External review of the German Accreditation Council (GAC) by ENQA

Annex I:
TRIPARTITE TERMS OF REFERENCE BETWEEN THE GAC, ENQA AND EQAR

June 2026

1. Background and context

The German Accreditation Council (GAC) was originally set up by the North Rhine-Westphalian Law which established the "Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany" in February 2005. When the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty came into force on 1 January 2018, the name of the foundation was changed to "Foundation Accreditation Council". In international contexts, the foundation is referred to as the German Accreditation Council and legally it is a foundation of public law. The GAC's mission statement, as set out on its website is:

"The German Accreditation Council is a joint institution of the states for external quality assurance of teaching and learning in Germany. It fulfils the tasks assigned to it in the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty and actively participates in the design and further development of goals and requirements of the accreditation system in Germany.

- *The German Accreditation Council is committed to academic freedom and autonomy of higher education institutions and sees the primary responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning at higher education institutions.*
- *It understands accreditation as a regular, external quality assurance process, which is carried out as a scientifically guided procedure with peer review and the participation of the relevant stakeholders.*
- *It ensures that the accreditation procedures are carried out quickly, reliably, on time and transparently from the application to the decision of the Accreditation Council. In particular, the administrative work involved in submitting applications should be kept to a minimum for higher education institutions and agencies.*
- *It acts in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty as well as its implementation through corresponding decrees of the Länder.*
- *It ensures that accreditation decisions are taken independently of third parties and that potential conflicts of interest are prevented by means of appropriate measures.*
- *It promotes the dialogue between all actors involved in the accreditation system and works towards a trustful cooperation of all represented stakeholders.*
- *It reflects on the implementation of its tasks and regularly evaluates the feedback from higher education institutions and agencies in order to use the results for an experience-based further development of the quality assurance system and the application procedures in accordance with its legal mandate".*

The tasks of the foundation are laid down in the Interstate Treaty on the organization of a joint accreditation system to ensure the quality of teaching and learning at German higher education institutions which was agreed upon by the 16 states in 2017. A major change at that point was that the GAC, as the central decision-making body of the foundation, was given the task of deciding on the accreditation of study programmes (programme accreditation) and the accreditation of quality management systems (system accreditation) on the basis of experts' reports produced as part of the procedures operated by the German accreditation agencies.

The GAC assumes its overall responsibility for the accreditation system by ensuring the consistency and coherence of its accreditation decisions, supporting the states in the further development of the German quality management system, promoting international cooperation in the field of accreditation and quality assurance and thus contributing to the realisation of a common European Higher Education Area.

According to Interstate Treaty, GAC wishes to be reviewed as an organisation ("in particular with respect to the organisational structure and work of the foundation"), and on the other hand the review should consider that GAC is integrated in an accreditation system, consisting also of the 16 German States laying down the criteria for accreditation, and of the agencies who provide the reports GAC decides upon.

The GAC has been a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since July 2022 and is applying for ENQA renewal of membership.

The GAC has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since June 2022 and is applying for the renewal of EQAR registration.

2. Purpose and scope of the review

This review will evaluate the extent to which the GAC (the agency) complies with each of the standards of Parts 2 and 3 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) and support the agency in its efforts to continually review and enhance its work. Such an external review is a requirement for agencies wishing to apply for ENQA membership and/or for EQAR registration.

2.1 Activities of the agency within the scope of the ESG

To apply for ENQA membership and EQAR registration, this review will analyse all of the agency's activities that fall within the scope of the ESG, e.g., reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditations of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). All activities are reviewed irrespective of geographic scope (within or outside the EHEA) or whether they are obligatory or voluntary in nature.

The following activities of the agency fall within the scope of the ESG and must be addressed in the external review:

(1) Programme accreditation in Germany

- Programme accreditation in accordance with the rules of the GAC (awarding the GAC's seal)

(2) System accreditation in Germany

- System accreditation in accordance with the rules of the GAC (awarding the GAC's seal)

(3) Alternative procedures accreditation

- Accreditation of alternative procedures to replace programme or system accreditation in accordance with the GAC's rules (awarding the GAC's seal)

(4) Equivalency assessment (German Jordanian University)

- Assessment whether the study programmes of the German Jordanian University meet the criteria of the Germany's specimen decree.

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

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2.2 Other matters relevant to the agency's application for renewal of registration on EQAR

Considering the renewal of GAC's application to EQAR, the self-evaluation report and the external review report are expected to give specific attention to the issues where the Register Committee concluded in its last decision that the agency complied only partially with the ESG, specifically: ESG 2.5 and ESG 3.1), and to the issues outlined in the substantive change report of 2026-05-20.

In case of any substantive changes taking place following confirmation of the Terms of Reference and the review i.e. including introduction or change in the activities within and outside of the scope of the ESG, the agency is expected to inform EQAR at the earliest convenience.

3. The review process

The review will be conducted following the methodology of ENQA Agency Reviews for **full reviews**. The process is designed in line with the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and the requirements of the *EQAR Procedures for Applications*.

The review process consists of the following steps:

- Formulation of, and agreement on the Terms of Reference for the review between the GAC, ENQA and EQAR (including publishing of the Terms of Reference on ENQA's website[1]);
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by ENQA;
- Notification of EQAR about the appointed panel;
- Self-assessment by the agency, including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit of the agency by the review panel;
- Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny and validation of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee (ARC);
- Publication of the final review report;
- Follow-up on the panel's recommendations to the agency, including a voluntary progress visit.

[1] The agency is encouraged to publish the ToR on its website as well.

Following the conclusion of the review process, the agency may use the review report to apply for ENQA membership, register on EQAR, or for other purposes (see section 4 below).

3.1 Independence of the review coordinator

The review coordinator follows EQAR's policy on the Eligibility of Review Coordinators and Panels[2].

3.2 Nomination and appointment of the review panel

The review panel consists of four members: one or two quality assurance experts (at least one of which is currently employed by an ENQA member agency), an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member, and potentially a labour market representative (if requested). One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. For ENQA Agency Reviews 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 for the Applied Sciences 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. An additional panel member may be included in the panel at the request of the agency. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

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.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers, whereas current members of ARC are eligible to serve as reviewers. At least three panel members come from outside the national system of the agency under review (if relevant).

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.

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

The agency is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and must adhere to the following guidance:

- Self-assessment is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The related report follows ENQA Guide of content for the self-assessment report (SAR) and is expected to contain:

[2] Available here: https://www.eqar.eu/about/official-documents/#eligibility-of-review-coordinators-and-panels

    - A description of the self-assessment process and preparation of the SAR, including information on whether any external consultants were engaged during the self-assessment;
    - A description of the higher education system and quality assurance of higher education in the context of the agency (including changes since the previous review, where relevant);
    - A description of the agency's history, profile, and structure;
    - A description of the agency's functions and activities, including the external quality assurance activities and cross-border external quality assurance activities (if applicable), as well as other international activities;
    - Sections that address the agency's compliance with each standard of Parts 2 and 3 separately for every activity. For each ESG, the text should include self-reflection on the presented evidence and the effectiveness of the agency's approach, covering both the standard and, where appropriate, the corresponding guidelines. If there were recommendations from the previous review (from the panel, ENQA Agency Review Committee, ENQA Board, EQAR Register Committee), these should also be included, along with an explanation of how they have been addressed (applicable for second and subsequent reviews only);
    - A SWOT analysis; and
    - Key challenges and areas for further development.
- The report is well-structured, concise, and comprehensive. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which the agency performs its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ESG.

It is recommended that the SAR does not exceed 60 pages (excluding annexes). The agency may enclose the most crucial documentation it believes may help the panel in its analysis of the report as annexes to the report, or links in footnotes. The SAR, including links and annexes, should be in English and made easily available to the panel.

Agencies should also refer to the ENQA policy on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in agency reviews (see Annex 5 of the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews), which sets out the principles and safeguards for responsible use of AI within the review process.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the review coordinator for screening at least three months before the visit. The review coordinator shall carry out screening in two weeks. The purpose of a screening is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The review coordinator will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews*, is present. If the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, ENQA 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. ENQA will publish the SAR on its website as well.

3.4 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel is expected to provide a draft site visit programme to the agency two weeks after receiving the self-assessment report.. The programme is to include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is usually 2,5 days. The agency and the panel are recommended to agree on the final version of the programme at the latest one week before the site visit.

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

In advance of the site visit (ideally 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.

The review panel will be assisted by the ENQA review coordinator during the site visit. The review coordinator will act as the panel's chief liaison with the agency, monitor the integrity of the review process and its consistency, and ensure that ENQA's overall expectations of the review are considered and met.

The site visit will close with a final debriefing meeting in which the panel outlines its general impressions and findings without providing judgements on the agency's ESG compliance. The panel will not comment on whether or not the agency would be granted/reconfirmed membership with ENQA or registration on EQAR.

3.5 Preparation, completion and publishing of the review report

Based on the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the rest of the review panel. The report will follow the purpose and scope of the review as defined under section 2. It will also provide a clear rationale for the panel's findings concerning each standard of Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should also bear in mind *EQAR's Policy on Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies*[3] to ensure that the report contains sufficient information for the Register Committee to consider the agency's application for registration on EQAR.

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA review coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language, and it will then be submitted to the agency – usually within 8 weeks of the site visit – for comment on factual accuracy and grave misunderstandings only. The agency will be given two weeks to do this and should not submit any additional material or documentation at this stage. Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the agency's feedback on possible factual errors and finalise and submit the review report to ENQA.

The report should be finalised within three months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 40-60 pages in length (excluding annexes). The review report is considered final after validation by the ARC. Before that, the report may not be used or relied upon by the agency, the panel, or any third party and may not be disclosed without ENQA's prior written consent. The validation of the report is independent of the decision on EQAR registration or ENQA membership.

[3] Available at: https://www.eqar.eu/about/official-documents/#use-and-interpretation-of-the-esg

During the validation process, the ARC may request further clarification from the review panel, coordinator, or the agency. In exceptional and well-justified cases, such as due to the need to clarify the existing evidence as listed in the review report, this information may be gathered through an additional online visit to the agency, conducted by the review chair and secretary. The ARC may request amendments to the review report, before proceeding with the validation. Reports not validated are deferred to a subsequent ARC meeting.

Once the review report is validated, the ARC issues a statement outlining its decision. This statement includes a record of any requested changes to the review report and any standards on which the ARC disagrees with the panel's compliance judgments on individual ESG standards. The ARC statement and the final report are shared with the agency and published on the ENQA website. The review report will be published on ENQA website regardless of the review outcome.

4. Use of the report

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.

The report is used as a basis for the Register Committee's analysis and decision on the agency's registration on EQAR. 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. The review process is thus designed to serve two purposes.

For the purposes of EQAR registration, the agency will submit the review report (once validated by the ARC) to EQAR via email before the expiry of the agency's registration on EQAR. The agency should also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), a Declaration of Honour, provided by the review coordinator, and any other documents that may be relevant for the application (i.e., annexes, statement to the review report, updates). EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting as stipulated in the indicative review schedule below and before the decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is requested to consult the document Pathways to ENQA Membership[4], which explains the application procedure in detail. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

5. The follow-up process

As part of the review's follow-up activities, the agency commits to react on the review recommendations and submit a follow-up report to ENQA within two years of the validation of the final external review report. The report should also highlight other substantive changes and developments of the agency's external quality assurance activities and processes. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website.

The follow-up report may be complemented by an optional progress visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). The visit takes place 2–

[4] Available at: https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/Pathways-for-ENQA-membership-2025_final.pdf

3 years after the final external review report is validated, and shortly after the follow-up report has been submitted. The purpose of the progress visit is not to assess ESG compliance or review how the agency has responded to previous recommendations. Instead, it is designed to facilitate a strategic, enhancement-oriented dialogue that might be difficult to truly integrate in the more compliance-focused site visit. The agency is required to confirm to ENQA whether it wishes to have a progress visit no later than 2.5 years after the validation of the external review report.

6. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	March 2026
Appointment of review panel members	April 2026
Self-assessment completed	31st July 2026
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	August 2026 (first week)
Preparation of the site visit schedule and indicative timetable	September 2026
Briefing of review panel members	October 2026
Review panel site visit	December 2026
Draft of review report and its submission to ENQA Review Coordinator for verification of its compliance with the Guidelines	February 2027
Draft of review report to be sent for a factual check to the agency	End February 2027
Agency's feedback on the factual accuracy of the draft report	March 2027
Submission of the final report to ENQA	March 2027
Validation of the review report by the ARC and publication of the report	April 2027
EQAR Register Committee meeting and initial consideration	June/July 2027
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	September 2027