



Agency for  
Quality Assurance  
and Accreditation  
Austria

# International Accreditation of Bachelor, Master and PhD Programmes

## Guideline

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# 1 Objective and outcome

By granting international accreditation to study programmes AQ Austria confirms their compliance with European quality standards. These standards are derived from the principles laid down in the Bologna Process and the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG).

If a higher education institution proves that the study programme to be examined complies with AQ Austria's standards, it will be accredited and, consequently, be awarded the certificate of AQ Austria.

The standards are in line with the requirements for the accreditation of study programmes of Austrian higher education institutions. Receiving international accreditation in accordance with this Guideline, however, does not entail the statutory recognition of study programmes in Austria's higher education system. To achieve such statutory recognition, the regulations issued by AQ Austria for the accreditation of study programmes at universities of applied sciences and private universities are relevant.

International accreditation is valid for a period of six years. Granting accreditation may be contingent on certain conditions whose fulfilment must be documented within nine months.

# 2 Standards

AQ Austria's quality requirements are defined by six standards for the design and implementation of Bachelor, Master and PhD programmes.

- Standard 1 Study programme and programme management
- Standard 2 Staff
- Standard 3 Quality assurance
- Standard 4 Funding and infrastructure
- Standard 5 Research and development and appreciation of the arts
- Standard 6 National and international co-operations

It has to be proven that every standard is met in accordance with the respective definition in order for the study programme to be internationally accredited.

## Standard 1

### Study programme and programme management

- 1.1 The study programme is aligned with the objectives of the institution and is logically connected with its strategies and goals.
- 1.2 The qualification objectives of the study programme (learning outcomes of the study programme) have been clearly defined and meet the technical, scientific and professional requirements and are in accordance with the respective levels of the qualification framework of the European Higher Education Area.
- 1.3 The contents, structure and scope of and teaching methods applied to the curriculum and the modules meet the technical, scientific and professional requirements and are suited to achieve the intended learning outcomes.
- 1.4 The application of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is appropriate and plausible. It meets the recommendations of the European Commission<sup>1</sup>.
- 1.5 The study programme is structured consistently with regard to formulated qualification objectives.
- 1.6 The students' workload required for the study programme is devised in a way so as to allow them to reach the aspired qualification objectives in the study period specified.
- 1.7 The examination methods are suitable to assess whether the defined learning outcomes have been achieved.
- 1.8 Issuance of a diploma supplement is guaranteed.
- 1.9 Admission requirements for the study programme are clearly defined, meet the statutory requirements and contribute to achieving the educational goals of the study programme. Recognition rules for external achievements pursuant to the Lisbon Recognition Convention<sup>2</sup> and achievements outside of higher education institutions have been defined.
- 1.10 If e-learning, blended learning and distance learning are part of the programme, suitable didactic, technical, organisational and financial preconditions have been created to ensure the achievement of the study programme's qualification objectives.
- 1.11 *If applicable:* The organisation of the study programme and the workload of a part-time study programme can be reconciled with a regular job.
- 1.12 *If applicable:* Placements form an educationally relevant part of the curriculum. The job profile, the selection, support and assessment of placements contribute to achieving the study programme's qualification objectives.
- 1.13 *If applicable:* The following additional criteria shall apply to the accreditation of PhD programmes:
  - 1.13.1 A well-established research environment is in place at the institution, which ensures close contact between doctoral students and scientific research staff and/or artistic staff as well as the opportunity for intra-university and non-university co-operation.

<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ects/guide\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ects/guide_en.pdf) (ECTS Users' Guide)

<sup>2</sup> Applicable to states that have ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention and where it has come into force. See: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/ChercheSig.asp?NT=165&CM=1&DF=07/10/2009&CL=ENG>

- 1.13.2 For PhD programmes, the number of permanent scientific and/or artistic staff possessing the relevant qualifications, having carried out recognised research activities and having gained experience in tutoring doctoral students is sufficient. In any case, a teaching qualification (*venia docendi*) in the scientific or artistic subject is required for independently tutoring doctoral students.
- 1.13.3 In the case of interdisciplinary PhD programmes, all subjects involved are covered by scientific and/or artistic staff possessing sufficient qualifications.
- 1.13.4 In addition to any other teaching, research and administration work, the permanent scientific and/or artistic staff is able to handle the teaching and tutoring responsibilities within the scope of PhD programme, in accordance with the number of doctoral students.
- 1.14 *If applicable:* The following additional criteria shall apply to the accreditation of Joint Programmes:
  - 1.14.1 The partner institutions are recognised higher education institutions.
  - 1.14.2 The study programme has been accredited, if so required, in accordance with the national laws and regulations applicable in the partner institutions' countries, or a parallel or joint accreditation procedure is underway.
  - 1.14.3 In a co-operation agreement, the institutions involved have specified the following aspects as a minimum:
    - academic performance to be rendered by the students at the respective institutions;
    - admission and selection procedures;
    - determination of the applicable study and examination regulation(s);
    - automatic and full recognition of examinations and scientific papers produced at the institutions involved;
    - academic degree and specification of how and by whom academic degrees will be awarded;
    - organisational rules and administrative accountability.

## Standard 2 Staff

- 2.1 A sufficient number of scientific or artistic teaching and research staff is available for the study programme, who are scientifically qualified, have adequate vocational experience and are qualified in terms of their teaching methods.
- 2.2 The composition of the faculty meets the requirements of a profound scientific and artistic education and ensures adequate student support.
- 2.3 Teaching and research staff have access to human resource development and further education measures.

## Standard 3 Quality assurance

- 3.1 The study programme is supported by the institution's quality management system.
- 3.2 The study programme is part of a regular quality assurance and enhancement process which takes into account the curriculum, the study conditions and the

programme organisation, and which involves all relevant groups as well as external experts.

- 3.3 The participation of students in reflections on the study programme, the study conditions and the programme organisation has been institutionalised.

## Standard 4

### Funding and infrastructure

- 4.1 Transparent documentation of the funding of the study programme is available.
- 4.2 Adequate rooms and technical facilities required for the study programme are available.

## Standard 5

### Research and development and appreciation of the arts

- 5.1 The objectives and perspectives for research and development defined for the study programme are consistent with the strategic orientation of the institution.
- 5.2 The scientific and/or artistic staff is involved in the institution's research activities and/or activities regarding the development and appreciation of the arts. The interaction between research and teaching is ensured.
- 5.3 To the extent required by the type of study programme, students will be integrated into research projects and/or projects regarding the development and appreciation of the arts.
- 5.4 The (planned) organisational and structural framework conditions are sufficient and suitable to implement the scheduled research activities and/or activities regarding the development and appreciation of the arts.

## Standard 6

### National and international co-operation

- 6.1 In line with the study programme's profile, national and/or international co-operation projects with higher education institutions or institutions outside the higher education sector have been established.
- 6.2 The co-operation projects encourage and support the advancement of the study programme and the mobility of students and staff.

## 3 Procedure

### 3.1 Self-documentation

The higher education institution can apply for accreditation of a newly established or already existing study programme. In this context, it shall prepare a self-documentation that gives evidence of its compliance with the accreditation standards.

If accreditation of several study programmes is applied for at the same time, AQ Austria can handle them in a joint procedure if this is reasonable, in particular considering the relatedness of the study programmes.

### 3.2 Peers

When selecting peers, AQ Austria takes care that the following competences are covered by the group of peers, taking into account the requirements on a case-by-case basis:

- proven scientific qualification in the relevant discipline;
- knowledge of relevant professional fields based on pertinent vocational activities;
- teaching experience as well as experience in the development, implementation and evaluation of curricula;
- recent student experience based on pertinent studies.

AQ Austria takes care that the composition of the group of peers is diverse and that its gender ratio is balanced.

AQ Austria allows the higher education institution an adequate period of time for raising objections against peers. The higher education institution does not have the right to propose peers. AQ Austria will examine any objections and, if necessary, it will appoint a new peer.

Peers must be independent and unbiased. They shall declare in writing that there are no grounds for prejudice and that they will keep all facts they become aware of in relation with their work as peers confidential.

### 3.3 Site visit

The evaluation is combined with a site visit of the peers to the higher education institution which is organised and accompanied by the Management Office of AQ Austria. Depending on the individual procedure, the site visit may take one to three days. The Management Office shall thoroughly prepare the peers for the site visit.

The following principles shall apply to the organisation and agenda of the site visit:

- Peers, members of the Management Office as well as representatives of the higher education institution participate in the site visit.
- The peers name those groups with which they intend to have talks. The higher education institution selects suitable persons for each group and ensures that knowledgeable persons are available for all subject areas.
- The student representatives are selected by the students' council.
- As a rule, peers also inspect the facilities and the infrastructure of the higher education institution.

The procedure is co-ordinated with the higher education institution and shall ensure that the individual groups are able to present their positions in an independent and autonomous fashion.

### 3.4 Peers' report

The peers draw up a joint report, including statements on the study programme and an assessment on whether the standards are categorised as "not met", "partially met" or "met".

The joint peers' report is drawn up respecting the diversity of peers' opinions, while at the same time aiming at a consensus on a basis that is as broad as possible. If diverging peers' opinions cannot be eliminated, they will be expressed in the report.

If several study programmes are evaluated in a joint procedure, the assessment on whether standards are met will be carried out separately for each study programme.

The preliminary peers' report is handed over to the higher education institution, which gets the opportunity to point out any potential factual or formal errors. The peers will take the higher education institution's comments into account for their final version of the report. The higher education institution will comment on the contents of the final report.

### 3.5 Accreditation decision

The Board of AQ Austria will make a decision on accreditation based on the final version of the peers' report and on the higher education institution's comment on its contents.

Accreditation can be granted without or with conditions and is limited to a six-year period.

If a standard has been assessed as "partially met", this means that deficiencies were detected that will lead to conditions. If accreditation is granted subject to conditions, their fulfilment must be documented in writing within nine months. As a rule, one peer will be involved in examining whether the conditions are fulfilled.

Accreditation will be denied if at least one standard has been assessed as "not met".

### 3.6 Publication of the findings of the procedure

After the procedure has been completed, AQ Austria will publish a report on the findings of the accreditation procedure, which includes the peers' report, the higher education institution's comment, the decision of the Board including the reasons for the decision as well as any conditions. This report on the findings will be published on the AQ Austria website. Any personal data, funding sources and business or trade secrets are exempt from publication.

### 3.7 Changes in the study programme

If the higher education institution changes an accredited study programme substantially and intends to keep its accreditation, it shall inform AQ Austria about these changes. The following changes require AQ Austria's approval: substantial deviations from the standards to be met; holding company; name of the higher education institution; name of the study programme; qualification objective and profile of the study programme; duration and scope of the study programme; wording of the academic degrees to be awarded; location/s of the higher education institution.

The higher education institution shall apply for approval of the changes and submit all data and documents required to check whether the changes are suitable to meet AQ Austria's standards. If necessary, AQ Austria will involve a peer in checking the changes and will decide whether the accreditation standards are met.