Accreditation with ASIIN – Degree Programmes, Institutions and Systems

Introduction to the procedural principles

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List of key documents

At European level:

"Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" (May 2015, in the applicable version) (ESG, European Standards and Guidelines)

European Union: ECTS Users' Guide, Luxembourg (2015, in the applicable version).

European Communities: European Qualifications Framework, EQF, (Empfehlung der Europäischen Parlaments und der Europäischen Rates vom 23. April 2008 zur Einrichtung des Europäischen Qualifikationsrahmens für lebenslanges Lernen (2008/C 111/01)

Specific to Germany:

Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany (Accreditation Council): Resolution "Accreditation Council Rules for the Accreditation of Study Programmes and for System Accreditation" (08/12/2009, in the applicable version).

Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs: Resolution "Common structural guidelines for the accreditation of Bachelor's and Master's study courses" (10 October 2003, in the applicable version).

Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs: Resolution "Qualifications Framework for German Higher Education Qualifications" (21 April 2005, in the applicable version).

The latest versions of these and other documents may be accessed from the following web pages:

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA): www.enqa.eu

European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR): www.eqar.eu

Accreditation Council: www.akkreditierungsrat.de

Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs: www.kmk.org

1. Self-Conception

The representatives from higher education institutions, the private sector and public administration who are involved with ASIIN share the belief that a solid academic education is the basis for the sustainable development of a modern society.

ASIIN understands „education" both as a learning and development process in order to achieve manifold competences and as the outcome of such a process. The result of the educational process supports the successful creation of the personal, social and professional life.

For this reason ASIIN pursues nationally and internationally the goals,

→ to strengthen and ensure the quality of academic education.

→ to establish transparency about the achieved quality of academic education and further education in order to promote academic and professional mobility.

We pursue these goals for the members of ASIIN, for higher education institutions, for teaching staff and students, for representatives of the private sector and the public administration as well as for interested third parties.

ASIIN achieves its goals

→ as a service provider for learning providers and educational systems within academic and further education nationally as well as internationally

→ especially by accreditation and certification, evaluation, consultation in matters of system and organisational development as well as training courses

→ through the participation of (honorary) external academic and professional experts.

This handbook firstly explains the central concepts used in the ASIIN criteria and in its accreditation and certification processes.

It details the principles and perspectives which are common to all ASIIN criteria and processes – irrespective of whether the accreditation/certification concerns a quality management system, an institution or a degree programme.

An overview of all quality seals awarded by ASIIN is followed by a description of the aims and principles for the design of procedures – again irrespective of the object of the accreditation/certification.

Finally, there is a summary of all available documents containing the criteria and guidelines for each single seal.

This document was designed for all kinds of institutions of higher education that offer educational programmes on an academic level of 6 or higher with respect to the European Qualifications Framework.

2.   Definition of Terms

2.1   Quality

ASIIN's understanding of quality is characterized by two key elements:

- The content-related quality of teaching and learning is defined by the higher education institution[1] itself by determining the objectives and expectations for outcomes.

- The higher education institution and its members include external requirements owed to the political, legal and socio-economic environment in which they design and implement their education and/or training programmes. As a consequence, content-related quality is not chosen arbitrarily since it must also meet external expectations: In contrast to economic success (the central standard for quality and quantity-related production objectives of businesses), quality criteria for higher education institutions can only be developed in reference to the effect which the activities of the institution have on society, the economy and education policy making.

2.2   Quality management und quality assurance

Management systems are systems used to both define the policies and objectives of an organisation and how to reach those objectives. An organisation can employ different management systems at the same time, e.g. to manage quality, budgets or risks[2].

"Quality management" can be described as quality-oriented governance in an organisation. Therefore, it is part of the management unit which coordinates, reviews and orients all activities in and of an organisation (e.g. higher education institution) towards compliance with the objectives defined by the organisation itself and other parties, while at the same time making sure that the objectives of the organisation are developed further. Quality management systems (QMS) unite all procedures, methods and tools destined for quality management which are aimed at some or all processes in an organisation.

"Quality assurance" refers to all activities which allow for the quality of an object to be maintained. Quality assurance activities can be an integrated part of a quality management system or implemented separately for single issues that need to be controlled.

ASIIN's principles for accreditation and projects assume that quality assurance is most effective if embedded within a cyclical logic that can be divided into four steps: plan, implement (do), ensure/analyse (check) and improve (act)[3] - irrespective of whether a degree programme or a whole institution is concerned.

2.3   Processes and their results

"An activity or set of activities using resources, and managed in order to enable the transformation of inputs into outputs, can be considered a process."[4]

Degree programmes at higher education institutions can be described as qualifying processes which help the student achieve certain learning outcomes or qualification profiles. To allow degree

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[1] The present document addresses all types of education providers of educational offers at an academic level (level 6 or higher with respect to the European Qualifications Framework. For all such providers the generic term "higher education institution" is used here.

[2] See DIN/*Deutsches Institut für Normung e. V.*, DIN EN ISO 9000:2000, 3.2.2

[3] Compare: PDCA-cycle after Deming (Deming, W.E.: Out of the Crisis. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge 1982, ISBN 0-911379-01-0, S. 88.)

[4] See DIN/*Deutsches Institut für Normung e. V.*, DIN EN ISO 9001:2008-12, 0.2: "For an organisation to function effectively, it has to determine and manage numerous linked activities."

programmes to be implemented, a number of additional processes take place in every higher education institution. Their results again have an impact on the qualifying process itself.

The quality of teaching and learning at a higher education institution becomes evident on the basis of the results of the qualifying process of the degree programmes. The results that are achieved by the students in the degree programmes are the learning outcomes.

2.4 Accreditation

Accreditation is defined as an instrument of quality assurance. It confirms in a way that is comprehensible to all interested parties - including those outside the higher education institution - that at a certain point of time an object under review complies with certain standards. These standards are publicly accessible and compliance is required from all institutions which want to acquire the certificate. Accreditation is connected with a yes/no decision if the object under review is awarded the certificate or quality seal for a certain period.

3. Programmes and systems: observation of good teaching and successful learning on two levels

According to ASIIN both accreditation procedures for institutions and systems in the area of teaching and learning as well as accreditation procedures for degree programmes focus on their quality – only on different levels. Based on this logic, institutional accreditation/system accreditation and accreditation/certification of degree programmes do not compete but can complement each other methodically: They focus on different aspects in the operation of a higher education institution and have a different depth of detail.

From the viewpoint of ASIIN both concepts should be designed in a way to make good teaching and successful learning apparent – in different levels of detail and results - and to support its further development.

3.1 The quality-related responsibility of higher education institutions

The higher education institution itself decides on the quality to be expected from teaching and learning. It defines the learning outcomes of a programme and chooses the nature of all quality management in both teaching and learning. By doing so, it is in a position to convey its strategic orientation, profile and relation to the given social context.

Therefore, external quality reviews and certifications cannot replace internal responsibilities in terms of quality and management when developing quality and organisational strategies. It is up to the institution to assume the responsibility to direct internal and external quality reviews, accept the results and include them systematically in all further strategy planning. This applies irrespectively of which accreditation approach was chosen and which instruments are used. The external quality assessment (accreditation and certification) thus does not replace the internal quality assurance and management responsibility of the higher education institution.

Because the different measures and instruments of internal and external quality assessment - e.g. accreditations and certifications – partly refer to the same processes or parts thereof, the same data/information and assessment instruments can be used for these approaches, even if they pursue different goals and the findings have a different meaning.

Higher education institutions therefore have the opportunity to take over the responsibility of internal and external quality reviews and their results, and to specifically include them into their strategic planning. A coordinated interaction between internal and external view leads to an integrated system which comprises all processes and activities of all units of a higher education institution and that can evolve into a quality management system which governs the whole organisation.

3.2 Stakeholders

Regardless of whether a higher education institution itself defines the quality to be expected from its activities (by aiming at results which the institution considers to be of good quality) or whether the quality of a degree programme or of the entire institution is determined by external quality expectations: when defining quality, different groups of people are typically involved or affected to a different extent and thus become stakeholders.

All individuals or groups who are directly involved in the activities of a higher education institution can be classified as internal stakeholders. This group includes students, teachers, lecturers, trainers and members of staff who work in the administration and management departments of an institution as well as other persons who deliver their services within the institution. In addition to that, there are external stakeholders who get involved by presenting demands and needs from outside and around the higher education institution. Among others, this group includes potential employers, future colleagues and representatives of government institutions. Stakeholders can be identified through their function within a higher education institution, but also through their specific and individual disposition, e. g. gender or cultural and linguistic origins. This is especially true when identifying people who are directly affected by or involved in teaching at a higher education institution.

The identification of all relevant stakeholders depends directly on the strategic positioning of a higher education institution in its environment as well as on its guidelines and development objectives. Taking into consideration such group-specific interests can, for example, mean taking measures for equal opportunities and diversity.

In order to achieve the quality aimed at, it is crucial whether and how stakeholders who have been identified as relevant are involved in the planning, management and implementation of quality assurance processes.

3.3 Programme objectives and learning outcomes

For ASIIN, a comprehensible and precise definition of the objectives and learning outcomes of any educational and/or training programme which a higher education institution offers is the starting point and central framework of reference which allows for its quality to be monitored and developed further.

Programme objectives describe where a qualification obtained in a degree programme is positioned from an academic, technical and – where possible – professional perspective. All programme objectives are substantiated into the (intended) **learning outcomes** of the programme.

Based on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, ASIIN uses the following definitions:[5]

- Qualification means the formal result of an evaluation and validation process in which a competent body has found that a given person's learning outcomes are in line with the required standards.

- Learning outcomes are definitions of what students know, understand and are able to do after completing a learning process. They are defined as knowledge, skills and competences.

- Knowledge is the result of the processing of information by learning/studying (theory and/or factual knowledge).

- Skills are the ability to apply knowledge in order to carry out given tasks and solve problems (cognitive skills such as logical, intuitional and creative thinking as well as practical skills such as skilfulness and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).

- Competence is the ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or systematic abilities in a working or learning environment as well as for one's own professional and/or personal development.

Learning outcomes may be achieved through various forms of teaching and learning.

The **learning outcomes** (knowledge, skills, and competences) which a degree programme aims to impart have to be clearly defined by the higher education institution – irrespective of whether it is an institutional accreditation/system accreditation or an accreditation of a degree programme. In case of an institutional accreditation the focus is on the processes and management mechanisms of the higher education institution with which the faculty members define the learning outcomes for all degree programmes. In case of an accreditation of a degree programme the peers' external view is directed towards the specific learning outcomes of a degree programme and their implementation.

3.4 Review of degree programmes in an accreditation procedure: orientation on results

ASIIN's understanding of quality is based on the stated goals and results of a qualification process. A programme is seen as a qualification process.

The definition of the substantive aspects which constitute the quality of a programme is based on the objectives and expectations set out by the higher education institution; they should take into account the political, legal and socio-economic context within which a programme is created and implemented. The quality of the qualification process is then established based on the combination of its elements and the extent to which it achieves its objectives.

The accreditation procedure examines the logic and effectiveness of the qualification process within a programme. A programme is typically implemented in three phases:

1. *Definition of objectives:* For each programme, the main focus lies on the learning outcomes that should be achieved by students during their studies. This means that the overall learning outcomes aimed at in the programme must be rigorously collated with the learning outcomes of the individual modules in the programme.

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[5] see European Parliament legislative resolution of 24 October 2007 on the proposal for a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (COM(2006)0479 – C6-0294/2006 – 2006/0163(COD)), Brussels 24/10/2007

2. *Implementation:* Here, the focus is on the measures, instruments and resources which are the product of the supporting or organisational processes of a higher education institution that it invests in the implementation of a programme (input) in order to attain the defined goals (outcome).

3. *Further development and checking results:* The institution's internal quality assurance process is considered at this juncture; its feedback mechanisms should lead to continuous improvements in the programme.

Educational Objectives

learning outcomes/ competence profile

knowledge, skills, competencies

job/career profiles

occupational area(s) work environment(s)

Input of HEI

support processes e.g.

student services, staff resources, infrastructure, programme structure, curriculum, didactic concept, quality assurance

Outcome

correspondence of educational objectives and learning outcomes

results of outcomes assessment and internal/external evaluation

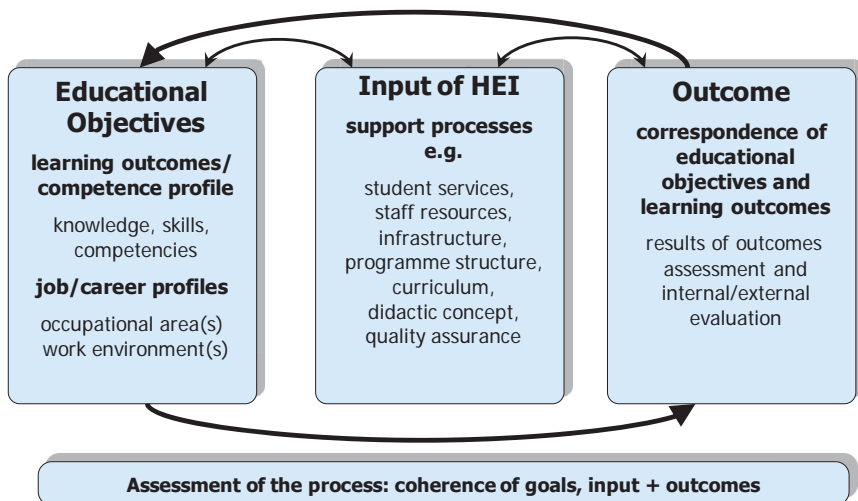**Assessment of the process: coherence of goals, input + outcomes**

Figure 1: ASIIN's approach to assessment – procedural view

ASIIN's process-oriented perspective and underlying quality concept mean that the responsibility for quality and the process firmly lies with higher education institutions which are, therefore, also responsible for defining the objectives for a given programme. In this way, they give expression to their strategic orientation, the image they seek to create and their integration within the social context.

3.5 Review of the system level in an accreditation procedure: governance of learning and teaching as quality management

For ASIIN, the quality of teaching and learning results first and foremost from the combination of the elements which make up the qualifying process in a degree programme and the extent to which its objectives have been met. ASIIN's understanding of quality is based on qualifying processes. It is the basis for all requirements and procedural principles for ASIIN programme and system/institutional accreditations. While single degree programmes are externally assessed by ASIIN during the accreditation of degree programmes, the higher education institution has to demonstrate during the system/institutional accreditation procedure that a review of teaching and learning is carried out as part of its internal quality management system.

The following is a good example of a comprehensive quality management system at a higher education institution (the figure takes the field of teaching and learning as an example for a more precise description):

Quality Management

- Strategy and structures
- Competences and responsibilities
- Instruments

Planning → Implementation → Information/Analysis → Assessment/Feedback

Core processes of the higher education institution

- Research and Development
- Teaching and Learning
- Other Activities

Teaching and Learning (Qualification Processes)

Feedback of results / improvement

Objectives + development → Implementation → Outcomes

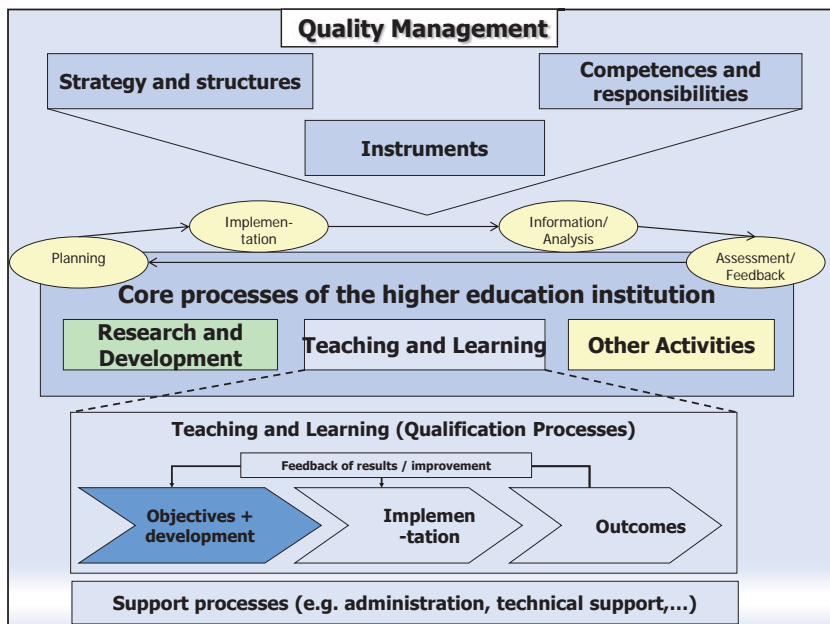Support processes (e.g. administration, technical support,...)

Figure 2: Internal quality management at a higher education institution

This design is only one tool for analysis. All other reasonable designs to set up a quality management system and the processes it is based on can serve as a suitable basis for accreditation.

During the system/institutional accreditation procedure it is necessary to describe and document the quality management system as well as to prove is effectiveness.

3.6 The possibility of further perspectives: governance of research and development as quality management

Besides the core process of teaching and learning, an HEI's quality management system can also focus on other core processes – such as research and development or administration.

The present approach is also suitable to assess an HEI's quality management system with respect to its effectiveness on other core processes. It thus allows ASIIN, upon request, to further assess an HEI's internal quality management system - in addition to the requirements and questions connected with the accreditation seal - in order to identify possible areas of improvement in structures and processes.

4. Quality seals under the roof of ASIIN

ASIIN offers its own quality seals, developed in cooperation with representatives from the academic world and the private sector (e.g. members of expert associations, trade unions, employers

associations and companies), as well as those that are controlled and determined by other organisations.

Currently it is possible to obtain the following quality seals on the basis of an accreditation/certification procedure via ASIIN:

- Seal of the Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany **(Accreditation Council**) by the way of a **system accreditation** or the **accreditation of a degree programme**

- **ASIIN system seal** for the quality management of higher education institutions (institutional accreditation)

- **ASIIN quality seal for degree programmes**

- **EUR-ACE®**-label of the *European Network for the Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAEE)* for degree programmes in engineering

- **Euro-Inf®**-label of the *European Quality Assurance Network for Informatics Education e.V. (EQANIE)* for Bachelor and Master degree programmes in the area of informatics

- **Eurobachelor®** and **Euromaster®**-label of the *European Chemistry Thematic Network (ECTN)* for degree programmes in the areas of chemistry

There are specific accreditation criteria for each single quality seal. If ASIIN does not own a seal, it is authorized by the respective owner organisation to award it on its behalf. The list represents a selection of quality seals available in the area of higher education. Several more international labels from other organisations are available for higher education institutions and programmes. The model of combined procedures, as described in chapter 5, can also be used to obtain these additional labels.

The higher education institution decides which seal it wants to obtain and applies for it in its accreditation request.

4.1 Seal of the Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany (Accreditation Council)

The Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany (Accreditation Council) defines procedural and decision-making rules and the criteria for the accreditation of degree programmes and for system accreditation. Under the stipulation of these rules and criteria the seal of the Accreditation Council can be obtained by the way of system accreditation or the accreditation of a degree programme.

The award of the seal of the Accreditation Council confirms the quality of the degree programmes as well as the compliance with the formal requirements of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) and the European standards for degree programmes **for academic degrees according to German law**.

While developing the criteria, procedural and decision-making rules, the Accreditation Council took into account the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

The award of the seal of the Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany is cost-covering and generates no profit.

4.2 ASIIN quality seal for degree programmes

The ASIIN quality seal is based on general and subject-specific criteria for degree programmes in the area of engineering, informatics, natural sciences and mathematics. These criteria are defined in consultation with stakeholders and their organisations from the academic and the private sector and are continually further developed during meetings of working groups of these stakeholders.

The ASIIN quality seal for study programmes provides assurance that subject specific quality standards of the academic discipline and of the profession for which that programme prepares are met at high level. It confirms further that a suitable framework for good teaching and successful learning is provided. The award of the seal is based on learning outcome oriented standards of the involved disciplines and complies with the European Qualifications Framework and the "European Standards and Guidelines".

The award of the ASIIN quality seal is cost-covering and generates no profit. It is available nationally and internationally.

4.3 European subject-specific labels: EUR-ACE®, Eurobachelor®-/Euromaster®, Euro-Inf® for degree programmes

The subject-specific labels **EUR-ACE**® by ENAEE, **Euro-Inf**® by EQANIE and **Eurobachelor**®-/**Euromaster**® by ECTN include learning outcomes for specific subjects (Engineering, Informatics and Chemistry) defined Europe-wide in cooperation with academics and professionals. All these subject-specific labels have been developed within the framework of projects funded by the European Commission and are today supported by non-profit associations whose members belong to different European countries.

They are especially aimed at translating the national and European qualification frameworks which have come to life during the so called Bologna-process into subject-specific frameworks. The labels through the means of independent external agencies make transparent and confirm from a subject specific and professional point of view the knowledge, skills and competencies achieved by an educational programme. In this way the academic as well as the professional mobility in the European higher education area are supported beyond the formal recognition of qualifications.

The general and the subject-specific criteria of the ASIIN quality seal include, where possible and applicable, the standards of the mentioned European subject-specific labels. The criteria and guidelines for the award of the ASIIN quality seal as pre-condition for the award of the European subject-specific labels have been verified and accepted by the owners of each label.

The award of the mentioned European subject-specific labels is cost-covering and generates no profit. They are available nationally and internationally.

4.4 ASIIN system seal (Institutional Accreditation)

On the basis of a maturity level model, developed by ASIIN for higher education institutions and education providers, a so-called system seal can be obtained in the course of an institutional accreditation procedure.

The ASIIN system seal confirms that an institution guarantees to fulfil the institutional, procedural and cultural requirements for good teaching and successful learning.

It is based on the observation of three quality-relevant parameters for the activities and the achievement of objectives of an organisation: its structures (institutional setting), its processes and their results and the predominant organisational values.

The award of the ASIIN system seal is cost-covering and generates no profit. It is available nationally and internationally. The relevant criteria are currently available only in English.

5. Model of procedures: single and combined procedures

Accreditation procedures with ASIIN are always based on international standards. The rules defined by the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA) as well as the standards of the *European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education* (EQAR) are implemented with due care.

ASIIN pursues a procedure model that serves several purposes:

1. Customized solutions: Every higher education institution gets customized solutions in order to efficiently combine their internal quality management with external measures of quality assurance according to their own aims and strategic orientation.

2. Voluntary: Every higher education institution decides on its own which nationally and internationally available label – also besides those offered by ASIIN – it wants to obtain.

3. Efficient processes: The internal and external costs should be as low as possible for the higher education institutions and for the usually honorary peers and committee members.

4. Transparency: The criteria relevant for a quality seal must be fulfilled in a manner transparent and distinguishable even for third parties, and the decision about the award of a seal has to be clear and must be based only on the relevant criteria.

Against this background ASIIN is committed to the „principle of connective procedures" whereby the combination of different accreditation and certification procedures is done in a way that suits the above mentioned purposes. In addition, the specific procedural rules of the label owners are observed.

Each of the above mentioned seals and every other available quality label for higher education institutions that is based on external quality assessment procedures can be obtained independently on its own. For this purpose guidelines and criteria are available.

The principle of connective procedures further states that no criterion will be checked again if it already has been finally verified in the course of another recent accreditation/certification procedure. As a consequence, the fact of an already existing and published accreditation/certification is taken into account.

Upon request, ASIIN conducts a so called complementary procedure for its own quality seal and possibly for the above mentioned European labels which can confirm the complete compliance with the criteria of the additionally applied for quality labels. If this complementary procedure follows on an accreditation procedure where the Seal of the Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany was awarded, the relevant accreditation report must have been published and the degree programme must have been registered with the database of the German Rectors` Conference (HRK).

Combinations besides the above mentioned labels and certificates

The principle of connective procedures can also include certifications that are not offered by ASIIN. Upon request, ASIIN is willing to check the combination of its own procedures with those of other national or international labels and to develop a corresponding concept.

Adaption to national systems and legal frameworks

If ASIIN conducts procedures in countries with an own higher education accreditation which is open to foreign agencies, ASIIN also awards possibly additional seals that are based upon national laws and requirements. In Switzerland the national accreditation system provides the preparatory work of an agency like ASIIN up to the decision recommendation. The final decision about the accreditation with national validity is only made by official government bodies.

6. Overview of ASIIN guidelines

The following guidelines are available for higher education institutions, peers, ASIIN committee members and ASIIN procedure managers. They document the currently valid criteria for the above mentioned labels:

0	**Accreditation with ASIIN – Degree Programmes, Institutions and Systems** Introduction to the procedural principles (valid for all ASIIN accreditation/certification procedures)
0.1	**Rules for the Accreditation of Study Programmes** (Seal of the Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany) (**only available for degree programmes leading to an academic degrees according to German law**)
0.2	**Rules for System Accreditation** (Seal of the Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany) (**only available for Higher education institutions issuing academic degrees according to German law**)
0.3	**General Criteria for the Accreditation of Degree Programmes** Engineering, Informatics, Architecture, Natural Sciences, individually and in combination with other Subject Areas European subject-related labels: **EUR-ACE®**, **Eurobachelor®**-/**Euromaster®**, **Euro-Inf®** (available nationally and internationally)
0.4	**Institutional Accreditation / Evaluation Criteria for the ASIIN System Seal** Requirements for Good Teaching and Successful Learning (institutional seal / system seal of ASIIN - available nationally and internationally)
0.5	ISO and system accreditation / institutional accreditation