures the goals, objectives and criteria are defined by the KMK and laid down in the specimen decree, which similarly applies the ESG. ACQUIN's procedures outside of this regulated sphere (international accreditation or certification procedures) directly apply the ESG part 1. Therefore, equivalence tables are no longer required (see also mapping table chapter 10.1).

2. ACQUIN should ensure that the matter of potential inconsistencies between national guidelines and the ESG are raised in the reports (ESG standard 2.2).

This recommendation has been entirely implemented. Conflicts between the ESG and national regulations are now mentioned in reports. Reports also point out, if and how national standards are incommensurate with the ESG.

3. ACQUIN should transparently lay out procedural steps and responsibilities for the audits in Austria for the public (ESG standard 2.3).

The recommendation has been implemented. The new guidelines for audits in Austria are published on the website of ACQUIN<sup>47</sup>. Since 2016 no audits have been conducted in Austria, currently is no procedure of this type on the agenda of ACQUIN.

4. ACQUIN should increase the proportions of international experts in programme accreditation procedures, in particular if smaller subject communities are affected (ESG standard 2.4).

Where applicable, this recommendation has been implemented. ACQUIN stands for the integration of international experts in review teams in all kind of assessment procedures. In particular, accreditation procedures with small subject communities, international experts are part of review teams. In procedures at foreign HEIs, teams are composed of peers from Germany and national experts if appropriate. For example, expert panels in Kazakhstan are composed of 1/3 national experts. Whereas system accreditation procedures usually comprise international experts as well, review teams in national programme assessment procedures show a lower participation of foreign peers. Due to language restrictions, ACQUIN systematically invites merely peers from Austria and Switzerland. The expert report has to be compiled in German in national assessment procedures within the scope of the Interstate Treaty. In accreditation procedures of joint programmes, experts from partner countries are involved according to the European Approach.

5. ACQUIN should comprehensibly document for the public how the impartiality of experts and members of the committees is ensured (ESG standard 2.4).

The recommendation has been completely implemented. Proposals and contracts of ACQUIN mention the criteria for the selection of experts according to the new Guidelines of the German

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<sup>47</sup> [https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN\\_Leitfaden\\_Auditverfahren\\_HS-QSG\\_v1.pdf](https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACQUIN_Leitfaden_Auditverfahren_HS-QSG_v1.pdf)

Rector's Conference<sup>48</sup>, covering impartiality requirements. Reviewers sign a specific "Impartiality and data protection form". The same is true for international and certification procedures of ACQUIN.

6. ACQUIN should regularly offer events that prepare and/or further qualify experts for the procedures on a voluntary basis and make it possible to exchange experience (ESG standard 2.4).

The training of reviewers is of fundamental importance for thorough accreditation and assessment procedures. Since peer review teams gain even greater importance in the new system of accreditation in Germany, reviewer training is of high priority for ACQUIN. In 2018, one workshop was organised for representatives of member HEIs and future peers with the aim to make them familiar with the new accreditation procedures and regulations. In 2019, ACQUIN conducted a reviewer training workshop with the "Validation Organization for Study Programmes Architecture and Planning" (ASAP) in Berlin.

In 2020, ACQUIN has developed a new concept for standardised expert training events. There will be a set of general online-training programmes for peers with a fixed schedule, which should give experienced peers the possibility to share their experiences, train the new peers, explain their role and duties and familiarise them with the regulations and criteria. As a first overview of a quality assurance procedure ACQUIN provides a small information video<sup>49</sup> to peers. In addition, an obligatory training of the whole peer group takes place before each assessment, if required, this could be combined with an individual peer training by phone / online-meeting before the expert group training session. The new online concept is implemented in autumn 2020.

7. ACQUIN should also set out and publish criteria and responsibilities for selecting experts for the procedures of the audits in Austria, despite of the low demand in this field of activity (ESG standard 2.4).

The selection of experts for audits in Austria follows the general internal regulation for the recruitment of experts. The recommendation has been implemented.

8. In the criteria for the impartiality of experts ACQUIN should clarify that a prior consultation of the higher education institution is excluded (ESG standard 2.4).

The criteria for the selection of experts follow directly the new Guidelines of the German Rector's Conference, covering impartiality requirements. Reviewers sign a specific "Impartiality

<sup>48</sup> [https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-01-Beschluesse/HRK\\_MV\\_Entschliessung\\_Benennung\\_Gutachter\\_Akkreditierungsverfahren\\_2017\\_2018.pdf](https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-01-Beschluesse/HRK_MV_Entschliessung_Benennung_Gutachter_Akkreditierungsverfahren_2017_2018.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> <https://youtu.be/RqO6YH5RPio>

and data protection form". For example, a reason for exclusion is an advisory activity at the same time at the HEI. ACQUIN applies the same standards for procedures, which are not regulated by Interstate Treaty and specimen decree in Germany.

9. In order to ensure consistency between the committees, there should be institutionalised communication in fixed formats, such as meetings across disciplines or the chairs regularly participating in the Accreditation Commission's meetings. Measures and communication loops should be laid out in internal quality management (ESG standard 2.5).

In July 2020, the general assembly has taken the decision to abolish the standing expert committees due to the information of the GAC, that an involvement of agency's committees is no longer seen as necessary. The recommendation is obsolete.

10. The guidelines for the Austrian audits should be published on the agency's homepage (ESG standard 2.5).

The guidelines have been published on the homepage of ACQUIN. The recommendation has been implemented.

11. ACQUIN should ensure that the reports of the various procedure formats are easy to find on the homepage, for example through separate areas (ESG standard 2.6).

ACQUIN publishes reports of national and international procedures on its website. Searching specific HEIs, procedures and reports, users are able to use selection criteria and filters. Reports of the procedures conducted according to the new law in Germany are now published by the GAC. According to the previous law, reports are published on ACQUIN's website and data is entered in the database of accredited study programmes of the GAC. Reports outside the scope of the Interstate Treaty are published on the website of ACQUIN. ACQUIN is also using DEQAR for the publication of international procedures' reports. The recommendation has been implemented.

12. ACQUIN should define a process with responsibilities and representation regulations for prompt publication of the reports (on the homepage and/or in the database of accredited study programmes) for each procedure format (ESG standard 2.6).

The recommendation has been implemented. A process for timely publications was defined and responsibilities were assigned within the ACQUIN secretariat. According to the previous law, reports are published on ACQUIN's website and data is entered in the database of accredited study programmes. Reports of the procedures conducted according to the current law in Germany are now published by the GAC. ACQUIN uses the DEQAR for the publication of the international procedures.

13. In order to improve transparency, the complaints/appeals procedure should be incorporated into the procedure representations in the QM manual (ESG standard 2.7).

The appeals and complaints procedure of ACQUIN is portrayed with the relevant documents on the website of the agency. Complaints and appeals procedures are also a part of the QM handbook. Since decisions in accreditation procedures in Germany are now taken by the GAC, complaints against decisions have to be addressed directly to the GAC or respective administrative courts. In procedures outside the scope of the Interstate Treaty HEIs can still lodge complaints and appeals with ACQUIN. The recommendation has been implemented.

14. The mission statement should be consistently taken into account in all of the agency's publications and should be published on the website (ESG standard 3.1).

The mission statement is published on the website of the agency. Since mission statement and statutes are the documents, which outline the underlying principles of all the agency's activities, they are not abundantly reiterated in each publication, though. The recommendation has been implemented.

15. ACQUIN's activities regarding qualitative analysis of the results of its own work should be intensified and lead to publication (ESG standard 3.4).

ACQUIN sees the area of thematic analysis as a continuous task for the agency. In 2017, a survey was carried out about the impact of ACQUIN's external peer reviews at universities in Kazakhstan. This survey will be regularly iterated after having more data from international procedures for one region.

In 2020, after having gained a sufficient data basis, ACQUIN has started the analyses aimed at evaluation of its assessment procedures conducted in 2018 – 2020 according to the new law. The accreditation recommendations of the reviewer-panels have been compared with the final decisions being taken by the GAC to identify inconsistencies, room for interpretation and carefully analyse these cases. The results are used for the reflection on the agency's work and its improvement. This analysis is regarded as a continuous task of the agency and will be conducted once per year. Results will be discussed with the board, the Accreditation Commission and members at the general assembly. ACQUIN considers the recommendation as implemented.

16. ACQUIN should submit a compilation of the amount of work for the activities related to and across procedures in the head office and demonstrate that the sub-sequent filling of

positions at the beginning of 2016 makes the human resources sufficient (ESG standard 3.5 and condition 2, criterion 2.4 GAC).

The discussions with various stakeholders triggered organisational adjustments in the secretariat of ACQUIN. These critical reflections took into account the findings of the external review team concerning standard 3.5 ESG. Since the report states that the characteristic organisation of ACQUIN is demanding for staff and management of the agency, organisational modifications are implemented. In particular, the “project organisation” of programme accreditation procedures was replaced by a “batch organisation”, which reduces the spectrum of diverse tasks for each employee. Through the modification of the ACQUIN project database and the combination with the project time recording process, cost calculations are providing better data for staff planning. Thus, the internal quality management processes were adapted to new procedures and new analysis tools are introduced for core processes of ACQUIN’s work. The recommendation has been implemented.

17. ACQUIN should complete the description of core processes in the QM manual (ESG standard 3.6).

The recommendation has been implemented. Core processes have been revised, due change of the legal framework for accreditation. The processes have been approved by the Accreditation Commission and are a part of the QM handbook. The QM handbook includes thematic analysis policy, follow-up procedures and description of the processes connected with the feedback acquisition. The changes that ACQUIN has been undergoing starting 2017 have necessarily influenced further development of the internal quality assurance at organisational and procedural levels. Simultaneously, the quality assurance mechanisms have supported the transformations, the agency has been going through, by supplying internal and external feedback, and thus building the basis for constant improvement.

The members of the permanent QM team, consisting of two members – QM manager and process manager – have separate areas of responsibility (operational guidelines and policies; monitoring and reporting) but are working closely with each other. It is the task of the QM team to gather and accumulate, process and analyse formal and informal, internal and external feedback and information received, participate in and oversee the development of respective measures and follow-ups to them. The team is working in close collaboration with and is reporting to the managing directors and heads of departments.

### **13 SWOT Analysis**

ACQUIN advocates a reflective and self-critical approach, combined with appropriate actions and follow-up, and sees the regular analysis of strengths and weaknesses as well as of

chances and risks as a crucial step in strategic development and consequent strategy implementation. Internal SWOT analysis is conducted regularly and is the basis for the following period strategy plan. Input from ACQUIN stakeholders (members of the agency's committees and bodies) which represent HEIs, labour market and students is gathered to provide insight on ACQUIN's strengths and weaknesses, threats and opportunities and is used in the consequent SWOT analysis.

An internal strategy meeting of ACQUIN staff in November 2017 has taken place in the context of the upcoming legislative framework change and had as a purpose to identify the threats that may have an impact on the future activities of the agency, as well as the ways to counterbalance and possibly benefit from them.

The introduction of the "new law" in combination with the growing number of system-accredited HEIs, would lead in a long perspective to a change of the programme accreditation market. This represents a threat for the agency, for ACQUIN is financially dependent on the number of the conducted assessment and accreditation procedures.

ACQUIN's experience in the area of quality assurance and development, both nationally and internationally, active involvement in policy making, its cross-discipline expertise, and its special emphasis on development and accreditation of internal quality assurance systems of HEI represent the biggest asset and thus the strengths of ACQUIN. These strengths allow exploring a range of new opportunities in both national and international contexts, with the main course of action being to build on the good practices and expanding these into new areas. The organizational structure has been enriched and new staff acquired to make effective implementation of a broad variety of internal and external national and international projects and grants possible. In addition, ACQUIN's website has been relaunched: information architecture has been changed to increase the website's efficiency as a tool for communication with the stakeholders.

The goals stated in the mission statement of ACQUIN are part of the agency's strategy plan in the form of long-term objectives. Receiving regular critical feedback from stakeholders on the agency's work is one of the activities aimed at the realisation of these goals. In 2018, the recent changes in the national accreditation system, ACQUIN's strengths and weaknesses in the altered environment, as well as opportunities it should make use of and threats to the agency have been discussed at the general assembly of ACQUIN member HEIs and the special general assembly of the former standing experts committees members. The 20 years' experience of successfully delivering quality assurance, cross-discipline expertise, combined with an active customer oriented approach – providing information, advice and guidance to the HEI – as well as professional staff that ensures a supportive coordination of the procedures are seen by the stakeholders as the strengths of ACQUIN. At the same time, it has been noted that the agency could benefit from further optimisation of the internal processes.

The stakeholders recognised the changes taking place in the market as posing threats for the agency, as well as for the quality assurance in higher education as a field in general, for the increasing competition among the agencies as well as the new organisational arrangements of the accreditation process. This might lead to the change of focus to compliance rather than enhancement. It has been suggested that ACQUIN, while maintaining and strengthening the quality of its work and drawing on its rich experience, should use the situation as an opportunity to redefine itself, by extending the range of its services, positioning itself stronger on the market, and building a closer contact with its stakeholders, offering them a fast and efficient services, combined with advice and guidance aimed at the further development of the quality of higher education.

In 2019, a strategy meeting has been conducted between the board and senior staff members. The SWOT analysis below presents a list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (in no order of importance).

#### ACQUIN's strengths:

- A well-known brand with a long history of active involvement in shaping the national and the European Higher Education Area and ensuring the comparability of the quality of higher education qualifications.
- Rich experience in the area of quality assurance and development, both nationally and internationally.
- Wide profile, combined with cross-discipline expertise.
- Focus on quality development and regarding the review process as helpful for the development of HEI, their internal quality assurance and development of quality culture.
- Highly experienced and motivated staff.
- Customer/HEI-oriented approach, with projects tailored to individual needs of HEI.

#### ACQUIN's weaknesses:

- Still ongoing internal adaptation and restructuring as response to the changed legal framework for accreditation in Germany and other changes in the field.
- Currently still expandable range of services.
- Communication with the stakeholders presents an opportunity for further improvement. Communication strategies, that are specifically tailored to various addressees, should be developed. Stakeholders should be more regularly informed about collected feedback, improvement plans, as well as results of thematic analysis.
- Income depends solely on assessment procedures.

Opportunities:

- Further promoting the quality of higher education and supporting the establishment of quality culture at HEIs in Germany and abroad, by emphasising and strengthening the role of internal quality assurance systems:
  - through increasing the range of services offered to HEI in the area of quality assurance and development.
  - by further development of thematic analyses, based on the analysis of the experience gathered from the completed accreditation cases, identified best practices, possibly challenging themes for HEIs as well as developments in the field, with the purpose of providing information, advice and guidance to the HEI.
- Further developing and maintaining a fluid system for communication with internal and external stakeholders, introducing new communication and interaction channels with the purpose to be better tuned at the stakeholders' problems and needs, to get critical feedback from stakeholders and guarantee their involvement in the agency's work, as well as to be able to communicate the information in the most efficient way.
- Further optimisation and development of the internal processes with the purpose to strengthen and increase competitiveness of the agency on the market, as well as to strengthen the quality enhancement of the review procedures and strengthen ACQUIN as a brand.
- Further development of international activities

Threats:

- Decreasing market: Demand for programme accreditation in Germany may decrease in the future due to the changes in the regulations (extension of the accreditation period from five respective seven years to eight years) and due to the increasing numbers of institutional assessment procedures (system accreditation).
- Increasing complexity of the review process due to the ongoing adaptation to the change of the legal framework without additional funding and corresponding price increase may lead to additional workload of the staff.
- The need to make the review process financially sustainable while keeping the cost acceptable to HEIs, and at the same time, acting on a market with highly competitive pressure.
- To a certain degree uncertainty about the expectations of the GAC concerning the reports and in the interpretation of assessment criteria by the GAC.

## 14 Current challenges and areas for future development

The most recent challenge has been the abolishment of the standing expert committees, which had served as an additional quality assurance element in ACQUIN's accreditation procedures. Statements of additional committees are not seen as necessary by the German Accreditation Council. Now ACQUIN will have to discuss how to maintain the cross-disciplinary expertise out of the former standing expert committees within the agency.

Another challenge is the changing role of the Accreditation Commission. Even though it is no longer responsible for taking decisions in the national accreditation procedures, the Accreditation Commission will still be informed about every assessment procedure conducted by the agency and is expected to be actively involved in the thematic analyses projects.

The major change in the German accreditation system simultaneously opens new horizons and possibilities to the agencies. ACQUIN firmly commits itself to its mission statement to support higher education in providing a high quality in teaching and learning and offering students a good learning environment. ACQUIN's claim "Your intention. Our focus" is still the guiding principle of ACQUIN's work. Therefore, ACQUIN sees itself as a reliable partner of HEIs in developing quality culture and as a professional service provider that would like to further expand its range of advice and comprehensive services in the future. In that sense, ACQUIN needs to strengthen and further develop its cooperation, relation and communication with its members in a systematic way.

HEIs are constantly adapting to developing needs of the society, but are simultaneously facing new challenges, such as internationalisation, growing heterogeneity of students, different educational biographies and its consequences for higher education and training, the consequences of demographic developments for HEIs and the demand for lifelong and digital learning in the future. In that sense, even quality assurance processes have to be adapted as well and a continuous dialogue between the stakeholders is essential. HEIs therefore need to share experiences whereby ACQUIN will act as a partner in developing new quality-oriented approaches and foster these activities.

ACQUIN, as an agency with a high experience in the area of system accreditation, also sees its role in contributing to the further and forward-looking development of quality assurance. In the new accreditation system HEIs have the possibility to undergo so called "alternative procedures" which enable them to develop procedures which foster quality culture and quality commitment with new, innovative approaches while securing the binding accreditation criteria. ACQUIN defines itself as an advising partner in developing these procedures for encouraging and supporting new quality development approaches.

**Glossary of Terms**

ACQUIN	Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute
DEQAR	Database of External Quality Assurance Results
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
GAC	German Accreditation Council (Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany, <a href="https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/hrk.de">https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/hrk.de</a> )
HEI	Higher education institution
HRK	Germans Rector's Conference ( <a href="https://www.hrk.de/hrk-at-a-glance/">https://www.hrk.de/hrk-at-a-glance/</a> )
KMK	Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Laender ( <a href="https://www.kmk.org/kmk/information-in-english.html">https://www.kmk.org/kmk/information-in-english.html</a> )
SAC	Swiss Accreditation Council

**Annexes**

1. Comparison ESG – Specimen Decree
2. Impartiality agreement
3. Guiding questions for national programme assessment procedures
4. Template expert report international study programme procedures
5. Template expert report institutional accreditation
6. Template expert report international certification procedures
7. Catalogue Conditions\_Recommendations\_2020

