

# Targeted review of Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ Austria) against the ESG

## Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

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

### 1. Background

Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria-AQ Austria has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 2014-05-01 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).

Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria - AQ Austria has been a member of ENQA since 2012 and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership.

AQ Austria is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG (activities marked with \* are discussed in the last Substantive Change Report Decision of AQ Austria):

- Accreditation of private higher education institutions in Austria
- Accreditation of programmes at private higher education institutions in Austria
- Accreditation of universities of applied sciences
- Accreditation of programmes at universities of applied sciences in Austria
- Audit of internal quality management systems at Austrian public universities, universities of applied sciences and university colleges of teacher education
- European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes
- International Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions\*
- International Programme Accreditation\*
- Programme accreditation in Germany
- System accreditation in Germany
- Institutional accreditation in Switzerland
- Joint programme accreditation

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 (activities marked with \* are discussed in the last Substantive Change Report Decision of AQ Austria):

- Notification of foreign degree programmes in Austria\*
- Developing and carrying out review procedures for programmes for continuing education\*
- Providing information and advice in matters related to the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal competences\*
- NQF Service Point\*
- Consultancy and other evaluation activities\*

## **2. Purpose and scope of the targeted review**

This review will evaluate the extent to which AQ Austria 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 AQ Austria'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. Not applicable

B) Standards 2.1 to 2.7 for the following activities: not applicable.

C) Standards affected by other types of substantive changes:

#### **a. System accreditation and programme accreditation in Germany**

- ESG 2.3: considering the interaction between GAC and AQ Austria, and their respective roles in the follow-up processes;
- ESG 2.5: addressing whether the new arrangements had any impact on the consistency of applying the accreditation criteria.
- ESG 2.6: analysing how AQ Austria ensures that its final reports are also published if the institution does not forward the report to GAC.

#### **b. International accreditation of higher education institutions and degree programmes**

- ESG 2.2: reflecting upon the implemented changes in procedural rules and assessment criteria for the institutional level;
- ESG 2.3: considering how does the agency ensures the implementation of the accreditation procedure in case of a combined institutional and programme level accreditation and how does the agency ensure a consistent follow-up, verifying the implementation of any conditions imposed with or attached to its decisions;

- ESG 2.5: consider the consistency of applying the accreditation decision at the level of higher education institutions.
- c. Other changes
- ESG 3.1: considering how the agency clearly separates between its activities that are within and outside the scope of the ESG, in particular considering the agency's newly introduced procedures i.e. 'review procedures for programmes for continuing education' as well as the agency's [other tailored evaluation activities](#) concerned with teaching and learning in higher education (please see further Annex 2 of EQAR's Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG).<sup>1</sup>

D) ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance;

E) Selected enhancement area: ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

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, AQ Austria and ENQA;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by ENQA;
- Self-assessment by AQ Austria including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to AQ Austria;
- 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.

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<sup>1</sup> See further Annex 2 of EQAR's Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG  
[https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2020/09/RC\\_12\\_1\\_UseAndInterpretationOfTheESG\\_v3\\_0.pdf](https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2020/09/RC_12_1_UseAndInterpretationOfTheESG_v3_0.pdf)

### **3.1 Independence of the review coordinator**

The coordinator has not provided remunerated (e.g. consultancy) or unremunerated services to AQ Austria during the past 5 years, and conversely AQ Austria 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 AQ Austria, including the preparation of a self-assessment report**

AQ Austria 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 AQ Austria 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 AQ Austria 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 EQAR<sup>2</sup>.

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.

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 AQ Austria 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 AQ Austria 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 will sign off on the final version of the external review report. The Coordinator will provide to AQ Austria the [Declaration of Honour](#) together with the final report.

## **4. Publication and use of the report**

AQ Austria 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)

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2 See here: <https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/UseAndInterpretationOfTheESGv2.0-2015.pdf>

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 June/July 2024. 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 2023
Appointment of review panel members	June 2023
Self-assessment report (SAR) completed by AQ Austria	September 2023
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	Early October 2023
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	October 2023
Briefing of review panel members	December 2023

Review panel site visit	February 2024
Submission of the draft review report to ENQA Review Coordinator	March/early April 2024
Factual check of the review report by the AQ Austria	April 2024
Statement of AQ Austria to review panel (if applicable)	April 2024
Submission of review report to ENQA	May 2024
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	June 2024
EQAR Register Committee meeting and decision on the application by AQ Austria	June-July 2024
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	September 2024