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ENQA Review 2021: Follow-up Report

Dear President, dear colleagues,

following the decision of the ENQA Board to renew the membership of the Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN e.V.) in June 2021, ACQUIN was invited to submit a follow-up report on progress with the expert-group's recommendations to the ENQA Board after a two-year period.

The recommendations listed in the President's letter on the membership of ACQUIN dated 29 June 2021 are taken as a reference point for the report. Please find the follow-up report enclosed.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Alexander Rudolph
Managing Director

ACQUIN



Das Akkreditierungs-, Zertifizierungs- und
Qualitätssicherungs-Institut



ENQA REVIEW FOLLOW-UP REPORT

ACQUIN

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INTRODUCTION

ACQUIN – the Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute successfully – underwent its fifth review in 2021, a process involving the external assessment of its activities in accordance with the ESG 2015. ACQUIN's full membership has been reconfirmed by the ENQA Board in June 2021.

On its Meeting in July 2021 the ACQUIN Board discussed the results of the review. A team has been formed to develop a follow-up roadmap, which outlined actions to be taken in connection with the recommendations made by the panel.

The work on the implementation of the ENQA recommendations required reflection on the mechanisms being at that time in operation und stimulated important strategic discussions. The resulting plan for the application of the recommendations should be viewed in the larger context of the development ACQUIN is undergoing and changes the agency is introducing.

Furthermore, the timeframe for the implementation of the plan had to be adjusted due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic had on the operative work and development of the agency from March 2020 onwards.

The report below presents a summary of decisions and actions taken by ACQUIN in response to the received recommendations. The report is structured according to the ESG standards.

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

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.

The Strategic Plan, yearly work plans, and yearly activity reports should all be clearly linked.

Students should be represented in the governance of the agency.

The strategic plan, including yearly work plans, for the period of the next five years (2023 – 2028) is currently being finalized. The structure of the next yearly activity report is to be updated accordingly.

Working on the implementation of the recommendation, concerning the representation of students in the governance of the agency, the ACQUIN team agreed on the necessity to conduct a systematic overview and analysis of the issue in a broader context, as well as of the best practices and their applicability in the national context.

An analysis of the decisions on the most recent accreditation of the 50 in second quarter of 2022 accredited agencies has been conducted to see if the question of student participation in the governing bodies has been raised and consequently a suggestion for improvement made. The results suggest an existence of conditions specific to national context, that make formal fulfilment of the requirement a more complex issue, and simultaneously limit the applicability of the accepted practices.

Having additionally examined the decision making practice, described in the paper "Analysis of Register Committee Decisions and Quality Assurance Agencies' Compliance with the ESG" (2021, EQAR aisbl/ivzw), ACQUIN recognizes that even in a context that has "a lack of legal framework to allow for the involvement of students" agency still should seek to continuously improve its consultation processes with its stakeholders.

At the present state, the student representatives are continuously involved in the design and approval of the internal procedures of the agency as well as the accreditation criteria (particularly outside of Specimen Decree). ACQUIN is currently examining the feasibility of alternative ways for the students to be usefully involved in the government of the agency (that is solely concerned with administrative and

financial aspects) as such, or a way to meaningfully and consequentially interact with the governing body.

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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.

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.

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

As suggested, a plan for the next 3 years has been developed and the production of thematic analysis is to be reflected accordingly in yearly work plans. The range of topics covers both national and international procedures conducted by the agency. The three core departments of the agency (Programme Accreditation, System Accreditation, and International Accreditation) are expected to coordinate their respective analyses. The analyses are to be conducted not on identical, but an overlapping timeframe. This timing is expected to make regular production of the thematic analyses possible. Additional resources have been planned for supporting the execution of the plan.

In addition, a thematic analysis that overarching concentrates on the national context is to be conducted in two ways. A joint initiative project of the German Accreditation Council (GAC) and the other national agencies has been initiated and to be implemented by a team, that includes representatives of all participating organizations. ACQUIN's own thematic analysis on "Deviations between Accreditation Recommendations of Expert Panels and Final Decisions of the German Accreditation Council" is being further conducted as planned and finds itself in the second phase. According to the stakeholders, the issues addressed in this analysis stays a topic of great relevance. Consequently, ACQUIN takes a special notice of the panel's recommendation regarding the scope of the analysis and shall address the implications of the finding to the external stakeholders more extensively.

As announced previously, the analysis „Quality Assurance at Universities in Kazakhstan and the Impact of ACQUIN’s External Peer Reviews“, which ACQUIN has been commended on, has been resumed to evaluate the impacts of the agency’s external evaluation activities in other countries and regions.



ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

The panel recommends the Board and the CEOs of the agency to revisit the question of the market strategy, including the overall package of services offered by ACQUIN, as well as its developmental needs, and financing in order to secure the agency's financial stability in the long run.

The fifth external evaluation review of the agency took place early after the change of the legal framework for accreditation in Germany. A certain degree of uncertainty has been intrinsic to the environment in general: associated with the consequent redefinition of roles stakeholders held and the ways in which they interacted. ACQUIN, as well as other national agencies, has been faced with a necessity to revise and update the internal processes accordingly or define new ones – a challenge that has made the last five years a time of transformation and growth.

Even though the world health crisis has had a considerable impact on the operative work of the agency, it has simultaneously triggered the process of the digitalization. Therefore, the list of the adapted processes includes: introduction of hybrid modes of work, virtual and written decision making by the bodies of the agency, virtual and hybrid visits to higher educational institutions, etc. Having gathered and analyzed the experiences of this transitional phase, the agency has decided to undertake a further major step in direction of the further digitalization of the complete agency's operation.

At the end of 2021 the preparatory phase been completed: the rationale for change, the action plan and a mechanism for monitoring the change defined. A new agency software has been introduced in 2022 to support operation of the agency and its continuous development, by strengthening ACQUIN's capability to monitor the implementation of the planned actions and systematically respond to challenges.

Since the expert group's completion of the ENQA agency review report (mid 2021) the economic development of ACQUIN has been positive further on. For the agency, no discernible decline has been observed in the national field yet, so that the market position could be well sustained. Thereby, in the medium term the current sales forecasts seem to be delightful stable. At the same time, the agency observes increases in the international sector. This development is correspondingly reflected in the financial reports that are presented annually at the agency's general assembly. As in the previous year, the revenue increased in turn and reached its highest level in five years in 2022.

Against this background, ACQUIN can confirm that currently allocated funds are sufficient for the proper functioning of the agency. In the coming years, the agency does not expect financial barriers for the implementation of the strategy plan as well as of the corresponding yearly plans.



ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

For transparency purposes, procedure guidelines should contain more specific information on all elements of the external review model.

ACQUIN should further develop their follow-up procedures more in line with the agency's improvement oriented approach and beyond checking on whether formal requirements set by the GAC or the Accreditation Commission have been fulfilled.

ACQUIN follows the recommendations of the ENQA panel and is currently examining the possibility to refine the follow-up reporting as part of the institutional accreditation procedure. The follow-up is basically conceptualized as a built-in component of the full accreditation cycle. In this capacity, the follow-up shall be more distinctly included in the revised edition of the procedure guidelines for Institutional Accreditation (to be implemented in winter semester 2023/2024).

Redefining the follow-up procedure, ACQUIN aims, first and foremost, to emphasize and enhance its development-oriented function. As a part of the preparatory phase, a survey will be distributed to the pilot institutions in order to gather stakeholder's input on how to design a useful and valuable feedback mechanism in a way that would provide clarity and transparency. After the introduction of the feedback-step, the possibility to write a follow-up report will be offered to the already accredited institutions as a useful, but a voluntary step.

The procedure guidelines and descriptions will be updated in the course of the revision and update in winter semester 2023-2024.

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

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).

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.

Inclusion of student members in all panels has been and stays a prescriptive part of the ACQUIN guidelines for all types of procedures. The participation of student representatives has been, to the best of our knowledge, an accepted and binding practice at ACQUIN for all procedures implemented both within the national context and abroad.

Following the findings and the subsequent recommendation of the ENQA-panel, ACQUIN has deemed it necessary to revisit its policy on expert selection: both to examine the possibility of broadening the definition of a student member, which would allow to account for special cases; and to simultaneously, develop a supplementary monitoring mechanism, to be able to timely identify a case deviating from the standard procedures and take an appropriate action on it.

Currently, a systematic in-depth analysis that addresses a set of questions connected to the composition of a panel in general as well as a set of specific issues connected to participation of various stakeholders in panels is being conducted. The analysis aims to identify patterns and trends, best practices as well as aspects that offer potential for future development. Additionally, findings of the analysis are expected to provide a valuable source of information for the further development and subsequent implementation of the strategy for communication with the stakeholders, which is currently being revised to be brought in accordance with the strategic plan of the agency.

The corresponding internal documentation will be updated on the basis of the findings of the analysis and relevant parts of it published on the agency's website (to be implemented in winter semester 2023/2024).

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

In its relevant procedure descriptions and the Quality Manual, ACQUIN should establish clearly in which cases conditional accreditation is given and how the term for a higher education institution to attend major deficiencies is established.

The possibility to ask and be granted a suspension of the accreditation procedure should be more clearly described and communicated to institutions.

The subject will be addressed accordingly in the course of the revision and update of the handouts, guidelines and procedural descriptions during winter semester 2023-2024.

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

The agency should take a consistent approach to drafting and publishing of all external review reports.

Despite the fact that now final decision making for procedures in Germany is vested in the GAC, ACQUIN has its own responsibilities towards publishing of reports and transparency that should be duly attended. All reports should be published fully.

ACQUIN is committed to fulfilling its responsibilities toward making full reports accessible to the academic community, external partners and all interested individuals. The approach to publishing of external evaluation reports has been addressed in the course of the review of the internal processes, that preceded the implementation of the new agency software.

The publication of the reports on the ACQUIN's own website finds itself currently in the final phase of implementation. The structure of the publishing sections of the website, as well as the presentation of the information have been revised, based on the feedback given by the ENQA-panel and the analysis of the existing practices. It is planned that the implementation phase is completed by the end of the third quarter of 2023. In the future, the prompt publication of the evaluation reports including accreditation recommendations and, where applicable, accreditation decisions will be made possible via automated processes, built-in in the new agency software.

As planned, ACQUIN has completed publishing of its external review reports (historical as well as recent) in the DEQAR database. The agency shall continue to keep the database up to date.

With great interest, ACQUIN follows the suggestion of the ENQA panel to review the existing templates for the external evaluation reports for international procedures to ensure the greater consistency in length of the reports and to explore the possibility of building in a section devoted to the description of good practices. Based on the results of the conducted analysis, the templates are being currently revised. An additional mechanism is being conceptualized and tested to ensure that all (both national and international) external evaluation reports are of comparably high quality in terms of evidence, transparency and clarity.

FINAL REMARKS

Although some of the plans and changes had unfortunately to be postponed due to the worldwide pandemic situation and its impacts, ACQUIN hopes that the report offers sufficient overview of the steps the agency has taken yet and plans to take in the future. As mentioned in the Introduction section, ACQUIN regards these activities, aimed at implementation of the recommendation of the expert panel, as a part of a larger plan of strategic development ACQUIN is undergoing. The newly introduced agency software has been conceptualized and is functioning as a multifaceted tool, supporting ACQUIN as a learning organization, giving it the opportunity to carefully monitor the progress and reflect on it, to further develop agency's approaches, policies, and procedures.

ACQUIN thanks the Board of ENQA for the opportunity to submit this progress report. ACQUIN would also like to use this occasion to express its sincere appreciation to the external review panel members for approaching their task as critical friends and for the many useful recommendations resulting from it. In order to continue this fruitful dialog with the ENQA panel, ACQUIN asked for a voluntary progress visit. The agency team is looking forward to that in 2024.