Thematic Analysis "International Accreditation in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia"

Rainer Arnold, June 2020

Introduction

ASIIN e. V. was founded in 1999 as a non-profit association for the accreditation of study programmes in engineering, computer science, natural sciences and mathematics. Since that time, ASIIN has been conducting accreditation procedures as an international quality assurance agency in Germany and abroad. Its national and international objectives are to ensure and strengthen the quality of academic education and to create transparency about the quality achieved in higher education in order to promote academic and professional mobility. So far, ASIIN has assessed, next to its around 5000 accreditations of German study programs, more than 700 degree programmes in 35 different countries internationally. During the course of an ASIIN accreditation procedure, study programmes are assessed based on the ASIIN criteria, developed for 14 different STEM disciplines in cooperation with a "grand alliance" of German stakeholders from academia, industry and technical-scientific organizations. Moreover, universities can also decide to be assessed for one of ASIIN´s European subject-specific quality labels: In addition to its seal, ASIIN is authorized by the European Network for Engineering Accreditation (ENAEE) to award the EUR-ACE®-Label for engineering programmes, the Eurobachelor®/Euromaster®-Label on behalf of the European Chemistry Thematic Network (ECTN) for chemistry programmes, the Euro-Inf®-Label for computer science programmes administered by the European Quality Assurance Network for Informatics Education, the AMSE (Alliance of Medical Schools in Europe) label for medical programmes as well as the EQAS label for programmes in food science and technology on behalf of the International Food Association ISEKI. The award of these labels demonstrates the compatibility of the respective degree programme with internationally accepted quality standards and at the same time promotes the mobility of students and graduates. In addition, ASIIN is included in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). This guarantees that all certificates awarded by ASIIN are registered in the new European Database of External Quality Assurance Reports (DEQAR).

Being a full member of ENQA and a member of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), ASIIN carries out its manifold activities in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG). As per § 3.4 ESG, European accreditation agencies must carry out thematic analyses to "describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities".

The aim of the following study is therefore to carry out such a thematic analysis as requested by the ESG and to analyse whether the results of ASIIN´s activities can indeed contribute to systematically improving quality assurance systems of higher education institutions and to identifying room for improvement.

This thematic analysis covers the impact of ASIIN quality assurance procedures in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the special features of the Saudi Arabian higher education system must be taken into account. They will be further elaborated below.

Another important goal of this analysis is to find out if it was useful and appropriate to conduct accreditation procedures in the first place in Saudi Arabia. Repeatedly, members of the ASIIN panels raised some critical points before and after the first accreditation procedures were conducted in Saudi Arabia. In particular, the general political situation, the restrictions of civil rights, the position of women in society, the pursuit of intellectuals and the dominance of Islam in the curricula of non-religious studies were viewed critically and serious questions raised whether ASIIN should carry out any procedures in Saudi Arabia at all.

Due to these questions, and in response to the concerns raised regarding the implementation of accreditation procedures in Saudi Arabia, ASIIN has established the Ethics Advisory Board in 2013. According to its statutes, any reviewer or committee member of ASIIN can call upon this body if he or she has serious doubts before, during, or after the execution of a procedure regarding the fulfilment of the ethical basis of the ESG criteria (examples are the treatment of military technology, a lack of freedom of research and teaching, no free access to education, active discrimination, bribery etc.). In these instances, the Ethics Advisory Board will provide an assessment and recommendation on how to proceed. In particular, ESG 1.1 "Such a policy supports academic integrity and freedom and is vigilant against academic fraud; guarding against intolerance of any kind or discrimination against the students or staff" is relevant in this respect.

The first part of this study presents general statistical data concerning the number of accreditation procedures, the respective share of female and male programmes, the involved Technical Committees, as well as the overall results of the accreditation procedures. The second part of the study focuses on a critical reflexion of the various requirements imposed by the ASIIN Accreditation Committee.

Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

According to the German Academic Exchange Council (DAAD)[1], in 2017 there were 26 public and 10 private universities in Saudi Arabia. No tuition fees are charged at public universities. The Saudi high school diploma does not automatically entitle students to enrol at a university. Access to institutions of higher education is based on the results of the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination (Tawjihi). Individual faculties may administer additional entrance exams.

All education in Saudi Arabia is segregated by gender; consequently, there are two different campuses at those universities, where boys as well as girls can study. Men are strictly forbidden to enter the female campus and male staff members can only give video lectures for female students. The division into two different and in some cases far apart campuses means that two peer groups (one with only female and one with only male experts) are required for the audits in Saudi Arabia if both female and male programmes are to be audited. Apart from the split campuses, there are several specialties offered only for male students (e.g. engineering) or only for female students (e.g. until recently bachelor of nursing).

The duration of undergraduate programmes leading to a bachelor's degree is normally four years (five years in the case of architecture, agriculture, pharmacy and six years for medicine and law). Master's degree programmes take two years to complete.

All Saudi universities need to be nationally accredited by the National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment (NCAAA), which has been established in Saudi Arabia with responsibility for determining standards and criteria for academic accreditation and assessing higher education institutions and the programmes they offer.

There is a high percentage of international faculty members, especially among the female teachers. The international teaching staff faces discrimination in salaries and contracts. For instance, Saudi Arabian faculty members receive higher salaries and have non-limited contracts. Non-Saudi faculty need to renew their contract every year. However, this is not a specific problem of the education sector, as foreigners in Saudi Arabia are generally only granted work visas for one year, and this regulation applies accordingly to the universities. Furthermore, it is usually the case that the extension of work visas is unproblematic for the academic staff members.

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[1] https://www.daad.de/de/laenderinformationen/asien/saudi-arabien/ueberblick-bildung-und-wissenschaft/

Organisational Obstacles related to the conduct of accreditation procedures in Saudi Arabia

Until 2019, no tourist visa were available for Saudi Arabia. In order to be able to carry out on-site-visits in the course of accreditation procedures, it was necessary to receive an invitation from the Saudi university together with preliminary visa numbers for all peers. These were issued by the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the necessary process took between three to six months. After receiving the preliminary visa, each peer had to apply for the final visa during a personal visit either at the Saudi consulate in Frankfurt or at the Saudi embassy in Berlin. This complicated and lengthy procedure caused several problems and led to the postponement of some procedures (the visa not issued in time) and the cancellation by some experts (wrong visa issued, no time for a personal trip to Frankfurt/Berlin). This side note shows, that accreditation procedures in Saudi Arabia are not "business as usual" but rather extensive endeavours.

Furthermore, it was at times difficult to find female experts that were willing to participate. Repeatedly, reservations about the very limited opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia and the restrictions to which they are also subject as Europeans while visiting the country were voiced. In this context, however, it should be positively mentioned that during the period of our work in Saudi Arabia, there have been improvements in this respect (e.g. travel possibilities, car driving, choice of occupation), even though there are still considerable restrictions for women in the country.

In general, the strict gender segregation in the education system poses a particular challenge for the implementation of international accreditation procedures at Saudi universities.

Conceptual Basis and Definitions

The following analysis is based on the reports of the accreditation and re-accreditation procedures carried out by ASIIN in Saudi Arabia between 2011 and 2019. Specifically, the pronounced requirements in the respective procedures are analysed and classified according to the ASIIN general criteria for programme accreditation. There will be a special focus on the differences in requirements for female and male programmes, because this is a distinctive feature of procedures in Saudi Arabia. Since the European labels are practically not in demand by Saudi universities, the award of the corresponding labels will not be discussed further in this analysis.

Several of the six ASIIN general criteria comprise a number of subtopics. Consequently, the requirements were subsumed to 16 criteria. The consideration of subtopics is needed to make a differentiated statement about the identified deficiencies. It should also be noted that the following study does not take a detailed view on the recommendations, because recommendations are often covering very diverse areas and only verified in the during the reaccreditation visit.

Qualitative and quantitative Document Analysis

The document analysis was carried out as a structured content analysis of the requirements issued by the ASIIN Accreditation Commission for Degree Programmes (AC).
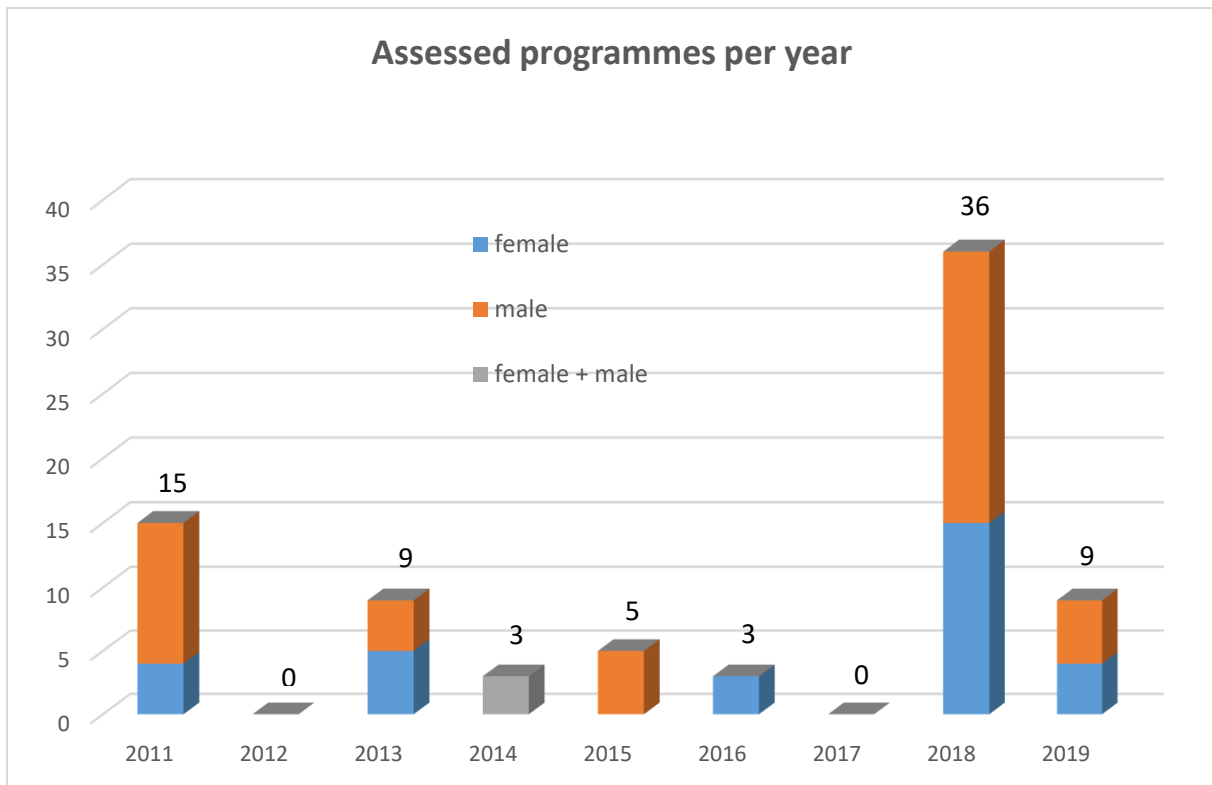
This study is not a randomly selected sample, but a complete survey of all degree programmes that have been assessed by ASIIN in Saudi Arabia. It covers eight Saudi Arabian universities where 29 accreditation procedures for 80 degree programmes were carried out:

University	Number of completed procedures	Number of assessed degree programmes	male programmes	female programmes	male + female programmes
Al Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University	2	8	4	4	
King Saud University	10	31	21	10	0
Majmaah University	2	6	3	3	0
Qassim University	2	9	4	5	0
Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University	1	2	2	0	0
University of Tabuk	2	3	0	0	3
Umm Al-Qura University	5	12	7	5	0
University of Hail	5	9	5	4	0
sum	**29**	**80**	**46**	**31**	**3**

It is noticeable that all of the procedures were carried out as cluster procedures, meaning that more than one degree programme was assessed at the same time by the same peer group and only one accreditation report was submitted. The first audits were conducted at King Saud University (2011) and Qassim University (2013); here, separate reports for the female and male programmes were submitted. In 2014, the two procedures at University of Tabuk were conducted and the female and male programmes were evaluated together and only one combined report was submitted. However, some of the requirements were only pronounced for the female campus. From 2015 on, only separate reports for the female and male programmes were submitted.

Re-accreditation procedures have only taken place at King Saud University for 14 degree programmes. The other possible re-accreditation procedures at Qassim University, University of Tabuk, and Majmaah University were not requested by the university or the respective offer from ASIIN was not accepted. It should also be noted that there is a drastic decline in requests and accepted offers since 2019. This may be related to the declining oil price and the increasing financial restrictions in Saudi Arabia.

The amount of assessed degree programmes per year is depicted in the following diagram:

Assessed programmes per year

In one case, a requirement covered two distinctly different criteria. In order to stay consistent, this requirement was assigned to both criteria. In all other procedures, the requirements were subsumed under exactly one criterion.
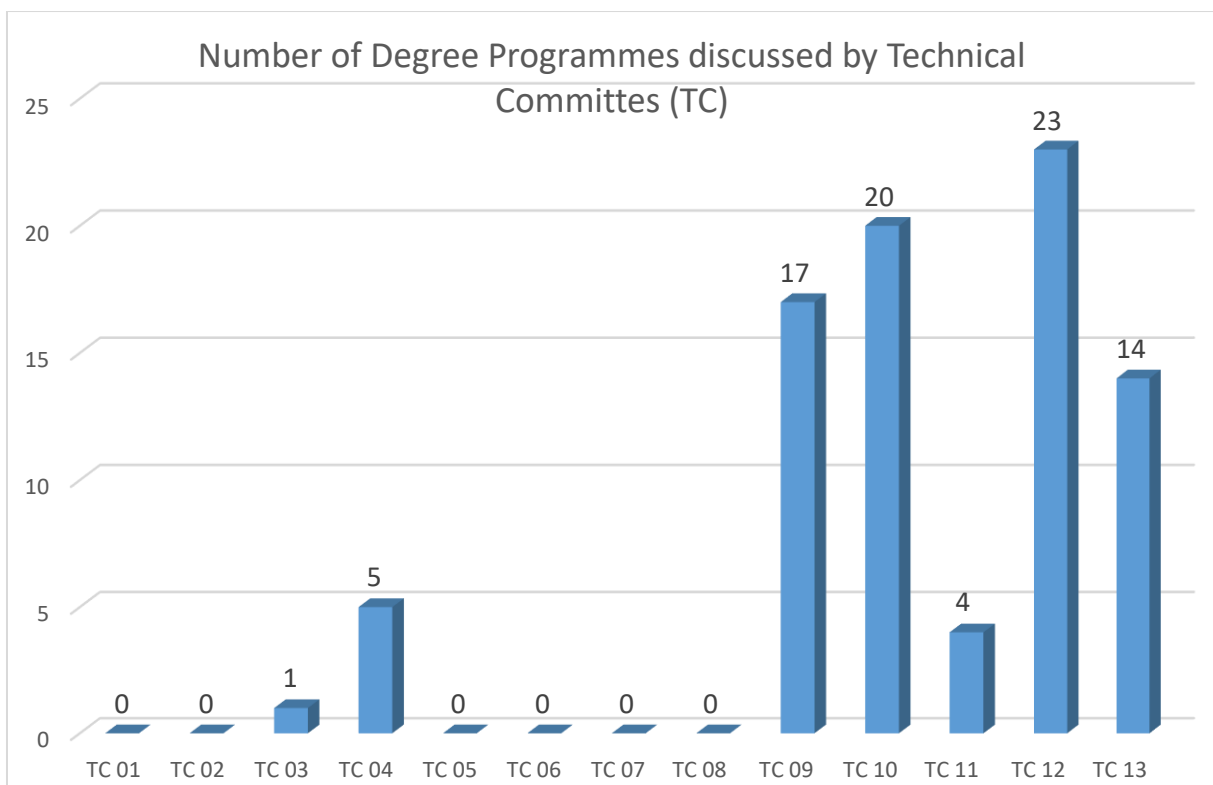
As a unique feature, ASIIN has established the Technical Committees (TC) that cover all fields of study in which ASIIN is active[2]. These committees supervise all accreditation procedures and prepare the decisions of the ASIIN Accreditation Commission for Degree Programmes. In this capacity, they oversee all procedures of their subject area and ensure their equal treatment from a professional perspective. Similar to the composition of the peer groups, each technical committee is composed of representatives from universities, the professional practice, and a student member.

The TC discusses all accreditation procedures, which fall within its area of expertise. This includes in particular the discussion of the deficiencies mentioned in the accreditation report as well as a final recommendation of the accreditation decision.

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[2] TC: Technical Committee for the following subject areas: TC 01 - Mechanical Engineering/Process Engineering; TC 02 - Electrical Engineering/Information Technology; TC 03 - Civil Engineering, Geodesy and Architecture; TC 04 - Informatics/Computer Science; TC 05 - Physical Technologies, Materials and Processes; TC 06 - Industrial Engineering; TC 07 - Business Informatics/Information Systems; TC 08 - Agriculture, Nutritional Sciences and Landscape Architecture; TC 09 - Chemistry; TC 10 - Life Sciences; TC 11 - Geosciences; TC 12 - Mathematics; TC 13 - Physics, 14 - Medicine.

With respect to the accreditation procedures in Saud Arabia, it stands out that almost all assessed degree programmes belong to the natural sciences (biology, chemistry, physics and earth sciences, mathematics and informatics). Only one degree programme (Islamic Architecture) does not belong to these areas. This distribution differs from the usual focus of ASIIN in Germany, where a large percentage of the assessed degree programmes are engineering programmes (civil engineering, electrical engineering, process engineering, and mechanical engineering).

The classification of the programmes assessed in Saudi Arabia according to their affiliation with a TC is depicted in the diagram below.

In this context, it is necessary to explain that the new Technical Committee 14 –Medicine was founded only in June 2019 and is thus not depicted in the diagram. Before TC 14 was established, the Technical Committee 10 – Life Sciences discussed all degree programmes in the area of medicine before this date. In addition, more than one TC can discuss a procedure. This is relevant for interdisciplinary programmes, which cover more than one subject-specific area. A typical example is biochemistry (TC 09 + TC 10).

The lack of accreditation procedures in Saudi Arabia in the area of engineering goes hand in hand with the observation that Saudi Arabian universities are rather focused on being accredited by the American Board of Engineering and Technology (ABET) as part of the Washington Accord instead of acquiring one of the European subject-specific labels in addition to the ASIIN label. As to the Euro-Inf© label for degree programmes in the area of informatics/computer sciences, it was only awarded four times (University of Hail), the Eurobachelor© label for degree programmes in the area of chemistry has been awarded twice (King Saud University), and the EUR-ACE© label for degree programmes in the area of engineering has not been awarded at all. The latter can again be explained by the fact that no engineering programmes have been assessed.

It is noteworthy that of the 80 assessed programmes, 76 were bachelor's programmes, whereas only four were master's programmes. This is typical for international procedures, where the focus is clearly on bachelor's programmes. Universities in countries like Saudi Arabia only offer few master's programmes with very few study places. In the first place, they send their promising students for graduate education (and possibly a PhD programme) to Europe or the U.S. This is combined with the expectation that these "high potentials" come back to Saudi Arabia after completing their academic education abroad in order to contribute to the further development of their home country.

Possible Outcomes of an Accreditation Procedure

After the on-site visit is finished, the final assessment by the peers with a recommendation for the decision on accreditation is recorded in form of an accreditation report. This report is then submitted to the relevant Technical Committees (TC) of ASIIN to comment on the conclusions of the peer group and the suggested requirements and recommendations. Subsequently, the accreditation report is discussed by the ASIIN Accreditation Commission for Degree Programmes (AC), which decides on the outcome of the procedure and the award of the ASIIN and the European quality seals. Finally, a notification letter with the decision and a copy of the final accreditation report is sent to the university's management. The report is published on the ASIIN webpage and all certificates awarded by ASIIN are registered in the new European Database of External Quality Assurance Reports (DEQAR).

Accreditation of a degree programme is granted for a limited period. An initial accreditation with one of the aforementioned seals is valid for five years; subsequent renewal is valid for seven years. An international accreditation procedure with ASIIN may have the following outcomes:

- Unconditional accreditation for the full accreditation period (possibly with recommendation).

- Accreditation with requirements and thus for a limited period (usually one year). The university has to submit meaningful documents for verifying the fulfilment of requirements in time.

- Suspension of the procedure. The procedure can be suspended once if the revealed deficits are so severe and take more time to overcome so that no limited accreditation can be awarded. The AC pronounces conditions that need to be met by the university, before the procedure can be resumed.

- Accreditation may be refused if the requirements for the award of a seal are not met and the problems identified are so serious that even a suspension of the procedure for a longer period does not seem promising.

Results

First, it is noteworthy that only in the two very first accreditation procedures at King Saud University no requirements were pronounced and the accreditation was granted solely with recommendations. In all other procedures, requirements were formulated which had to be fulfilled by the respective Saudi Arabian universities in the course of one year after the accreditation decision war issued by the ASIIN Accreditation Commission.

Decisions of the AC

As mentioned above, all ASIIN accreditation procedures for degree programmes are discussed by the ASIIN Accreditation Commission for Degree Programmes, which also decides on the outcome of the procedure and imposes conditions, requirements, and/or recommendations.

Most of the degree programmes were accredited with requirements for one year. Only at the first procedures at King Saud University (2011), no requirements but only recommendations were imposed. The peer group suggested nine recommendations that were confirmed by the involved TCs and the ASIIN accreditation commission. Some of the recommendations (e.g. with respect to the quality and scope of the final thesis, the module descriptions, and the amount of practical work) have the character of a requirement and similar problems were tagged with a requirement in other, meaning later, procedures. (This is valid for the male and female programmes). During the re-accreditation requirements were issued e.g. with respect to the module descriptions and the final thesis.

A special case are the three degree programmes at University of Tabuk, here the procedure for the Biology and Microbiology programmes were suspended and finally rejected.

As stated in the ASIIN thematic analysis of accredited programmes (national and international procedures), in the year 2017 the AC has decided to suspend the accreditation for seven degree programmes (3 % of all decisions), to pronounce an accreditation with requirements for 204 degree programmes (88.8 %) and to grant the accreditation without requirements for 19 degree programmes (8.2 %). The numbers are very similar to the decisions about the Saudi degree programmes. This is rather unexpected, because one would think that in international procedures in countries like Saudi Arabia, the peers would identify more problems than in national procedures in Germany.
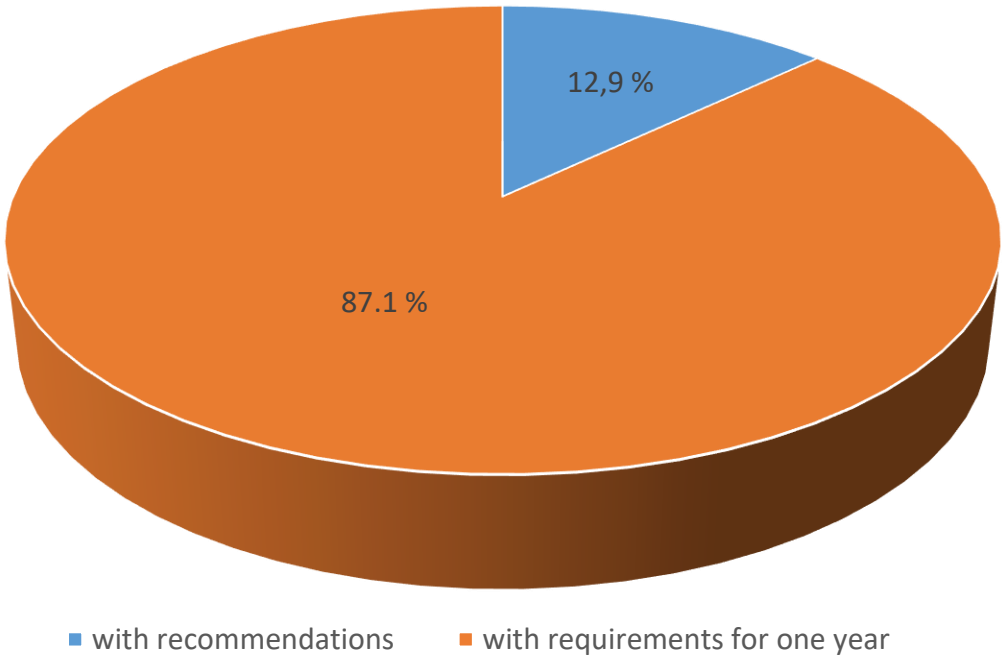
The different outcomes of the procedures in Saudi Arabia are summarised in the following table:

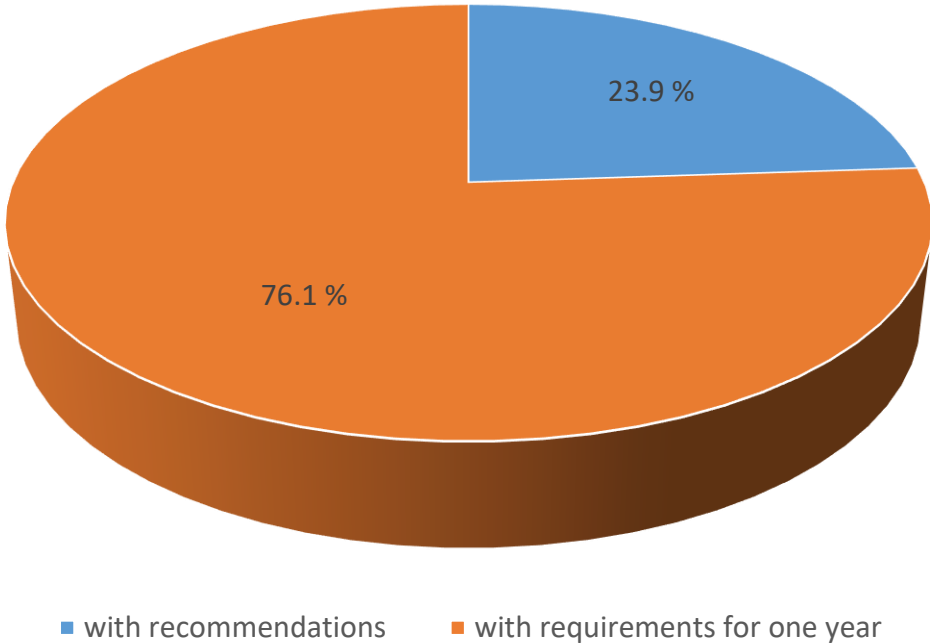| Decision	with recommendations	with requirements for one year	suspension, rejection
all programmes (80)	15	63	2
share	18.75 %	78.75 %	2.5 %
female programmes (31)	4	27	0
share (female)	12.9 %	87.1 %	0 %
male programmes (46)	11	35	0
share (male)	23.9 %	76.1 %	0 %
female + male programmes (3)	0	1	2
share (female + male)	0 %	33.3 %	66.7 %

The share of female programmes that were accredited only with recommendations is lower than for male programmes, but the difference is not substantially high. It is mainly caused by the fact that during the first procedure at King Saud University (the only procedure where no requirements were pronounced) more male than female programmes were assessed (11 male programmes and 4 female programmes). As one can see in the following diagrams, 87.1 % of the female programmes were accredited with requirements for one year and 12.9 % only with recommendations. In comparison, of the male programmes, 76.1 % were accredited with requirements were accredited for one year and 23.9 % with recommendations.

The three programmes, which were assessed at the University of Tabuk, are not depicted here. In this case, male and female programmes were evaluated jointly and no separate reports were submitted. As a result, there is no difference in the outcome between the female and male programmes.

Decision of the AC, female progammes

- with recommendations
- with requirements for one year

12,9 %

87.1 %

Decision of the AC, male programmes

- with recommendations
- with requirements for one year

23.9 %

76.1 %

Requirements per Degree Programme

In the 29 examined accreditation procedures with 80 degree programmes, a total of 288 requirements and 515 recommendations were imposed; this corresponds to an average of 3.6 requirements and 6.4 recommendations per degree programme. The number of imposed requirements and recommendations in total and per degree programme in comparison between female and male programmes is depicted in the following table:

	requirements	recommendations
all programmes (80)	288	515
per programme	3.6	6.4
female programmes (31)	125	208
per programme (female)	4.0	6.7
male programmes (46)	146	293
per programme (male)	3.2	6.4
female + male programmes (3)	17	14
per programme (female + male)	5.7	4.7

As one can see, significantly more requirements were pronounced for the female than for the male programmes. A special case are the three degree programmes that were assessed at the University of Tabuk. As mentioned before, here a combined report was published for the female and male programmes. Since the identified deficits were rather severe, the procedure for the Biology and Microbiology programmes was suspended and four conditions for resuming the procedure and four possible requirements were imposed by the AC. These issues were counted as a total of eight requirements in the analysis. Usually, there are more requirements for programmes on the female campus as for the same programme on the male campus. "Same" in this case means that the curricula are identical, but of course, the technical equipment, the quality of the final thesis, and the staff members are different. One exception is the re-accreditation procedure at King Saud University for the mathematics and physics programmes. Here, more requirements (seven in comparison to two) were pronounced for the male campus. When looking at the pronounced requirements in detail, one can assume that the male peer group took a closer look at the exams, the available personnel and the regulations. Because the five additional requirements for the male programmes concern issues (final project, forms of exam, admission requirements, research activities of the academic staff and technical staff members) that are also relevant for the female

programmes. In particular, it is surprising that a requirement to intensify research activities was imposed for the male academic staff members and not on the female lecturers, although the research opportunities for men are usually much better than for women at Saudi universities. For this reason, several requirements were pronounced with respect to improving the technical equipment and the infrastructure, especially on the female campuses. This issue is discussed in detail in the second next paragraph (classification of requirements).

In several procedures (Qassim University, Informatics Cluster at University of Hail, and mathematics/physics cluster at Umm Al-Qura University) identical requirements and recommendations were pronounced for the female and male programmes. Obviously, the male and female peer groups "synchronised" their findings. This is a usual procedure during the audits in Saudi Arabia but in most cases, there are differences between the female and male campuses and thus different requirements and recommendations are pronounced. ASIIN has learned during the procedures in Saudi Arabia that it is very useful that the male and female peer groups discuss their findings before the results are presented.

The ASIIN thematic analysis of accredited programmes (national and international procedures) shows that in 2017 the AC has pronounced 3.4 requirements per degree programme. This number is very similar to the requirements per male programme for the procedures in Saudi Arabia. Again, it is surprising that no significant differences between the average procedure and the procedures in Saudi Arabia can be found. However, it is apparent that the peer groups found more deficits with the female than with the male programmes.

Procedure for Fulfilment of Requirements

If the AC has granted the accreditation with requirements, the university needs to submit meaningful evidence and a statement within the set time limit in order to verify that the requirements have been fulfilled. The documents and the statement are sent to the peers that were involved in the procedure for assessment. The peers give a final statement with respect to the fulfilment of requirements, which is then discussed by the involved TCs, which can comment on and add to it. Finally, the AC decides about the fulfilment of the requirements and on the extension of the accreditation and the award of the labels (initial/first treatment).

If the requirements are met, the accreditation is extended to cover the full period allowed. If not, the AC can decide to prolong the period for submitting additional information/evidence (usually for another six months). The university is notified about the decision. The additional documents are again submitted to the peers, the TCs, and the AC (second treatment). The AC can decide that all remaining requirements are met and extend the accreditation period to its maximum length, or they can decide that some serious deficits still exist and can refuse the prolongation of the accreditation. If some minor problems are identified, the AC can prolong the accreditation and include a remark in the notification letter to the university's management. The decisions of the AC about the fulfilment of requirements is summarised in the following table:

Decision	all requirements fulfilled (first treatment)	prolongation for six month	all requirements fulfilled (second treatment)	prolongation denied	not decided yet
all programmes (63)	32	31	22	3	6
share	50.8 %	49.2 %	71 %	9.7 %	19.3 %
female programmes (27)	11	16	9	3	4
share (female)	40.7 %	59.3 %	56.3 %	18.7 %	25 %
male programmes (35)	21	14	12	0	2
share (male)	60 %	40 %	85.7 %	0 %	14.3 %
female + male programmes (1)	0	1	1	0	0
share (female + male)	0 %	100 %	100 %	0 %	0 %

The analysis shows that the proportion of female programmes that had to go through a second treatment of requirements (59.3 %) is significantly higher than the share of male programmes (40 %). In addition, only for female programmes there was so far a refusal of the accreditation, because the requirements were considered to be not fulfilled.
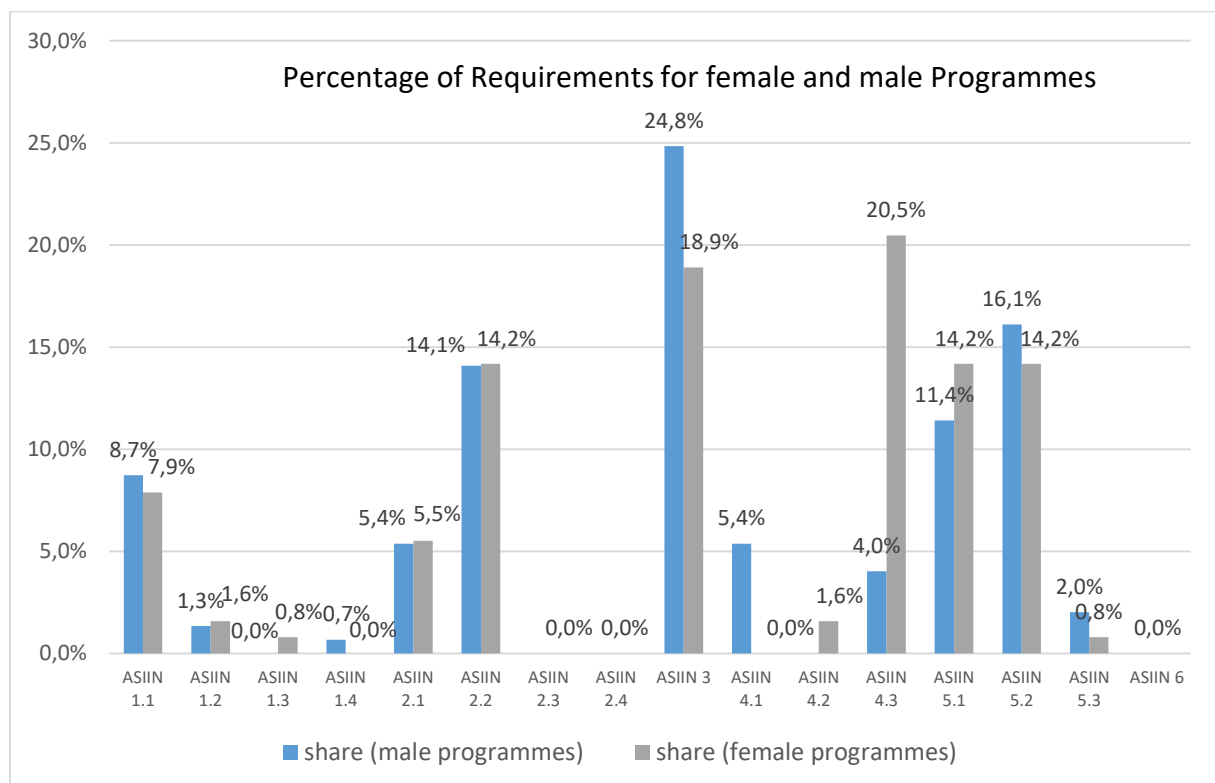
For six degree programmes (the most recent one conducted at the University of Hail), the university has to submit additional document for the second treatment of the fulfilment of requirements. So, the outcome of these procedures (four female and two male programmes) is not yet decided. Another noteworthy outcome is the denial of the prolongation of the accreditation of three degree programmes (all female) at Majmaah University. In this case, the accreditation for the three educational programmes was not prolonged, because the university (change of responsibility) was no longer interested in providing additional documents for verifying the fulfilment of requirements.

During the course of the procedure at Qassim University, all requirements were considered to be fulfilled in the first treatment, but five remarks were included in the notification letter to the university's management. Some of the remarks e.g. with respect to the workload, the awarded credits, and the safety measures are rather severe and would normally have had the consequence to consider the respective requirement to be not fulfilled. Unfortunately, Qassim University has not accepted the ASIIN offer for the re-accreditation of the degree programmes, so that no conclusion can be drawn, if the recommendations have been taken

seriously and if the necessary improvements have been made. This observation is valid for the male and female programmes.

Classification and Analysis of Requirements

Imposing requirements is the main tool ASIIN uses for indicating deficiencies in distinctive areas of the assessed degree programmes and for urging the universities to solve the identified problems. The university needs to fulfil the requirements in order to extend their accreditation to the maximum period. The goal of analysing the imposed requirements is to identify the areas in which the assessed degree programs fell short of the expectations and if there are differences between the female and male programmes.

The previous graph shows the distribution of the imposed requirements across the sixteen criteria that ASIIN das developed for awarding the ASIIN-label. In order to be able to compare the results for the female and male programmes the share of the requirements in relation to the total number of imposed requirements is depicted. This means, e.g. for criterion 1.1 that of 127 requirements, which have been pronounced for all female programmes, 10 belong to this criterion. This corresponds to a share of 7.9 %. For the male programmes, 140 requirements have been pronounced. The two procedures at the University of Tabuk, where the female and male programmes were jointly assessed are not included in this diagram.

Most requirements have been issued for criterion 3 (Exams), criterion 5.2 (Diploma and Diploma Supplements), criterion 2.2 (Work load and credits), criterion 4.3 (Funds and equipment), and criterion 5.1 (Module descriptions). Criterion 2.2 can be regarded as a

"formal criterion" as it assessed if there is a credit point system in place, if the students' total workload (including time for self-studies) is taken into consideration, verified, and fits with the awarded credits. The high number of imposed requirements shows that Saudi universities have a credit point system in place that is not aligned with European standards such as the ECTS Users' Guide. The main problem is that credits are awarded based only on the amount of contact hours (lectures, lab work, seminars etc.). The students' time for self-studies is not taken into consideration at all.

With regard to criterion 3 (Exams), it can be stated that the expert groups primarily criticised the quality and scientific standards of the theses/final projects. It is often a problem that the theses are carried out as group projects, in which the individual performance and contribution of the individual students is not made transparent and no separate grades are given. For this reason, requirements were regularly imposed on these issues.

It should be noted that a similar amount of requirements have been imposed on both female and male programmes on this point. No major discrepancy is to be expected here either, as the same criteria and rules for conducting examinations and theses/final projects are usually applied to both female and male students. However, the high number of requirements pronounced on this issue indicates that the quality of the theses often does not meet European quality standards and that female as well as male students still have some catching up to do with regard to scientific methods and writing scientific papers. This is partly due to the fact that the Saudi system traditionally (as in many other countries) does not provide for a thesis at all and this process is implemented only slowly.

Requirements were also regularly imposed on criterion 5.1 (Module descriptions) and criterion 5.2 (Diploma and Diploma Supplements) in the procedures. This is not surprising, since the module descriptions are only in the rarest cases flawless and the Diploma Supplement is a European "invention", which has not yet been established outside the European Higher Education Area. As a result, practically no Saudi university has a Diploma Supplement before an international accreditation procedure has taken place. However, the requirements for the revision and correction of the module descriptions and for the introduction of a Diploma Supplement and its automatic delivery to all graduates are easy to implement, since there are suitable templates for both the module descriptions and the Diploma Supplement, which then only need to be adapted. As is to be expected, there is practically no difference in the frequency with which requirements for these two criteria are imposed between the female and the male programmes, as both the module descriptions and the Diploma Supplement are gender-neutral.

A further problem with many courses of study in Saudi Arabia is the observation that the intended learning outcomes and learning objectives are not officially anchored in a regulation nor are they accessible to all stakeholders, e.g. through publication on the university's homepage. As the ASIIN criteria demand "The objectives and learning outcomes of the degree programme (i.e. the intended qualifications profile) are described in a brief and concise way.

They are well-anchored, binding and easily accessible to the public, i.e. to students, teaching staff and anyone else interested." (criterion 1.1), requirements are regularly imposed on this, whereby once again no difference can be observed between female and male programmes, as this is not a gender-specific issue.

The main point of discussion behind criterion 2.1 is the fact that many Saudi universities do not have official regulations for the recognition of credits achieved at other (international) universities. This is apparently not considered necessary, since only very few Saudi students complete a stay abroad as part of their studies. Therefore, the question of crediting the academic achievements acquired during this time does not arise. If, in exceptional cases, a semester abroad is nevertheless completed, individual decisions will be made. The lack of guidelines for the recognition of academic achievements is coupled with a low academic mobility of students and the lack of an internationally comparable credit point system (see criterion 2.2). Since conducting an international accreditation process has the goal (among others) of supporting the internationalisation of the respective university and promoting the academic mobility of the students, it is necessary and also sensible to define and publish official rules for the recognition of academic achievements rendered at other universities.

Probably the most decisive difference between female and male programmes in Saudi Arabia lies in the quality and scope of the technical equipment of the laboratories and the infrastructure of the campus (criterion 4.3). Large deficits can be found on the female campuses in several programmes and at most universities. While the male campuses generally have good to satisfactory infrastructure and technical equipment in quality and quantity, the situation is often much worse on the female campuses. As result in 20.5 % of all assessed female programmes, a requirement was pronounced with respect to this issue. In contrast, in the case of the male programmes, corresponding requirements were imposed much less frequently (only in 4 % of all the assessed male programmes).

Finally, there are several criteria, where only very few or no requirements have been issued: 1.2 (Title of the Degree Programme), 1.3 (Curriculum), 1.4 (Admission Requirements), 2.3 (Teaching Methodology), 2.4 (Support and Assistance), 4.1 (Staff), 4.2 (Staff Development), 5.3 (Relevant Rules), and 6 (Quality Management). The reasons why practically no requirements were imposed on these criteria are that the curricula are largely developed according to elaborate, international models, that the student support system is very comprehensive, and that the quality management systems usually meet international standards.

Observations during the Audits

The totalitarian political system in Saudi Arabia in the form of an absolute hereditary monarchy encompasses continuing restrictions on women and non-Muslims. Although there has been some easing of the restrictions in the recent past, women in Saudi Arabia still have significantly fewer rights than men. The discrimination of women is also reflected in the

education system. This is especially true at universities:

- Women cannot study all subjects.

- The infrastructure and technical equipment on the women's campus is generally much worse than on the men's campus. This is partly due to the fact that the female campuses are often still under construction or have to be adapted to the rising number of female students. In principle, however, the policy at the universities is that all offers for men and women should be equally available.

- Female university graduates have clearly limited and thus much worse career prospects than men. The majority of female graduates enter the teaching profession.

- Many female students either do not complete their studies or do not take up a profession, but start a family.

- The international teachers feel a sense of belonging to their home universities, where they usually conduct their own research during the semester breaks. As a result, they are also familiar with systems in which universities are not subject to gender segregation.

- Women generally have lower academic positions at universities than men. On the operational level of teaching and research, however, there are a considerable number of lecturers and assistant professors from neighbouring countries, whose employment is based on fixed-term contracts that are repeatedly extended on probation. The majority of these teachers were educated at European or American universities.

On the other hand, higher education is one of the few opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia to obtain a socially recognized position and to take up a qualified profession. Furthermore, female students are significantly more motivated and eager to learn than their male counterparts are and are very grateful for the contact and exchange with female academics from Europe. At least the male students from rich parents do not always seem to understand the benefit of studying. In the audits, this is particularly evident in the poorer English language skills of the male students.

It is of crucial importance to note, that the ASIIN audits and the requirements imposed have led to considerable improvements in the study situation of women. This is especially true for the improved infrastructure and technical equipment on the women's campus. The equal treatment of women and men with regard to the implementation of excursions as part of the studies is also a point that is often questioned critically during the audits and on which requirements are imposed.

The previously expressed fears that there is no academic freedom of research and teaching at the universities and that an intolerant view of the world is being taught were not confirmed either. This also applies to the "Islam modules", in which, according to the feedback of teachers and confirmed by the students, all world religions are represented and no world domination of Islam is demanded. Therefore, no conditions have yet been imposed on this

aspect.

Quality Management at Saudi Universities

The consideration of student feedback or assessments from evaluations is handled very differently. Foreign lecturers are subject to sometimes rigorous checks and are quickly sorted out in the event of poor evaluations. Since even working foreigners never receive visas for longer than one year, there is considerable pressure on the employees. Saudi employees are usually permanent and enjoy many privileges. Their motivation to respond to criticism or to further their education is therefore often less pronounced.

The active participation of students in the quality assurance process has been developing in Saudi Arabia for a few years now; many of the Bachelor's students are still quite young and are hardly considered responsible actors. Nevertheless, various universities are trying to slowly change this situation, among other things, through strongly regulated student representations and student participation in committees and quality assurance boards.

Conclusion

This study has been designed to evaluate the result of ASIIN's accreditation procedures at Saudi Arabian universities. A special focus has been given to the observed differences between the assessed female and male degree programmes, as the strict gender segregation is a unique feature of the educational system in Saudi Arabia. The following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Almost 80 % of all assessed programmes were accredited with requirements. This shows that ASIIN supports the further development of the quality of the degree programmes in Saudi Arabian universities. There is no significant difference between female and male programmes in this respect.

2. Only two degree programmes were suspended and later rejected. Instead of directly rejecting accreditation, ASIIN was successful in convincing the universities to solve the problems identified and thus to improve the quality of the educational offer.

3. For only three degree programmes the accreditation was not prolonged, because the pronounced requirements were not fulfilled. This is a sign that imposing requirements usually leads to improvements actually being introduced, which primarily benefits the students.

4. Especially with respect to the quality and quantity of the technical equipment in the laboratories and the infrastructure, much more requirements are imposed for the female programmes. Even if it takes several months, the improvements on the female campuses are visible and documented by the universities during the procedure of fulfilling the requirements.

5. Other deficits found at several degree programmes in Saudi Arabia concern the quality of the theses, the lack of a Diploma Supplement, flaws in the module descriptions, no

official regulation on the recognition of credits achieved at other universities, and no publication of the intended learning outcomes. Also in these areas, major progress could be identified in the course of the accreditation procedures.

6. The previously expressed concerns that there is no academic freedom of research and teaching at Saudi universities and that an intolerant worldview is being taught have not been confirmed as of now. Instead, the experts were able to experience the universities as places of tolerance and openness.

7. Female students are significantly more motivated and curious than their male fellow students and very grateful for the contact and exchange with female academics from Europe.