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Dublin, 8 June 2017

Subject: ASIIN's appeal to ENQA and decision on ASIIN's membership in ENQA

Dear Iring,

I am writing to inform you of the outcome of the ENQA Board's discussion of 4 May 2017 regarding the appeal ASIIN lodged against the ENQA Board's decision of 30 November 2016 to designate ASIIN as a Member under review for a period of two years with the need to undergo a new (partial) review process at the end of this period, or sooner, if ASIIN wishes.

On 7 February 2017, ASIIN submitted an appeal to the ENQA Board against the Board's decision. In a letter of 6 March 2017 the President of ENQA informed the ENQA Appeals and Complaints Committee (hereafter: ACC) of the appeal, requesting the ACC to review the Board's decision. Enclosed in the President's letter to the ACC were:

- The ENQA Board's decision letter to ASIIN dated 7 December 2016
- ASIIN's letter of appeal dated 7 February 2017
- The scrutiny report of ENQA's review committee
- The expert panel's review report

The ACC gave their statement to the ENQA Board on 6 April 2017 in which the committee recommends the Board to reconfirm ASIIN's membership in ENQA, i.e. overturn its decision to designate ASIIN Member under review.

Following this, the Board took a decision at its meeting on 4 May 2017, in which it follows the statement of the ACC and reconfirms ASIIN's membership in ENQA for five years from the initial decision taken on 30 November 2016. A follow-up report is expected in two years' from this date, i.e. by November 2018. Please find the summary of the ACC's findings as an appendix to this letter. This letter will be published on the ENQA website together with the final review report as well as the Board's initial decision.

For any questions, do not hesitate to be in touch with the ENQA Secretariat.

Yours sincerely,



Padraig Walsh
President of ENQA

Annex 1 - Summary of findings

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The ACC concluded that the decision of the ENQA Board should be overturned in the context of evidence provided and evaluated against the appropriate criteria, standards and guidelines (ESG):

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

The Board's statement

'The Board's concern is that ASIIN does not regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their own external quality assurance activities that would feed back to the stakeholders and society, and that would also strengthen the internal quality assurance of the agency.'

Evaluation report (p 41)

- The report states that no recommendation was made in the previous evaluation.
- The report identifies two main 'mechanisms' for summing up and sharing findings from quality assurance activities: (a) ASIIN Newsletter and (b) ASIIN's annual and committee meetings.
- The report makes the following comments:
 - The Newsletter has not developed this function very much. Plans exist for the future.
 - Annual open meetings concentrate (like the newsletter) on procedural and methodological matters related to the evaluations, not on thematic analysis of findings.
 - ASIIN refers to their participation in bringing about thematic analyses through participation in third parties and Accreditation Council activities.
- Finding: This function is not really developed and ASIIN is only partially compliant.

ENQA Review Committee

The committee unanimously endorse the expert review team's judgement: partially compliant.

ASIIN's appeal response

1. Refers to this standard as "new".
2. Refers to systematic contact with experts and stakeholders about the conduct of evaluations.

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3. Refers to their ‘thorough list of standard requirements and recommendations’ from their numerous accreditation procedures. Claims that there will be a joint review (with GAC) to analyse the material.
 4. Refers to published thematic newsletters.

ACC’s assessment

Concerning ASIIN’s points in their appeal letter, we observe that

- (Ref. 1 above): The standard is not new, but it was changed in the recent overhaul of ESG (2015) to become more demanding. ASIIN’s self-evaluation was submitted about the same time as the change was made. Follow up on the standard prior to this was less demanding and the consequences less.
- (Ref. 2 above): The point is rather irrelevant, as is also pointed out by the expert review team. It relates to method and procedure, not analysis of findings. It may however be considered relevant in relation to the standard’s reference to strengthening the internal quality assurance of the agency.
- (Ref. 3 above): This could be relevant, as the list of ‘standard requirements and recommendations’ would provide an interesting data source for analysis. But as long as it does not emerge from the presented evidence that such analysis is actually carried out, the point is mainly lost. (The plan to analyse the material is relevant, but plans for the future cannot count much in an evaluation. It indicates good intentions, though.)

It may be seen as a mitigating factor that the standard was recently changed in emphasis and application, and ASIIN do seem to be building an information bank of experiences gained from their many QA activities. They also have certain mechanisms in place to share their experiences with relevant stakeholders. Still, the agency is far from producing any kind of systematic reporting of analyses, so it is our assessment that ASIIN is clearly weaker on this point than the standard expects.

It is the ACC’s assessment that ASIIN is not more than *partially* compliant.

ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts

The Board’s statement

‘The Board is especially concerned that student representatives are not involved in all quality assurance procedures.’

Evaluation Report (pp 22-26)

- The report refers to one recommendation from the previous evaluation about communicating publicly that a foreign expert is always involved. There is no

indication in the review team's report that this recommendation has not been followed up.

- The report also says that 'the selection criteria and procedures appear to be fundamentally suited to recruiting experts with the required skills and competences. However, measures should be taken to improve the professional diversity and other differences in the expert group.'
- A main point of criticism concerns a formulation in ASIIN's criteria documents that all interest groups are (only) "usually" expected to be represented in expert review teams. Mention is made of an instance from Slovenia, where there was no student member, and another where there was no representative of professional practice in the expert review team.
- It is also the review team's view that some bundle evaluation have had less experts and a much more narrow range of competences in the composition of the expert groups.
- ASIIN is given credit by the review team for examples of good practice.
- The review team finds ASIIN to be partially compliant on this standard.

ENQA Review Committee

- Unanimously endorses the review team's assessments and conclusion: partially compliant.

ASIIN's appeal response

- ASIIN claims that 'student representatives have been and are involved in all quality assurance procedures in ASIIN since its very beginning.' Also, that 'all this is laid down in our statutes.'
- ASIIN claims that it is 'one of the only agencies in ENQA and within Germany, which for a long time has been funding on a completely voluntary basis our national student accreditation organisation'. Training courses are provided and the agency organises a pool of student experts for participation in the evaluation review teams.
- However, as a matter of policy, student experts in international accreditations are recruited in the country where the accreditation is carried out. According to the agency, this can be difficult in some countries, but they usually succeed. In this context, the agency argues, the review team's reference to one single case out of hundreds gives a wrong picture of the agency's practice: 'The involvement of student representatives in all panel groups thus is surely not a structural issue.'
- ASIIN states that the use of the word 'usually' occurs in the criteria document only in order to apply in cases 'where in the very last minute a panel member has to cancel participation. The panel member will then be involved in all subsequent steps.'

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- Further, ASIIN claim that: ‘as opposed to what is written in the external report, students in the past also have been a part of the ASIIN selection committee for peers.’ They admit that ‘in spite of the fact that students thus on a factual basis had been involved in the selection of our peer groups (including the obligatory student peer) it is true to state that this was not explicitly anchored in the statutes of the commission ASIIN. To also satisfy this from a formal point of view, the ASIIN Accreditation Commission has changed this last year by rephrasing its statutes.’

ACC’s assessment

The ACC finds that the expert review team offers very sensible assessments of weaker points in ASIIN’s practice on implementation. For instance, the process of appointment by the head office has so far not been formalised or made transparent. Also, mandatory requirements for the training of expert groups are not documented. Other weaker points (referred to above: consistency; professional diversity and number of experts in the pool) are relevant, but maybe more relevant in a local disciplinary context from the perspective of the German Accreditation Council. However, although the review team’s points stand well as recommendations for general improvements, their reasons for passing a “verdict” of partially compliant are well argued against by ASIIN in their appeal letter and the evidence in the report.

The ACC considers it would be unfair to penalise the agency because of a single case of non-conformance (which seems to be the main issue here), while it seems well documented that ASIIN has a good general track record on implementation of this standard. They have demonstrated that student (and other stakeholder) involvement is a regular and systematic practice. They have actually included all of the members of the panel as proposed by the standard.

Based on the information provided to us, the ACC would consider ASIIN’s performance on this standard to be *substantially* compliant, thus diverging from the review team’s conclusion.

ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

The Board’s statement

‘The Board considers that the appeals procedure needs further refining as recommended by the Panel.’

Evaluation report (pp 29-32)

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- The review team states that there was no recommendation concerning this standard in the previous evaluation.
 - The review team states that ‘for accreditation purposes, the appeals procedure is under binding regulations and published’, i. e. in order.
 - The review team finds weaknesses in the area of certifying modules and courses, where the procedures are ‘not regulated so as to be sufficiently binding.’
 - The review team finds that ‘the agency’s practice does not correspond to ESG standard 2.7 for the area of evaluations’ (with no formal decisions.), where there is no appeal procedure indicated. This may particularly present problems in international evaluations.
 - The review team’s all-round assessment on this standard is partially compliant.

ENQA review committee

Follows the reasoning and assessment of the review team: partially compliant.

ASIIN’s appeal response

ASIIN state that: ‘Following up on the peers’ recommendations, we have clarified on our website the means to formally launch a complaint for program and institutional accreditations, certification procedures and type 1-procedures. More specifically, the procedures and steps for complaints in certification procedures but also in evaluation type-1 procedures are now completely aligned to those of accreditation procedures.’

ACC’s assessment

Although it is not normal procedure to take into account improvements that have been implemented after the evaluation, there may be reasons here to look pragmatically at indicated weaknesses that demonstrably have been repaired in the meantime.

Based on the review team’s evidence – as it was then – the ACC is uncertain about the strictness of the verdict. Maybe ‘partially compliant’ is the right verdict, since we are dealing here with certain shortcomings in securing formal rights that an evaluated party must have. The standard states that ‘complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of the external quality assurance processes’. ENQA defines ‘quality assurance’ as including both such processes as are carried out for control purposes, and those that merely have a developmental aim.

On the other hand, ASIIN’s practice is considered to be fully aligned with the standard in the majority of (and main) cases of *accreditation*, where the outcome of the process may have formal consequences for the evaluated party. The question then is how serious it is not to have an explicit complaints procedure in place for evaluation processes without such formal consequences; and secondly, whether ASIIN’s ‘correction’ of this weakness after the evaluation should be considered at all. The ACC is a little bit sensitive about undue

“legalism” being possibly implied in an understanding of the ESG, where a formal appeals procedure is considered *necessary* even for evaluations/consultations without formal outcomes. There is always right of reply and the opportunity to challenge the assessments of external experts in public debate.

The ACC have been in doubt concerning the proper assessment for ASIIN’s performance on this standard. However, the ACC finds in the end that the assessment should be *substantially compliant*, also based upon whether any more can be done by ASIIN in the context of satisfying this standard (which is a technical point), now that it has been dealt with by the Agency.