

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW

ACCREDITATION, CERTIFICATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE INSTITUTE (ACQUIN)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises the analysis and conclusions of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) review of the Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN) (Akkreditierungs-, Zertifizierungs- und Qualitätssicherungs-Institut, ACQUIN), Germany (ACQUIN/the agency). The review was performed against the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) following the methodology described in the Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews.

The purpose of the review was the renewal of ACQUIN's membership in ENQA and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) registration for a period of 2026-2031.

The review took place from June 2025 to June 2026 with the site visit on 3rd-5th December 2025.

ACQUIN was founded in 2001 and began its activities in the same year. Since 2001 ACQUIN has been recognized by the German Accreditation Council (GAC) to perform accreditation in Germany. ACQUIN has been a member of ENQA since 2006 and has been registered on EQAR since 2008.

ACQUIN is a registered association with recognised non-profit charitable status. Its members include more than 150 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Germany and abroad as well as professional and trade associations close to science. ACQUIN's mission is to act as a quality assurance agency for national and international educational programmes and institutions in the tertiary education sector in order to provide impulses for their quality development. The aim is to promote a high quality of education as well as internationally recognised, high-quality educational qualifications. According to the Terms of Reference, the review panel evaluated to what extent ACQUIN continues to fulfil the requirements of the following ESG where ACQUIN was judged as partially compliant by the EQAR Register Committee during the previous full external review of the agency in 2021, namely ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance, ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis, ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct and ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts. Also, the review panel was asked to evaluate ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance across all ACQUIN's activities. Finally, this report also addresses ACQUIN's selected enhancement area ESG 2.6 Reporting. Summarizing, the review panel found ACQUIN compliant with ESG 2.1, 2.4, 3.1, 3.4 and 3.6. In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, ACQUIN is overall in compliance with the ESG.

The agency's compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3) in total.:

ESG	Compliance according to the targeted review¹	Compliance transferred from the last full review² (Judgement of the 2018 review panel ☐ Judgement of the EQAR Register Committee)
2.1	Compliant	
2.2		Fully compliant → Compliant
2.3		Substantially compliant → Compliant
2.4	Compliant	
2.5		Substantially compliant → Compliant
2.6		Partially compliant → Compliant
2.7		Fully compliant → Compliant
3.1	Compliant	
3.2		Fully compliant → Compliant
3.3		Fully compliant → Compliant
3.4	Compliant	
3.5		Substantially compliant → Compliant
3.6	Compliant	
3.7		Fully compliant → Compliant

¹ Compliance refers to the focus areas that were evaluated in depth and are part of the Terms of Reference, i.e., standards that were only partially compliant with the ESG during the last full review, ESG Part 2 for newly introduced or changed QA activities of the agency, ESG 2.1 for all QA activities and any standard affected by substantive changes since the last full review. If any of the standards of Part 2 of the ESG are covered due to the newly introduced or changed QA activities, a remark "for new or changed QA activities only" is added in brackets to the compliance assessment.

² Compliance refers to the last EQAR Register Committee decision for renewal of inclusion on the Register, or in case when an agency is not renewing its registration in EQAR, compliance refers to the last ENQA Agency Review report and should its judgement differ from that of the panel, the judgement of the ENQA Board, as stipulated in the membership decision letter by the ENQA Board. Compliance refers to the QA activities of the agency that were reviewed during the previous full review.

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute) (Akkreditierungs-, Zertifizierungs- und Qualitätssicherungs-Institut), Germany (ACQUIN/the agency) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted from June 2025 to April 2026 and should be read together with the external review report of the agency's last full review against the ESG.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they act in compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

Registration on EQAR is the official instrument established by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for demonstrating an agency's ESG compliance. An external review is a prerequisite for registration.

ACQUIN has undergone four successful reviews against the ESG Parts 2 and 3, the last one in 2021. The agency was hence eligible and has opted for a targeted review. The purpose of a targeted review is to ensure the agency's compliance with the ESG by covering standards that were found partially compliant during the agency's last renewal of registration in EQAR and on standards that could have been affected by substantive changes³ during the past five years while at the same time further strengthening the enhancement part of the review.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

ACQUIN is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- Programme accreditation in Germany
- System accreditation in Germany
- Joint programme accreditation
- Programme accreditation abroad
- Institutional accreditation abroad
- Certification procedures in Germany and abroad
- Certification of further education offers that are part of higher education

The following activities of the applicant are outside the scope of the ESG:

- Consulting and Services
- Participation in EU Erasmus+ projects

This review will evaluate the extent to which ACQUIN continues to fulfil the requirements of the ESG. The targeted review aims to place more focus on those parts that require attention and provide sufficient information to support ACQUIN's application to EQAR. The review will be further used as part of the agency's renewal of membership in ENQA.

³ e.g. organisational changes, the launch of new external QA activities.

Focus areas of the review were

- Standards with a partial compliance conclusion in the Register Committee's last renewal decision: ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts, especially whether the agency systematically provides training for peer-review experts.
- ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance, especially whether the agency has clearly defined goals and objectives that are effectively translated into the agency's work plans of the agency and whether the stakeholders are effectively involved in the governance of the agency.
- ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis, especially whether the agency regularly and systematically publishes thematic analyses.
- ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct, especially whether the agency effectively manages the professional development of its staff and whether the agency has addressed the issues raised in the previous external reviews.
- ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

The selected enhancement area was ESG 2.6 Reporting

During the review process the review panel did not find any evidence of activities that were not assessed during the last full review against the ESG and that were not included in the Terms of Reference of this review. The review panel also did not discover any other substantial changes to the quality assurance activities carried out by ACQUIN that were not already reported to EQAR and included in the Terms of Reference.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2021 REVIEW

ACQUIN went through the full agency review in 2021. According to the EQAR Register Committee's decision (2021), ACQUIN was found to be in the following state of compliance with ESG Part 2 and 3:

ESG	Panel conclusion	Register Committee conclusion
ESG 2.1	Full compliance	Compliance
ESG 2.2	Full compliance	Compliance
ESG 2.3	Substantial compliance	Compliance
ESG 2.4	Substantial compliance	Partial compliance
ESG 2.5	Substantial compliance	Compliance
ESG 2.6	Partial compliance	Compliance
ESG 2.7	Full compliance	Compliance
ESG 3.1	Partial compliance	Partial compliance
ESG 3.2	Full compliance	Compliance
ESG 3.3	Full compliance	Compliance
ESG 3.4	Partial compliance	Partial compliance

ESG 3.5	Substantial compliance	Compliance
ESG 3.6	Full compliance	Partial compliance
ESG 3.7	Full compliance	Compliance (by virtue of applying)

In 2021 the review panel concluded that ACQUIN was in compliance with the ESG.

After the external review in 2021, ACQUIN was granted ENQA membership for five years and inclusion on the EQAR Register until 30 June 2026.

In 2023, the agency submitted to ENQA a follow-up report on recommendations in the panel report, which was approved by the ENQA Board.

The review panel acknowledges, in this report, the status of the ESG standards that were found to be in compliance with the ESG during the last full review.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2025 external targeted review of ACQUIN was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*, the EQAR Procedures for Applications, and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the targeted review of ACQUIN was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Eva Fernández de Labastida, Internationalisation and projects manager, Agency for Quality of the Basque University System (Unibasq), Spain (Chair), QA professional (ENQA nominee)
- Achim Hopbach, higher education consultant, Austria (Secretary), QA professional (ENQA nominee)
- Krzysztof Kozłowski, Director of the Institute of International Studies, Collegium of Socio-Economics, SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Poland (panel member), academic (EUA nominee)
- Topias Tolonen-Weckström, PhD student in Mathematics, Uppsala University, Sweden (panel member, student) (ESU nominee, member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool)

Alexis Fábregas Almirall, ENQA's Project and Reviews Officer, acted as the review coordinator.

The review took place from June 2025 to April 2026. The review panel received the SAR in October 2025 and held its first meeting on 20 October 2025. During this briefing meeting, the review panel was provided with information by ENQA and EQAR. On 27 October 2025 and 17 November 2025, the review panel had its kick-off meeting to prepare for the site visit and an online clarification meeting with the agency's resource persons which took place on 20 November 2025. On 2 December 2025 the review panel had the pre-visit meeting to finalise the preparations for the site visit. The site visit took place from 3 to 5 December 2025 at the office of ACQUIN in Bayreuth, Germany. On the last day the review panel formulated its preliminary decisions on ACQUIN's compliance with the various standards and offered oral feedback to the agency. After that, the secretary drafted the report which was sent to the other panel members on 24 December 2025 and, after the feedback of the review panel members, the draft report was sent to the ENQA coordinator for screening on 6 January 2026. On 30 January 2026 the finalised report from the review panel was sent to the agency for a check on factual inaccuracies. The panel reviewed this and made corrections in the report. The report was finalised by the panel on 2 March 2026. After this it was sent to the ENQA Agency Review Committee

(ARC). The review panel would like to confirm that the arrangements by ENQA ensured a smooth and well-coordinated review process. The review panel would also like to thank the ACQUIN team for making the panel feel welcome, for all the time and effort invested in the review, and for providing everything needed for the review. All the findings and conclusions of this review report are the joint opinion of the review panel and have been agreed on during the report drafting process.

Self-assessment report

In October 2024 ACQUIN decided to opt for a targeted review, following internal discussions within the Executive Board, the Accreditation Commission, with the managing director and the heads of the three business departments. ESG Standard 2.6 Reporting was selected as enhancement area because the agency is deliberating a change in its practice and intended to discuss this with the panel.

ACQUIN started the self-evaluation process in early spring 2025 by establishing a working group consisting of the managing director, the heads of the business departments and the Data and Process Manager. First steps in the process included surveys among various stakeholders to collect feedback and information, mainly for the SWOT analysis. This involved member institutions, members of the Accreditation Commission, members of the Complaints and Appeals Committee, appointed experts and ACQUIN office staff. These outcomes were also compared with the results of the existing *Progress Visit* materials. Subsequently, they started drafting the self-evaluation report. The final draft was submitted to the Executive Board, the Accreditation Commission and all members of ACQUIN's office for feedback. The final version was sent to ENQA in September 2025.

The SAR contains relevant information about all ESG to be addressed and is easy to read. The panel wants to indicate that the chapters demonstrating compliance with the respective standards take more the form of follow-up reports than genuine demonstration of compliance with the standard. The panel had to request a substantial number of additional documents and information to establish a sufficient basis for the evaluation.

Site visit

The site visit was held on 3rd-5th December 2025 in the ACQUIN premises in Bayreuth. The meetings were generally organized face-to-face, however more than half of external interviewees joined online; the meeting with the representative of the German Accreditation Council was organized using online technologies. The organization of the site visit was agreed in advance with the review panel, the agency and ENQA.

Taking into consideration the scope of the review, specified in the Terms of Reference, the panel decided to address all focus areas in every interview with different groups, including the selected enhancement area. There was a specific workshop held with staff and stakeholders of the agency to discuss the selected enhancement area.

The full list of meetings that the review panel conducted is provided below:

- Meeting with the Managing Director;
- Meeting with the members of the Executive Board;
- Meeting with the Heads of Business Departments;
- Three separate meetings with the Agency's staff involved in study programme and institutional accreditation procedures in Germany and in procedures abroad;
- Meeting with the Agency's staff of Organisational Departments;

- Meeting with the Managing Director of the German Accreditation Council;
- Meeting with the representatives of the Accreditation Commission;
- Two separate meetings with the representatives of local and foreign HEIs (including quality assurance officers of HEIs) that underwent accreditation procedures by ACQUIN;
- Meeting with reviewers incl. students participating in accreditation procedures organized by ACQUIN;
- Meeting with representatives of the General Assembly;
- Workshop about the agency's self-selected enhancement area (ESG 2.6);
- Meeting with the Managing Director and the Head of International Department to clarify any pending issues.

The ACQUIN premises were appropriate for the site visit and were well-equipped for the interviews. The staff of ACQUIN was very helpful.

The review panel appreciates the quality and the atmosphere of the interviews: all the participants were very open and engaged in the discussions.

CHANGES WITHIN THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Since the last full review in 2021, there have been no significant changes in the German higher education system in terms of legal framework, types of HEI and study programmes. This applies also to the German accreditation system; a revision of the *Specimen Decree* as the principal regulation for accreditation of study programmes in November 2024 was mainly limited to clarifications and adjustments. The German accreditation system follows a two-tier approach with agencies implementing the accreditation procedures and the GAC taking the accreditation decisions.⁴

ACQUIN'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

Since the last full review in 2021, there have been no significant changes in the governance of the agency. The highest decision-making body of the association is the General Assembly; and the association is managed by the Executive Board. The Accreditation Commission is the sole decision-making body in accreditation procedures, together with the Complaints and Appeals Commission in cases of complaints and appeals. The daily operations are supported by the office that is managed by a Managing Director appointed by the Executive Board.

Significant changes were introduced to the structure of the office. In 2021 the former dual leadership in management was reversed and a new managing director was appointed. In 2023 a modified organisational structure was established: It involved a division into the three key business areas National Programme Accreditation, System Accreditation, and International Activities on the one hand, and organisation-related cross-sectional tasks in the form of organisational units on the other. Each business department has its own director and deputy director.

⁴ <https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/index.php/en/accreditation-system-legal-basis/laws-and-regulations/laws-and-decrees>

In 2023 ACQUIN dissolved the ACQUINUS GmbH which was a subsidiary company that implemented ACQUIN's consultancy activities. These activities are now being implemented directly by ACQUIN.

ACQUIN'S FUNDING

Since the last full review in 2021, there have been no significant changes in the funding model of the agency. 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 non-profit. The generated funds are used only for the purposes of the association.

ACQUIN'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

The agency's activities have not changed since the last review. Its functions in the German accreditation system remain unchanged. The core area in the national context continuously includes all accreditation procedures within the scope of the *Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty (programme accreditation in Germany, system accreditation in Germany)*. Furthermore, ACQUIN offers certification procedures within the scope of the ESG for single modules or parts of study programmes (micro-credentials) or continuing education programmes that are based at least on EQF Level 5 (*certification procedures in Germany*).

International activities also continue to focus on programme accreditation and institutional accreditation (*programme accreditation abroad, institutional accreditation abroad*). It is worth noting that ACQUIN has received further national authorisation (e.g. Turkey, Vietnam, Indonesia), which advances the professionalisation of the Agency.

As mentioned previously ACQUIN dissolved the ACQUINUS GmbH in 2023 and implements its consultancy activities, which haven't changed, now directly.

FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF ACQUIN WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG) WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

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.

2021 review recommendation:

- 1. ACQUIN's Strategic Plan should extend beyond the two year period and contain a clear mission, vision, values, objectives for activities with a concrete measure of success timewise and by deliverables (follow the widely accepted format of such documents). It should be published.*
- 2. The Strategic Plan, yearly work plans, and yearly activity reports should all be clearly linked.*
- 3. Students should be represented in the governance of the agency.*

2021 EQAR conclusion:

"Taking in consideration the necessity for better defined goals and objectives that will effectively translate into the work plans of the agency, and the lack of involvement of students in the governance of the agency, the Register Committee concurred with the panel's conclusion that the agency is partially compliant with the standard."

Specific focus according to ToR, paragraph 2.1, A: *"Whether the agency has clearly defined goals and objectives that are effectively translated into the agency's work plans of the agency and whether the stakeholders are effectively involved in the governance of the agency."*

Evidence

The purpose of ACQUIN is "to establish and to apply instruments for the accreditation of study programmes as well as to develop further methods for evaluation and assurance of quality processes in higher education." (§2 of the Statutes) The agency's objectives are further elaborated in the mission statement which is published on the website and which states that ACQUIN acts as a "quality assurance agency for national and international educational programmes and institutions in the tertiary education sector in order to provide impulses for their quality development." By implementing its review activities, the agency aims to "promote a high quality of education as well as internationally recognised, high-quality educational qualifications." A particular emphasis is put on the relevance of cooperation with other quality assurance agencies, tertiary education providers, stakeholders "to enable development in line with current and international requirements and needs." (Mission

Statement). ACQUIN has also a publicly available vision statement which includes further relevant attributions of its aims and objectives: “ACQUIN's quality concept follows the principle that criteria-based quality development is as individual as the organisational cultures and profiles of the various institutions in the tertiary education sector. ACQUIN therefore provides individual advice and support tailored to the specific needs of each institution, taking external requirements into account. Intercultural understanding and respectful interaction are just as much a part of ACQUIN's basic principles as the promotion of integration, (inter)national cooperation and diversity. In all its activities, ACQUIN highly values sustainable and trusting relationships with business partners, employees and all other stakeholders.” (Vision Statement). Both Mission Statement and Vision Statement are integral parts of the current strategic plan.

ACQUIN implements quality assurance activities which are accreditation at programme and institutional levels in tertiary education in Germany and abroad, and certification of further education provision that is part of higher education in Germany and abroad. Since the last review of ACQUIN against the ESG in 2021 the numbers of implemented procedures are as follows:

Type of activity	Number of respective cases					
	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025*	Total**
Programme accreditation in Germany	240	357	292	280	287	1.724
System accreditation in Germany	8	8	6	3	0	30
Joint programme accreditation (EA)	1	0	0	1	1	3
Programme accreditation abroad	63	59	113	255	169	780
Institutional accreditation abroad	1	3	3	4	4	16
Certification procedures in Germany and abroad / Certification of further education offers that are part of higher education	0	3	2	1	1	19

*as of 13.10.2025

**The total number of study programme accreditation procedures in Germany completed since the introduction of the new law constitutes 1930, with 206 programme accreditations completed in 2019.

In addition to these activities ACQUIN also offers consulting activities such as provision of personnel (at already system accredited HEIs) or general information events on relevant topics aspects of accreditation such as student assessment or internal quality assurance. However, consulting activities are not among the strategic objectives of the current strategic plan and are not mentioned in the sub-goals. Neither were any consultancy activities foreseen in the workplan for 2026. Activities in this area are agreed by the Executive Board in consultation with the heads of department. Depending on the nature of the consultancy projects these are implemented either by the department for reviews at programme level in Germany or by the department for system accreditation in Germany. To separate consultancy services from review activities ACQUIN applies the *Guiding Principles for the Separation Between Agencies' Activities* by EQAR and especially the regulations for preventing conflicts of interest. As a follow-up to the last review ACQUIN dissolved the subsidiary ACQUINUS GmbH which was the agency's consultancy arm and implements these activities since 2024 directly. During the site-visit the panel was informed that since 2020 the agency implemented six consultancy projects in total and that the agency does not aim to extend its consultancy activities. These activities were implemented in Germany and restricted to institutions that had already undergone system accreditation to prevent possible conflict of interest; or to study programmes of other institutions, provided that the issues in question do not affect the accreditation or evaluation mandate. Information about ACQUINUS GmbH

was removed from the website. However, no information has been put on the website that would present and explain ACQUIN's current consultancy activities, even if being very limited.

To guide its development and activities ACQUIN uses a strategy. The currently valid strategic plan 2024 – 2029 lists five strategic objectives, namely

- “1. ACQUIN aims to sharpen its profile as a competent, agile and trustworthy institution both nationally and internationally.
2. ACQUIN pursues sustainable activity and growth planning. The primary focus is on consolidating existing activities. ACQUIN also aims to further expand existing market shares and tap into additional markets.
3. Internal structures, procedures and processes will be continuously optimised in order to respond to external influences in an agile manner.
4. ACQUIN provides cooperative and modern working conditions for all employees and pursues a sustainable human resources policy.
5. ACQUIN strives for the sustainable use of resources in all business processes.”

which are broken down in sub-goals. The strategy including the strategic objectives is published on the website whereas the version with the sub-goals is not published; the panel received them upon request. The agency uses annual workplans that link activities to the relevant sub goals. For some sub-goals the agency uses specific and more detailed work plans. Regarding reviews as the core activity of the agency, the work plan also includes a calculation of necessary staff capacity. The panel learned during the site-visit that necessary staff capacity is calculated on the basis of an effective IT planning tool that helps allocating resources effectively.

ACQUIN's governance structure comprises of the General Assembly, the Executive Board, the Accreditation Commission, and the Complaints and Appeals Commission. The General Assembly includes all members of the association; it elects and appoints the other governance bodies and has typical statutory functions of an association such as passing resolutions on the budget, discharging the Executive Board, and amending the statutes. The Executive Board is responsible for the appointment of the director and has typical board functions such as supervision of the daily operations, financial planning and monitoring, etc. The Accreditation Commission is the decision-making body in all matters related to the reviews, such as deciding on external quality assurance methodologies, criteria and results as far as reviews outside the realm of the German accreditation system are concerned; the commission also appoints the panels. The Complaints and Appeals Commission rules in appeals against decisions by the Accreditation Commission and decides on complaints against the conduct of procedures; during the last five years no cases occurred. During the site-visit the panel learned that in practice the Executive Board focuses to a large extent on management and oversight, whereas all topics related to the content of operations are addressed rather in the Accreditation Commission.

Stakeholders are represented in all governance bodies. The General Assembly comprises of the members which include 154 HEIs, 6 of which from abroad, and 4 professional organisations. The Executive Board comprises of five members, out of which two members must be representatives of the member groups universities and universities of applied sciences respectively and one member must represent the member group professional practice. The Accreditation Commission comprises of 13 members with each having a substitute member; four members must be representatives of the member groups universities or universities of applied sciences respectively, one member must be a representative of the arts and music colleges, and two members must be representatives of each the member group professional practice and the students. At the time of the site-visit, the Accreditation Commission was composed in accordance with the statutes and included one member and three

substitute members from abroad. The Complaints and Appeals Commission comprises of five members, one representative of each member group including a student.

According to the SAR ACQUIN identifies higher education institutions, students, and professional practice as “relevant stakeholders” (p. 17); further to this ACQUIN names expert groups and policy bodies as additional stakeholders in the national framework (p. 20), and ENQA or INQAAHE as examples for international stakeholders (p. 20). During the site-visit the panel learned in various meetings that ACQUIN considers the higher education institutions the most important stakeholders which is supported by the motto placed on the website “By universities. For universities.”

Analysis

The tasks of ACQUIN are formulated clearly and haven’t changed since the agency’s foundation in 2001. Implementing external quality assurance is at the core with other activities related to this core activity such as international developmental projects, demonstrating that the agency is a quality assurance agency with quality assurance activities on a regular basis.

The website presents the agency’s scope of activities in an informative and transparent way; however, the lack of information about consultancy activities limits the transparency to a certain extent. The panel could confirm that the agency has established responsibilities for consultancy projects and that the agency applies a clear non-conflict of interest policy that forbids consultancy activities if the institution is to be reviewed. The panel acknowledges that this area of activity plays a marginal role in the agency’s activities. Nevertheless, for the sake of transparency consultancy activities should be published on the website.

During the site-visit the panel found that although the reviews outside Germany are addressed in the strategy, and although interviewees expressed clear views about nature, relevance, risks and benefits of the international review activities, there is little general deliberation about the impact of the international review activity on the agency in general, its identity and organisation. With around 26% of accreditation procedures conducted at foreign HEI, including amounting to around 48% of all accredited study programmes this field of activity is everything but a niche. The panel got the impression that the question whether ACQUIN is a German quality assurance agency or an international quality assurance agency didn’t resonate with interviewees. The panel considers it a question worth further discussion if the fact that only very few members come from abroad, and very few foreign members are involved in the Accreditation Commission and none in the executive Board should be considered appropriate. ACQUIN may wish to deliberate about the impact of the big and growing proportion of reviews outside Germany on the agency’s identity.

The mission and vision mirror two characteristics of ACQUIN that are to be emphasized for a better understanding of the agency and how it complies with the ESG. Mission and vision, as the previously quoted parts demonstrate, focus on implementation of quality assurance procedures and their impact on the provision of higher education. This is by no means unusual as such for a quality assurance agency. What is more interesting is the fact that mission and vision do not include references to national (or regional) higher education systems and their general development goals or similar. However, this is not surprising because ACQUIN is not a national (or regional) quality assurance agency established and mandated by legislation. It is a private organisation that is –as others are as well– recognized to conduct accreditation procedures in Germany. This means also that the agency has no official mandate to organise, design and develop, analyse and represent the German accreditation system. This does not mean that ACQUIN is not involved in such activities, on the contrary. But it limits the task to conducting reviews whose regulations are defined by another body, the German Accreditation Council.

The second characteristic is the deliberate focus on the interests of higher education institutions: “ACQUIN strives to support national and international HEIs and education programmes in achieving and developing their quality goals efficiently, while aligning external and internal requirements with each institution’s unique objectives, profile, and culture.” (SAR, p. 15) Again, this is by no means unusual as such for a quality assurance agency. What is more interesting is the fact that references to other stakeholders are missing. ACQUIN is an association mainly of higher education institutions and this is the core of the agency’s identity which is not just demonstrated through the statutes, the strategy or in the SAR (e.g. p. 15) but was confirmed in many variations during the site-visit by management, members of governance bodies, representatives of members and by staff.

Another aspect to be taken into account is the fact that ACQUIN is a competitor in national and international markets.

In conclusion, ACQUIN is a provider of reviews in a competitive market but not a national quality assurance agency with overarching tasks at system level. As will be demonstrated throughout this report, these characteristic features of ACQUIN have an impact not only on the mission and vision but also on strategic objectives, the involvement of stakeholders, and on thematic analyses.

With its currently valid strategy 2024-2029 ACQUIN followed the recommendation from the last panel and extended the validity period beyond the previously applied 2-year period. The strategy is published as was recommended by the previous panel. The agency uses also a second version with sub-goals which provides strategic orientation, however more so for the first two years than for the second part of the validity period which will require review after the end of 2026. The panel could assure itself of the close link between the work plan 2026 and the strategy; it is to be emphasized that the work plan includes a detailed capacity utilization plan that gives a good overview about necessary resources and allocation of review activities. The panel wants to highlight the relevance of the IT instruments used by the agency to support planning the resources which provides management with real time information about current distribution of resources and with a sound basis for planning resources.

Four out of the five objectives address internal developments. The only objective with an external component addresses ACQUIN’s profile nationally and internationally. The focus on internal developments or recognition in the competitive market without overarching objectives linked to the national or regional system is consistent with the nature of ACQUIN as a provider of reviews in a competitive market but not as a national quality assurance agency with overarching tasks at system level. The panel concluded that the outline of the strategy fits to the nature of the agency; as far as external aspects are concerned relevant topics such as market shares, new markets are addressed and gives orientation. Notwithstanding this, ACQUIN might wish to give more details to the implementation of strategic goals during the second half of the validity period.

The focus on internal developments has also an impact on the role of stakeholders for the agency. Compared to the last review in 2021 the panel didn’t find any substantial changes in this area. At first sight, the involvement of stakeholders does not demonstrate any general specifics. Representatives from higher education institutions, from professional practice and students are involved in the governance of the agency. (Anyway, stakeholders are involved in review activities as they should be which will be addressed further under ESG 2.4.)

The involvement of students is not as strong as the involvement of the other stakeholders, because students are represented only in two out of four governance bodies, namely the Accreditation Commission and the Complaints and Appeals Commission. Currently, students are not represented in the General Assembly which is a consequence of ACQUIN’s legal nature as an association and the General Assembly being the entirety of the members with no student association or body being a member of the association.

The panel followed up on the critical remarks in the last review about student involvement in the Executive Board. In the SAR this situation was justified by the fact that all decisions related to accreditation are taken by the Accreditation Commission where students are represented and that the Executive Board has a more management and administrative function which makes student involvement in it not so important.

The panel agrees that the key role of the Accreditation Commission (and of the Complaints and Appeals Commission) where students are members, in decision-making regarding all issues related to the reviews makes student involvement indispensable. On the other hand, the panel does not agree with the notion of a negligible relevance of the General Assembly and the Executive Board for student involvement. Strategic decisions and decisions about the mission, the statutes and about work plans shape the profile and the direction of a quality assurance agency which would give relevance to student involvement as well. During the site-visit this fact was not considered an issue by any interviewee; on the contrary student involvement was considered unanimously good and sufficient.

A brief discussion during the site visit if it would be possible to attract student organisations as members and hence strengthen student representation in the agency was not taken up by ACQUIN. The key argument put forward regarding student involvement in the Executive Board was the same as during the last review, namely the fact that in an association under German law members of the Board are personally liable which would be too big a risk for students to take. In general, the involvement of students was deemed enough by all interviewees with no real need for change. The panel takes the point of the personal liability of Board members as a high risk for students and acknowledges that student bodies cannot be forced to become members of the association to assure involvement in the General Assembly. Nonetheless, the panel came to the conclusion that ACQUIN could increase the participation of students, apart from being members of the Accreditation Commission and the Complaints and Appeals Commission and should consider ways to compensate for the limited involvement of students in discussions about future developments of the agency and about strategic topics. These might include a student advisory board or regular student focus groups.

In addition to this, the stakeholder involvement in ACQUIN's governance is also impacted by the feature of ACQUIN as a provider of reviews in a competitive market but not as a national quality assurance agency with overarching tasks at system level. ACQUIN's definition of its stakeholders in the SAR is clear. Identifying higher education institutions as main stakeholders is part of ACQUIN's identity resulting from its origin.

The meetings during the site-visit revealed a twofold understanding of stakeholders at the side of ACQUIN. On the one side stakeholders are defined as 'stakeholders of higher education' as described in the ESG, and on the other side ACQUIN defines its stakeholders divided into internal and external stakeholders which are first and foremost its members which ACQUIN is accountable to, followed by its clients.

The discussions revealed a dominating role of the instrumental concept of ACQUIN's stakeholders which are those involved in or having impact on the conduct of the reviews over the general concept of stakeholders in higher education. This fits the nature of ACQUIN, whereas a national agency would most likely follow the latter approach being accountable to the general stakeholders in higher education.

ACQUIN's nature and the dominating instrumental concept of stakeholders translates into ACQUIN's understanding of stakeholder involvement that is to a large extent characterized by utilizing expertise of panel members and members of the association. During the site-visit the panel identified this concept of stakeholders in various meetings with members of the association, members of the Accreditation Commission, members of expert panels including students, most of which identified themselves as stakeholders feeding their experience and expertise into the agency. This might be an

explanation why the current involvement of students in the governance is considered sufficient by the agency. In this context, it is to be emphasized that the panel assured itself that ACQUIN by no means undervalues the role of students as stakeholders in higher education as such.

The panel concluded that both concepts of stakeholders are valid, and that for a quality assurance agency not being a national agency but a provider of reviews in a competitive market the focus on members and in clients and the instrumental concept of stakeholders cannot surprise and is not to be criticised. However, the panel is of the opinion that these two concepts must not be taken as alternatives, and the concept of stakeholders in higher education has to play a major role as well.

In conclusion, regarding the focus areas of this targeted review, since the last review ACQUIN has clearly defined goals and objectives that are effectively translated into its work plans. As explained above, stakeholders are involved in ACQUIN's governance, even if due to the specific nature of ACQUIN, its main stakeholders are the members of the association who are represented in the General Assembly and the Executive Board, where there are no students. The panel is not particularly concerned about the lack of student representation in these two bodies but believes that ACQUIN would benefit from a stronger student involvement in strategic management and decision-making of the agency.

Panel commendations

1. The panel commends ACQUIN for effective introduction of IT instruments to optimize and coordinate activities of the Agency in addressing challenges indicated in the previous SAR.

Panel recommendations

1. The panel recommends that ACQUIN documents consultancy as a field of activity on its website and also provides information about the differences between these activities and review activities including the non-conflict of interest policy.
2. The panel recommends that ACQUIN explores ways to compensate for the absence of student representation in the General Assembly and the Executive Board to strengthen student involvement in strategic management and decision-making of the agency.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. The panel suggests that ACQUIN deliberates about the impact of the big and growing proportion of reviews outside Germany on the agency's identity.
2. The panel suggests that ACQUIN reconsiders its understanding of stakeholders with view to strengthen the agency's accountability to stakeholders of higher education as a public good.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

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

2021 review recommendation5:

- 1. ACQUIN needs to fine-tune its policy on conducting thematic analysis and in line with this redefinition, to update the relevant part in the Quality Manual following the standard description of other processes.*
- 2. Efforts on thematic analysis should be much intensified, reports should be published regularly. To show developments, as a starting point, ACQUIN should make a working plan for the next analyses to be done within the coming 2-3 years and follow it.*
- 3. Analyses should focus on trends and areas of good practice as well as persistent difficulty across the higher education system; they should pertain to institutional, national and international contexts.*

2021 EQAR conclusion⁶:

“The Register Committee recognised the agency’s efforts to create a better structured approach to thematic analysis and to publish the reports. While these improvements tackle the concerns raised in the last renewal of the agency’s registration, the Committee agreed with the panel’s views that the publication of thematic analyses should be regular and systematic. Following this, the Committee concurred with the panel’s conclusion that the agency is only partially compliant with the standard.”

Specific focus according to ToR, paragraph 2.1, A: *“Whether the agency regularly and systematically publishes thematic analyses.”*

Evidence

In the SAR, ACQUIN refers to its strategy for thematic analysis whose development is to be seen in connection with the agency’s strategic planning. The thematic analysis strategy which was made available to the panel on request includes a structured approach that covers resource allocation, organisational and conceptual dimensions of thematic analysis; it emphasizes the high relevance of thematic analyses for the agency’s development and success and identifies explicit purposes, namely

- Embedding as a strategic instrument within ACQUIN’s operational framework and direct contribution to the fulfilment of the five institutional goals defined in the Strategic Plan 2024–2029;
- Support to sharpening of ACQUIN’s profile;
- Informing sustainable activity and growth planning;
- Anticipation of developments in higher education, respond to stakeholder needs;
- Contribution to the optimization of structures and processes.

During the site-visit these purposes were confirmed in various meetings; in general, thematic analyses were considered by management and staff as highly relevant for the development of the agency and their potential contribution to internal quality assurance as staff development were highlighted. The thematic analysis strategy identifies different types of thematic analyses, namely

- Sector-Specific Analyses that aim to identify and address the interpretive and procedural challenges faced by specific/specialized sectors under the current regulatory framework.
- System-Level Analyses that aim to capture and reflect on the structural implications of regulatory framework shifts on the form and results of interaction of QA actors (EQA and HEI) in Germany, and to identify system-level challenges and address these through structured stakeholder engagement.

⁵ If the ENQA Board deviated from the recommendations made by the review panel, the Board version of the recommendation is referred to.

⁶ EQAR conclusions are only referred to when they beyond assessments and include reasoned deviations from the assessments made by the review panel.

- Beyond Compliance Analyses aim to address problems that have not yet been codified within the current regulatory framework but are already manifesting in practice both in the context of accreditation procedure as well as outside of it, often articulated by external stakeholders seeking orientation.
- Recurrence-Based Analyses apply a longitudinal, pattern-seeking approach to accreditation data, examining recommendations across multiple cycles to identify systematically recurring issues.

In 2023 a Data and Process Manager was assigned the task of coordinating thematic analyses with dedicated time for planning, delivery, and oversight of thematic analysis activities.

According to the thematic analysis strategy the selection of topics is to be guided by three criteria: strategic relevance, stakeholder demand, and data availability. The interviews during the site visit revealed that in practice, it is mainly the heads of departments together with the Data and Process Manager who collect and discuss possible topics. An organisational determination is made by implementing the ‘collaborative model’ which means that staff from more than one organisational unit participate in the project which is understood as a means of professional development. The thematic analysis strategy envisages a minimum of one project per year formally scheduled and published.

Since the last review ACQUIN published one thematic analysis in late 2025, namely *The Chronopolitics of Quality Assurance: Gatekeeping or Joint Action? Case Study of System Accreditation in Germany 2018–2024* which is an analysis of the structural consequences of the 2018 reform of the German accreditation system. At the time of the site visit, four thematic analysis projects were in the making at different stages of development:

- Specific challenges in the accreditation of music, art, and design degree programs (KuMuGe). This project addresses the interpretive and procedural challenges faced by art and music HEIs under the current legal framework. The results were formally presented to the Accreditation Commission in June 2024 and subsequently shared with GAC and presented at a joint event in May 2025 which brought together representatives from HEIs, QAAs, and GAC. The results of the KuMuGe project were being finalised and prepared for publication.
- “QA and AI: Between Gatekeeping and Guidance” which is an international project that started in November 2024 and is still running. The project focuses on how HEIs address AI-related challenges within their internal quality assurance systems.
- EQAAAI: Exploring the Role of Artificial Intelligence in External Quality Assurance – From Paradigm Shift to Paradigmatic Case, which is currently being implemented by and conducted by an international, interdisciplinary team of experts from QAAs, including ACQUIN, HEIs, legal professions, and technical domains; the project aims to develop practical guidance for responsible AI use in external QA.
- Recurrence-based analysis of programme accreditation procedures in Kazakhstan. In this analysis, ACQUIN examines recommendations issued across multiple cycles over the past decade to identify whether certain issues recur systematically and, if so, whether targeted support or structured follow-up mechanisms are warranted. This analysis introduces a longitudinal, pattern-seeking logic to ACQUIN’s thematic analysis portfolio. A preparatory project was completed in 2023 and shared with national authorities;

Further to these, ACQUIN plans to conduct a second phase of the *The Chronopolitics of Quality Assurance* project with focus on the recommendations issued by expert panels in system accreditation reports, and an adaptation of the KuMuGe project for the fields of teacher education and for police and administrative HEIs.

During the site-visit the panel learned that the organisational changes in the office since 2023 and stabilizing staff situation since 2024 had a substantial impact on the capacity to conduct thematic analyses.

Analysis

Compared to the last review where ACQUIN was found partially compliant with this standard, the panel identified substantial progress. The development of the thematic analyses strategy constitutes a substantial change since the last review in 2021 when the panel concluded that ACQUIN's policy needed fine tuning. With regard to the implementation the progress since the last review is less significant. As far as the 2021 review recommendation and the 2021 EQAR conclusions are concerned the panel confirms that ACQUIN is now using a dedicated thematic analyses strategy which includes determinations for the choice of topics and for annual publication of reports. The recommended integration of thematic analyses into the standard descriptions of processes in the Quality Manual hasn't happened because the agency had started already preparing for the revision of the Quality Manual. In fact, the current draft of the revised Quality Manual includes such a process description.

With its thematic analyses strategy, the agency has a sound and comprehensive basis and an organisational framework for identifying topics and implementing the respective activities. At the same time the panel believes that caution is to be exercised. Acknowledging the very high relevance ACQUIN gives to thematic analyses for its own development, the panel considers the actual plans very ambitious. Compared to the envisaged publication of one thematic analysis in the strategy, the current plans include nine projects running at the time of the site-visit or are about to start within the coming two years with potentially up to 16 publications. Compared to the very low level of activities in this field in the past, with even the publication of the outcomes of the KuMuGe project pending since summer 2024, implementing these plans would mean a huge impact on the agency's resources. However, during the site-visit the panel was informed consistently by various interviewees that the organisational changes, the sufficient and stable staff resources in the last two years and the staff capacity planning process create a framework that assures realistic planning of staff resources.

With regard to the organisational aspect, it is worth emphasizing that, despite the nomination of one staff member as responsible (part time) for thematic analyses, in principle every staff member can be included in the actual implementation of the respective projects which the panel supports explicitly. The fact that staff members consider thematic analyses as a means of staff development confirms the value of this approach.

The purposes of this activity as mentioned in the strategy are consistent with the self-understanding of the agency. They are closely linked to the operations of the agency and less linked to questions relevant for the entire higher education system. However, in practice the KuMuGe project and its envisaged adaptation for the fields of teacher education and for police and administrative HEIs are clearly of great interest for the system level. During the site-visit, stakeholders confirmed the high relevance of the KuMuGe project for the institutions because typical challenges in quality assurance and accreditation of the arts and music institutions were put on the agenda. In general, the choice of topics is relevant for the design and especially for the conduct of ACQUIN's procedures, especially with regard to addressing specific features of institutions under review, such as the music and arts institutions, or with regard to specific actual challenges to be addressed in reviews such as artificial intelligence in internal quality assurance.

At the same time, the panel must conclude that the activities are of rather recent nature. The activities based on the strategy started in 2023 and include nine thematic analyses being implemented or being about to be implemented at the time of the site-visit. Furthermore, the efforts to disseminate the outcomes of thematic analyses are still limited. ACQUIN has published one thematic analysis in 2025 which means one publication during a five-year-period, which is as much as during the previous five-year-period. The publication of the thematic analysis of specific challenges in the accreditation of music, art, and design degree programs (KuMuGe) is pending since June 2024; one more publication was foreseen for late 2025 but that hasn't materialized yet. The panel is convinced that the number of projects under way at the time of the site-visit and the plans for publishing relevant reports as mentioned previously will change this substantially within a short period of time.

The panel acknowledges the high relevance that ACQUIN attributes to thematic analyses. This was confirmed during the site-visit not only by management and staff but also by representatives of the Accreditation Commission and by the members of the agency. The panel's view that general approach to thematic analyses and the choice of topics are relevant and appropriate was confirmed throughout the site-visit. The panel wants to emphasize that four thematic analyses foresee a longer-term perspective with analyses implemented and reports published on an annual basis. This approach, e.g. in the continuation of the project *The Chronopolitics of Quality Assurance: Gatekeeping or Joint Action? Case Study of System Accreditation in Germany 2018–2024* bears potential to identify developments in the higher education system.

It is worth mentioning that the discussions during the site-visit revealed that thematic analyses are not only relevant for the agency to learn about implementation of their procedures in general, and about enhancing relevance of the procedures in particular; beyond the 'internal' relevance interviewees also emphasized the relevance for institutions with regard to addressing new challenges in higher education. This is noteworthy because, quite apart from the topic of thematic analyses the panel learned during the site-visit that members of the agency generally appreciate ACQUIN's activities that go beyond conducting reviews, namely informing about new developments in the accreditation system, discussing actual topics at General Assembly meetings, organizing workshops, etc. The panel believes that thematic analyses bear a huge potential for ACQUIN to strengthen its relevance for members and higher education stakeholders beyond conducting reviews.

The panel took note of the enormous growth in activities in this area that is planned for the near future; at the same time ACQUIN confirmed in the SAR and during the site-visit that, after overcoming organisational changes and having sufficient and stable personal resources since two years, they had now the capacity to implement the policy. The panel is confident that ACQUIN, following its strategy for thematic analyses, will be able to implement the projects as planned.

Panel recommendations

3. The panel recommends that ACQUIN publishes the reports on thematic analyses that are pending.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Standard:

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

2021 EQAR conclusion⁷:

“Taking into consideration the need for a more structured management of the professional development of the staff and the lack of a comprehensive response to the issues raised in the previous external reviews, the Register Committee was unable to concur with panel’s conclusion and found the agency to be partially compliant with the standard.”

Specific focus according to ToR, paragraph 2.1, A: *“Whether the agency effectively manages the professional development of its staff and whether the agency has addressed the issues raised in the previous external reviews.”*

Evidence

ACQUIN presents on its website a short statement that includes key activities in internal quality management, whereas the Quality Management Manual is not published. The Quality Management Manual (version from 2020) was provided to the panel on request. It includes definition of goals, responsibilities, processes and instruments. Responsibility over the entire quality management system is vested with the Managing Director with core operational responsibility assigned to the recently appointed Head of Internal Quality Development, which is a part-time assignment.

The agency has defined four quality goals:

- to be a preferred partner of higher education institutions for procedures of programme and system accreditations as well of institutional accreditations and certifications;
- to actively participate in shaping the higher education policy debate;
- to further promote quality development and quality culture at HEIs as well as
- to further develop existing expertise in the various core areas of quality assurance in the national and international higher education sector.

Collecting feedback was a core instrument in the current Quality Management Manual and will remain so in the draft version of the new manual. As far as internal relations are concerned, feedback is collected from project managers, administrative staff, and the General Assembly; at the core of external feedback are the reviewed institutions and the reviewers.

As far as the Quality Management Manual is concerned no change occurred since the last review in 2021. However, the organisational changes had a significant impact on the implementation of internal quality assurance activities and especially on the responsibilities. The establishment of three business units and the establishment of the part time post of Head of Internal Quality Development brought about core responsibilities with the Heads of Department and the Head of Internal Quality Development. Further to this, at the time of the site visit the Quality Management Manual was under revision. The revision of the manual is one out of three components of a broader process that includes two more components which are definition and description of all core processes and supporting processes through Process Guidelines, and the implementation of an Internal Documentation System;

⁷ EQAR conclusions are only referred to when they beyond assessments and include reasoned deviations from the assessments made by the review panel.

a draft of the new Quality Management Manual was submitted to the review panel together with the SAR.

The internal quality assurance of reviews as the core activity includes internal and external components.

The internal component includes regular team meetings in the business units where project managers exchange experience with current reviews and where results from questionnaires are discussed. During the site visit the panel learned that these meetings play an important role. Further to this, the standardized process descriptions play an important guiding role for the conduct of reviews. Of the same relevance are templates, which ACQUIN uses for all steps in the international reviews, and which are helpful as was confirmed by reviewers. In the reviews in Germany, ACQUIN has to use the templates by GAC. Staff members emphasized that the revision of the description of all core processes and supporting processes through Process Guidelines, and the implementation of an Internal Documentation System which were underway at the time of the site visit will have a substantial impact by easing the monitoring of correct and high-quality conduct.

The external component consists mainly of collecting feedback from reviewed institutions and from reviewers through questionnaires; however, the panel was informed during the site visit that collecting informal feedback is also an important means. Representatives from institutions and reviewers confirmed that their feedback is sought and appreciated. Both groups consistently commended the agency for the professionalism and the quality of the reviews.

The Quality Management Manual also includes a policy on ethical behaviour. A code of ethics is published on ACQUIN's website and reviewers confirmed that a no-conflict-of-interest policy with relevant statements to be signed before a review starts is applied effectively.

Where ACQUIN conducts reviews as part of the relevant national framework, communication with the relevant authorities is part of the standard procedure.

On request by the panel ACQUIN demonstrated the implementation of internal quality assurance through two case documentations. One referred to the identification of a lack of proper guidance for reviewing distance learning programmes through reviewers' feedback. As a response ACQUIN developed through a collaboration of staff and members of the Accreditation Commission *Guidelines for the assessment of distance learning programmes* which were formally adopted by the Accreditation Commission.

The second case referred to the quality of accreditation reports in German reviews. Because in 2022 the GAC referred a couple of reports back to ACQUIN, the agency analysed the reasons why the reports were not deemed sufficient for GAC's decision-making, and introduced two measures to rectify the problems, namely an internal editing by experienced project managers as first additional step in the procedure and an additional step in the Accreditation Commission that is normally not involved in procedures in Germany. The commission gives its expert comment in complex or controversial cases as another round of quality assuring the quality of accreditation reports. As a result, the number of cases went down in 2025.

Because in its decision EQAR introduced the topic of staff development under ESG 3.6, the panel addresses this topic here since ESG 3.5 is not within the scope of this review. The training of peers, also introduced by EQAR under this standard, will be addressed under ESG 2.4.

During the site-visit the panel explored the staff development activities of ACQUIN. It was confirmed that the agency does not implement a formal staff development policy. An important role is played by the annual feedback meetings between staff and management which is also used to identify staff development needs. The panel was informed that, as a general policy, staff members have the

opportunity to attend at least one international conference per five years. During the last couple of years, staff was provided with inhouse training seminars on communication and conflict management. Furthermore, members of the Works Council which is the legal representation of the employees and the Data Protection Officer were offered specific training. Apart from these activities, staff development is driven by the individual demands. Staff and management consistently reported that demands for development activities are matched on a regular basis. Staff can participate in the staff development programme of the University of Bayreuth and or in seminars by other providers. In general, staff was satisfied with the opportunities given. In addition, as indicated under standard 3.4, staff members consider thematic analyses as a means of staff development.

Analysis

The panel considers the statement on internal quality management as published on the website sufficient to give general information about the agency's activities in this field. ACQUIN might wish to consider publishing information about responses to outcomes of its internal quality management activities; this might create confidence on the side of stakeholders.

Based on the evidence presented, the approach to internal quality assurance is to be considered typical for a quality assurance agency, with the combination of collecting feedback and supporting the standardized implementation of the various steps of the review procedures as the core business.

In the last review, the Quality Management Manual was characterized by the panel as very detailed and very long. On the one hand one might follow this assessment, on the other hand the panel acknowledges that staff appreciates the guiding function the clear process descriptions have. It is always risky to make a link between the quality of something as complex as an external review and one or two quality assurance measures; at least the positive feedback from institutions and reviewers during the site visit demonstrated a high level of satisfaction with the conduct of reviews.

What became apparent during the site-visit was the relevance and impact of the organisational changes that the agency underwent in 2023 in general and also on internal quality assurance in particular. This applies not so much to the external component, since collecting feedback from institutions and reviewers has been an ongoing activity; it applies more to the internal components. The panel heard many times and in variations how much the organisational changes changed internal processes, not the least through clearer responsibilities. Furthermore, the sufficient and stable staffing situation since early 2024 and the introduction of an IT-based staff capacity solution was reported as important for organizing the reviews and the whole operations in a high-quality way. The panel believes that the revision of the Quality Management Manual will mark, so to say, the end of this process by including Process Guidelines for all core and support processes.

Regarding staff development, the panel acknowledges that the demand-driven approach is effective and that staff is content with the opportunities. On the one side, the panel evaluates the staff development activities positively and on the other side the panel concludes that the suggestion made in the last review is still valid. The panel believes that staff development would benefit from a more consistent and formal approach that should be linked to strategic planning of the agency and thus be more proactive, in terms of recognizing needs of individual staff members and the agency, and less reactive.

Regarding the recommendations of previous reviews, particularly considering the focus areas of this targeted review, as explained under the corresponding standards (3.1, 3.4, 3.6 and 2.4), the agency has addressed the issues raised previously, even if there are some further options for improvement listed as recommendations and suggestions. The panel is confident that with its new structure and strategic plan ACQUIN will continue making improvements in all the focus areas.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

3. The panel suggests that ACQUIN develops a formal staff development policy.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part I of the ESG.

Evidence

In the SAR ACQUIN reported that its external quality assurance procedures have been maintained with no major changes since the last review in 2021 when ACQUIN was found compliant with this standard. The panel was able to confirm during the desk-based analysis and the site visit that the external quality assurance procedures listed in the ToR are the same as were the basis of the last review. Furthermore, the panel was able to confirm that the design of the procedures has not been substantially changed with one exception in the accreditation procedures in Germany which was the added reference to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

The SAR to the 2021 review explains how part I of the ESG was addressed in the then implemented review procedures which, according to the ToR of the current review are the same.

In its vision statement ACQUIN states “ACQUIN's quality concept follows the principle that criteria-based quality development is as individual as the organisational cultures and profiles of the various institutions in the tertiary education sector.” This emphasis of institutional diversity to be taken into account is rooted in the agency's self-understanding as being “By Universities, for Universities” and provides the basis for ACQUIN's general approach to put high relevance on the institutions' own goals and approaches.

As far as Programme Accreditation in Germany and System Accreditation in Germany is concerned, the agency, as all agencies conducting accreditation procedures in Germany, must apply the standards laid down in the *Specimen Decree* by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany. These standards were revised in autumn 2024, however the revision was limited to clarification of wording; only one change addressed the content of the standards which is the additional clause 4 of §3 that now requires HEI explicitly to apply the national legal regulations regarding recognition of prior learning which is the proxy for the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC).⁸ This change was suggested by the German accreditation agencies.

The Specimen Decree emphasizes in Article I, clause I, “that assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning is the primary responsibility of HEI” and, following from this includes sets of criteria for programme accreditation and for system accreditation that translate the standards of part

⁸ https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2024/2024_11_21-Musterrechtsverordnung.pdf

I of the ESG into the German accreditation system, namely the design of programmes, recognition of qualifications and of prior learning, implementation of ECTS, student assessment, etc.

As far as Accreditation of Joint Programmes, International Programme Accreditation, International Institutional Accreditation, Certification procedures in Germany and abroad, Certification of further education offers that are part of higher education are concerned, ACQUIN uses regulations including criteria approved by the Accreditation Commission; these have not undergone any changes since the last review of the agency against the ESG in 2021. With regard to International Programme Accreditation and International Institutional Accreditation this means that the standards of ESG part I are directly used as accreditation standards. With regard to Accreditation of Joint Programmes this means that the *European Approach for Quality Assurance in Joint Programmes* is applied. Hence, in both cases the coverage of ESG part I is obvious. As far as accreditation of doctoral programmes is concerned, ACQUIN considers the Salzburg recommendations in addition to ESG part I. 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). 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.

During the site visit, the panel explored especially the international accreditation procedures and whether ACQUIN addresses national standards valid in the countries of residence of the higher education institutions under review. Although contextualization of the review is given relevance in the preparation of the review panels, this does not change the accreditation standards which remain part I of the ESG. In a few cases ACQUIN conducted reviews jointly with national quality assurance agencies; however, in these cases combined sets of standards are applied and ACQUIN writes the report and takes the decision separately and solely based on its own standards.

Overview about the alignment of criteria with ESG 2.1 (Amended Mapping Grid of the 2021 SAR)

	Germany			International							
	Programme Accreditation ⁹	System Accreditation ¹⁰	Certification ¹¹	European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint	Programme Accreditation	Accreditation of PhD Programmes ¹³	Institutional Accreditation ¹⁴	Certification	Switzerland		Austria
									Institutional Accreditation ¹⁵	Programme Accreditation ¹⁶	
ESG 1.1	§14	§§14, 17	2.4	9	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	§6(4) §§8, 11 §12(1, 4, 5) §13	§6(4) §§8, 11 §12(1, 4, 5) §§13, 17	2.1 2.2 2.4	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(1, 4, 5, 6) §15	§12(1, 4, 5, 6) §15, 17	2.2	5	ESG 1.3	ESG 1.3	2.3	ESG 1.3	3.2	2.3	2
ESG 1.4	§5 §6(1, 2, 3, 4) §12(1) §14	§5 §6(1, 2, 3, 4) §12(1) §§14, 17	1.2 2.2 2.4	4	ESG 1.4	ESG 1.4	2.3	ESG 1.4	3.4	2.3	2
ESG 1.5	§12(2)	§12(2) §17	2.2	7	ESG 1.5	ESG 1.5	2.5	ESG 1.5	4.2, 4.3	3.3	2
ESG 1.6	§12(3) §15	§12(3) §15 §17	2.2	6, 7	ESG 1.6	ESG 1.6	2.5	ESG 1.6	4.1	3.2	2
ESG 1.7	§14	§§14, 18	2.4	9	ESG 1.7	ESG 1.7	2.6	ESG 1.7	2.2	4.2	1, 2, 3
ESG 1.8	Publication of examination regulations which contain information on study programmes is obligatory according to the higher education	Publication of examination regulations which contain information on study programmes is obligatory according to the higher education	2.2.5	8, Part I ESG	ESG 1.8	ESG 1.8	2.4	ESG 1.8	5.2	5.2	3

⁹ 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

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ 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.

¹² https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf

¹³ In addition to the criteria defined by ESG part I the assessment of doctoral programmes follows the so-called Salzburg principles as they are specified in the Salzburg recommendations ("Salzburg II").

¹⁴ In addition to the criteria defined by ESG part I 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 (VWR) („Guidelines for the accreditation of non-state higher education institutions” Section B.IV).

¹⁵ 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).

¹⁶ 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).

¹⁷ ACQUIN has developed four quality standards based on HS-QSG's six assessment areas.

	acts of the German federal states	acts of the German federal states §18									
ESG I.9	§14	§§14, 17, 18	2.4		ESG I.9	ESG I.9	2.6	ESG I.9	3.3, 5.1	2.2, 3.1, 4.1	2, 3, 4
ESG I.10	§26	§26	n/a		ESG I.10	ESG I.10	2.6	ESG I.10	1.4	1.4	1, 2

Analysis

The panel compared ACQUIN's external quality assurance procedures with the versions that were applied at the time of the previous review. The panel was able to confirm the analysis of the previous review that ACQUIN's quality assurance procedures address appropriately the standards and guidelines in Part I of the ESG in a comprehensive way. This is obvious for the international procedures for programme accreditation, accreditation of doctoral programmes and for certification where the standards of ESG part I are used directly as accreditation standards; this is also true for the accreditation of joint programmes by using the *European Approach for Quality Assurance in Joint Programmes*. Especially the procedures at institutional level, namely system accreditation in Germany, institutional accreditation in Switzerland and Audit in Austria the entire design of the procedures and the standards emphasize the primary responsibility of the institutions for quality through the focus on the effectiveness of internal quality assurance mechanisms. The standards are built on the standards of part I of the ESG with great emphasis on ESG I.1 to ESG I.7. and ESG I.9. ESG I.8 does not feature prominently in the regulations for the procedures in Germany because this is regulated by law. Regarding ESG I.4 it is to be mentioned that the implementation of recognition procedures in accordance with the LRC is now addressed more explicitly in accreditation procedures in Germany as demonstrated by the mapping table. This was a criticism of the previous panel, and since then the Interstate Treaty and the specimen decree have been amended accordingly.

The panel found that ACQUIN continues to emphasize the primary responsibility of higher education institutions for the quality of their provision and for quality assurance. During the site-visit the panel learned that representatives of reviewed institutions, namely of foreign higher education institutions, were content with the agency's reviews that respected diverse institutional approaches to internal quality assurance and that were also directed to support the institutions in enhancing quality.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard:

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

2020 review recommendation I 8:

I. Student members should be included in all panels for all procedures implemented both within Germany and abroad (including procedures done jointly with other quality assurance agencies and in certification).

¹⁸ If the ENQA Board deviated from the recommendations made by the review panel, the Board version of the recommendation is referred to.

2. The principles on selection of experts for international procedures should be documented more clearly. Principles and procedure(s) for expert selection both domestically and internationally should be published on the agency's website.

2020 EQAR conclusion¹⁹:

"The Register Committee concluded that the status quo in regards to the training of experts has changed little since the last renewal of registration on EQAR, and thus remains a critical point. The Committee was therefore unable to concur with panel's conclusion and found the agency to be only partially compliant with the standard."

Specific focus according to ToR, paragraph 2.1, A: *"Whether the agency systematically provides training for peer-review experts."*

Evidence

For the implementation of its accreditation and certification procedures ACQUIN appoints panels of experts. Compared to the last review in 2021 the panel identified very little changes in the way they are appointed.

The composition of the panels and their nomination are regulated; as far as accreditation procedures in Germany are concerned, the composition is regulated by the Specimen Decree, notably at least two subject-related professors, one subject-related representative with professional experience, and one subject-related student in programme accreditation, and at least three professors with relevant experience in quality assurance of teaching and learning, one representative with professional experience, and one student in system accreditation.²⁰ ACQUIN applies the widely used *Guidelines on the appointment of experts and the composition of expert groups for accreditation procedures*, adopted by the German Rector's Conference²¹ which explain in detail how to compose panels and also include explanation of potential bias.

As far as audit procedures in Austria and accreditation procedures in Switzerland are concerned, national regulations apply, which refer to general requirements regarding the expertise of panel members; also in these regulations student involvement is assured.

As far as the certification procedures and all the international accreditation procedures are concerned, ACQUIN laid down the details in its separate guidelines for institutional accreditation procedures, for programme accreditation procedures, for doctoral study programme accreditation procedures, and for international certification procedures which are published on the website. The panel explored if these regulations are applied consistently and confirmed that all panels regularly consist of academics in varying numbers (one in certification procedures and more than one in other procedures), of one student and of one professional practitioner.

ACQUIN aims at including a mixture of experienced and new experts in the panels which was confirmed during the site-visit. In reviews outside Germany ACQUIN, as a regular feature of its reviews, appoints one panel member from the country to assure national expertise in the panel, which was also confirmed during the site-visit. A quick review of a random choice of panel reports also evidenced that ACQUIN appoints students to all panels. The agency reported that in 2024 35 percent

¹⁹ EQAR conclusions are only referred to when they go beyond assessments and include reasoned deviations from the assessments made by the review panel.

²⁰ Specimen Decree § 25

https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2024/2024_11_21-Musterrechtsverordnung.pdf

²¹ https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-01-Beschluesse/HRK_MV_Entschliessung_Benennung_Gutachter_Akkreditierungsverfahren_2017_2018.pdf

of the members of the expert panels were female, and 15 percent came from abroad. Compared to the previous year, the proportion of female experts rose by one percentage point and the proportion of foreign experts by three percentage points, with the total number of experts appointed increasing by just under twelve percentage points. Compared to the last review in 2021 the proportion of foreign panel members remains around 1/3.

The internal process of selecting and nominating panels is generally described for each procedure separately in the formal process descriptions which are included in the Quality Management Manual. ACQUIN receives a profile of the programme or the institution to be reviewed, and the office puts together a longlist of suitable panel members, taking into account experience, expertise and possible reasons for bias. The office draws on its database and/or does additional research. Finally, the Accreditation Commission nominates the experts which is stipulated in the statutes. After the nomination, ACQUIN applies the usual process and informs the institution under review about the panel composition to exclude conflict of interest. All panel members have to sign a no conflict-of-interest statement which was confirmed during the site-visit. Compared to the last review in 2021 nothing has changed in this respect; the processes are defined but not published on the website. During the site-visit the panel learned that ACQUIN does not have a specific policy for selecting panel members in international review but uses the same policy as for reviews in Germany.

All ACQUIN panels are supported by a project manager who organizes the review and supports the reviewers in the preparation of the review, during the site-visit and during the report-writing. Further to this panels are provided with templates for the reports which were considered very helpful by reviewers. In general, reviewers confirmed the high relevance of the project managers for correct and consistent applications of the relevant regulations, also during the drafting of the reports; the guidance by the agency was considered very good.

Since the last review, a general online training seminar has been introduced. In terms of training and briefing the agency's activities differ between procedures in Germany and procedures abroad. What is common for all reviews is this voluntary general online training seminar, organized twice a year, which aims at introducing potential panel members to external quality assurance procedures in general and the roles and responsibilities of reviewers in general; these training seminars don't focus on specific types of reviews. The general training seminars are open for everybody, and ACQUIN uses them also to attract potential panel members.

Regarding accreditation procedures in Germany, panel members are, after nomination provided with the relevant national regulations and the individual review material. Panel members may contact the project manager if questions concerning the regulations arise. Before the site-visit the panel convenes for a 3 to 4 hours meeting which includes in addition to the preparation of the site-visit presentations and discussions about the regulations and the roles and responsibilities of the panel members.

Regarding accreditation procedures outside Germany, ACQUIN organizes an additional training activity by convening the panel for a specific online seminar that consist of four elements one of which addresses explicitly the national context and is provided by a national expert in addition to the other three elements namely the regulations as such, the ESG and writing the report; the panel noted that panels are provided with written information about the national context right before the site-visit. Further to this the seminar addresses the regulations and the roles and responsibilities of panel members.

During the site-visit ACQUIN repeated that they don't consider specific training seminars necessary for panels in Germany, indicating that in most cases the reviewers also have previous experience with other German agencies. Reviewers who the panel met during the site-visit agreed that they felt prepared properly for the reviews and the reviewed HEI representatives also indicated that the panels were well prepared.

Analysis

Based on the available evidence, the panel found that in general little has changed since the last review in 2021 regarding the selection and appointment of experts. Main changes are with the exception of the involvement of students in all panels, the introduction of a general online training seminar and the higher proportion of non-German panel members.

With regard to the regulations and policies for composing panels this means that, although the practice is well-established, the regulations are not presented in detail on the website. The ENQA recommendation from the 2021 external review, to present explicitly the regulations for the panel composition on the website remains valid.

With regard to the panel composition and especially the involvement of non-German reviewers the panel wants to emphasize the high proportion of 40% reviews outside Germany. Following the suggestion made under ESG 3.1 to deliberate the impact of the growing international review activity on the nature and identity of the agency, the panel suggests to also consider having more non-German panel members in reviews outside Germany. The panel makes this suggestion by acknowledging that an important reason for foreign institutions to choose ACQUIN is its origin as a German and European quality assurance agency.

With regard to the training of panel members the panel acknowledges efforts to provide panel members with appropriate training and briefing. As far as reviews outside Germany are concerned the panel could assure themselves that the individual training addresses relevant topics such as role and responsibilities of panels and the regulations in general. The emphasis that is given to inform panels about the national context and relevant cultural differences is to be emphasized.

As far as reviews in Germany are concerned the picture looks slightly different. The voluntary general training does not address specific regulations of the accreditation procedures but roles and responsibilities of panel members in general. The panel considers ACQUIN's standpoint that specific training is not necessary because reviewers are very experienced, also through involvement in reviews by other agencies, not convincing. Especially when taking into account that ACQUIN aims at panels with a combination of well experienced and less experienced members, a need for training of at least the panel members without experience cannot be denied. The panel believes that ACQUIN could do more in this regard, at least for panel members without experience. As far as students are concerned, the lack of specific training is balanced by the training activities of the self-organized German Student Accreditation Pool. The panel acknowledges that ACQUIN participates in the training activities of the German Student Accreditation Pool as requested.

Panel recommendations

4. The panel recommends that ACQUIN introduces specific training seminars for reviewers without experience for system accreditation and programme accreditation procedures in Germany.
5. The principles on selection of experts for international procedures should be documented more clearly. Principles and procedure(s) for expert selection both domestically and internationally should be published on the agency's website.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

4. The panel suggests considering having more non-German panel members in reviews outside Germany.

5. The panel suggests that ACQUIN provides panel members in international accreditation procedures with specific information about the national context when submitting the review material and not just before the site-visit.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ENHANCEMENT AREA

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

The motivation to select ESG 2.6 (Reporting) as enhancement area goes back to deliberations that started after the 2021 review, when the ENQA panel recommended ACQUIN that *“the format of the external review reports could be further refined and contain features of good practice as a standard entry”* and that *“analyses should focus on trends and areas of good practice as well as persistent difficulty across the higher education system.”*

The recommendation prompted more general considerations on the strategic role of reporting in external quality assurance that might also include system-level learning and peer exchange. Furthermore, the concept of good practice and who would be responsible for defining good practice was discussed internally. In an additional paper to prepare for the discussions which was requested by the panel ACQUIN widened the topic by referring to an ongoing discussion about how to support the enhancement function of quality assurance through the reports and about the structure of the reports in international reviews; the agency considered to change the structure from following the ESG standard by standard to a more integrated structure under four main themes: objectives, plans, implementation and quality assurance which is a structure that ACQUIN had applied in the past but moved to a more transparent ESG-oriented structure upon request by the institutions. It is to be noted that the agency is free to choose its approach to structure, content and style of the report in certification procedures and international reviews; in accreditation procedures in Germany the agency has to use a template provided by the GAC.

The panel had a preparatory meeting to discuss the enhancement area and agreed to the format of an open discussion; the panel also suggested to invite stakeholders in addition to staff which the agency accepted. During the site-visit the panel addressed the topic in many interview sessions to collect some views from all parties involved and not the least from stakeholders.

The open discussion started with a short introduction by ACQUIN. The discussion revealed quite quickly that the questions raised by the agency and the ideas that were discussed internally are not only technical or editorial questions but also or maybe even in the first questions that refer to principal aspects of the procedures as such. This became apparent not the least regarding the ideas to strengthen the enhancement dimension in the reports and to design the reports so that they can inform peer exchange and learning at system level.

The panel offers the opinion that any discussion about structure and content, orientation and style of review reports should not be discussed in isolation but needs to be discussed by taking the purpose of the reviews as a starting point. Structure and content, orientation and style must be consistent with the (main) purpose of the review. An accreditation procedure that leads to a yes/no-decision based on compulsory criteria should result in a report that primarily presents exactly this outcome. The panel acknowledges the tension between the *twin purposes* of quality assurance accountability and enhancement, as the ESG calls them, and wants to commend ACQUIN for its strive to strengthen the enhancement dimension in the reports. However, this should be done with a sense of proportion. Transparent presentation of facts and especially analysis in the reports provides institutions already with reference points for further actions. In any case, giving recommendations or suggestions, or hinting at good practice should always support internal follow up at the institutions.

In this context the panel wants to encourage ACQUIN to use its leeway in writing the reports in the accreditation procedures in Germany. The templates by the GAC explicitly foresee the opportunity to give recommendations and to point at good practice.

Anyway, as one participant in the discussion rightly emphasized, the relevance of site-visits as a source of information, ideas, and suggestions for improvements should not be underestimated. It might be worth discussing if through panel training this feature of site-visits could be strengthened.

With regard to the concept of good practice the panel understands the specific challenge ACQUIN faces in the accreditation procedures in Germany; it's true that in a system with a regulatory body and competing accreditation agencies the concept of good practice raises the question of eligibility to make such statements. One alternative option would be to use the concept of commendation which is much easier to use because it has a more individual aspect and does not carry the notion of something (semi-)official.

Furthermore, the panel wants to emphasize that in voluntary accreditation procedures –which ACQUIN's international accreditations are– the expectations of the clients should be taken into consideration; obviously without compromising the correct, comprehensive and transparent presentation of the findings. The panel found it understandable that some participants emphasized that their interest is in the first place a clear statement, if the criteria are met or not, and that other aspects like enhancement-oriented foci were of second order if at all welcome. For example, a university embarks on a voluntary accreditation in addition to the compulsory national review and does this to use the outcome for marketization of the institution. It sounds natural that too a big focus on potentials for improvements might blur the desired and usable message that it is a good institution or a good programme.

With regard to the ideas to find ways to strengthen the accreditation reports' contribution to peer exchange and learning at system level, it is to be questioned if accreditation reports are the best instrument to achieve these aims. The panel wants to commend ACQUIN for the intention to make contributions to discussions and learning at system level. Especially because of ACQUIN's characteristic as a provider of reviews in a competitive market but not as a national quality assurance agency with overarching tasks at system level, these intentions bear the potential to strengthen ACQUIN positioning in Germany and abroad. However, following the previous discussion about the necessary alignment between the reports and the purpose of the procedure, and following the discussions during the site-visit about thematic analyses the panel wants to recommend ACQUIN to deliberate on using other instruments than accreditation reports. Thematic analyses would be the classic instrument to share good practice and to initiate peer learning or to kick off discussions at system level. ACQUIN might consider reviewing its Thematic Analysis Strategy with a view to integrate aims they try to achieve with revised approaches to accreditation reports. Another instrument might be workshops; as the panel learned during the site-visit, ACQUIN members and institutions appreciate the presentation of general topics of interest at general Assembly meetings or the organisation of workshops.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATION

ORGANISATIONAL CHANGES

The panel wants to address organisational changes in the office in general because ESG 3.5 is not within the scope of this review. In the SAR as well as in many interview sessions during the site visit the significant impact of the organisational changes were highlighted. Responsibilities were considered much clearer, the formation of three business units supported planning of resources and together with the IT based planning tool resource allocation was much easier, and since the beginning of 2024 the monitoring of staff capacities and overhours led to significant reduction of overload. Because of the high relevance these developments were given in the SAR, the panel used the interview sessions to explore whether the organisational changes caused problems that would make it necessary to add ESG 3.5 to the scope of the review. However, the panel received consistent messages that the changes resulted in substantial improvements and didn't find any indications of problems with resources or staffing or resource planning. Hence, the panel concluded no need for further investigations regarding ESG 3.5

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

ESG 3.1

The panel commends ACQUIN for effective introduction of IT instruments to optimize and coordinate activities of the Agency in addressing challenges indicated in the previous SAR

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel finds ACQUIN compliant with ESG 3.1, 3.4, 3.6, 2.1, 2.4. In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, ACQUIN is in compliance with the ESG.

Panel recommendations

ESG 3.1

1. The panel recommends that ACQUIN documents consultancy as a field of activity on its website and also provides information about the differences between these activities and review activities including the non-conflict of interest policy.
2. The panel recommends that ACQUIN explores ways to compensate the absence of student representation in the General Assembly and the Executive Board to strengthen student involvement in strategic management and decision-making of the agency.

ESG 3.4

3. The panel recommends that ACQUIN publishes the reports on thematic analyses that are pending.

ESG 2.4

4. The panel recommends that ACQUIN introduces particular training seminars for reviewers without experience for system accreditation and programme accreditation procedures in Germany.
5. The principles on selection of experts for international procedures should be documented more clearly. Principles and procedure(s) for expert selection both domestically and internationally should be published on the agency's website.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

ESG 3.1

1. The panel suggests that ACQUIN deliberates about the impact of the big and growing proportion of reviews outside Germany on the agency's identity.
2. The panel suggests that ACQUIN reconsiders its understanding of stakeholders with a view to strengthen the agency's accountability to stakeholders of higher education as a public good.

ESG 3.6

3. The panel suggests that ACQUIN develops a formal staff development policy.

ESG 2.4

4. The panel suggests considering having more non-German panel members in reviews outside Germany.

5. The panel suggests that ACQUIN provides panel members in international accreditation procedures with specific information about the national context when submitting the review material and not just before the site-visit.

ANNEXES

ANNEX I: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	TOPICS
	[17.11.2025] – Review Panel			
1	10:00	60 min	Review panel's kick-off meeting and preparations for site visit	
	[20.11.2025] - Online meeting with the agency's resource person			
2	09:30	60 min	An online clarifications meeting with the agency's resource person to clarify the agency's changes since the last full review against the ESG and to understand the background and motive of the agency's choice of the self-selected ESG standard for enhancement (next to the overall HE and QA context of the agency)	Managing Director Head of International Activities Head of Data- and Process Management
	02.12.2025 – Day 0			
3	16:00	120 min	Review panel's pre-visit meeting and preparations for day 1	
4				
	03.12.2025 – Day 1			
		30 min	Review panel's private meeting	

5	09.00-09.45	45 min	Meeting with ACQUIN Managing Director	Managing Director	General overview of ACQUIN ESG 3.1, 3.4, 3.6, 2.1, 2.4
		15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
6	10.00-10.45	45 min	Meeting with Executive Board	Chairman, former Vice-Rector for Teaching at RWTH Aachen University Second Chairperson, former Vice President of Academic Affairs at RheinMain University of Applied Sciences (online) Member representing Professional Practice, former Managing Director of Aldi Süd	General overview of ACQUIN ESG 3.1, 3.4, 3.6
		15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
7	11.00-11.45	45 min	Meeting with heads of business departments	Head of Programme Accreditation Head of System Accreditation Head of International Activities	General overview of ACQUIN ESG 2.1, 2.4, 3.4, 3.6
		15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
8	12.00-12.45	45 min	Meeting with staff from business departments programme accreditation and system accreditation	Deputy Head of Programme Accreditation Deputy Head of System Accreditation	ESG 2.1, 2.4, 3.1, 3.4, 3.6

				Project Manager and Member of Works Council Project Manager and Data Protection Officer 3 Project Managers	
		60 min	Lunch (panel only)		
9	13.45-14.30	45 min	Meeting with staff from business department international activities	Deputy Head of International Activities Head of EU-Projects 3 Project Managers Project Manager and Member of the Works Council	ESG 2.1, 2.4, 3.4, 3.6
		15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
10	14.45-15.30	45 min	Meeting with staff from organisational departments	Head of Backoffice Head of Finance and Accounting Head of Data- and Process Management Head of Internal Quality Development and Chair of the Works Council Head of IT and Technology	ESG 3.6; Resources and staff development
		15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
11	15.45-16.15	30 min	Meeting with the Managing Director of the German Accreditation Council (online)	Managing Director GAC (online)	

	16.15-17.15	45 min	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day 2		
	[04.12.2025] – Day 2				
		30 min	Review panel's private meeting		
12	09.00-09.45	45 min	Meeting with members of the Accreditation Commission	Rector Private University in the Principality of Liechtenstein (UFL) (online) Former Chair of Business Information Systems (Dresden University of Technology / TU Dresden) Rector of Deutsche Bundesbank University of Applied Sciences Vice-President for Studies, Research and Teaching, Mannheim University of Music and Performing Arts Consulting & Coaching, Zeitelhack Communications Consulting and Training Student, Business Informatics, Berlin School of Economics and Law	ESG 3.1, 3.6, 2.1, 2.4
		15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
13	10.00-10.45	45 min	Meeting with representatives of some reviewed HEIs, if possible a mixture of rectorate-level and QA representatives (national)	Former Vice-President for Academic Affairs, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) München (online)	ESG 2.1, 2.4

				Vice-President for Academic Affairs, Technische Universität (TU) Ilmenau (online) Dean of Studies, Faculty of International Business, Hochschule Heilbronn Quality management in studies and teaching, University of Bamberg Consultant for System Accreditation, Nuremberg University of Music Head of Quality Management and Organisational Development, International Psychoanalytic University Berlin	
		15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
14	11.00-11.45	45 min	Meeting with representatives of some reviewed HEIs if possible a mixture of rectorate-level and QA representatives (international)	Full Professor and International Accreditation Team member at Istanbul Beykent University, Turkey President of the German International University (GIU) Cairo (online) Rector's Delegate for Quality Assurance, Saint-Joseph University in Beirut, Lebanon (online) Rector of German University of Technology in Oman (GUtech) (online)	ESG 2.1, 2.4

				Quality Management Faculty for English Education, Universitas Pendidikan, Indonesia (online) Head of Studies & Continuing Education, Private University in the Principality of Liechtenstein (UFL) (online)	
		15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
15	12.00-13.00	60 min	Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool, including students	Vice President for Academic Affairs, Technische Hochschule Nürnberg (online) Sustainability in Engineering and Management, Hochschule Koblenz (online) Languages, Linguistics, and Literatures, (Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan) (online) Head of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Cultures, University of Lorraine (online) Consultant for process and quality management, Bosch Engineering GmbH Lead Consultant & Quality Expert, Malta Student at FH Kufstein Tirol (online) Student at University of Freiburg, Member of the Board of the <i>German Student Accreditation Pool (GSAP)</i> (online)	ESG 2.1, 2.4

		60 min	Lunch (panel only)		
16	14.00-14.45	45 min	Meeting with stakeholders (members of the association)	Vice President for Study, Teaching and Continuing Education, University of Regensburg (online) Accreditation at Vice-Rectorate for Studies and Teaching, University of Halle-Wittenberg Quality Development, Folkwang University of Arts (online) Vice President for Studies and Teaching, Nordhausen University of Applied Sciences (online) Quality Management and Accreditation, FU Berlin Professor of New Testament, University of Balamand, Lebanon (online)	General overview
		15 min	Review panel's private discussion		
17	15.00-16.45	105 min	Workshop: ESG 2.6	6 representatives of external stakeholders Managing Director 11 staff members	
	16.45-17.30	45 min	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day 3		
			Dinner (panel only)		

	[05.12.2025] – Day 3				
		30 min	Review panel's private meeting		
18	09.15-9.45	30 min	A session to further investigate additional topics that may arise during the site visit regarding agency's compliance with the ESG or to clarify any pending issues(as necessary)	Managing Director Head of International activities	
	9.45-11.45	120 min	Review panel's private discussion		
	11.45-12.15	30 min	Final de-briefing meeting with staff and Board members of the agency to inform about preliminary findings	Chairman Second chairperson Managing Director 7 Staff members	
19	12.15-13.00	45 min	Lunch (panel only)		

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

Targeted review of Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN) against the ESG

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

The present Terms of Reference were agreed between ACQUIN (applicant), ENQA (coordinator) and EQAR.

June 2025

1. Background

Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN) has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 2008 and is applying for renewal of EQAR registration based on a targeted external review against *the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) coordinated by the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA).

Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN) has been a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since 2006 and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership.

ACQUIN is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- Programme accreditation in Germany
- System accreditation in Germany
- Joint programme accreditation
- Programme accreditation abroad
- Institutional accreditation abroad
- Certification procedures in Germany and abroad
- Certification of further education offers that are part of higher education

All these activities will be included on the agency's profile on the EQAR website and linked to DEQAR database. NB: The agency may not upload reports from other activities to DEQAR.

The following activities of the applicant are outside the scope of the ESG:

- Consulting and Services
- Participation in EU Erasmus+ projects

While the consultancy activities are not external quality assurance activities, the review should address the way in which the agency ensures a clear separation and prevents potential conflict of interest between quality assurance activities and consultancy services, taking into account Annex 2 of the Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG. Beyond

this requirement, it is ACQUIN's choice – in agreement with the review coordinator – whether those activities should be commented upon by the review panel.

2. Purpose and scope of the targeted review

This review will evaluate the extent to which ACQUIN continues to fulfil the requirements of the ESG. The targeted review aims to place more focus on those parts that require attention and provide sufficient information to support ACQUIN's application to EQAR.

The review will be further used as part of the agency's renewal of membership in ENQA.

2.1 Focus areas

- A) Standards with a partial compliance conclusion in the Register Committee's last renewal decision:
 - a. ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts
 - Whether the agency systematically provides training for peer-review experts.
 - b. ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance
 - Whether the agency has clearly defined goals and objectives that are effectively translated into the agency's work plans of the agency and whether the stakeholders are effectively involved in the governance of the agency.
 - c. ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis
 - Whether the agency regularly and systematically publishes thematic analyses.
 - d. ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct
 - Whether the agency effectively manages the professional development of its staff and whether the agency has addressed the issues raised in the previous external reviews.
- B) Standards 2.1 to 2.7 for the following activities:
 - a. n/a
- C) Standards affected by other types of substantive changes:
 - a. n/a
- D) ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance;
- E) Selected enhancement area: ESG 2.6 Reporting
- F) Other matters regarding ESG compliance that come up during the targeted review and that may affect the agency's compliance with the ESG (if any).

These issues should be investigated by the review panel as far as possible, providing an analysis and conclusion on the ESG standard(s) concerned.

3. The review process

The review will be conducted in line with the requirements of *the EQAR Procedures for Applications* and *the Policy on Targeted Reviews*, and following the methodology described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Agreement on the Terms of Reference between EQAR, ACQUIN and ENQA
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by ENQA
- Self-assessment by ACQUIN including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to ACQUIN;
- Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee;
- Analysis of the final review report and decision-making by the EQAR Register Committee;
- Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board;
- Attendance to the online follow-up seminar.

3.1 Independence of the review coordinator

The coordinator has not provided remunerated (e.g. consultancy) or unremunerated services to ACQUIN during the past 5 years, and conversely ACQUIN has not provided any remunerated or unremunerated services to the coordinator.

3.2 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of four members including an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member and one other expert. At least two members are from another country.

At least one panel member should be a quality assurance professional that is currently employed by a QA agency and has been engaged in quality assurance within the past five years. When requested by the agency under review or when considered particularly pertinent, other stakeholders (for example, a representative of the labour market) may be included. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and one as the review secretary. At least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the

Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. At least two panel members come from outside the national system of the agency under review (if relevant).

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator (an ENQA staff member) who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The Review Coordinator will not be the secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

ENQA will provide the agency with the proposed panel composition and the curricula vitarum of the panel members to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The reviewers will have to agree to a non-conflict of interest statement that is incorporated in their contract for the review of this agency.

Once appointed, the coordinator will inform EQAR about the appointed panel members.

3.3 Self-assessment by ACQUIN, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

ACQUIN is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-assessment includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;

The self-assessment report is expected to contain:

- a description of the self-assessment process and the production of the SAR;
- a description of changes occurred within the agency since the last full review, including any eventual changes in the higher education system and quality assurance system in which the agency predominantly operates, the agency's structure, funding, its list of external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG, as well as the changes in the agency's quality assurance activities abroad (where relevant);
- a section that addresses the focus areas of the review, including standards that were considered to be partially compliant with the ESG in the last full review as well as ESG 2.1 and one self-selected ESG standard for enhancement (see 2.1 Focus areas);
- a SWOT analysis of the agency as a whole;
- for each of the individual standards enlisted above (see section 2) a consideration of how the agency has addressed the recommendations as noted in the previous EQAR Register Committee decision of inclusion/renewal (if applicable).

The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which ACQUIN fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and continues to meet the ESG and thus the requirements for EQAR registration.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the review coordinator, which has two weeks to carry out a screening. The purpose of a screening is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The coordinator will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*, is present. If the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect

the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to ask for a revised version within two weeks.

The final version of the agency's self-assessment report is then submitted to the review panel a minimum of eight weeks prior to the site visit. The agency publishes the completed SAR on its website and sends the link to ENQA. ENQA will publish this link on its website as well.

3.4 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule considering the aspects included under the focus area (as defined under point 2.1 of the Terms of Reference).

The schedule will include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit. The approved schedule shall be given to ACQUIN at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The site visit should enable the review panel to explore how the agency has addressed the standards where it has been found to be partially compliant (if the case), aspects of substantive change, consideration of internal quality assurance (ESG 2.1) and the self-selected ESG standard(s) for enhancement. The panel will include extra time during the site-visit to address any other arising issues (if the case) that might have an impact on the agency's compliance with the ESG.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the panel's overall impressions but not its judgement on the ESG compliance of the agency.

Prior to the physical site visit, the panel attends a joint briefing call between the panel, ENQA and EQAR to clarify the review expectations and address any possible arising matters.

In advance of the site visit (at least two weeks before the site visit), the panel will organise an obligatory online meeting with the agency. This meeting is held to ensure that the panel reaches a sufficient understanding of:

- The specific national/legal context in which the agency operates;
- The specific quality assurance system to which the agency belongs;
- The key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities.

3.5 Preparation and completion of the final review report

The review report will be drafted in consultation with all review panel members and correspond to the purpose and scope of the review as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. In particular, it will provide a clear rationale for its findings concerning each ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG* to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR²².

The external report will present the facts and analysis reflecting the reality at the time of review. This will form the main basis for the Register Committee's decision making.

²² See here: <https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2025/01/EQAR-UseInterpretation-v4.0.pdf>

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language. After panel has considered coordinator's feedback, the report will go to the agency for comment on factual accuracy. If ACQUIN chooses to provide a position statement in reference to the draft report, it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report.

Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the statement by ACQUIN and submit the document for scrutiny to ENQA's Agency Review Committee and then to EQAR along with the remaining application documents (self-evaluation report, Declaration of Honour, statement to review report-if applicable). The report is to be finalised normally within 2-4 months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 30 pages in length. All panel members will sign off on the final version of the external review report. The coordinator will provide to ACQUIN the [Declaration of Honour](#) together with the final report.

4. Publication and use of the report

ACQUIN will receive the expert panel's report and publish it on its website once the ENQA Agency Review Committee has validated the report. Prior to the final validation of the report, the ENQA Agency Review Committee may request additional (documentary) evidence or clarification from the review panel, review coordinator or the agency if needed. The review report will be published on ENQA website regardless of the review outcome. The report will also be published on the EQAR website together with the decision on registration, regardless of the outcome.

ENQA will retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the review panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, will be vested in ENQA. In the case of an unsuccessful application to EQAR, the report may also be used by the ENQA Board to reach a conclusion on whether the agency can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA.

5. Decision-making on EQAR registration and ENQA membership

The agency will submit the review report via email to EQAR before expiry of the agency's registration on EQAR. The agency will also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), the Declaration of Honour and any other relevant documents to the application to EQAR (i.e. annexes, statement to the review report).

EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting in the summer of 2026. The Register Committee's final judgement on the agency's compliance with the ESG as a whole can either be substantially compliant (approval of the application) or not substantially compliant (rejection of the application). In case of a positive decision (substantially compliant with the ESG), the registration is renewed for a further five years (from the date of the review report).

The decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board will take place after EQAR Register Committee decision.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which the agency expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be considered by the Board together with the confirmation of EQAR listing when deciding on the agency's membership. Should the agency not be granted the

registration in EQAR or the registration is not renewed, the decision on ENQA membership will be taken based on the final review report, the application letter, and the statement from the Agency Review Committee. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

6. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	June 2025
Appointment of review panel members	July 2025
Self-assessment report (SAR) completed by ACQUIN	12 September 2025
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	September 2025
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	November 2025
Briefing of review panel members	November 2025
Review panel site visit	December 2025
Submission of the draft review report to ENQA Review Coordinator	January 2026
Factual check of the review report by the ACQUIN	February 2026
Statement of ACQUIN to review panel (if applicable)	February 2026
Submission of review report to ENQA	March 2026
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	April 2026
EQAR Register Committee meeting and decision on the application by ACQUIN	Spring/Summer 2026
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	Autumn 2026

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

ACQUIN	Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN)
AI	artificial intelligence
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	external quality assurance
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015
ESU	European Students' Union
GAC	German Accreditation Council
HE	higher education
HEI	higher education institution
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
LRC	Lisbon Recognition Convention
QA	quality assurance
QAA	quality assurance agency
SAR	self-assessment report
SWOT	Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY ACQUIN

1. Self-assessment report
2. Additional material
 - Strategic plan 2024 – 2029
 - Work Plan 2026
 - Strategy for Thematic Analyses (2024–2029)
 - Project description: Specific challenges in the accreditation of music, art, and design degree programs (KuMuGe)
 - Report: BESONDERHEITEN IN DER AKKREDITIERUNG VON MUSIK-, KUNST- UND DESIGNSTUDIENGÄNGEN
 - Project description: QA and AI: Between Gatekeeping and Guidance
 - Project description: EQAAAI (External Quality Assurance And Artificial Intelligence):
 - Exploring the Role of Artificial Intelligence in External Quality Assurance – From Paradigm Shift to Paradigmatic Case
 - Quality Management Manual (version 2021)
 - Quality Management Manual (Draft) [2025]
 - Paper: Staff Development Policy
 - Regulations for international review procedures
 - Paper: General Training Events for Peer-review Experts
 - Table: Completion of the internal expert database
 - Process description: Erstellung des Jahresberichts für die Mitgliederversammlung von ACQUIN e.V.
 - Agenda: Systemakkreditierung für Gutachter:innen. Online-Veranstaltung am 10.9.2025
 - Agenda: Online workshop in preparation for expert activities in international accreditation procedures for program accreditation and institutional accreditation procedures on January 23, 2025, 8-11am CET
 - Presentation: Workshop for expert activities in international accreditations 23. January 2025
 - Presentation: SYSTEM-REAKKREDITIERUNG AN DER UNIVERSITÄT BAMBERG 2. VOR-ORT-BEGEHUNG MIT STICHPROBEN AM 18.-20. MÄRZ 2024
 - Site-visit agenda: Art, Science and Technology University (AUL) Institutional accreditation Online-Visit 23 -25 July 2025
 - Presentation: INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION at Art, Science and Technology University (AUL)
 - Presentation: LEBANON'S HIGHER EDUCATION&ACCREDITATION SYSTEM
 - Process description: Handreichung für Gutachter:innen und den internen Gebrauch Hinweise für die Begutachtung von Fernstudiengängen. Prozessablauf
 - Agendas: AUSZÜGE AUS DER TAGESORDNUNG DER AKKREDITIERUNGSKOMMISSION
 - Minutes: AUSZÜGE AUS DEN PROTOKOLLEN DER AKKREDITIERUNGSKOMMISSION
 - Handreichung für Gutachter:innen und den internen Gebrauch. Hinweise für die Begutachtung von Fernstudiengängen
 - Process description: Beschreibung des Prozessablaufes (Stand 04.12.2025) Interner Prozess zur Verbesserung von Akkreditierungsberichten in der nationalen Programmakkreditierung und in der Systemakkreditierung. Prozessablauf
 - Table: Report returns 2020-2025
 - Minutes: AUSZÜGE AUS DEN PROTOKOLLEN DER AKKREDITIERUNGSKOMMISSION
 - Process description: Qualitätsfeedback - Vorgehensweise

- Stand: 21.09.2023 Qualitätsfeedback durch die Akkreditierungskommission Vorgehensweise für die Feedbackschleife bei diskussionswürdigen Verfahren (nationale Programm-/Systemakkreditierung)
- Hilfestellung für Prüfberichte – internes Papier Stand: 16.11.2023 Formale Kriterien (Art. 2 Abs. 2 Studienakkreditierungsstaatsvertrag)
- Checkliste zur Selbstüberprüfung (vor Versendung / vor Abgabe an Lektorat) Begriffs- und Formatierungskonventionen für Akkreditierungsberichte
- Assessment Report and Accreditation Recommendation
- Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences (NAoG), Ulan Bator, Mongolia, "Public Management" (Master), "Public Administration" (Master)
- Verfahren und Kriterien der Gutachterbestellung (Beschluss der Akkreditierungskommission vom 31. März 2016)
- Overview – Planning M. Kozybayev North Kazakhstan University
- Konzept zur Einarbeitung neuer Referent:innen bei ACQUIN – Programmakkreditierung (National)
- Ablaufplan Workshop für Vorbereitung von Gutachter:innen auf Akkreditierungsverfahren (online), 26. November 2024
- Paper: Ablauf Gutachterschulung, Beispiel „Gutachtertätigkeit in der Programmakkreditierung nationale Programmakkreditierung“, Online-Veranstaltung am 3.11.2025
- Letter accompanying the documents sent the to Ministry of Science and Education of KZ_18.11.2023
- Analysis on the total number of accreditation in KZ_letter to ministry_ACQUIN Nr. 15-15-01-01 2814- 29.04.2025
- Paper: 1.5.2 Analysis and recommendations
- Table: Example of the data from agency-software
- Email to engage a co-author
- Info provided to co-author: Internationalisation as a goal and a means for sustainable development of quality of higher education
- Example: email to KZ (same letter sent to all russian speaking INT customers) HEI 28.04.2025
- Example: email to OM (same letter sent to all english speaking INT customers) HEI 28.04.2025
- Example: letter to KZ HEI, ACQUIN, Global-survey, QA-and-AI, Invitation 02.05.2025
- Poste: Pilot results presentation at INQAAHE 2025 Forum
- QAAAI PROJECT-DESCRIPTION

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL

ACQUIN website <https://www.acquin.org/en/>

ENQA Review 2021. Self-Assessment Report of ACQUIN (2020)

ENQA AGENCY REVIEW. ACCREDITATION, CERTIFICATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE INSTITUTE (ACQUIN) (2021)

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW 2026

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Targeted Review of the Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN), undertaken in 2025.