



SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

FOR THE 2026 ENQA REVIEW

of the Central Evaluation and
Accreditation Agency Hanover
(ZEVA)

January 2026



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1 Introduction

Since its establishment in 1995, ZEvA has been on the forefront of quality assurance of teaching and learning in higher education. ZEvA was the first agency for quality assurance founded in Germany, the first to establish an accreditation procedure and the first agency to be accredited. From the beginning, ZEvA was active in national and international networks for quality assurance in higher education, such as the Joint Quality Initiative¹ and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Since its transformation into a foundation under public law, ZEvA has continued to widen its range, establish new kinds of procedures and offering its services nationally and internationally.

Today, ZEvA's range of services includes programme and system accreditation in Germany, evaluation, especially at higher education institutions in Lower Saxony, international accreditations on a programme and institutional level, institutional audits at Austrian Universities of Applied Sciences, certification of further education at higher education institutions, validation of educational offerings outside of higher education, certification of HEI's internationalisation with the CeQuint label, and consultations and seminars in the area of teaching and learning in higher education. From the beginning, ZEvA has ensured that all activities that pertain to quality assurance in higher education are carried out in line with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in their current version.

The following self-assessment-report (SAR) has been put together for ZEvA's upcoming ENQA review which shall serve as the basis for the renewal of ZEvA's ENQA membership and inclusion in the European Quality Agency Register (EQAR). For this purpose, the SAR provides information about the German higher education and quality assurance system under which ZEvA operates, a description of ZEvA's structure, internal quality assurance and history. Furthermore, it will describe ZEvA's external quality assurance activities in detail and demonstrate their adherence to the ESG. The SAR will concentrate on activities within the scope of the ESG, which are subject to the ENQA review. Activities not directly relevant to the review will be mentioned for completeness' sake but not described in detail. The annexes and links to online sources of information provide evidence for the descriptions in the SAR.

¹ A working group that developed the Dublin descriptors between 2001 and 2004. For a short history, see: <https://www.scribd.com/document/441182837/Joint-Quality-Initiative-the-origin-of-the-Dublin-descriptors-short-history-pdf>



2 Development of the Self-Assessment Report

In the summer of 2025, ZEvA has put together a working group for the preparation of the self-assessment report consisting of ZEvA's managing director and division heads, who serve as the editorial team of the self-evaluation report. The team has compiled the relevant documentation and reviewed all current sources of information about ZEvA's work (website, brochures etc.) to ensure they represent the current state of affairs. ZEvA's manuals and handbooks have been updated where necessary.

The working group has conducted a SWOT analysis in October-December 2025, based on questionnaires distributed among ZEvA's employees and stakeholders. The results will be presented in chapter 9. Additionally, ZEvA conducts regular evaluations of their work among its stakeholders, the results of which serve to improve ZEvA's procedures and develop them further (see chapter 7).

The review report has been approved by ZEvA's Foundation Council on December 10, 2025 and has been presented to the ZEvA-Commission (ZEKo) on November 4, 2025.



3 German Higher Education and Quality Assurance System²

Higher education in Germany is regulated for the most part by the federal states („Länder“) and their higher education laws, with the Higher Education Framework Act („Hochschulrahmengesetz“)³ as a basis on the national level. The Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs („Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK)“)⁴ provides frameworks for higher education that the federal states agree upon. The university system is divided into universities, universities of applied sciences and universities of arts and music. Additionally, universities of cooperative education or vocational academies („Berufsakademien“), which are technically outside of the higher education system, can offer Bachelor's programmes that are equated to higher education programmes and lead to the same qualifications.⁵ Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can be public or private, but, to be able to offer academic degrees, private institutions have to be recognized by the state, usually on the basis of an institutional accreditation by the German Scientific Council („Wissenschaftsrat (WR)“). Most study programmes have been adapted to the Bachelor/Master system, but there are still programmes leading to a Diploma degree or a State Examination (e.g. teacher training, laws, medicine). Additionally, some universities have formalised doctoral programmes, some of them adapted to ECTS.

With the introduction of the Bachelor/Master system, the KMK also conceived an external quality assurance system and issued „Common Structural Guidelines of the Länder for the Accreditation of Bachelor's and Master's Study Courses“ and the German Qualifications Framework for Higher Education. The German Accreditation Council (GAC) was established in 2003 as a foundation under public law and tasked with the formulation of criteria and procedural rules based on the Structural Guidelines as well as the accreditation of private, non-profit agencies to carry out the accreditation procedures. The agencies could then decide on accreditation in their accreditation commissions and issue the quality seal of the GAC alongside their own.

In 2008, system accreditation was introduced, which has as its subject not individual programmes but the quality assurance system of an entire institution (or possibly a faculty). In turn, all programmes of a system accredited HEI that have undergone the accredited internal quality assurance system count as accredited and carry the GAC seal.

The accreditation agencies in Germany are private not-for-profit institutions competing for accreditation procedures on an open market. At the moment, 11 agencies are competing on the German market, including the national agencies of Austria and Switzerland and the international agency MusiQue. Five of these agencies have specialized in certain subjects. In general, HEIs are free to choose an agency based on a quotation, with the exception of catholic theology and catholic studies for teacher training, which have to be accredited by the agency AKASt. The criteria for selection and their weighting vary

² For a compact but comprehensive overview of the German accreditation system, the presentations by Prof. Bargstädt (chairman of the GAC) and Henning Schäfer (Managing director of ZEVA) held during ENQA's 2024 Members Forum in Hanover can be found here: <https://www.enqa.eu/events/2024-enqa-members-forum-17-19-april-2024-hanover-germany/>

³ See <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/hrg/>

⁴ See <https://www.kmk.org/kmk/information-in-english.html>

⁵ In the following, whenever Higher Education Institutions in Germany are referred to, the statements are generally valid for Universities of Cooperative Education offering Bachelor's degrees as well.



from case to case (e.g., pricing, the proposed timeframe, prior experience with the agency, quality of a proposed concept etc.). Increasingly, public HEIs are placing an open call for tender that agencies have to apply to.

Since the legal status of this accreditation system had been put into question, in March 2016, the German Federal Constitutional Court tasked the federal states with the establishment of a new accreditation system that would rectify this unclear status until the end of 2017. As a result, the KMK agreed on an „Interstate Treaty on the Organization of a Joint Accreditation System to Ensure the Quality of Teaching and Learning at German Higher Education Institutions (Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty)”⁶ in 2016, which provided the legal framework for a new accreditation system. It was supplemented with the „Specimen Decree Pursuant to Article 4, Paragraphs 1 – 4 of the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty”⁷ in 2017. Both were enacted on January 1st, 2018, and the federal states agreed to implement the specimen decree into their own accreditation decrees that would not differ from the specimen decree in any substantial way. The last of these state decrees was ratified in March 2020. These decrees formed the basis for all accreditation procedures contractually agreed upon from January 1st, 2018 onward.

The main specifics of the new accreditation system are that, on the one hand, the accreditation procedure is split in two parts. First, the agencies carry out the review and provide an accreditation report, and then the HEI hands in their self-report and the accreditation report to the GAC, which takes all decisions on accreditation. On the other hand, agencies are no longer accredited by the GAC but are licensed on the basis of their inclusion in the EQAR. Furthermore, the criteria are now divided into formal and academic criteria, and it falls to the agency itself to formulate an assessment on the formal criteria while the expert group is tasked with the assessment of the academic criteria. The GAC can decide on a conditional accreditation, decides on the fulfilment of the conditions and also on any substantial changes during the accreditation period.

In 2021, the KMK has started the process of evaluating the new accreditation system or, more specifically, the Specimen Decree and its implementation in the federal states. All relevant stakeholders were asked to give input with specific questionnaires, especially the German Accreditation Council (GAC), the Confederation of German Employers' Associations, the German Trade Union Confederation, the Conference of University Rectors, Churches, Students, the Association of Private Universities and the Accreditation Agencies. The results were presented in a final report in 2023, after which a KMK working group developed suggestions for changes to which the stakeholders could again respond.⁸ The new specimen decree went into force on August 1st, 2025, together with most of the decrees in the federal states.⁹ All decisions by the GAC since that date will be based on the new decree. As of the writing of this report, all but one of the state decrees have been ratified, with only Thuringia missing.

⁶ See https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2016/2016_12_08-Studienakkreditierungsstaatsvertrag-englisch.pdf

⁷ See https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2017/2017_12_07-Muster-rechtsverordnung-englisch.pdf (translation of the old version)

⁸ The process and results of the evaluation have been summarised in a presentation (German) to be found here: https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/sites/default/files/downloads/2025/Pr%C3%A4sentation_L%C3%A4nder_MRVO_Evaluation_28012025_final.pdf

⁹ The current version can be found here: https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/sites/default/files/downloads/2024/2024_11_21-Musterrechtsverordnung.pdf (so far no English version has been provided).



The changes to the Specimen Decree were not substantial, mainly the new decree has clarified several points, e.g. criteria for dual study programmes, the requirement to publish the Intended Learning Outcomes and all relevant regulations for study programmes, and a clearer distinction between the criteria for system accreditation and programme accreditation. Among the more substantial changes is the full implementation of the European Approach and its extension to double or multiple degree programmes. Furthermore, the GAC now has an extended mandate to extend accreditation periods in exceptional cases, and system accredited HEIs no longer have to publish a full report of their internal accreditation procedures. On the procedural side, the informally called "Quality Improvement Process", which had already been in use before, is now formally included as a possibility within the Specimen Decree (§ 24 (6)).



4 About ZEvA

4.1 History of ZEvA

ZEvA was founded in 1995 by the State University Conference of Lower Saxony („Niedersächsische Landeshochschulkonferenz (LHK)“) and the Ministry of Science and Culture of Lower Saxony („Niedersächsisches Ministerium für Wissenschaft und Kultur (MWK)“) as the Central Evaluation Agency. As such, it is the oldest agency for quality assurance in higher education in Germany. Originally, ZEvA was installed as a part of the University of Hanover (now Gottfried-Wilhelm-Leibniz-University of Hanover), operating as a public institution of the state. As such, its mission was the evaluation of teaching and learning at higher education institutions in Lower Saxony. The evaluations centred around individual study subjects at public HEIs. The evaluations were carried out in the form of peer reviews and resulted in reports that were published and served as recommendations for the institutions and the state. After a few years, ZEvA usually conducted a follow-up evaluation of the same subjects.

As a reaction to the Bologna process, ZEvA was the first institution to introduce accreditation in 1998 and designed a procedure and criteria for the process. Subsequently, ZEvA's name was changed into Central Evaluation and Accreditation Agency to incorporate the new procedure, and the Standing Accreditation Commission („Ständige Akkreditierungskommission (SAK)“) was formed to decide on accreditations. When the GAC was founded in 2000, ZEvA was the first agency to be accredited for the accreditation of study programmes in Germany. In 2008, the GAC accredited ZEvA to carry out system accreditations, and ZEvA formed a separate division for the new procedure as well as a sub-committee of the SAK, the Commission for System Accreditation („Kommission Systemakkreditierung (KSA)“). ZEvA then was reaccredited three times by the GAC, and the results of the reaccreditation procedures also served as a basis for the renewal of ZEvA's ENQA membership and EQAR listing, until ZEvA switched to ENQA reviews under the new accreditation system.

In 2009, ZEvA was transformed into a foundation under public law, founded by the state of Lower Saxony. Since then, it acts as a private, non-profit organisation but retains its mission for the state of Lower Saxony for which it receives institutional funding. ZEvA has devised new forms of evaluation which include institutional and thematic evaluations that have taken the place of subject-related evaluations. Starting in 2008, ZEvA has also been conducting accreditations internationally and has established a separate division for international procedures and a Commission for International Affairs („Kommission für internationale Angelegenheiten (KIA)“) in 2014. In 2012, ZEvA has been licensed to conduct Institutional Audits at universities of applied sciences in Austria under the Quality Assurance Act for Higher Education Institutions („Hochschul-Qualitätssicherungsgesetz (HS-QSG)“).

Since 2012, ZEvA has conducted certification procedures for further education programmes at higher education institutions and validation procedures for vocational training programmes to formulate recommendations towards Higher Education Institutions regarding the recognition of parts of these programmes. In 2020, ZEvA has expanded certification procedures to incorporate certification of further education institutions at HEIs („institutional certification“).

In 2018, when the new legal framework for the accreditation of study programmes and quality assurance systems was introduced, ZEvA was licensed to conduct accreditation procedures under these new laws, has devised new procedures and changed the structure of its deciding bodies. The SAK, KIA and



KSA have been merged into one ZEvA Commission („ZEvA Kommission (ZEKo)“) which is now responsible for all decisions regarding accreditation, institutional audits, certification, and validation, in Germany and internationally. The final decision for accreditation procedures in Germany under the new legal framework falls to the GAC, however, and is thus not the responsibility of the ZEKO, which is merely tasked with the nomination of the respective expert groups and informed about the outcome of the procedures. From 2026 onwards, with the dissolution of the Standing Evaluation Commission (SEK) (see 4.2.3), the ZEKO will also be charged with the tasks of nominating experts for evaluation procedures in Lower Saxony and of approving the evaluation reports for publication.

4.2 ZEvA's Structure and Profile

4.2.1 General

ZEvA is an incorporated foundation under civil law, founded by the state of Lower Saxony (see Annex 1). As such it is charitable and not profit-orientated. ZEvA's internal structures are bindingly established by the Foundation Charter (Annex 2) as well as the rules of procedure assigned to the bodies and commissions (Annexes 3-6). Competencies and responsibilities as well as the procedures for appointing the respective members are clearly defined therein. The Charter clearly states the Foundation's purpose, (§ 2):

The purpose of the foundation is to perform quality assurance tasks and thereby promote science and research. It does this by participating in accreditation and reaccreditation, thereby contributing to scientific development, particularly in the European Higher Education Area, while taking national aspects into account.

In addition, the foundation pursues the following purposes:

- a) Consulting on issues of quality assurance and development, including the evaluation of teaching and studies at universities.
- b) Providing services for the state of Lower Saxony and Lower Saxony's higher education institutions to improve the quality of study and teaching within the meaning of Section 5 (2) NHG.
- c) Planning and implementation of procedures for the accreditation of study programs at higher education institutions and the system accreditation of higher education institutions for submission to the Accreditation Council.
- d) Further development of quality assurance procedures in terms of methodology and content.
- e) Establishment and maintenance of national and international cooperation, in particular within the framework of the creation of a unified European higher education area.
- f) Assumption of special tasks relating to quality assurance and quality development at universities on the basis of contractual arrangements.
- g) Planning and implementation of external quality assurance procedures at national and international level in addition to accreditation in accordance with letter c).

The Charter also defines ZEvA's legal bodies, namely the Foundation Council, the Executive Board and the ZEvA-Commission. The Standing Evaluation Commission has been disbanded in December 2025 and part of its tasks have been given to the ZEvA-Commission. The Council consists of seven members,



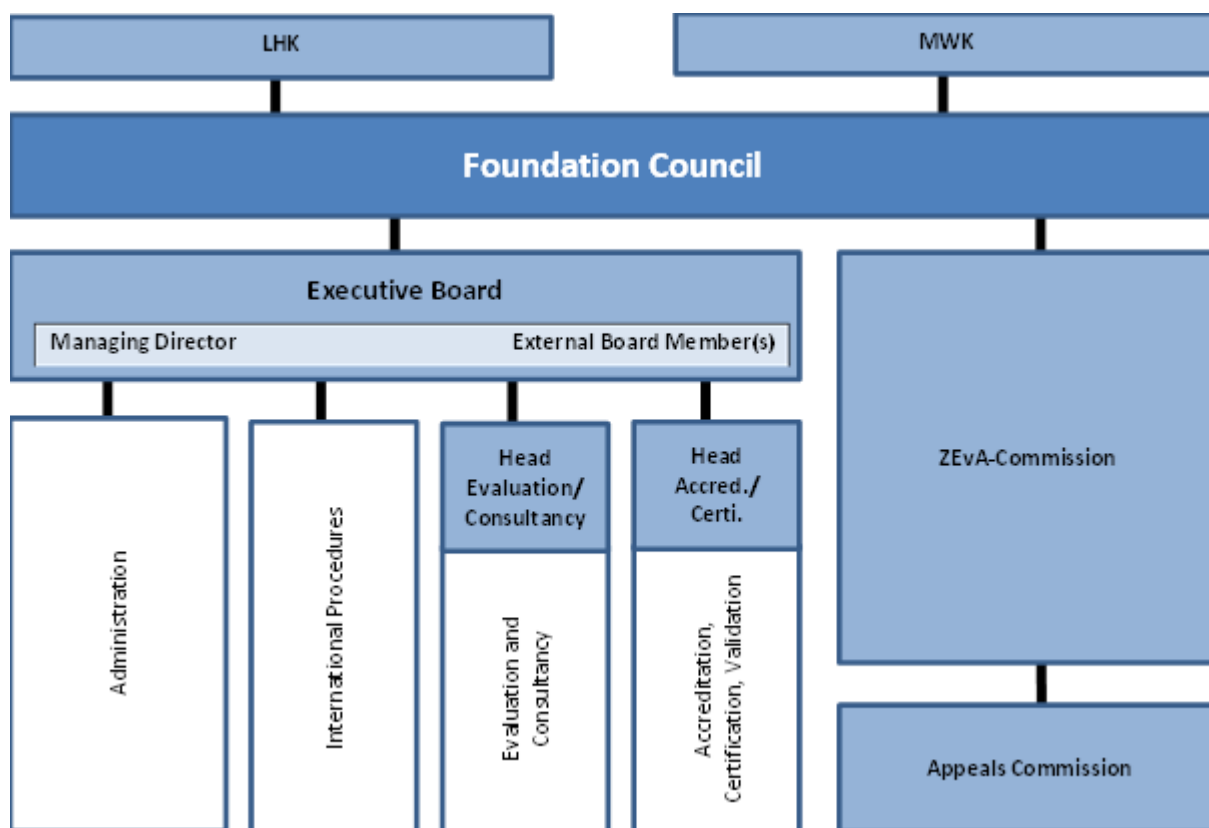
six of them appointed by the State Universities Conference (LHK) in agreement with the Ministry of Science and Culture of Lower Saxony (MWK) and one appointed directly by the MWK. Three members should be selected from HEIs in Lower Saxony and three from outside of Lower Saxony. The Board elects a chairperson and a deputy chairperson. The members are appointed for a period of 5 years. Re-election is permissible. The Board's tasks are defined in § 8:

- a) Appointing and dismissing members of the Executive Board
 - b) Receiving the report of the Foundation's Executive Board, Approving the budget and granting discharge to the Foundation's Executive Board,
 - c) Appointing the members of the ZEvA Commission on the basis of the proposals pursuant to § 12, and dismissing them,
 - d) Resolving on amendments to the statutes,
 - e) Deciding on the dissolution of the Foundation,
- Approval of the rules of procedure of the Executive Board and the ZEvA Commission.

The Executive Board consists of the Managing Director and one or two non-salaried external members, who are appointed by the Council for a period of five years (See Annex 4). Re-election is permissible as well. The Managing Director manages the day-to-day business of ZEvA, acts as the head of staff and represents ZEvA in judicial and extrajudicial matters. The external board members represent ZEvA outside towards the MWK and HEIs and determine the strategic direction of ZEvA together with the Managing Director.

For its different kinds of activities, ZEvA has appointed two Division Heads, one for Evaluation and Consultancy and one for Accreditation and Certification/Validation, who act as middle management for the project officers. The international procedures are headed by the managing director directly.

As will be further elaborated below, ZEvA's Foundation Council has approved a change of the Foundation Charter and thus a change in ZEvA's structure, as the Standing Evaluation Commission has been dissolved (the new charter can be found in Annex 2). As of January 6th, 2026, this decision has only just been ratified and thus, ZEvA's website, manuals and relevant rules of procedure have not yet been amended, but all changes will be implemented by the time of the site visit. The following diagram shows ZEvA's new internal structure:



The ZEvA Commission is described in detail in 4.2.2. For the Appeals Commission, which is appointed by the ZEvA Commission, see chapter 6.7. As the Appeals Commission does not take any final decisions, but advises the ZEvA Commission in appeals and complaints, it is not counted among ZEvA's bodies.

4.2.2 ZEvA-Commission

Central deciding body for all procedures is the ZEvA Commission (ZEKo). It was formed in 2018 in reaction to the changes in the German accreditation system. Previously, ZEvA had employed three distinctive bodies, the Standing Accreditation Commission (SAK), responsible for all procedures in Germany, the Commission for International Affairs (KIA), and the Standing Evaluation Commission (SEK, responsible for all evaluation procedures in Lower Saxony. Additionally, the Commission for System Accreditation (KSA), a sub-commission to the SAK, dealt specifically with procedures in system accreditation and prepared these for the final decision by the SAK. Since, in the new German accreditation system, accreditation decisions are no longer taken by the agency's internal commission, ZEvA decided to merge these commissions into one, the newly formed ZEKo. As with the former commissions, all relevant stakeholders are represented. The ZEKo is comprised of long-standing experts from academia, the professional world, quality assurance and the student body. Its composition is as follows:

- a) seven representatives from universities or equivalent institutions of higher education, representing the major fields of study humanities and cultural sciences; mathematics and natural sciences; health care, medicine and psychology; engineering sciences; law, economics and social sciences,
- b) four representatives from universities of applied sciences from the major fields of study



economics and law; social sciences and health care; engineering and architecture; natural and life sciences,

- c) two representatives of the study areas art, design and music,
- d) two representatives of quality management at universities,
- e) two representatives from the professional practice,
- f) one student representative each of a university or equivalent institution of higher education and a university of applied sciences.¹⁰

The members elect a chairperson from their rank, who is appointed for three years. Re-election is possible.

The ZEKo takes decisions on national and international accreditation procedures (apart from those within the current German accreditation system), institutional audits, certifications and validations, approves evaluation reports for publication, approves revised procedures and manuals and appoints expert groups for all of these procedures, including those according to the current German accreditation system. The results of procedures concluding with a GAC decision are presented to the ZEKo for information and discussion. The ZEKo reflects on pertinent issues from these procedures and advises ZEvA in questions of strategy. Additionally, the ZEKo can appoint working groups for special topics, as for instance the digitalisation of study and teaching.

The ZEKo members are appointed by the foundation council. Student members are appointed for two years, all other members for three years. The ZEKo's procedures are regulated by the ZEKo's Rules of Procedure (see Annex 5).

4.2.3 Standing Evaluation Commission

Until 2025, ZEvA's Standing Evaluation Commission supervised ZEvA's evaluation activities as a whole and conducted decisions about ZEvA's evaluation activities in Lower Saxony, usually covering the following two years. The commission has received reports on ongoing evaluation processes and decided on recommendations for measures concerning quality improvement. Furthermore, it approved the refined procedural principles for ZEvA's evaluation procedures (based on the ESG) and monitored compliance with them.

After consultation with the KMK and LHK, ZEvA's Foundation Council has decided in December 2025 to dissolve the SEK, since its function as a coordinating body of evaluation procedures had become superfluous. In the future, ZEvA coordinates its services and work plan in Lower Saxony directly with the ministry and the State Rector's Conference. Functions such as approval of evaluation reports and the nomination of experts will in the future be performed by the ZEKo.

¹⁰ For the current composition, see <https://www.zeva.org/en/agency/zeko/>



4.3 ZEvA's External Quality Assurance Activities

4.3.1 Activities in Germany

4.3.1.1 Programme Accreditation

The subject of programme accreditation are Bachelor's and Master's programmes of state or state-recognized universities in Germany. Since January 2018, all programme and system accreditation procedures are conducted according to the accreditation decrees of the federal states („Studienakkreditierungsverordnungen der Länder“).

The accreditation process is a multi-stage procedure based on the principle of peer review. ZEvA has issued a manual which describes this process in detail.¹¹ If a higher education institution commissions an agency, it appoints an expert group, the composition of which reflects both the subject matter and the specific profile of the study programme. The expert group includes representatives of all relevant interest groups, namely

- at least two professors/academics with expertise in the relevant field of study to be examined,
- a representative of professional practice with close professional ties to the field of study,
- a student from the field of study.

Part 2 and 3 of the current accreditation regulations provide the criteria for assessment of programmes. Compliance with the formal criteria defined in Part 2 shall be assessed by the agency. The agency documents the results in a report, which is made available to the experts and the university.

The academic assessment of the study programme is based on the criteria laid down in Part 3. This part is conducted by the expert group and, in addition to the analysis of the self-assessment report, usually includes a site-visit at the HEI.¹² In the course of this site visit, the expert group holds discussions with representatives of the university, at least the university management and administration, teaching personnel, as well as students and alumni, if there are any. Subsequently, and combined with the report on the formal criteria, the experts prepare an accreditation report with a recommendation for a decision on the accreditation of the study programme(s).

If there is a reasonable and justified connection between two or more study programmes, the HEI and ZEvA can agree to carry out the accreditation in the form of a cluster procedure; nevertheless, the accreditation decision always relates to the individual study programme. In the German accreditation system, cluster accreditations („Bündelakkreditierungen“) are regulated in § 30 of the specimen decree, where it is made clear that programmes can be organised in a cluster “if these have a high affinity on subject level that goes beyond the mere affiliation to a disciplinary culture” (§ 30 (1)). Clusters

¹¹ See https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1260/leitfaden_programmakkreditierung_jan_2023-1.pdf

¹² In the initial accreditation of programmes that have not yet begun ("Concept Accreditation") and in re-accreditations, the experts can decide to dispense with a site visit in exceptional cases and will instead conduct a desktop validation.



should not exceed 10 study programmes, and all clusters with more than 4 study programmes (or involving a “combined study programme”¹³) have to be approved by the GAC beforehand.

The Accreditation Council decides on the accreditation of the study programme upon application by the university based on its SAR and the expert group's accreditation report.

If a programme has successfully undergone an accreditation procedure, it receives a limited accreditation of eight years with or without conditions and bears the GAC's quality seal for the period of its accreditation.

If the HEI installs any significant changes to the programme, or if its working conditions undergo significant changes, the HEI has to inform the GAC, which will then decide if these changes have a bearing on the programme's accreditation status.

4.3.1.2 Accreditation of Study Programmes Outside of the Bachelor/Master-System

In some singular cases, ZEvA also accredits study programmes that do not fall in the Bachelor or Master category, but since this occurs only rarely, ZEvA does not consider this as a separate field of activity but rather a part of programme accreditation. Examples are Diploma programmes and structured doctoral programmes. Purpose and context of these accreditations may vary. Only in Lower Saxony, special rules and criteria for doctoral programmes have been devised by the Ministry of Science and Culture that refer to the ECTS system and the Dublin Descriptors for the doctoral level („Leitlinien und Kriterien für die Akkreditierung von Promotionsstudiengängen in Niedersachsen“).¹⁴ As the universities in Lower Saxony increasingly turn to system accreditation, this type of procedure, which has already been scarce, is expected to fade out completely in the near future. In the remaining cases, ZEvA uses criteria relevant to the case based on the ESG and the applicable German accreditation criteria. The procedure resembles that of the accreditation of international Bachelor and Master programmes, with the final decision taken by the ZEvA Commission.

4.3.1.3 System Accreditation

System accreditation assesses the „internal quality assurance system of a higher education institution in the area of teaching and learning.“ The internal system must, among other things, ensure the setup and operation of compliant study programmes according to the criteria of programme accreditation and thus also adhere to the standards mentioned in Part I of the ESG. The agency assesses whether this is conducted in line with the accreditation criteria at the higher education institution in the course of the system accreditation procedure. The assessment of the internal quality assurance system of a higher education institution also gives consideration to its quality assurance strategy (Standard 1.1, ESG 2015).

¹³ Combined study programmes are programmes involving two or more subjects studied together. This is most common in teacher training programmes and in the humanities. See § 32 of the specimen decree.

¹⁴ See https://www.mwk.niedersachsen.de/download/157318/Leitlinien_und_Kriterien_fuer_die_Akkreditierung_von_Promotionsstudiengaengen_in_Niedersachsen_Stand_17.07.2020_nicht_vollstaendig_barrierefrei_-_Download_.pdf



A higher education institution that obtains system accreditation has self-accrediting status, i.e. it is given the right to award the quality label of the German Accreditation Council to its own programmes, without the programmes having to undergo external programme accreditation. As a central prerequisite for this, the HEI must prove that it has implemented an effective and appropriate internal accreditation procedure which involves a regular assessment of all programmes by external experts.

System accreditation is designed as a multiple-step procedure as stipulated in the ESG. The assessment of the quality assurance system is conducted based on a self-evaluation report of the higher education institution and two on-site visits of the expert panel (one of which can be online). In preparation for the second site visit the higher education institution compiles a so-called sample, i.e. a collection of documents which illustrate the impact of internal quality assurance processes (including the internal accreditation procedure) on selected study programmes. The sample provides another important basis for the assessment of the system. The final accreditation decision is taken by the German Accreditation Council based on the assessment report of the expert panel, and the GAC also assesses the fulfilment of conditions and significant changes to the QA system during the eight-year accreditation period.

Experts in system accreditation need to possess solid experience and competencies in higher education leadership and management, quality assurance, accreditation and/or the development of educational programmes. Ideally, they should also be used to working in international settings. As in programme accreditation, all expert groups also include a student member and a representative of professional practice from outside academia. At the request of the higher education institution, the panel may be complemented by a quality management professional.

4.3.1.4 Certification and Validation

HEIs increasingly provide opportunities for lifelong learning and further education to students, graduates and lecturers. ZEvA offers the external assessment and certification of such further education modules and programmes as well as the institutional certification of tertiary institutions or organisational units at HEIs offering further education programmes (as e.g. specialized institutes or departments, which may also be jointly run by several HEIs). In these procedures, the focus of the assessment lies on analysing the structure, the efficiency and the objectives of the HEI or the organizational unit, and – if applicable – the integration of the unit into the overall structure and strategy of the HEI.

Additionally, ZEvA conducts validations of educational programmes offered by non-university education providers. The target group of a validation by ZEvA are education providers with a relationship to higher education, but whose educational offerings do not themselves belong to the higher education system. The subjects of validation procedures may be, for instance, curricular elements of a regulated vocational school education or independent educational modules and programmes that are offered by public or private educational institutions. As a central prerequisite for the awarding of the ZEvA quality label, all these educational units and programmes have to provide evidence that they impart qualifications at an academic level and could be recognised in study programmes leading to level six of the German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and are thus equivalent in level and content to educational units in Bachelor's programmes at HEIs. Hence, the procedure does not only serve to support non-university education providers in increasing their quality in teaching and learning



but also to increase the politically desired permeability of the secondary into the tertiary education sector.

As laid out in the ZEvA manual,¹⁵ the requirements of the ESG are binding for certification procedures. In validation procedures, some deviation from the ESG is possible as regards the execution of the procedure and the assessment framework. Depending on the complexity and scope of the procedure, the process must be designed accordingly. However, the main purpose of the procedures would be to determine the equivalence of the defined learning objectives and competencies or the classification according to the German Qualifications Framework, check consistency with the structure and system of modules and credit points (according to ECTS) and to ensure suitable teaching and learning conditions.

The procedure is the same as in international programme accreditation, always involving handing in a self-report, a site visit, a review report and a final decision by the ZEKo. The decision can be on unconditional or conditional certification/validation or refusal of certification/validation. The certification or validation period is usually eight years.

So far, ZEvA has conducted certification and validation procedures in Germany and Switzerland. The latter included the validation of a professional training programme offered by the International Telecommunication Union (see also 2.4.3).

A separate certification procedure is the assessment of an institution's or programme's quality of internationalisation under the CeQuint label. CeQuint as a methodology has been devised by the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education.¹⁶ As an ECA member and a partner in this project, ZEvA also offers certification under this label.

The procedure also includes a self-assessment report, a site visit and a review report. The final decision is two-fold. Firstly, the responsible agency takes a formal decision on the certification and then the HEI has to apply for the certificate at the ECA secretariat. The final decision on the awarding of the certificate is taken by ECA's Certification Group. The certificate is awarded for six years.

ECA has published an assessment framework and a guide to assessing internationalisation and provides a template for the self-assessment report on the CeQuint website.¹⁷ The website also lists examples of good practice. ZEvA follows the CeQuint assessment framework and guide in its procedures.

So far, ZEvA has assessed four programmes at two institutions, but the demand for this label has been negligible as of yet.¹⁸

4.3.1.5 Evaluation and Consultancy

Evaluation

In Lower Saxony, ZEvA receives institutional funding to support higher education institutions in fulfilling their obligation for external evaluation in teaching as stipulated in the state higher education

¹⁵ See https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1422/leitfaden_zertifizierung_und_validierung_dez_2023.pdf

¹⁶ <https://cequint.eu/>

¹⁷ <https://cequint.eu/key-documents/>

¹⁸ All decisions and reports on the CeQuint certificate can be found here: <https://cequint.eu/awarded-certificates/>



act. ZEvA can also offer evaluations outside of Lower Saxony and even internationally (see also 4.3.2.1), but these would not fall under ZEvA's mandate in Lower Saxony and are thus not covered by the institutional funding.

In all procedures that fall under the mandate of ZEvA in Lower Saxony, ZEvA takes care to separate the resources needed for this task from those needed for its business areas, providing a proof of expenditure each year to the Ministry of Science and Culture (MWK). This proof of expenditure is also subject to the annual audit ZEvA is undergoing. Funds that were not used in the previous year will be transferred back to the MWK.

ZEvA offers consultancy (see below) and the organization and implementation of external evaluation procedures as a service to higher education institutions. It provides support to HEIs for quality development and improvement in all areas related to study, teaching and learning, including quality management. ZEvA considers itself as a catalyst for quality development in higher education and not as a supervisory authority. In order to achieve the greatest possible benefit for the HEIs, the specific objectives of an evaluation process are clarified in detail at the beginning of each project.

The evaluation procedures are based on the ESG. The processes run in several stages, i.e. they include phases of internal evaluation (self-report) and external evaluation (site visit by a group of experts), and ZEvA can also accompany and support the HEI during the implementation phase.

ZEvA's range of services in the field of evaluation and consulting currently includes the areas of thematic evaluation, programme evaluation, institutional evaluation, project monitoring and evaluation, and consulting services for higher education institutions. In recent years, the focus was mainly on thematic evaluation, project evaluation and monitoring, and consulting. Additionally, ZEvA has been tasked with organizing the assessment of project proposals for public funding programmes.

At the moment, ZEvA is in discussion with the Ministry of Higher Education about a new ongoing task, namely monitoring academic success and motivation of students at HEIs in Lower Saxony. At first this will mainly focus on teacher training programmes, but prospectively this will be expanded to all fields of study. ZEvA shall analyse statistical data about academic success and formulate an assessment based on these findings. The new project is supposed to start in the first half of 2026.

Assessments in evaluation procedures are carried out in the form of a peer review. An expert group of academic colleagues, supplemented by representatives of the student body and professional practice, conducts discussions with various interest groups of the institution to be assessed based on a self-report. The expert group writes a report about the results and makes recommendations for the further development of the institution.

The results of an evaluation procedure are published by ZEvA. The respective report, including a statement from the evaluated institution and the composition of the group of experts are made available as an online publication on the ZEvA website.

The nomination of experts, as well as the approval of evaluation reports for publication, lies with the ZEKo. No formal decisions are taken as the focus of evaluation procedures is to advise HEIs and/or the responsible ministry on the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning.



Consultancy

In addition to thematic evaluations, ZEvA offers higher education institutions, vocational academies and other educational institutions consulting services. The main topics are:

- Organizational development
- Curriculum development
- Internal evaluation
- Project management
- Accreditation, certification and validation

The institutions of higher education have the opportunity to get extensive information in all areas of study and teaching as well as quality management and to get in touch with both the agency's employees and proven subject-specific experts.

Evaluation, accreditation or certification procedures can be prepared in a confidential atmosphere with communication based on partnership. Internal structures and processes can be optimized by looking from an external position and there is a chance to initiate and facilitate internal change processes.

Consulting services from ZEvA can be used via three process variants:

- Consultation without the involvement of external experts
- Consultation with the involvement of external experts
- Consultation based on evaluation projects

As consultation is not an instrument of external quality assurance, it is not subject to the ESG and thus only mentioned here for completeness' sake. Consultation for HEIs in Lower Saxony falls under ZEvA's mandate from the state government.

Consultancy at an HEI precludes a subsequent accreditation or certification by the same agency in the same subject matter at this institution. If, for example, ZEvA provides advice on the content, the design or further development of a curriculum or an internal university quality management system, it cannot assess this as part of a subsequent accreditation or certification procedure.

ZEvA has had several consulting projects since 2021,¹⁹ but in none of these cases did ZEvA do a subsequent accreditation. Some of these consulting projects were at HEIs preparing for a system accreditation. In all of these cases, the actual system accreditation was carried out by other agencies. One case concerned an HEI preparing for a „triple crown“ accreditation (AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS). ZEvA has cooperated with a consultancy agency to prepare the HEI for these procedures. Recently, ZEvA has also started to cooperate with two professors for consultancy services, but no projects have arisen from that cooperation yet.

Apart from that, ZEvA offers in-house workshops for HEIs preparing for an accreditation to inform them about the requirements of the current accreditation system, similar to open seminars ZEvA offers for accreditation applicants. For Universities in Lower Saxony, these are part of ZEvA's service and are offered free of charge. These workshops, however, cannot be considered consultancy, as ZEvA does not advise these HEIs on the design and contents of their study programmes but simply provides

¹⁹ See Annex 17



information on the current system, and thus these seminars would not preclude a subsequent assessment.

4.3.2 International Activities

4.3.2.1 Cross-Border Quality Assurance

ZEvA is shifting its focus increasingly towards international activities due to a rapidly increasing demand and the concurrent shrinking of the German accreditation market. To expand its international activities, ZEvA has also expanded its geographical focus. Due to ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the middle east, the former focus areas of Eastern Europe and the Arab region have been on the decline with the exception of Ukraine, where ZEvA procedures are also recognized by the national Ministry of Education. New opportunities have arisen mainly in Central, East and South East Asia, namely China, Uzbekistan and Indonesia, with more countries on the list of markets to be explored. ZEvA is working together with cooperation partners in these countries to promote its services. In China, two procedures have been concluded, whereas procedures in Uzbekistan and Indonesia are in the planning stages.

Programme accreditation procedures still constitute the biggest part of ZEvA's international business. For these procedures, ZEvA has formulated its own assessment framework, which is in close accordance with the ESG. The assessment criteria and the review procedure are described in detail in the ZEvA Manual for the External Assessment of Study Programmes.²⁰ The manual is published on the ZEvA website and serves as a central reference document for both higher education institutions and reviewers.

In addition to programme accreditation, ZEvA has also developed an assessment framework and procedural guidelines for institutional accreditation procedures outside Germany.²¹ The concept was applied in practice for the first time in 2019 at a university of applied sciences in the Kurdish region of Iraq, where it was combined with a programme accreditation procedure. Since then, ZEvA has applied this procedure also at a university in the United Arab Emirates. Another procedure is ongoing and at least two more are planned for 2026/27.

Furthermore, ZEvA is licensed to conduct quality audits at universities of applied sciences in Austria. The assessment framework is specified by the Austrian Higher Education Institution Quality Assurance Act („Hochschulqualitätssicherungsgesetz“) (§ 22 HS-QSG), which integrates the ESG criteria for internal quality assurance at higher education institutions. ZEvA has published an audit manual for the support of experts and higher education institutions, which explains the assessment procedure and the audit requirements in detail.²² The audits involve a self-report and a 2-3 day site visit at the university, leading up to the final certification of the institutional quality management system with the ZEvA quality label.

²⁰ See https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1494/manual_international_programme_accreditation_jan-2023.pdf

²¹ See https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1512/manual_international_institutional_accreditation_jan-2023.pdf

²² See https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1549/leitfaden_qualitatsaudits_osterreich_jan_2023-1.pdf



Finally, ZEvA also offers evaluation, certification and validation services on an international scale, but so far these do not yet constitute relevant business areas and have not been in significant demand.

4.3.2.2 International Networks

From the beginning, ZEvA has been engaged in networks both nationally and internationally. In its early years, it collaborated with other evaluation bodies like evalag and the Nordverbund. In 2000/01, ZEvA has collaborated with the "Vereniging van Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten" in the Netherlands (VSNU) and the "Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad" (VL.I.R.) for an international evaluation of Physics. In 2002, ZEvA founded the European Institute for Quality Assurance (EIQA) as a network of up to 40 higher education institutions that also served as an advisory body. ZEvA is a founding member both of the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (now the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)) and the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA), a member of The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), a long-standing member of the German Evaluation Society („Deutsche Gesellschaft für Evaluation (DeGEval)“) and a member of the Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA). ZEvA has been part of the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI) and thus has participated in the formulation of the Dublin Descriptors that formed the basis for the framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.

In much of its international work, ZEvA also relies on international partners and has signed memorandums of understanding with the following organisations that can assist in promoting ZEvA's services, finding experts in the country concerned or support HEIs that are interested in ZEvA's services:

- National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA), Ukraine
- Analytical Center for Education Quality (ACEQ), Ukraine
- Alliance of Sino-German Universities of Applied Sciences (ASGUAS), China
- AK Flagman, Uzbekistan
- Accreditation and Rating International Agency (ARIA), Uzbekistan
- National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC), Moldova

Furthermore, ZEvA cooperates with the German Academic Exchange service (DAAD) and conducts seminars about international accreditation and joint programmes for them.

A cooperation with the Russian agency AKKORK has been suspended since the beginning of the Ukraine conflict, and an MoU with the Ministry of Science of the Kurdish region in Iraq has been dormant for several years.



5 Profile, Functioning and EQA activities of ZEvA (Compliance with Part 3 of the ESG)

5.1 Standard 3.1: Activities, Policy and Processes for Quality Assurance

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

External Quality Assurance Activities

ZEvA carries out external quality assurance procedures on a regular basis (see chapter 4.3). They comprise the central task and purpose of the agency and occupy a large majority of its time and resources. The largest portion is still programme accreditation in Germany but especially system accreditation and international procedures have increased significantly and are expected to increase more in the future, while programme accreditation will be reduced in volume. All procedures are described on ZEvA's webpage and in separate manuals as to ensure a clear distinction between them.

As stated before, in the state of Lower Saxony, ZEvA's task as an evaluation agency is to carry out evaluations and to counsel and support the public HEIs in Lower Saxony, encompassing ZEvA's mission for which it receives state funding. (See 4.3.1.5)

For consultancy outside of Lower Saxony, which only happens on rare occasions and is not an ongoing task which ZEvA promotes actively at the moment, ZEvA keeps these activities separate from its ESG-based assessment procedures. Consultancy cannot be combined with accreditation or certification in the same matter and experts involved in consultancy would be excluded from these procedures, if such cases would arise, which so far they have not. ZEvA has included information to that matter in all of its manuals, e.g. international programme accreditation:

It should be noted that a quality assessment in the form of an accreditation or certification may not be combined with consultancy on the same subject matter. If, for example, ZEvA provides content-related counselling with regard to the conception or the further development of a curriculum or of an institution's internal QA system, it cannot assess the same educational programme or QA system in the context of a subsequent accreditation or certification procedure (p. 6).²³

As consultancy does not result in a published report, no public reference to the ESG is made in these projects. As for validation procedures, the criteria developed for these procedures are derived from the ESG because ZEvA assesses these non-academic programmes with respect to their fitness for recognition within higher education programmes. The resulting resolutions and certificates, however, do not make reference to the ESG as a label. Annex 18 provides an overview of the number of procedures concluded since 2021.

²³ https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1494/manual_international_programme_accreditation_jan-2023.pdf



Goals and Objectives

The agency's understanding of quality, which provides the basis of its work, is predicated on the ZEvA mission statement published on ZEvA's webpage.²⁴ ZEvA's mission is defined in the Foundation Charter, which states:

The purpose of the foundation is to perform quality assurance tasks and thereby promote science and research. It does this by participating in accreditation and reaccreditation, thereby contributing to scientific development, particularly in the European Higher Education Area, while taking national aspects into account.

In addition, the foundation pursues the following purposes:

- a) Consulting on issues of quality assurance and development, including the evaluation of teaching and studies at universities.
- b) Providing services for the state of Lower Saxony and Lower Saxony's higher education institutions to improve the quality of study and teaching within the meaning of Section 5 (2) NHG.
- c) Planning and implementation of procedures for the accreditation of study programs at higher education institutions and the system accreditation of higher education institutions for submission to the Accreditation Council.
- d) Further development of quality assurance procedures in terms of methodology and content.
- e) Establishment and maintenance of national and international cooperation, in particular within the framework of the creation of a unified European higher education area.
- f) Assumption of special tasks relating to quality assurance and quality development at universities on the basis of contractual arrangements.
- g) Planning and implementation of external quality assurance procedures at national and international level in addition to accreditation in accordance with letter c).

Additionally, ZEvA's understanding of quality and organizational goals are laid out in the Quality Manual (Chapter 1),²⁵ and through the manual and the definition of ZEvA's individual procedures in their respective manuals, the goals are put into practice.

Stakeholders are involved in the ZEKo, ZEvA's central decision-making body, with representatives of the areas of higher education, professional practice, quality assurance and the student body.²⁶ Additionally, the Appeals Commission is also comprised of representatives from higher education, professional practice and the student body.²⁷ Thus, all relevant stakeholders are involved in all decisions on quality assurance procedures.

²⁴ <https://www.zeva.org/en/agency/mission-and-principle/>

²⁵ https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1378/quality_manual_en_october_2023.pdf

²⁶ <https://www.zeva.org/en/agency/zeko/>

²⁷ <https://www.zeva.org/en/agency/audit-commission/>



5.2 Standard 3.2: Official Status

Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

On 11 September 2008 ZEvA was converted into a legally independent foundation under civil law (Annex 1). As a foundation, ZEvA is a non-profit organisation. Its mission and governance structure are defined in the Charter (Annex 2) and by federal and state foundation laws. ZEvA thus has a Foundation Council (Annex 3), an Executive Board (Annex 4) and other bodies, namely the ZEvA Commission (Annex 5) and the Appeals Commission (Annex 6). Furthermore, ZEvA is listed in the foundation register of Lower Saxony.²⁸

Programme and System Accreditation

ZEvA's recognition as a quality assurance agency is dependent on ZEvA's listing in the EQAR. In Germany, ZEvA had to be accredited by the GAC in the old accreditation system. ZEvA was the first agency to be accredited and has retained this status until the accreditation system was changed. Under the current system, the GAC recognizes ZEvA on the basis of ZEvA's EQAR listing.²⁹

Evaluation

ZEvA's mandate for evaluation procedures in Lower Saxony is defined through ZEvA's foundation certificate issued by the state of Lower Saxony and ZEvA's statutes. Recognition is ensured through the representative of the Ministry of Science and Culture and the State University Conference on the Foundation Council.

International Procedures and Certification

In international procedures and certification, ZEvA in most cases has no legal mandate, as the procedures are not part of a regulatory process. Thus, there is no need for recognition by a higher authority apart from ZEvA's listing in the EQAR. Recognition of ZEvA's quality seal in these cases is rather dependent on ZEvA's reputation which increases with every completed procedure. Already, ZEvA has made a name for itself in Eastern Europe and the Arabian and North African countries as well as in China. Institutions seek out ZEvA's quality seal for marketing purposes and because they have confidence that ZEvA's procedures will help them improve the quality of teaching and learning.

There are two exceptions: In Austria, ZEvA has been recognized by the Ministry of Science and Research in 2013. Similarly, ZEvA is listed in Ukraine as an agency whose accreditation is equivalent to that of the national agency NAQA.³⁰

²⁸ See https://www.arl-we.niedersachsen.de/startseite/grundbesitz_und_stiftungen/stiftungen/

²⁹ See the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty, Article 5 (3), Nr. 5: "[The GAC] authorizes the agencies within the meaning of Article 3 paragraph 2 clause 2. As a requirement for the authorization the agency must prove that it is reliably able to exercise the tasks of the assessment and the preparation of the review report; this is refutably assumed for agencies that are listed in the EQAR."

³⁰ <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/554-2019-%D1%80#n8>



5.3 Standard 3.3: Independence

Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

5.3.1 Organisational Independence

Legal independence provides the basis for independence and autonomy. As a foundation, ZEvA is a separate legal entity that governs itself. Thus, ZEvA is autonomous and only bound by its statutes and the legal framework it is operating in, namely the foundation laws in Lower Saxony and on a federal level, the German accreditation decrees in each federal state, the Higher Education Institution Quality Assurance Act in Austria³¹ and the „Regulations on Accreditation of Study Programmes in Higher Education” in Ukraine.³² Furthermore, there are budgetary restrictions under which ZEvA operates in connection with the institutional funding received by the state of Lower Saxony, as defined by the General Auxiliary Conditions for Grants for Institutional Support („Allgemeine Nebenbestimmungen für Zuwendungen zur institutionellen Förderung (ANBest-I)”).³³ Within these legal boundaries, ZEvA’s bodies are independent in their decisions.

The supervisory Foundation Council consists of six representatives of academia and one representative of the Founder, namely the State of Lower Saxony. The other members of the Foundation Council, in the legal sense, are natural persons and not representatives of institutions, e.g. higher education institutions or associations. Its members are elected by the State University Conference of Lower Saxony with the exception of the representative of the State of Lower Saxony, who is appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The Foundation Council in turn is responsible for appointing the members of the Executive Board and the ZEKo, while the members of the Appeals Commission are elected by the ZEKo.

5.3.2 Operational Independence

Operational independence is warranted through independent bodies, which hold discussions and take decisions on the basis of general guidelines and laws, e.g. the accreditation decrees of the German federal states and ZEvA’s ESG-based criteria for international accreditation. There are no restrictions that are agency-specific or grant a binding influence to individual interest groups. New or revised procedures or criteria are approved by the ZEKo without outside influence. The same is true for the nomination of experts by the ZEKo. Decisions of the Foundation Council, the ZEKo and the Appeals Committee are taken by majority vote, with no vetoing rights granted to one party.

³¹ <https://www.bmfwf.gv.at/wissenschaft/hochschulsystem/gesetzliche-grundlagen/hs-qsg.html>

³² https://en.naq.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Regulations_on_accreditation.pdf

³³ See https://www.bva.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Aufgaben/ZMV/Zuwendungen_national/nebenbestimmungen_anbest_i_2019.pdf?blob=publicationFile&v=5



5.3.3 Independence of Formal Outcomes

All of ZEvA's formal decisions are taken by the ZEvA Commission, which is acting independently and without third-party influence, as stipulated in its rules of procedure (see Annex 5). Formal decisions in German programme and system accreditation are taken by the GAC.

ZEvA's experts also act independently as individuals, not as representatives of an institution or organisation. They are not subject to third-party influence and only bound by the terms of ZEvA's expert contracts, which also ensure that no conflict of interest exists, and that the experts' assessment shall be based on the criteria of the respective quality assurance system (e.g., the accreditation decrees of the German federal states). Through the contract, experts are also excluded from advisory positions at the institution assessed over the course of the procedure.

5.4 Standard 3.4: Thematic Analysis

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

ZEvA attaches great importance to the analysis and reflection of the external quality assurance procedures and has also carried out conferences on this subject, the results of which have been published. In the past, ZEvA has published an extensive evaluation of the effects of the Bologna process in Lower Saxony and beyond. Furthermore, ZEvA staff had the opportunity to place articles in national and international publications, e.g. on international accreditation and dual study programmes. Since ZEvA's last review, ZEvA has installed a new system that ensures the regular publication of thematic analyses and has started a new academic series „Studien zum Qualitätsmanagement im Hochschulwesen“ (ISSN 2750-7475), listed in the German National Library. So far, six publications have been brought forth in this series:

1. Antje Kuhle, Programmakkreditierung in der Corona-Pandemie – Eine Bilanz. Studien zum Qualitätsmanagement im Hochschulwesen, Nr. 1 Hannover 2022.
2. ZEvA, 2021: Themen, Trends und Perspektiven, Studien zum Qualitätsmanagement im Hochschulwesen, Nr. 2, Hannover 2022.
3. Anja Grube, Malte Huylmans, Internationale Akkreditierung im Europäischen Hochschulraum: Befunde aus Gutachten & Beschlüssen deutschsprachiger Qualitätssicherungsagenturen. Studien zum Qualitätsmanagement im Hochschulwesen, Nr. 3, Hannover 2023.
4. ZEvA, 2022: Themen, Trends und Perspektiven, Studien zum Qualitätsmanagement im Hochschulwesen, Nr. 4, Hannover 2023.
5. Anja Grube, Malte Huylmans, International Accreditation in the European Higher Education Area: Findings from Review Reports & Decisions of German Speaking Quality Assurance Agencies. Studien zum Qualitätsmanagement im Hochschulwesen, Nr. 5, Hannover 2024.³⁴

³⁴ This is a translated version of Nr. 3.



6. Torsten Futterer, Beurteilungen von Förderanträgen durch individuelle Gutachtende und durch Gutachtergruppen. Studien zum Qualitätsmanagement im Hochschulwesen, Nr. 6, Hannover 2024:

The responsibility for ensuring the regular publication of thematic analyses lies with the Executive Board and the department heads. They decide on topics to be tackled and on the persons responsible for putting together the analysis. The thematic analysis will then be defined as a project in ZEvA's management software and assigned a time budget. Depending on the subject, a member of the ZEvA Commission or the Board can serve as academic advisor for the analysis. The final text is approved for publication by the Foundation Board and then published in ZEvA's academic series.

For the future, thematic analyses could also be conducted with outside cooperation partners like e.g. higher education research centres. Furthermore, the German agencies and the GAC have discussed the possibility of joint thematic analyses but no project has been agreed upon as yet. Furthermore, ZEvA is testing the use of generative AI in the design and composition of thematic analyses at the moment. A pilot analysis is expected to be finished in the first half of 2026.

5.5 Standard 3.5: Resources

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

ZEvA has sufficient resources to carry out all of their external quality assurance procedures.

ZEvA's activities are managed by the Executive Board, which consists of the Managing Director and at least one unsalaried outside member. The Managing Director oversees ZEvA's day-to-day activities and acts as head of staff. The Board members are appointed by the Foundation Council for 5 years.

ZEvA has reduced personnel over the last six years to lower general costs. This has been accompanied by an ongoing process of increasing efficiency in internal processes and an almost complete digitalization of processes.

Of the academic staff, two project officers are exclusively working on procedures within ZEvA's mandate in Lower Saxony. Most of the other academic staff are working in at least two areas of activity. Two project officers serve as heads of their respective field, one for evaluation and counselling in Lower Saxony, one for accreditation and certification. The international procedures are overseen by the Managing Director directly. Information about ZEvA's personnel can be found on ZEvA's website.³⁵

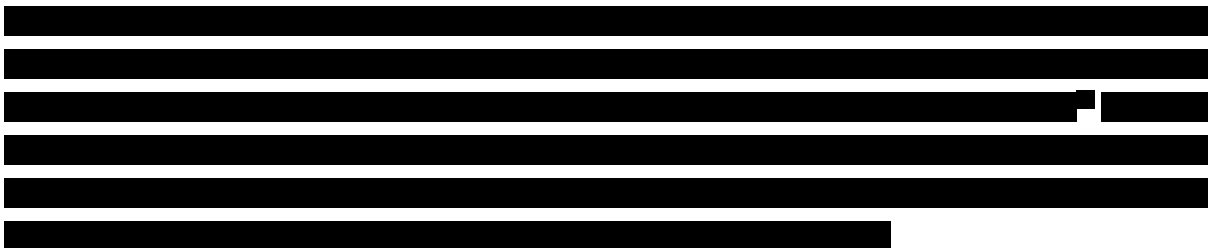
To supplement the standing personnel, ZEvA also works with very experienced Freelancers in the area of programme accreditation. Most importantly, they can fill in for a project officer in case of sickness or handle some work overflow when the number of procedures exceeds the capacity of the permanently employed project officers.

Financially, ZEvA is still in a good position and has sufficient means for performing its statutory tasks. Still, reducing costs and increasing efficiency is an ongoing process to make sure that ZEvA will remain

³⁵ <https://www.zeva.org/en/agency/team/>



able to compete with other agencies and retain its standing in the market and the good current financial position.



The agency is located on the 2nd floor of Lilienthalstraße 1, 30179 Hannover, with a total office space of 580 m² and a storage space of 64 m². The IT equipment includes – in addition to printers, copiers etc. – 7 workstation computers, 12 notebooks, an NAS-server, two projectors and one widescreen TV, professional videoconferencing equipment, one tablet computer, and smartphones for all project officers. The infrastructure is provided by a corresponding computer network with ethernet and Wi-Fi as well as an external web and mail server. ZEvA's telephone system has been upgraded to an internet-based system (STARFACE). For the maintenance of ZEvA's computer and telephone systems, ZEvA has a contract with an external IT systems provider, Nexave in Hanover.

ZEvA's processes are managed through an internet-based project management and Controlling software, QuoJob (see also 5.6.2). QuoJob serves to allocate and document individual projects, record working hours of employees and the hours per project, maintain a database of experts and customers, manage quotations, contracts and invoices and also serves as a powerful tool for reporting and for financial controlling and planning.

5.6 Standard 3.6: Internal Quality Assurance and Professional Conduct

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

5.6.1 General

In order to meet the quality requirements and to operationalise its own quality understanding for its activities, ZEvA has developed a formalised and binding system for internal quality management, defined in the Quality Handbook (Annex 7). It is used to ensure procedural quality and procedural ethics, the analysis of one's own processes, internal evaluation by experts and higher education institutions, systemic self-correction capability by functional feedback processes and training of employees and experts. In particular by means of the feedback processes and the training of employees and third parties acting for or on behalf of the agency, ZEvA ensures that these persons perform the tasks entrusted to them by ZEvA professionally and competently and in full accordance with the ESG. In the discussions of the expert groups with the various different representatives of higher education institutions in connection with external quality assurance procedures and consulting, ZEvA ensures that these are conducted based on tolerance and fairness.

³⁶ Annual financial statements („Jahresabschluss“) can be made available on request.



In its work in external quality assurance in higher education, ZEvA aspires to the following primary quality goals:

- To ensure the coherence and consistency of its evaluations and decisions
- Reliability towards the customer, especially combined with a high degree of adherence to delivery dates for all processes
- Transparency through complete documentation of procedures and processes
- Internal and external quality assessment of working processes and results
- Establishing and maintaining an efficient organization characterized by cost-effectiveness and a good cost-benefit ratio

The objectives are described in more detail in ZEvA's published Quality Handbook (See Annex 9), which serves the purpose of maintaining quality standards in the execution of reviews, and are thus documented transparently within the organization and vis-à-vis external interest groups:

Objective	Measure
High quality of assessments	The reviews and evaluation reports, as well as the subsequent decisions, consider all evaluation criteria. The assessments are comprehensibly justified. The factual basis for the evaluation is sufficient.
Customer satisfaction	Benefits for students in the focus Effective quality management Internal evaluation through evaluation of procedures
Expertise, appropriateness of decisions and reliability	Ensure comparable decisions in comparable cases, e.g. by entering the decisions in the ZEvA database. Ensuring the quality of the reviewers through feedback with commissions and within the team. Further training of the reviewers, employees and commission members.
Efficiency and effectiveness	Adherence to deadlines Internal controlling of processes Consulting and publications for universities Securing resources
Transparency	Documents completeness Actuality of the documents Quality of documents Flawless documentation Publications



Compliance with procedural principles	Co-signing procedure Project management separate from planning/controlling and organizational controlling. Internal feedback, with the other agencies, with the Accreditation Council Accountability and division of labour; Reliability Truthfulness
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In order to achieve these goals, ZEVA has implemented various elements of quality assurance and improvement and combined them in a comprehensive system. In all its quality improvement activities, ZEVA is oriented towards the PDCA cycle (plan-do-check-act) and always tries to establish closed quality cycles. The starting point is not so much in the „plan” phase as in the ”do” phase, i.e. the work routines that have been established for a long time. However, these routines must be constantly questioned and evaluated (check), especially in such a fast-moving business as education and quality assurance at universities. Direct reactions to market requirements and the design of new and adapted procedures (act and plan) are vital for a quality agency. The transition to the new accreditation system in Germany is a fitting current example of necessary and comprehensive adaptation processes. The quality cycle is closed by considering all cycle phases as a whole. This system has already proved to be effective and sustainable in the past.

5.6.2 Project Database

An important basis for internal quality assurance is provided by a project database called QuoJob, which supports the project officers and experts in carrying out the assessment procedures. The software has been installed in 2021 and has become the central planning and controlling tool for all of ZEVA’s procedures.³⁷

QuoJob contains master data of the involved stakeholders and documents ZEVA’s procedures along the process diagram of the accreditation procedures. At the same time, the database contains a deadline calendar or the fulfilment of tasks, which ensures that ZEVA’s project officers can follow up on the respective tasks in due time despite the large number of procedures.

Furthermore, the software serves to document the working time spent on a procedure, related to the individual milestones. This documentation is evaluated by the ZEVA administration and used as a basis for cost calculations for the respective procedures. In addition, it is used to determine whether there is still a need for optimization in the workload hours of the procedural steps.

The project software serves

- the process control of the procedures and their documentation,
- as a repository for relevant documents and papers related to the project,
- as an electronic deadline book for all procedural steps,
- as documentation of all reviewers with their CVs and the procedures in which they have been

³⁷ For information about QuoJob, see: <https://quojob.de/>



- active,
- the project-related recording of working time,
- and thus, as a management information system for the management of ZEvA.

5.6.3 Measuring Success

A comprehensive system of quality assurance and improvement includes the measurement of success. Success or the achievement of a certain goal is on the one hand reflected in the measure of satisfaction, which is collected from reviewers and stakeholders in the universities via the online survey (see 2.5.7). Beyond the relatively "soft" measure of the expression of opinion on satisfaction, however, a relatively "hard" indicator that demonstrates the quality of ZEvA's work concerns behaviour of stakeholders: Reviewers are often willing to commit themselves to a long-term cooperation with ZEvA and are willing to take part in ZEvA's procedures repeatedly, which can only be achieved through a high level of satisfaction and trust in the quality of ZEvA's work and its results. Similarly, HEIs that have worked with ZEvA will make use of its services repeatedly only if they are convinced of the quality and value of ZEvA's work, even when compared to competitors in the field of quality agencies. The great majority of ZEvA's customers express their satisfaction by returning for further procedures and establishing a long-term working relationship. As ZEvA is working in a market for quality assurance agencies, the ability to distinguish itself among its competitors is an important indicator of ZEvA's ongoing success.

The results of external reviews of ZEvA serve as a further measure of success. ZEvA's accreditation reports are subject to scrutiny by both the GAC's head office and the members of the GAC itself. ZEvA measures success in the current system by the level of acceptance of these reports and the assessments contained therein by the GAC. Disagreements with expert opinions on behalf of the GAC or deviations from the experts' recommendations provide us with important information for our work practice and the future design of procedures. The decisions of the GAC are supplemented by intensive communication with council members and the GAC office. After a short period of adjustment to the new system, ZEvA has been very successful in this respect, with very few procedures with substantial deviations from the expert recommendations (apart from the elimination of proposed conditions because the HEI had already remedied the respective deficiencies before applying at the GAC) and very few reports given back for amendments.

5.6.4 Quality of Staff

The most important resource for ZEvA is competent and motivated personnel, especially on the level of the project officers. They form an important interface between the universities, the expert groups and the commissions. Therefore, ZEvA's staff is also the most important factor influencing the quality of ZEvA's services. Through our efforts in personnel recruitment, we have so far been successful in attracting suitable employees for the position of project officers and in making them fit for their task through a comprehensive induction program. A solid introduction to the daily work of reviewing is guaranteed by means of work shadowing, i.e. sitting in on procedures of senior staff, a buddy system and accompanied procedural support.



In addition to individually plannable further training opportunities, regular communication and joint planning are important in ZEvA's ongoing activities. For this purpose, ZEvA holds a general jour fixe every four weeks and separate jour fixes of the management team and the administrative staff. In addition to managing ZEvA's daily business, the general meetings particularly serve to establish a joint interpretation of standards, criteria and guidelines. Employees are informed about current developments and report on their own experiences and problems in their daily work. This format is often used to jointly find viable solutions to individual and overarching problems. The results are documented in the meeting's minutes, and derived measures are tracked.

The jour fixe of the management team is used to discuss strategic topics and current issues, whereas the jour fixe of the administrative staff is used to coordinate administrative tasks.

Usually once a year, the entire staff participates in a two-day retreat. In addition to strategic discussions (including the results of internal QA surveys), this usually involves the revision of processes and documents.

As a further personnel development measure, ZEvA has in the past offered personal and individual coaching to its employees and management team by an external coach, culminating in a group coaching at the 2023 corporate retreat.

5.6.5 Quality of Experts

Another important resource are ZEvA's experts, who are carefully selected and prepared for their task. The preparation of the experts for the accreditation or evaluation procedures is based on various instruments such as guides, handouts, briefings prior to the site visit, as well as the expert trainings offered by ZEvA.

With regard to the composition of the expert groups, agreement is sought with the higher education institutions, but the HEI is given no vetoing right. Through the code of conduct attached to the expert contracts, preliminary discussions for every procedure and the expert training, the members of the expert groups are reminded by ZEvA staff that the procedures should be critical as regards the subject matter and the assessment, but that they must also be carried out with fairness and tolerance towards the higher education institution and its representatives.

The expert seminars for programme accreditation are carried out annually. Recently, the more general training has been conducted in the form of webinars, which can reach a greater number of experts and could also be offered during the Covid-19 crisis, while in-person seminars are used to cover specific quality assurance topics. The webinars introduce experts to the procedural rules and criteria they need to observe and to inform them about new developments and changes as regards the procedural framework. Trainings for experts in system accreditation, international procedures and evaluations are offered to the individual expert groups in preparation of the respective procedure they are involved in. In the future, as international procedures are increasing, ZEvA is planning to recruit more experts from the countries it is working in internationally and providing specific training seminars or webinars for them together with its cooperation partners.

In the context of the webinars and seminars, ZEvA can also receive valuable feedback about the assessment procedures from the experts' perspective. After completion, the attendees are also asked to



fill in a questionnaire to evaluate the quality of the event and suggest topics for further seminars or webinars.

5.6.6 ZEvA's Internal Organization

ZEvA's internal bodies serve an important function in ZEvA's quality assurance. On the one hand, ZEvA's management reports twice a year to ZEvA's Foundation Council which oversees ZEvA's strategic goals and financial status. The management submits annual reports, annual financial statements and the business plan for the subsequent year to the Council for approval and reports on current developments. The Foundation Council also includes a representative of ZEvA's founder, the state of Lower Saxony, thus ensuring ZEvA's communication with the responsible authorities in its home state. Every five years, the Executive Board presents its strategy for the next five years to the Foundation Council for approval and reports regularly on its implementation and progress.

Further quality assurance takes place in the ZEvA Commission, which serves to facilitate the exchange of information among employees and with the members of the commissions. ZEvA submits its reports on the various QA activities to the ZEKo, either as a basis for formal decisions or for approval, but also to instigate discussions about broader and recurring topics which serve to further refine ZEvA's procedures. Since the committee members are external representatives from the tertiary education system, ZEvA employees get close access to external stakeholders with a long-standing experience with ZEvA's work (see also 4.2).

As a further measure of quality ZEvA employs a "dual control principle" concerning assessment reports. The project officers submit their drafts to the head of their field of activity or to other experienced colleagues for double-checking. The fact that documents (especially expert reports) are viewed by several people avoids errors and strengthens compliance with standards.

5.6.7 Involvement of External Stakeholders

The main stakeholders of ZEVA are higher education institutions – in Germany and abroad – and their members, i.e. university management, administration (including internal QA officers), teaching staff, students, and alumni. Other stakeholders include the labour market, state governments (especially the respective ministries of culture and science) and other institutions involved in higher education and the quality assurance thereof.

For a continuous exchange of information with stakeholders, the ZEvA-Commission (ZEKo) is of particular importance, as all relevant stakeholder groups are represented (see 4.2.2), including international experts. The composition of the ZEKo grants ZEvA access to relevant stakeholder groups, and ZEvA benefits strongly from their expertise and advice.

Additionally, ZEvA staff and management regularly attend networking events of different stakeholders, e.g. meetings of HEI QA officers, meetings and conferences organized by the German Rector's Conference or scientific associations, meetings of the labour union network of accreditation experts, and seminars by the German Student Accreditation Pool that are co-financed by ZEvA. Internationally, ZEvA meets stakeholders through events like the European Quality Assurance Forum and other international conferences, or through self-organized conferences and workshops. In Lower Saxony, ZEvA is in close



contact with the Ministry of Science and Culture and the State Rectors Conference. Furthermore, ZEvA staff and management regularly attend meetings with their peers, e.g. other quality assurance agencies, nationally and internationally (e.g. through ENQA, ECA, CEENQA, regular meetings among Germany's QA agencies), and the German Accreditation Council.

As part of its quality assurance, ZEvA regularly collects feedback from different stakeholders – formally and informally. Informally, HEI members and experts involved in ZEvA's procedures give direct feedback during and after a procedure. ZEvA's project officers hold close communication with all parties involved in their respective projects. In addition, ZEvA irregularly conducts feedback meetings with selected universities to obtain feedback on their satisfaction with the quality assurance procedures.

Formally, ZEvA carries out structured evaluation procedures. After each procedure, university representatives and experts are asked to fill out an evaluation form about the quality of the review process after completion of a review via the online survey portal SurveyMonkey. The results of the survey are forwarded to the participating employees and to the ZEvA management and are also presented to and discussed in the committees at regular intervals in summarized form. If necessary, measures to improve the quality of the process are derived from the evaluation results.

In evaluation, the experts are also interviewed using the "SurveyMonkey" system, but feedback by the respective HEI can in some cases also be obtained directly, e.g. by means of a structured telephone interview, where a standardised questionnaire may be less effective or practical.

ZEvA seminars are another important way of obtaining feedback from external stakeholders. On the one hand, ZEvA regularly carries out training seminars for their experts (see 5.6.5) and on the other hand, offers seminars on a variety of topics. Although these seminars primarily serve to provide information to the attendees (mainly experts, QA officers and teaching staff from HEIs), they have proven to be very valuable for obtaining direct feedback on specific topics, e.g. on the examination system or evaluation procedures at universities. In addition to the general seminars, ZEvA can also design workshops for individual HEIs on topics of their choosing. Where necessary and desired, experts on the respective topics are invited to contribute to these seminars and workshops. Webinars have proven to be a valuable additional tool to stay in touch with stakeholders because of their easy accessibility and repeatability. As a preparation for their respective QA procedures, ZEvA also offers opening workshops for HEIs at the agency's office, online or as a half-day or full-day inhouse-workshop. All workshops are evaluated with a specific questionnaire afterwards.

ZEvA's publications and website serve to provide information for ZEvA's stakeholders and about the current standards and procedures as well as general developments in the field of quality assurance in higher education.

5.7 Standard 3.7: Cyclical External Review of Agencies

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

ZEvA was first assessed externally by the Accreditation Council in the year 2000 and since then has been re-accredited in the years 2003, 2006, 2011 and 2016.³⁸ These reviews served the purpose of

³⁸ See <http://archiv.akkreditierungsrat.de/index.php?id=29&L=1>



(re-)accrediting ZEvA for the German accreditation system and have since 2005 also included an ESG review for the purpose of (re-)confirming ZEvA's ENQA membership and (since 2009) ZEvA's EQAR listing. Starting in 2021, this has been replaced by a regular ENQA review every five years. ZEvA's license to accredit within the German system is now solely dependent on ZEvA's continued EQAR listing.



6 Design and Implementation of ZEvA's ESG Activities (Compliance with Part 2 of the ESG)

6.1 Standard 2.1: Consideration of internal quality assurance

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

Part 1 of the ESG defines the subjects and standards of internal quality assurance in ten sections: 1. Policy for quality assurance, 2. Design and approval of study programmes, 3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment, 4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification, 5. Teaching staff, 6. Learning resources and student support, 7. Information management, 8. Public information, 9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of study programmes and 10. Cyclical external quality assurance.

All of ZEvA's procedures, insofar as their purpose is an assessment of study and teaching at HEIs, follow criteria that are in line with and for the most part directly derived from the standards and guidelines in Part 1 of the ESG. Annex 8 shows a table linking the criteria applied in the respective procedures to the corresponding ESG standard.

Programme and System Accreditation in Germany

In the accreditation of study programmes and in system accreditation in Germany, the criteria of the current system are defined in the „Specimen Decree Pursuant to Article 4, Paragraphs 1-4 of the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty,“³⁹ which has been implemented in individual decrees in each federal state. The German Accreditation Council has issued a comparison between these criteria and the ESG, presented in Annex 9.⁴⁰ ZEvA is bound by these criteria in their assessment of study programmes and quality management systems in preparation of their accreditation by the GAC. A new version of the Specimen Decree has come into force in August 2025 and has been implemented in most of the federal states since.

Accreditation of Programmes other than Bachelor/Master in Germany

In the accreditation of programmes other than Bachelor's and Master's Programmes, the criteria differ from procedure to procedure according to the purpose of the accreditation. These cases are very rare and do not constitute a substantial field of activity, so ZEvA does not publish criteria but defines them from case to case, mostly derived from the criteria of the Specimen Decree. For doctoral programmes in Lower Saxony, broad criteria are defined in the guidelines of the Ministry of Science and Culture.⁴¹

³⁹ See https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/sites/default/files/downloads/2024/2024_11_21-Musterrechtsverordnung.pdf; English outdated version: https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2017/2017_12_07-Musterrechtsverordnung-englisch.pdf (The current version has not yet been translated.)

⁴⁰ This comparison is based on an older version of the Specimen Decree but still valid for the new version.

⁴¹ See https://www.mwk.niedersachsen.de/download/157318/Leitlinien_und_Kriterien_fuer_die_Akkreditierung_von_Promotionsstudiengaengen_in_Niedersachsen_Stand_17.07.2020_nicht_vollstaendig_barrierefrei_-_Download_.pdf



These criteria are in line with Part 1 of the ESG. For the accreditation of Diploma programmes, ZEvA usually employs the relevant criteria of the current accreditation system in analogy.

International Programme and Institutional Accreditation

For international programme and institutional accreditation procedures, ZEvA has formulated its own quality standards in its manuals,⁴² which are based on the ESG, the ECTS User's Guide and the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area. These form the basis for the review reports and the decisions of the ZEvA commission.

Quality Audits in Austria

The focus areas of the audit are specified by the Austrian Higher Education Institution Quality Assurance Act ("Hochschulqualitätssicherungsgesetz") (§ 22 HS-QSG) and cover the ESG criteria for internal quality assurance. ZEvA has translated these into an assessment framework to be found in the respective manual.⁴³

Certification of Further Education

For the certification of further education at HEIs, ZEvA has formulated criteria based on the ESG standards 1.1 to 1.10 in its respective manual.⁴⁴ The already mentioned Specimen Decree may function as an additional reference.

In addition, the German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (DQR) is employed as an instrument for classifying qualifications in the German education system.

Evaluation

Evaluations of study and teaching carried out by ZEvA have a varying thematic focus and are oriented towards the requirements of the higher education institutions and the statutory requirements in Lower Saxony pursuant to Sect. 5 of the Lower Saxony Higher Education Act (NHG).⁴⁵ In these procedures, not all aspects become relevant in every case; occasionally they focus on a particular topic or on certain individual aspects (and standards). In the ZEvA procedure of *Institutional Evaluation* and in *Subject / Programme Evaluation*, the ESG are covered as a whole. In the procedure for *Thematic Evaluation* the ESG are usually only covered in part, depending on the actual concrete question governing the evaluation procedure. Thematic evaluations of ZEvA have focussed on certain aspects of higher education, such as the promotion of Mathematics, Computer Science, Natural Sciences and Technology degrees at higher education, an evaluation of dual-study programmes and an evaluation of examination systems at HEIs. These evaluations naturally do not cover all of the ESG standards but only those relevant to the purpose of the evaluation. In some cases, like the evaluation of dual study

⁴² See https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1494/manual_international_programme_accreditation_jan-2023.pdf and https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1512/manual_international_institutional_accreditation_jan-2023.pdf

⁴³ See https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1549/leitfaden_qualitaetsaudits_osterreich_jan_2023-1.pdf

⁴⁴ See https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1422/leitfaden_zertifizierung_und_validierung_dez_2023.pdf

⁴⁵ See <https://www.schure.de/22210/nhg.htm>

Unofficial older English version:

https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/document/download/715fc9e9317654a6f83f3302d614c7bc.pdf/NHG_English.pdf



programmes, feature catalogues are developed that provide the basis for self-evaluation reports of the evaluated study concepts and are designed in accordance with the ESG.⁴⁶

Other evaluation procedures are in their nature not assessments of teaching and learning but rather of projects, and thus, the ESG are not applicable. ZEvA offers to coordinate the review of applications for projects in teaching and learning in higher education by HEIs applying for special state funding programmes. The criteria are usually defined by the state ministry of science and culture (MWK) which also takes the final decision. ZEvA may also evaluate project process and/or success, measured against the project criteria.

6.2 Standard 2.2: Designing Methodologies Fit for Purpose

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

ZEvA has a long-standing experience with designing and carrying out procedures of external quality assurance and thus can build on these experiences to ensure all procedures are fit for purpose. All procedures of external quality assurance are clearly defined in ZEvA's manuals and, where applicable, in procedural rules issued by the German federal states or the Austrian Government. All procedures of external quality assurance of study and teaching follow the same pattern, starting with a self-assessment report of the HEI, which will usually undergo a preliminary desktop validation and then be sent to an expert group including experts from academia, professional practice, and the student body. As a rule, the findings of the experts will be verified and supplemented during a site visit, after which an assessment report will be prepared by the experts. The HEIs can issue a response to the report and, where applicable, a formal decision will be reached by the responsible body (e.g. the ZEvA Commission or the GAC). A follow-up usually deals with the question whether conditions issued in conjunction with the formal decision have been met or whether recommendations have been implemented.

These procedures are all specifically designed with their purpose in mind, involving stakeholders in its design and continuous improvement on several levels. In regular Jour Fixe meetings and the yearly corporate retreat, ZEvA's management and employees regularly discuss the effectiveness of the current design of procedures and define measures, if these procedures have to be amended. Smaller amendments are being approved by the Executive Board, while more substantial amendments are brought to the ZEvA Commission for approval.

ZEvA regularly issues questionnaires to HEIs and experts involved in quality assurance procedures to assess its procedures' fitness for purpose. Furthermore, ZEvA regularly reviews its procedures, e.g. through feedback sessions with the HEIs assessed. Additionally, ZEvA's training seminars for experts and quality assurance managers at HEIs are also used to receive feedback on ZEvA's procedures (see also 2.5). In general, this feedback shows a high level of satisfaction with ZEvA's work.

All of ZEvA's procedures and manuals are subject to scrutiny by the ZEvA Commission (ZEKo). As per the ZEvA statutes, the relevant interest groups (professors of various different higher education

⁴⁶ ZEvA's evaluation manuals can be found here: <https://www.zeva.org/en/services/evaluation/>



institution types and subject disciplines, representatives of professional practice, experts in quality assurance, students) are represented.

ZEvA ensures that its procedures remain cost-effective by constantly reviewing the amount of workload necessary and adjusting the costs for the different procedures regularly. Since ZEvA is a non-profit organization, procedures are planned on a cost price basis. The costs are calculated beforehand and defined in ZEvA's contracts with HEIs. Except for evaluation procedures in Lower Saxony, ZEvA also has to compete with other agencies and thus has to adjust prices according to the current market.

All external quality assurance procedures carried out by ZEvA serve the purpose of improving the quality of teaching and learning at Higher Education Institutions. Procedures which HEIs are obligated to carry out (i.e. mandatory accreditation) and which result in formal decisions may be designed as a form of external quality control to ensure the HEIs compliance with pre-defined rules, but the procedures always provide opportunity to aid the HEIs efforts in improving their programmes and internal quality assurance procedures. ZEvA project officers and experts act as critical friends who go beyond the task of an external assessor and can also offer recommendations for improvement, both during on-site talks and in the review reports.

The outcomes of all external quality assurance procedures are published and thus made transparent to all relevant stakeholders.

Programme and System Accreditation in Germany

The intentions and objectives of programme and system accreditation have been conclusively defined and published. Since January 2018, all programme and system accreditation procedures are conducted according to the state regulations based on the Specimen Decree, which has been amended in 2025. Clear criteria for the design of the procedures have been formulated (Specimen Decree, Part 4; Drs.). These rules have been designed and recently updated by representatives of the federal states in close collaborations with stakeholders. The GAC is composed of representatives of HEIs, the federal states, professional practice, and the student body. For the design of the Specimen Decree, the federal states have consulted with various stakeholders, and a substantial evaluation with all stakeholders has been conducted after five years, resulting in the updated version published in 2025.

Manuals issued by ZEvA substantiate and interpret the procedural rules issued by the federal states where required. Furthermore, ZEvA's accreditation reports and procedures are and have been subject to quality control by the GAC through direct feedback on reports handed in by HEIs for accreditation by the GAC. ZEvA uses this feedback to improve on procedures.

Accreditation of Programmes other than Bachelor/Master in Germany

Since accreditation procedures for non-Bachelor/Master-programmes are not standardized due to their varying contexts and purpose, no specific procedures have been defined for the different types of programmes. However, ZEvA's manual for programme accreditation makes it clear that these accreditation procedures follow those for Bachelor/Master programmes closely, apart from the fact that the final decision falls to the ZEvA Commission and not the GAC, thus resembling ZEvA's international programme accreditation procedure.



International Programme and Institutional Accreditation

ZEvA's manuals for International Programme Accreditation and International Institutional Accreditation describe in detail the procedures employed.

Quality Audits in Austria

Auditing and certification in the context of Quality Audits in Austria take into account the statutory guidelines laid out in the Austrian Higher Education Institution Quality Assurance Act („Hochschulqualitätssicherungsgesetz“) (§ 22 HS-QSG) and involve the relevant interest groups in the arrangement of procedures.

Certification and Validation

The procedures for certification and validation are described in detail in ZEvA's manual. The objective of the respective procedure may vary and is agreed upon between ZEvA and the HEI by contract.

Evaluation

In the field of evaluation, ZEvA's manuals, in which ESG-compliant processes and criteria are described, provide the basis for the organisation of review procedures. As far as higher education institutions of the State of Lower Saxony are concerned, evaluation is designed in accordance with the Lower Saxony Higher Education Act („Niedersächsisches Hochschulgesetz“ (Sect. 5 NHG)).

6.3 Standard 2.3: Implementing Processes

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- a report resulting from the external assessment;
- a consistent follow-up.

All of ZEvA's external quality assurance procedures are carried out according to pre-defined and published processes. For each kind of standardized procedure, ZEvA has issued manuals that can be downloaded from ZEvA's website. In the case of programme and system accreditation in Germany, these manuals refer to the procedural rules as issued by the federal states, whereas in Austria, the procedures follow the Austrian Higher Education Institution Quality Assurance Act. All procedures include a self-assessment report, an external assessment by a peer group which results in a review report, and in almost all cases an on-site visit to the HEI concerned. If this site visit is conducted in the form of a video conference because an in-person visit is not possible, the HEI is asked to employ other means to demonstrate the quality of their facilities, e.g. a video walkthrough or drone flight through the building. In Ukraine, ZEvA has to assess the HEI online, but wherever possible, ZEvA recruits at least one expert within the country who can visit the HEI personally.

The follow-up varies from procedure to procedure and is not always the agency's task, as is the case in the current German accreditation system. Where formal decisions are taken, the follow-up is mostly concerned with formulated conditions and their fulfilment by the respective HEI. Since all formal decisions are only valid for a limited time, a follow-up in the form of a re-accreditation or re-certification



is required after this time period to re-assess the programme or institution and to examine whether recommendations from the previous procedure have been implemented.

Programme and System accreditation in Germany

Programme and system accreditation procedures have comparable routines, described in the specimen decree under Part 4. The HEI is required to hand in a self-evaluation report that addresses all relevant criteria in its written part and provides the necessary evidence through annexes. In initial system accreditations, and also reaccreditations if the HEI desires it, ZEvA kicks off the procedure with a status seminar which serves to take stock of the HEI's progress in designing and implementing their quality assurance system and to help the HEI in the preparation of their self-evaluation report. For programme accreditation, ZEvA offers shorter kick-off meetings if requested.

All self-evaluation reports are subject to a desktop pre-check by the responsible project officer, assessing whether the report is complete and if problems in the fulfilment of criteria are to be envisioned. This pre-check is combined with the first part of the accreditation report, the formal report. It is the task of the responsible project officer to assess the fulfilment of formal criteria according to part 2 of the Specimen Decree. After the pre-check and formal report, the HEI is given the opportunity to revise their self-evaluation report to remedy the issues raised.

Parallel to this process, the agency gathers an expert group, which is formally installed by the ZEvA-Commission. The HEI can object to the composition of the expert group but has no vetoing rights. The expert group receives the (possibly revised) self-evaluation report and the formal report and is asked to hand in a list of preliminary findings before the site-visit, which the project officer summarizes and sends to the HEI for the preparation of the site-visit.

As a rule, this is followed by a site-visit to the HEI, where the experts will interview the university management, teaching staff and students, with the possible addition of alumni or external partners involved in the programme (e.g. staff from companies involved in a dual study programme). In cases of a concept accreditation of a programme not yet begun and in case of a re-accreditation of a study programme, the expert group can decide to dispense with the site-visit and will then assess the programme in a desktop validation, which can be supplemented by sending a list of questions to the HEI to be answered or by video conferences. In system accreditation, two site visits are being conducted, one of which can be online. After the first site visit, ZEvA prepares a short report on the preliminary findings, and the experts agree on samples from study programmes to be assessed in order to see the effect of the quality assurance system on the programmes.

As a result of the site-visit or the desktop validation, the experts write the second part of the accreditation report, the review report, assessing the academic criteria (Part 3 of the Specimen Decree). The HEI receives the report and can respond to it to correct factual errors.

In the current accreditation system, if the experts give recommendations for an accreditation with conditions in their accreditation report, the HEIs have the opportunity to address these deficiencies by starting a follow-up process with the agency („Quality Improvement Process“), if they wish it.⁴⁷ In this follow-up, the HEI is given the opportunity to improve their study programmes or quality assurance system to meet all the criteria and hand in a revised review report which will again be assessed by the

⁴⁷ In the revised specimen decree, this possibility has been included under § 24 (6).



experts. As a result, a new or revised accreditation report is prepared. The agency decides in conjunction with the experts which steps are necessary to assess the revised self-report, which may also include another site visit.

The Quality Improvement Process, when it is employed, is a further step in the assessment process and follows the same principles. It may occur immediately after the site-visit or after the completion of the first draft of the accreditation report. Once it is completed, the HEI will receive a finalised accreditation report based on the revised self-evaluation report.

After the accreditation report has been finalised, a formal decision will be taken by the GAC. It is the HEI's task to hand in their self-evaluation report and the accreditation report to the GAC and apply for accreditation. The agency's task is concluded at this point. The decision can be on accreditation, conditional accreditation (with conditions to be fulfilled in a defined timeframe, usually 12 months) or refusal of accreditation. Accreditation is issued for eight years. If the GAC decision deviates significantly from the experts' recommendation, the HEI is given the opportunity to give a statement in response to these deviations before the final decision. In these cases, the GAC's decision will only come in effect after the HEI's response and possibly another discussion in the GAC, should the HEI disagree with the deviations.

Follow-up to these decisions in the form of assessing the fulfilment of the conditions issued is the task of the GAC in the current system and does not involve the agency or the expert group. The GAC can delegate this decision to the foundation's Executive Board. Similarly, the agency or the experts are not involved in the assessment of significant changes to the accredited programmes which are reported by the HEI to the GAC.

Since 2015, all full reports and decisions are published, including negative decisions. ZEvA publishes them on their own homepage, and the GAC also publishes all reports and decisions from the German accreditation system in their ELIAS database and the DEQAR database.⁴⁸

International Accreditation, Quality Audits in Austria, Certification and Accreditation of Programmes other than Bachelor/Master

In all other external quality assurance measures resulting in a formal decision, ZEvA applies the same procedure. This applies to institutional or programme accreditation in the international context, quality audits in Austria, the certification of further education and the accreditation of study programmes that do not fall in the Bachelor/Master category. All of these procedures include a self-report, a pre-check of the self-report, an expert group, a site visit (as a rule), a review report that the HEI can respond to and a formal decision by the ZEvA Commission, with a possible follow-up to assess the fulfilment of conditions. The main difference to the current accreditation system in Germany is that no entity like the GAC is involved, the entire procedure is the sole responsibility of the agency, including the publication of the reports and decisions on ZEvA's website and in the DEQAR. International institutional accreditations and quality audits in Austria are more closely linked to system accreditation and may also include two site visits, a sample assessment of programmes and a status seminar as a kick-off event. All accreditation or certification decisions can be issued with conditions to be fulfilled in a

⁴⁸ ELIAS: <https://antrag.akkreditierungsrat.de/> (German only); DEQAR: <https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/search/>



certain time frame or, in the case of international procedures, with pre-conditions to be fulfilled before the accreditation comes into force, and the ZEvA Commission decides on their fulfilment based on an assessment of the experts involved.

Evaluation

In evaluation procedures, the process can vary depending on the purpose of the procedure. In the case of the evaluation of study programmes or subjects, institutional evaluation and thematic evaluation, it will in every case involve a self-report, an expert group, a site visit and a review report. These procedures are described in their respective manuals. No formal decisions ensue; these procedures rather serve to formulate recommendations for further improvement. ZEvA and the expert groups are acting for the most part in a support capacity. However, these reports may also be used by the Ministry of Culture and Science of Lower Saxony, e.g. for the formulation of target agreements. Follow-up also varies from procedure to procedure and may take the form of a regular follow-up report to the agency or a re-evaluation after a certain time.

6.4 Standard 2.4: Peer-Review Experts

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

In all external quality assurance procedures, ZEvA applies the peer review principle. For every procedure, an expert group is installed that includes experts from academia, professional practice, and the student body, which is documented in each of ZEvA's manuals. For programme and system accreditation in the current German system, ZEvA is bound by guidelines issued by the German Rectors' Conference.⁴⁹ Formal instalment of the expert group is always carried out by the ZEvA Commission, which has formalised the procedure in internal guidelines (Annex 14).

Experts are carefully selected. ZEvA works closely with the HEIs to define which areas of expertise have to be covered in the expert group. Based on this definition, ZEvA project officers contact possible candidates and make a suggestion for the composition of the panel, drawing on ZEvA's existing pool of experts where possible, or on experts formerly employed by other agencies that can be found via the GAC database ELIAS. Furthermore, ZEvA may consult State Rectors' Conferences, scientific societies, Faculty and Department Conferences, university networks in the field of study and teaching or the Standing Commission for Teaching and Studies of the German Rectors' Conference. For the selection of student experts in German accreditation, ZEvA regularly cooperates with the Student Accreditation Pool, which suggests suitable student reviewers to the agency on request. Other possible sources of student experts are the European Students Union or the student self-administration of HEIs. Several labour unions also employ a joint network of accreditation experts from the professional world which ZEvA can draw from.

The main criterion for selection is always the professional competence for the assessment of the respective subject matter. Panel members must possess expertise in the relevant field, should have experience with quality assurance procedures and must be independent and impartial. ZEvA closes

⁴⁹ See <https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/de/media/65>



contractual agreements with experts which include a code of conduct and a manual detailing their task and cooperation with the agency. Through these contracts, ZEvA ensures their impartiality. The following criteria for conflict of interest are applied throughout:

- Family ties or personal relations or conflicts.
- Teaching positions (also as external lecturer or guest professor) at the university to be assessed within the last 3 years or in the foreseeable future.
- Participation in on-going or recently completed appointment procedures at the university to be assessed.
- Participation of members of the university to be assessed in recent assessments of the experts' university.
- Personal or shared economic interest in the accreditation.
- Direct competition of the university to be assessed with the expert's projects or programmes.
- Close cooperation (e.g., conjoint research projects or other close collaboration) within the last 3 years.
- Current or recent enrolment as a student at the university to be assessed.

In all assessment procedures, the expert group is appointed by the ZEvA Commission at the proposal of the ZEvA project officer in charge. In all procedures, the HEI can object to the composition of the expert group but has no explicit vetoing right. Objections can be based either on conflicts of interest or insufficient expertise for the subject matter to be assessed.

Training

ZEvA's experts are briefed or trained on several levels. ZEvA offers yearly training seminars and webinars for experts. Attendance of these seminars and webinars is documented in our experts database. In system accreditation procedures, experts are obliged to participate in preparatory seminars. Evaluation procedures are preceded by extensive preparatory meetings of the expert group.

Due to the specifics of the German accreditation system, it is not possible to make it mandatory for ZEvA's experts to undergo formal training before they conduct procedures, as that would exclude many possible experts and thus would severely limit ZEvA's possibilities of carrying out their procedures according to the contractually agreed schedule. Also, ZEvA has to compete for experts with 10 other agencies and over 200 system accredited HEI that all need experts for their internal accreditation procedures.

However, many experts that ZEvA employs have already undergone some form of training. On the one hand, many experts work for multiple agencies and all agencies working in Germany are offering training seminars as well as ZEvA, and thus training experts is a collective task in Germany. Furthermore, organisations like the student accreditation pool and the trade union network of experts from professional practise also offer trainings. Since almost all of ZEvA's student experts are part of the student pool, the percentage of trained student experts is very high. For system accreditation, expert groups receive an extra training well before the start of the assessment procedure.

Additionally, ZEvA relies mostly on very experienced experts. Experts who have already been part of several accreditation procedures can be considered „trained” and thus would not necessarily need or agree to attend further training seminars (although some of them do).

Additionally, training is done „on the job.” In all of ZEvA's procedures (which holds true for the other German agencies as well), our project officers use the evening prior to the site visit to explain the



experts' tasks and responsibilities as well as the criteria and procedural rules to make sure that all experts are well informed. All experts also receive the relevant manual and pertinent legislation well before the site visit, and the expert contracts all include an expert guideline outlining their role.

This system has always worked very well for ZEvA and has resulted in a high level of satisfaction of the HEIs about the expert teams. Complaints about experts are very rare, and in almost all evaluations, HEIs rate the workings of the expert group either as good or very good. Thus, ZEvA is convinced that a high quality and preparation of experts can sufficiently be maintained with the system described above.

6.5 Standard 2.5: Criteria for Outcomes

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

All assessments in external quality assurance procedures leading to a formal decision are based on clearly defined and published criteria. Where ZEvA is not bound by criteria issued by other bodies (e.g. the federal states), these criteria are defined in ZEvA's respective manuals and are based on Part 1 of the ESG. In some cases (e.g. accreditation of non-BA/MA-programmes) the criteria may not be clearly defined beforehand but are agreed upon in preparation of the respective procedure, attuned to the procedure's purpose. In evaluation procedures, it depends on the purpose and concept of the respective procedure whether pre-defined criteria are assessed.

ZEvA establishes consistency in the use and interpretation of criteria in various ways. Most importantly, all reports are subject to proof-reading. As a rule, the heads of the relevant area of activities or experienced colleagues read reports written by the project managers before these are sent to the expert group and can thus ensure a consistent interpretation of the criteria. Additionally, the interpretation of criteria is discussed in Jour Fixes and corporate retreats to develop a common understanding. Whenever ZEvA takes a formal decision in its procedures, the ZEvA Commission is supported by ZEvA's staff in keeping track of the current interpretation of criteria, and the members of the commission have access to an online archive of prior meetings and decisions.

As an additional measure for quality and consistency, new colleagues passively attend procedures of experienced project managers before they manage their „own“ procedure. After that, at least the first peer review managed and moderated by a new colleague will be conducted in a buddy system.

Programme and System Accreditation in Germany

In Germany, the accreditation criteria for Bachelor's and Master's programmes are defined in the accreditation decrees of the federal states which are based on the Specimen Decree. These criteria are available on the GAC's website and are mandatory for all procedures.⁵⁰

The consistent application of criteria for the formal decision in the current accreditation system is the responsibility of the GAC. The GAC is supported by its head office and has access to the outcomes of all former GAC meetings through an online database. The Specimen Decree itself contains a detailed

⁵⁰ <https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/de/akkreditierungssystem-rechtliche-grundlagen/gesetze-und-verordnungen/gesetze-und-verordnungen>



substantiation of the rules and criteria which serves as a basis for the GAC's decisions. Additionally, the GAC agrees on further interpretations of criteria and communicates these to the HEIs and agencies in several ways. On the one hand, the accreditation reports are subject to a pre-check by the GAC's office, and the agencies receive feedback on the quality of the report, which may also include comments on the correct and consistent application of criteria. If the reports are to be found too inconsistent or inconclusive, the GAC retains the right to hand them back for revision before processing the HEI's application for accreditation. On the other hand, the GAC publishes official interpretations of criteria on their website in the form of FAQs or resolutions. Also, the GAC head office organizes regular feedback rounds with the individual agencies on the managing level and for project officers to jointly reflect on the experiences gathered and to discuss, among other things, the application and interpretation of accreditation standards and criteria.

ZEVA uses the GAC's feedback to fine-tune its interpretation of criteria and monitors the GAC's website for current changes to their FAQ or new resolutions.

Accreditation of Programmes other than Bachelor/Master in Germany

For the accreditation of programmes that do not fall in the Bachelor/Master-category, the criteria may vary from procedure to procedure, as these are very singular occurrences the purpose of which may vary. So far, only the state of Lower Saxony has made it mandatory for some of these programmes to undergo an accreditation and provided criteria in their guidelines for the accreditation of doctoral programmes („Leitlinien und Kriterien für die Akkreditierung von Promotionsstudiengängen in Niedersachsen“).⁵¹ For the accreditation of Diploma programmes, ZEVA has in the past adapted the relevant criteria for programme accreditation in the current system. As most universities in Lower Saxony by now have undergone or are preparing for system accreditation, at least the accreditation of doctoral programmes is expected to fade out completely in the foreseeable future.

Quality Audits in Austria

For audits in Austria, HS-QSG provides 6 areas of assessment („Prüfbereiche“), which ZEVA has translated into a list of Topics for the Audit, which serve as an assessment framework. These are described in ZEVA's Manual for Quality Audits, to be found on our website.⁵²

International Accreditation

In all other international procedures that lead to a formal decision, ZEVA has formulated criteria based on the ESG, the ECTS User's Guide and the European Qualifications Framework for Higher Education, to be found in the manuals for international programme and institutional accreditation.⁵³

⁵¹ See https://www.mwk.niedersachsen.de/download/157318/Leitlinien_und_Kriterien_fuer_die_Akkreditierung_von_Promotionsstudiengaengen_in_Niedersachsen_Stand_17.07.2020_nicht_vollstaendig_barrierefrei_-_Download_.pdf

⁵² See https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1549/leitfaden_qualitaetsaudits_osterreich_jan_2023-1.pdf

⁵³ See https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1494/manual_international_programme_accreditation_jan-2023.pdf and https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1512/manual_international_institutional_accreditation_jan-2023.pdf



Certification

For the certification of further education, ZEvA has formulated criteria based on the ESG, to be found in the manual for certification and validation.⁵⁴

Evaluation

For evaluation procedures, the criteria (or indeed the use of pre-defined criteria) depend on the purpose of the evaluation. For the evaluation of study programmes and subjects and for institutional evaluation, ZEvA has formulated criteria that directly apply the ESG, to be found in the respective manuals.⁵⁵ In thematic evaluations, these criteria vary significantly, and an important part of the evaluation procedure may even be to arrive at assessment criteria, as with the accreditation of dual programmes. These procedures often start with an assessment of the status quo, leading to an understanding of common characteristics of the subject matter (e.g. dual programmes) and a sample of best practice examples which can then be transferred to a catalogue of standards and guidelines which ZEvA publishes to be used for future evaluations.

6.6 Standard 2.6: Reporting

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

In all assessment procedures the full expert reports and decisions are published on ZEvA's website.⁵⁶ Reports and decisions in programme and system accreditation according to the German system are also published in the GAC's ELIAS-database.⁵⁷ The GAC also transfers these reports and decisions to the DEQAR database. For other procedures leading to a formal decision, ZEvA transfers them to the DEQAR itself.

Reports and outcomes of negative decisions are also published in full, although in international procedures, certifications and system accreditations, ZEvA has had no negative decisions yet. In German programme accreditation, the GAC has taken a negative decision on two study programmes at the same institution in a ZEvA-conducted accreditation procedure. As with all negative decisions in Germany, these can be found in the ELIAS database.⁵⁸ Negative decisions are overall a rare occurrence. So far, Elias only lists 14 initial negative decisions, with 2 conducted by ZEvA, and 8 instances where an accreditation has been revoked.

For accreditation reports in the German system, the GAC has provided mandatory templates which have been designed in a working group together with representatives of the agencies and updated by the same working group if necessary. For international accreditation, quality audits and certification,

⁵⁴ See https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1422/leitfaden_zertifizierung_und_validierung_dez_2023.pdf

⁵⁵ See <https://www.zeva.org/en/services/evaluation/>

⁵⁶ See <https://www.zeva.org/en/project-reports/>

⁵⁷ <https://antrag.akkreditierungsrat.de/>

⁵⁸ <https://antrag.akkreditierungsrat.de/akkrstudiengaenge/775a53ad-d4f1-4389-bf23-71af9f9412a1/> and <https://antrag.akkreditierungsrat.de/akkrstudiengaenge/aee6445f-5416-4126-bdad-4b1b726168ff/>



ZEvA has designed standardized templates that ensure a common structure of the reports. All of ZEvA's reports include

- context description
- description of the individual procedure, including experts involved
- evidence, analysis and findings
- conclusions
- features of good practice, demonstrated by the institution
- recommendations (or conditions) for follow-up action.

In all procedures, the HEIs involved are given the opportunity to respond to the review report to correct factual errors or object against the findings of the expert group. In this way, ZEvA ensures that the reports are clear and factual and gets the opportunity of revising them where they are not. Additionally, all reports are subject to proof-reading to ensure their clarity and consistency. ZEvA takes care that reports are concise and written in a common language and that they provide a clear distinction between description of the status quo and its assessment. In procedures where ZEvA takes a formal decision, the ZEvA Commission provides additional feedback on the reports in the context of regular meetings.

As far as programme and system accreditation in Germany are concerned, the GAC head office provides another external input on the quality of the agencies' accreditation reports and has provided guidelines for their composition. The GAC may also return a report for revision if it is found to be incomplete or incomprehensible in any way. This contributes significantly to the establishment of common, system-wide standards as regards the clarity and consistency of accreditation reports.

6.7 Standard 2.7: Complaints and Appeals

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

ZEvA has installed a formal process for complaints about the conduct of the process or those carrying it out and for appeals against formal decisions. All of ZEvA's customers are being thoroughly informed of these procedures, both through ZEvA's manuals and website, through our terms and conditions attached to every contract, and through ZEvA's written decisions, which always contain a note on the possibilities to appeal the decision and the deadline for appeals:

Notification of extraordinary legal remedy:

Appeals against this decision can be filed within a period of four weeks after receipt of the decision. The appeal must be made in writing and must state the reasons therefor. It is to be addressed towards: Geschäftsstelle der ZEvA, -Revisionskommission-, Lilienthalstraße 1, 30179 Hannover.

Information about the complaints and appeals procedure and the Appeals Commission are also included in all of ZEvA's manuals and on ZEvA's website.⁵⁹ Appeals against formal decisions have to be brought forth within one month after being notified of the decision. Complaints may be issued at any

⁵⁹ For the appeals procedure and the current composition of the Appeals Commission, see <https://www.zeva.org/en/agency/audit-commission/>



point in the procedure. They all go towards the Managing Director and are forwarded to the Appeals Commission by him together with a statement of the project officer responsible.

ZEvA's Appeals Commission, appointed by the ZEvA Commission, addresses all complaints and appeals. The commission's tasks and procedures are defined in the commission's Rules of Procedure (Annex 6). The commission includes four members from the academic world, one from professional practice and one student. The complaint or appeal, the documents necessary to assess it, and a summary assessment by ZEvA's office are submitted to the Appeals Commission, which, after reviewing these documents, issues a recommendation to the ZEvA Commission on how to deal with the complaint or appeal. The ZEvA Commission then decides on the complaint and whether any changes have to be made in the decision or process. No second appeal or complaint may be issued on the same subject matter.

In the past, appeals and complaints were only filed in accreditation procedures in the German system. With only one exception these were all appeals against formal decisions. If sustained, these appeals led to a change in the decision, e.g. retracting or modifying conditions. If a complaint were sustained, ZEvA would e.g. repeat the procedural step the HEI complained about, exchange an expert or the project officer or add an additional expert. Through this appeals process, ZEvA could in almost all cases avoid legal steps taken by the HEI concerned against a decision. ZEvA has had to appear in one court case in the early 2000s which was, however, resolved out of court.

ZEvA's relevant bodies (Appeals Commission and ZEvA Commission) are all well aware of their tasks and will be reminded of them with every case brought before them, which are at the moment very few and are expected to remain the exception from the rule.

Since the last ENQA review, ZEvA has received one appeal in the area of system accreditation that has been resolved in 2023 (See Annex 16) and no complaints.



7 Opinion of Stakeholders

ZEvA systematically collects feedback from its key stakeholder groups, in particular external reviewers (experts) and higher education institutions, through annual evaluation surveys covering programme, system, audit, certification, and international accreditation procedures. The results demonstrate consistently very high levels of stakeholder satisfaction and provide strong evidence of ZEvA's credibility, professionalism, and reliability as a quality assurance agency.

From 2022-24, an average of approximately 97% of respondents rated their overall experience with ZEvA as *excellent* or *good*. This high level of satisfaction is observed consistently across different procedures and respondent groups, with international procedures achieving uniformly positive evaluations throughout the period.⁶⁰

Stakeholders particularly value ZEvA's clear and transparent communication, professional organisation of procedures, and high-quality moderation of site visits and expert discussions. Reviewers highlight the constructive working atmosphere, well-structured documentation, and effective coordination by ZEvA staff, which enable focused and evidence-based peer review. Higher education institutions emphasise the agency's service orientation, flexibility, and responsiveness, as well as the constructive and development-oriented nature of the feedback they receive.

The evaluation results also indicate that ZEvA's procedures are widely perceived as useful for institutional quality development, especially in system accreditation and international contexts. Stakeholders report that the accreditation processes support reflection on internal quality assurance systems and contribute positively to strategic and operational improvement.

Suggestions for further enhancement are limited in scope and mainly concern panel composition (e.g. diversity and profile matching), coordination of timelines, and, in some cases, the desire for more time for in-depth discussion during site visits. These comments point to opportunities for continuous improvement rather than structural weaknesses and confirm a generally high level of trust in ZEvA's work.

Overall, the stakeholder feedback from 2022–2024 demonstrates that ZEvA is regarded as a highly professional, transparent, and trustworthy quality assurance agency, whose activities are widely accepted and appreciated by both reviewers and higher education institutions at national and international levels.

⁶⁰ The results are summarised in Annex 10.



8 Previous ENQA Review

8.1 ENQA Review Process and Decision

ZEvA has undergone an external review by ENQA in 2021. As a result, the experts came to the following conclusions⁶¹:

Fully compliant: 3.2, 3.3, 3.5, 3.7, 2.1, 2.3, 2.5, 2.6,

Substantially compliant: 3.1, 3.6, 2.2, 2.4,

Partially compliant: 3.4, 2.7

At its meeting on September 13-14, 2021, the ENQA Board reconfirmed ZEvA's membership for five years and concluded that ZEvA is in compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines. The ENQA Board requested a follow-up report to be handed in by September 2023 and issued the following recommendations:⁶²

ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

The agency is recommended to formalise the approach to agreeing, documenting and monitoring progress towards the strategic priorities of the agency.

The agency is recommended to review and ensure a shared understanding of the responsibilities of its board, commissions and management following a period of major change, including responsibility for approving new and revised external quality assurance methodologies.

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

The agency is recommended to develop, assign resources to, and implement a plan for thematic analysis of findings from across the range of the agency's QA procedures.

ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

The agency is recommended to complete the review of operating procedures used by staff to guide the delivery of external quality assurance activities and monitor the effectiveness of their implementation.

The agency is recommended to formalise and systematise the way in which feedback from stakeholders informs the agency's approach to strategic development and internal quality assurance.

ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

The agency is recommended to establish a systematic approach to periodically and comprehensively reviewing each of the external quality assurance methodologies operated by the agency.

ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts

The agency is recommended to clarify its expectations for experts to engage with training, including a more robust mandatory requirement for newer experts to undertake initial training, and implement

⁶¹ <https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/ZEvA-external-review-report.pdf>

⁶² https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/Board-letter-membership-reconfirmed_ZEvA.pdf



systems to record experts' engagement with training in order to monitor that these expectations are met.

ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

The agency is recommended to further develop the complaints and appeals procedure to include a more detailed operating procedure, the point of submission, expected timescales and authority delegated by the Council to other governance and management bodies in handling complaints and appeals.

8.2 EQAR Decision

On September 7, 2020, EQAR's Register Committee confirmed the eligibility of ZEvA's application.

On December 24, 2021, ZEvA was informed of a deferral of the decision on ZEvA's application, combined with a request for further representation by February 15, 2022. The Register Committee had also asked the experts for further clarification. ZEvA handed in additional representation on February 11, giving explanations on some unclear points and further evidence.

On March 14, 2022, the Register Committee concluded that ZEvA is in substantial compliance with the ESG as a whole, while only partially complying with the standards 2.4, 2.7 and 3.4. Thus, ZEvA's inclusion on the Register was renewed until September 30, 2026.⁶³ As for standard 2.4, the Register Committee did not concur with the assessment of the expert panel because „the level of formal expert training remained weak to date“ (item 22).

8.3 ENQA Follow-Up

On September 29, 2023, ZEvA issued a follow-up report with extensive comments on how ZEvA has dealt with the recommendations.⁶⁴

On October 25, 2023, the ENQA Board responded to the follow-up report and stated:

"We appreciate the agency's honest reflection on how it has addressed the panel's recommendations, echoing well on the challenges ahead and the work done so far to address these challenges. Furthermore, the Board commends the agency for the revision of its internal QA system, and the agency's approach to thematic analysis. With this, the Board approves the report and takes note of the progress that has been made."⁶⁵

8.4 Actions Taken Regarding the Recommendations

Most of the following points were already made in the follow-up report, but we have updated the state of affairs where necessary.

ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

The agency is recommended to formalise the approach to agreeing, documenting and monitoring progress towards the strategic priorities of the agency.

⁶³ http://backend.degar.eu/reports/EQAR/A98_ZEvA_RenewalDecision_v1_0.pdf

⁶⁴ <https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/ZEvAs-2023-follow-up-report.pdf>

⁶⁵ https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Letter-ENQA-to-ZEvA_FU.pdf



The Executive Board develops the overall strategy and monitors its progress in close collaboration with the department heads. Mainly at corporate retreats and the regular Jour Fixe meetings, ZEvA's employees also get the opportunity to contribute and give their input, often also in the form of working groups. Every five years, the Board presents its overall strategy to the Foundation Council for approval and gives regular updates on changes and progress. ZEvA then documents its progress in the yearly reports delivered to the Council.

On December 10, 2025, the Foundation Council has approved the current strategic plan, valid for 10 years, presented by the Executive Board.

See also the chapter on ESG 3.1 in chapter 3.

The agency is recommended to review and ensure a shared understanding of the responsibilities of its board, commissions and management following a period of major change, including responsibility for approving new and revised external quality assurance methodologies.

New and revised quality assurance methodologies are approved by the Executive Board and will be presented to the ZEvA Commission. Both the Foundation Council and the ZEvA Commission have given themselves statutes that describe their respective tasks. Additionally, as a response to ENQA's recommendations, the Foundation Council has formulated their understanding of the Council's respective tasks and responsibilities in a memo (See Annex 11).

See also the chapter on ESG 3.1 in chapter 3.

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

The agency is recommended to develop, assign resources to, and implement a plan for thematic analysis of findings from across the range of the agency's QA procedures.

In ZEvA's corporate retreat in 2021, ZEvA had put together a working group for Thematic Analysis to develop a new concept for publishing Thematic Analyses regularly and a process for their development. For the purpose of publication, ZEvA has started a new scientific series, „Studien zum Qualitätsmanagement im Hochschulwesen“ (ISSN 2750-7475). So far, six publications have been put forth and a seventh is in preparation.

The analyses are being published on ZEvA's website:

<https://www.zeva.org/en/publications/>

The original concept has since been amended slightly. The responsibility of deciding on new thematic analyses to be put forth now lies with the Executive Board and the department Heads, to be determined at the beginning of each year. ZEvA's project officers are encouraged to bring forth suggestions on topics they would like to tackle.

See also the chapter on ESG 3.4 in chapter 3.



ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

The agency is recommended to complete the review of operating procedures used by staff to guide the delivery of external quality assurance activities and monitor the effectiveness of their implementation.

The current procedures, revised in 2023, are documented in ZEvA's new Handbook for Internal Quality assurance, published on ZEvA's website.⁶⁶ In the handbook, the processes for collecting feedback from experts and customers, analysing the collected data and translating them in measures to be taken are laid out in a comprehensive manner. Drawing conclusions from the collected feedback is the responsibility of the Board in conjunction with the department heads. The results are presented yearly at ZEvA's corporate retreats.

See also the chapter on ESG 3.6 in chapter 3.

The agency is recommended to formalise and systematise the way in which feedback from stakeholders informs the agency's approach to strategic development and internal quality assurance.

How ZEvA collects feedback from stakeholders is described in the quality handbook. In all our procedures, we are using the evaluation software Survey Monkey to evaluate the quality of our procedures. Through discussions of the Executive Board with the Department Heads, ZEvA identifies measures to be taken which then will be included in ZEvA's strategy.

See also the chapter on ESG 3.6 in chapter 3.

ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

The agency is recommended to establish a systematic approach to periodically and comprehensively reviewing each of the external quality assurance methodologies operated by the agency.

We are regularly reviewing our methodologies by collecting feedback in all procedures, as described in our Quality Handbook, and during the annual corporate retreats. Apart from that, defining our processes further is part of the periodic strategy development.

See also the chapter on ESG 2.2 in chapter 3.

ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts

The agency is recommended to clarify its expectations for experts to engage with training, including a more robust mandatory requirement for newer experts to undertake initial training, and implement systems to record experts' engagement with training in order to monitor that these expectations are met.

⁶⁶ https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1378/quality_manual_en_october_2023.pdf



ZEvA has formulated its approach to training experts and to documenting which experts have undergone some form of training in an internal document (see Annex 15).

See also the chapter on ESG 2.4 in chapter 3.

ESG 2.7 Complaints and Appeals

The agency is recommended to further develop the complaints and appeals procedure to include a more detailed operating procedure, the point of submission, expected timescales and authority delegated by the Council to other governance and management bodies in handling complaints and appeals.

ZEvA has not revised the procedure as such, as we saw no need to change a process that has been working smoothly for years, but we have placed the relevant information even more prominently on our new website, and, as before, the procedure is described in all of ZEvA's handbooks, which can also be downloaded from our website in their current version.

See also the chapter on ESG 2.7 in chapter 3.



9 SWOT Analysis

9.1 Procedure

From October to December 2025, ZEvA has conducted a SWOT analysis to gain deeper insight into ZEvA's current situation and position in order to derive appropriate strategic measures. Recent results were also compared to results from 2020/2021. As a tool for developing strategic measures, the SWOT analysis will be repeated every five years, coinciding with the preparation of the SAR for the ENQA Review. The results will be discussed internally at ZEvA's annual retreat (Klausurtagung). This final step is still due. The SWOT analysis as described in the following combines the internal perspective of ZEvA staff with the external perspective of members of the standing committee of ZEvA: the ZEvA-Commission (ZEKo).

As a first step, ZEvA's staff was asked to fill out a questionnaire on the four categories Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Staff members that were already in present in 2020/21 were in addition asked for their ranking of changes perceived. Out of the results, clusters of recurring answers and generic terms were defined and weighted. In a second step, the results were presented to members of the ZEKo to obtain an external perspective. As a result, the validation conducted by the members of the ZEKo by weighting of the identified factors was adapted.

9.2 Summary of Results

The main findings of the SWOT analysis are:

- A strength of ZEvA is the highly committed and competent staff.
- A weakness is the scarce staffing level which makes the agency less resilient in cases of long-term illness or staff departures.
- These first two factors did not significantly change since the last SWOT analysis in 2020/21.
- The internationalisation in quality assurance is still considered an opportunity for ZEvA but is also perceived as an activity that has already been followed up.
- At the same time the international market is perceived as a threat because it is considered as prone to crisis.

9.3 Measures

As the SWOT analysis has just been completed and ZEvA has not had a chance yet to discuss it in a corporate retreat, a more detailed analysis and definition of measures is still to follow. Some of the points seen as weaknesses and threats have not changed since 2021, and some of them have already been addressed.

Based on the SWOT analysis in 2021, the following measures were defined:

- Increase staffing level (project officers) by at least 1.0 FTE (an increase by 1.5 FTE is already accomplished beginning of January 2021!)

The staffing level was not raised but instead ZEvA has reduced personnel. As can be seen from the current SWOT analysis, the staffing level is still seen as a weakness. However, the reduction was



necessary to retain competitiveness in the markets ZEvA is competing in and to ensure ZEvA's financial success. Instead, ZEvA has increased the efficiency of its processes to reduce the workload for each procedure. Additionally, ZEvA now uses external freelancers in addition to the standing personnel and is considering recruiting more freelancers in the future to alleviate staff workload. (See chapter 5.6)

- Improve and increase marketing activities with a focus on the international market (including a relaunch of the website)

The new website was launched together with a new corporate design in 2023 and has received very favourable reactions. Most importantly, all individual pages are now available in English to make the website more accessible for international partners. Additionally, ZEvA has shown increased presence in international events, such as conferences in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and Chongqing, China, signed MoUs with international partners that are helping to promote ZEvA's services in their countries and has offered workshops and webinars to international universities. Already, ZEvA has expanded its international services to China, Indonesia, Lebanon and Jordan, and further procedures are being planned in Malta, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Kuwait, and the international procedures now comprise a significant percentage of ZEvA's overall business. Since in the current SWOT analysis, the international market is seen as a threat due to its proneness to crises, ZEvA seeks to diversify its international activities so it is no longer reliant on a few countries or regions.

On the national level, ZEvA has increased its marketing activities by deliberately contacting HEIs with expiring accreditation periods that haven't worked with ZEvA before. This is done once per year.

- Strengthen networking activities to increase the chances of being heard at the political level

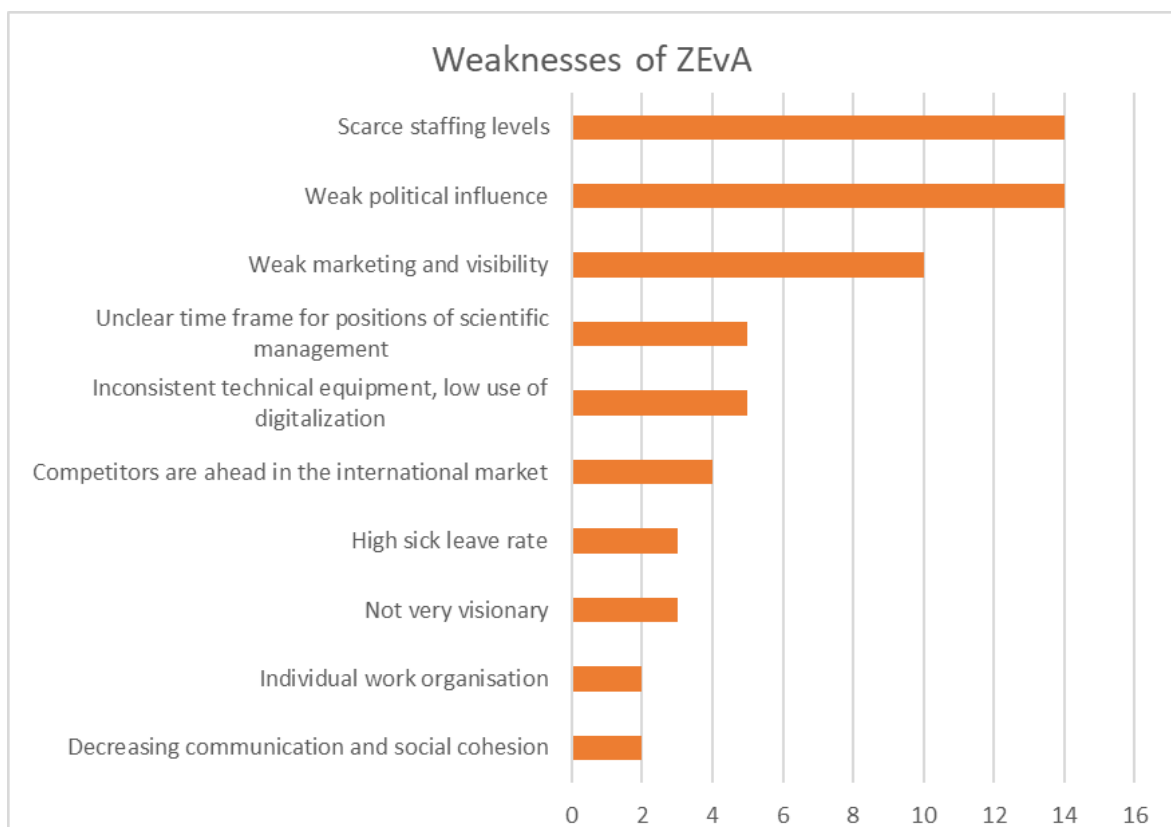
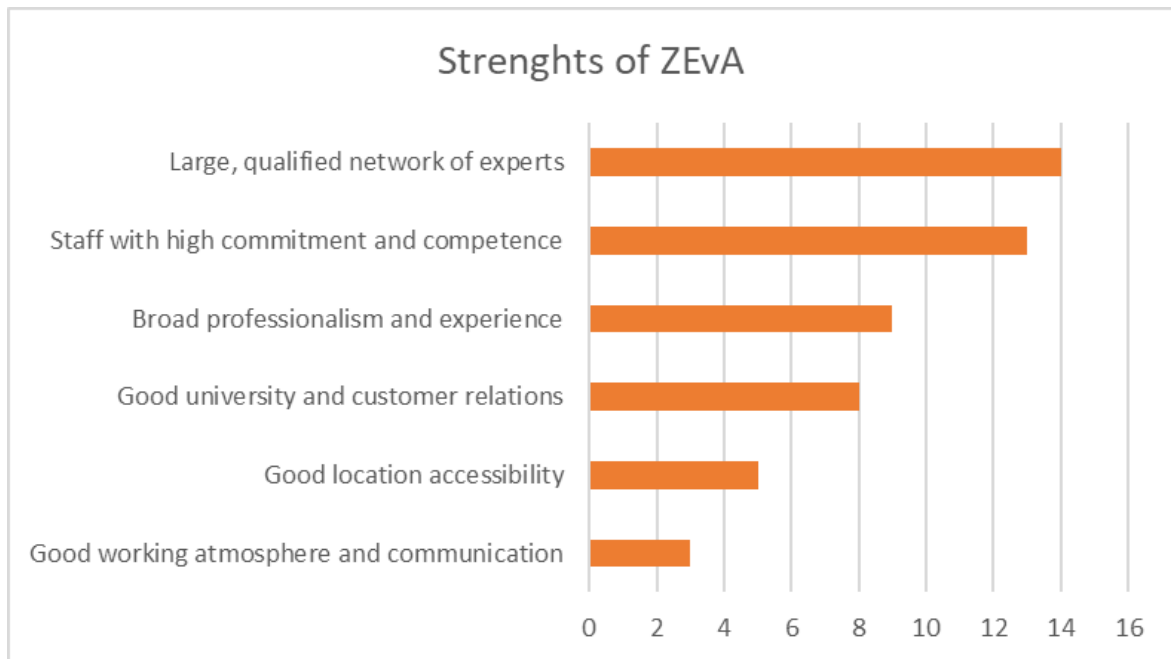
The networking activities have been increased on several levels, but the influence on the political level is still very low, as can be seen in the graph below. As an example, the German agencies were asked to comment on the revision of the Specimen Decree but very few of their recommendations were put into practice. For ZEvA, networking in Germany works mostly on the level of the GAC, where ZEvA personnel are participating in networking activities on several levels to discuss recurring problems and agree on common interpretations of criteria and procedural rules.

In Lower Saxony, ZEvA is currently engaging stronger with the Ministry of Science and Culture and devising a new ongoing task for ZEvA within Lower Saxony.

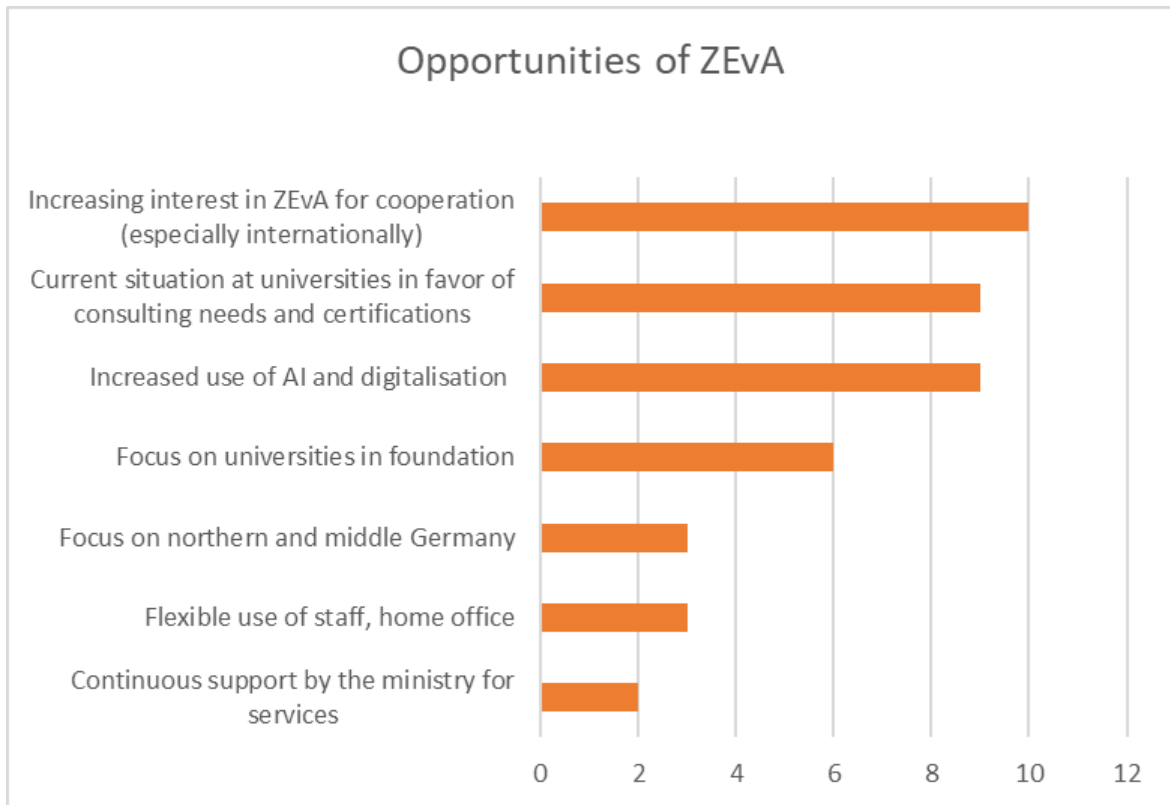
Internationally, ZEvA is not really intent on appealing to the political level but nevertheless has new cooperations with partners that themselves have close ties to their government.



9.4 Graphs⁶⁷



⁶⁷ The x-axis denotes the number of mentions of the individual items.





10 Key Challenges and Areas of Future Development

10.1 Current Challenges

During the last five years, ZEvA's business was at times inhibited by current crises like the corona-pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The pandemic led to a more extensive use of video conferencing tools like Zoom and a general overhaul of ZEvA's digital services, e.g. by installing a new digital telephone system, a stable VPN service and handing out smartphones to all project officers. All of which make it easier to work from home, so ZEvA now offers the possibility of two days of home office per week. The video conferencing tools are now an essential part of ZEvA's processes and make communication with customers, experts and other stakeholders much easier. This is especially important for ZEvA's international work, and nowhere more so than in Ukraine. Due to the ongoing conflict, it is not possible for ZEvA's project officers and German experts to do on-site visits, and we have had to switch to virtual site visits instead. Recently, ZEvA has had requests by institutions in other crisis regions, namely the Middle East, where the Israel/Palestine conflict also resulted in travel warnings for other states in the region and thus has made travel to some of these countries unfeasible. It has become obvious that interest in ZEvA's international services is highest in regions that may be prone to conflicts or instability and ZEvA has to deal with this fact. In Ukraine, the practice of recruiting part of the expert group within the country so the site visit could be carried out in hybrid mode has proved very effective, and ZEvA can rely on its cooperation partners in Ukraine to suggest suitable candidates. In other regions, this possibility also has to be explored, although it may be harder to find experts that have experience with the European higher education system. As a result, ZEvA is exploring the possibility of training experts in these countries together with local partners to prepare them for their expert role in an ESG context.

Another challenge is the increasing marketisation and bureaucratisation of accreditation procedures. As ZEvA has worked in an open market in Germany for a long time, this is of course familiar ground, but the pressure on pricing is increasing in Germany, where 11 agencies are competing for procedures and a growing number of HEIs are system accredited, which significantly reduces the number of programme accreditation procedures on offer. Since almost all public universities now (have to) offer their procedures in a public tender, the process becomes more bureaucratic and even more focussed on the price, and it is harder to play out the individual strengths of an agency. In public tenders, the HEI offering the tender is always determining the contract which does not always fit with ZEvA's terms and conditions. Furthermore, some HEIs formulate their tenders in a way that excludes certain agencies as they are tailored to the specifics of one agency or formulate prerequisites that not all agencies can fulfil. All in all, the system of public tenders has made the distribution of ZEvA's services in Germany more difficult, and applying for an accreditation procedure in these public tenders is very time consuming. As can be seen from the SWOT analysis, ZEvA had to reduce personnel due to the pressures of the market and seeks to alleviate that by engaging Freelancers.

As a reaction, ZEvA puts a lot more emphasis on international procedures, which are also subject to marketisation but with a much less competitive and unbureaucratic market. This is the cornerstone of ZEvA's current strategy, along with streamlining its procedures in Germany further to reduce costs without sacrificing ESG compatibility.



10.2 Areas for Further Development

As mentioned above, ZEvA is shifting its activities towards the international market. To achieve this, ZEvA has to increase the efforts in international marketing and acquisition. For this reason, ZEvA is always seeking international partners that can aid the agency in distributing its services in these countries. As mentioned above, this is already underway in China and Uzbekistan but will have to be expanded to more countries. Regional diversification will make ZEvA's business more resilient towards international crises and will create a broad range of opportunities. At the moment, ZEvA is concentrating on Asia regionally, from the Middle East (Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan etc.) to Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan etc.), East Asia (China) and Southeast Asia (Indonesia), with further countries as possible markets yet to be explored. Once ZEvA has a solid standing in these regions, an expansion into Africa is also envisioned.

To support this development, ZEvA has put an emphasis on international competencies in recruiting new staff. All new project officers are expected to also be able to work in English and willing to travel internationally. In this way, ZEvA has recruited skilled personnel in the past that can work in several areas of activity, nationally and internationally.

As far as other services go, validation and certification have yet to be developed into significant business areas. At the moment, this is not a top priority in ZEvA's strategy but will have to be tackled in the mid-term, with a more thorough market analysis and further promotion of these services. Furthermore, ZEvA will explore the possibility to develop new certificates beyond those already offered, e.g. in the areas of sustainability or digitalisation, possibly with partners experienced in these areas.

Similarly, the area of consulting (beyond ZEvA's mission in Lower Saxony) has not yet been developed into a steady course of income and will have to be addressed in the future. ZEvA is in the process of building partnerships for consulting as well, but so far has not been able to promote these services extensively.

Lastly, ZEvA plans to develop its digitalisation even further. For 2026, ZEvA has scheduled the introduction of Microsoft 365 and of generative AI software to further aid its internal processes. At the moment, ZEvA is in the testing phase of ChatGPT Business and Adobe Firefly to decide whether these tools are suitable for its purposes. To support the introduction, ZEvA's employees will receive training in the use of these new software tools.



11 Glossary of Terms

Term	German original (where applicable)	Explanation
Accreditation Decrees of the Federal States	Studienakkreditierungsverordnungen der Länder	Decrees of the German federal states, based on the Specimen Decree, regulating the accreditation system in the respective state. Some of these decrees include a substantiation of the rules and criteria and some refer to the substantiation of the Specimen decree.
Appeals Commission	Revisionskommission	ZEvA's commission handling appeals against decisions and complaints about procedural steps
Commission for International Affairs (KIA)	Kommission für internationale Angelegenheiten	ZEvA's former deciding body for international quality assurance procedures
Commission for System Accreditation (KSA)	Kommission Systemakkreditierung	A former subcommittee of ZEvA's SAK responsible for German system accreditation procedures
European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)		European membership association of quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education area
European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA)		An association of European quality assurance agencies.
European Institute for Quality Assurance (EIQA)		Former association of HEIs and other bodies serving as an external advisory council to ZEvA
European Quality Agency Register (EQAR)		A register for European quality assurance agencies. Registration in the EQAR is in many countries required for agencies to work.
European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF)		A regular meeting of European quality assurance experts
Foundation Council	Stiftungsrat	ZEvA's supervisory body
Foundation under Civil/Public Law	Stiftung nach privatem/öffentlichen Recht	Foundations in Germany are either founded under civil or public law. A foundation under public law would operate with public assets under public supervision and fulfil responsibilities of a public administration. ZEvA is a foundation under civil law and thus operates mostly with its own assets while serving public purposes.
General Auxiliary Conditions for Grants for Institutional Support	Allgemeine Nebenbestimmungen für Zuwendungen zur	Auxiliary conditions for the German Federal Budgetary Regulations, regulating governmental institutional support of private institutions



	institutionellen Förderung (ANBest-I)	
German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)	Deutscher akademischer Austauschdienst	Association of German HEIs and student bodies to support international relations in higher education.
German Accreditation Council (GAC)	Akkreditierungsrat (AR)	Central regulating and decision-making body in the German accreditation system, incorporated as part of a foundation under public law of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.
German Evaluation Society	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Evaluation (DeGEval)	German association for evaluation in higher education
German Federal Constitutional Court	Bundesverfassungsgericht	Highest constitutional court in Germany
German Scientific Council (WR)	Wissenschaftsrat	Central body of the German federal government and the federal states, responsible for further development of the German academic system and for the institutional accreditation of private HEIs
Higher Education Framework Act (HRG)	Hochschulrahmengesetz	Legal framework for higher education on the federal level
Interstate Treaty on the Organization of a Joint Accreditation System to Ensure the Quality of Teaching and Learning at German Higher Education Institutions (Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty)	Staatsvertrag über die Organisation eines gemeinsamen Akkreditierungssystems zur Qualitätssicherung in Studium und Lehre an deutschen Hochschulen ("Studienakkreditierungsstaatsvertrag")	A treaty of the German federal states with the purpose of developing a new common accreditation system in Germany. Legal basis for the Specimen Decree and the accreditation decrees of the federal states.
Joint Quality Initiative		An initiative by European countries with the purpose of developing a joint system of quality assurance for higher education in Europe. Formulated the Dublin Descriptors which served as a basis for the European Qualifications Framework for Higher Education
Lower Saxony Higher Education Act (NHG)	Niedersächsisches Hochschulgesetz	State law of Lower Saxony regulating higher education in the state.
Ministry of Science and Culture of Lower Saxony (MWK)	Niedersächsisches Ministerium für Wissenschaft und Kultur	Ministry of the state of Lower Saxony governing higher education in the state
Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA)		An association of East and Central European quality assurance agencies



Quality Assurance Act for Higher Education Institutions (HS-QSG)	Hochschul-Qualitätssicherungsgesetz	Austrian legal framework for quality assurance at HEIs
Specimen Decree Pursuant to Article 4, Paragraphs 1 – 4 of the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty (MRVO)	Musterrechtsverordnung gemäß Artikel 4 Absätze 1 4 Studienakkreditierungsstaatsvertrag	Legal document agreed upon by the German federal states to serve as a template for the legally binding state accreditation decrees. Includes procedural rules and criteria for accreditation procedures and an extensive substantiation of these rules and criteria. Updated in 2025
Standing Accreditation Commission (SAK)	Ständige Akkreditierungskommission	Former decision-making body of ZEvA for German accreditation procedures
Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK)	Kultusministerkonferenz	A conference of ministers for culture, education, and higher education of the German federal states. Issues common guidelines and frameworks for education and higher education.
Standing Evaluation Commission (SEK)	Ständige Evaluierungskommission	ZEvA's former commission for all state-funded evaluation and consultancy projects in Lower Saxony
State University Conference of Lower Saxony (LHK)	Niedersächsische Landeshochschulkonferenz	A conference of all public HEIs in Lower Saxony
System Accreditation	Systemakkreditierung	An accreditation of an HEI's quality assurance system, in effect enabling them to self-accredit their programmes
University of Cooperative Education (also: vocational academy)	Berufsakademie	A vocational academy that may offer Bachelor's degrees that are equated to higher education programmes and lead to the same qualifications
ZEvA-Commission (ZEKo)	ZEvA-Kommission	ZEvA's central decision-making body for all external quality assurance procedures that lead to a formal decision since 2018



12 Links

12.1 General

ZEVA Website:

<https://www.zeva.org/>

Website German Accreditation Council (GAC):

<https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/>

Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK)

<https://www.kmk.org/kmk/information-in-english.html>

Interstate Treaty on the Organization of a Joint Accreditation System to Ensure the Quality of Teaching and Learning at German Higher Education Institutions (Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty)

https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2016/2016_12_08-Studienakkreditierungsstaatsvertrag-englisch.pdf

Specimen Decree Pursuant to Article 4, Paragraphs 1 – 4 of the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty (MRVO)

https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/sites/default/files/downloads/2024/2024_11_21-Muster-rechtsverordnung.pdf

Outdated English Version:

https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2017/2017_12_07-Musterrechtsverordnung-englisch.pdf

Lower Saxony Higher Education Act.

<https://www.schure.de/22210/nhg.htm>

Unofficial outdated English version:

https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/document/download/715fc9e9317654a6f83f3302d614c7bc.pdf/NHG_English.pdf

Guidelines and Criteria for the Accreditation of Doctoral Programmes in Lower Saxony:

https://www.mwk.niedersachsen.de/download/157318/Leitlinien_und_Kriterien_fuer_die_Akkreditierung_von_Promotionsstudiengaengen_in_Niedersachsen_Stand_17.07.2020_nicht_vollstaendig_barrierefrei_-_Download_.pdf

German Higher Education Framework Act (HRG)

<https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/hrg/>

Austrian Higher Education Quality Assurance Act:

<https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20007384>

Lower Saxony Foundation Register:

https://www.arl-we.niedersachsen.de/startseite/grundbesitz_und_stiftungen/stiftungen/



General Auxiliary Conditions for Grants for Institutional Support:

https://www.bva.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Aufgaben/ZMB/Zuwendungen_national/Nebenbestimmungen/nebenbestimmungen_anbest_i_2025.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=4

12.2 ZEvA Manuals

Quality Handbook:

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1378/quality_manual_en_october_2023.pdf

Programme Accreditation (Germany):

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1260/leitfaden_programmakkreditierung_jan_2023-1.pdf

System Accreditation (Germany):

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1292/leitfaden_systemakkreditierung_jan_2023-1.pdf

Certification/Validation:

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1422/leitfaden_zertifizierung_und_validierung_dez_2023.pdf

International Programme Accreditation:

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1494/manual_international_programme_accreditation_jan_2023.pdf

International Institutional Accreditation:

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1512/manual_international_institutional_accreditation_jan_2023.pdf

Quality Audits Austria:

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1549/leitfaden_qualitaetsaudits_osterreich_jan_2023.pdf

Evaluation of Study Programmes:

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1953/leitfaden_evaluation_von_studiengangen_jan_2023.pdf

Quality Audit/Institutional Evaluation:

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1954/leitfaden_institutionelles_audit_jan_2023.pdf

Evaluation Exam Systems:

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1963/leitfaden_zur_evaluation_des_pruefungswe-sens_2022.pdf

Evaluation Dual Study-Programmes:

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1963/leitfaden_zur_evaluation_dualer_studienkonzepte_2022.pdf

Evaluation STEM-Programmes:

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1963/leitfaden_evaluation_der_massnahmen_zur_foerderung_der_mint-studienabschluesse_2022.pdf

Project Monitoring and Evaluation



https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1956/leitfaden_projektbegleitung_jan_2023.pdf

Consultancy:

https://www.zeva.org/site/assets/files/1453/leitfaden_beratung_jan_2023-1.pdf



13 List of Annexes

- Annex 1: Foundation Certificate (Translation)
- Annex 2: Foundation Charter (Translation)
- Annex 3: Rules of Procedure Foundation Council (Translation)
- Annex 4: Rules of Procedure Executive Board (Translation)
- Annex 5: Rules of Procedure ZEvA-Commission (Translation)
- Annex 6: Rules of Procedure Appeals Commission (Translation)
- Annex 7: ZEvA's Quality Handbook (Translation)
- Annex 8: Comparison ZEvA Criteria to ESG
- Annex 9: GAC Comparison Criteria to ESG
- Annex 10: SurveyMonkey Evaluation Results (in German)
- Annex 11: Role of the Foundation Council
- Annex 12: Template Assessment Contract
- Annex 13: Handout for Experts
- Annex 14: Selection of Experts
- Annex 15: Concept Training of Experts
- Annex 16: List of Complaints and Appeals
- Annex 17: List Consultancy Work
- Annex 18: List of Procedures

(Translations aided by DeePL)



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