INDEPENDENCE OF ACCREDITATION AGENCIES: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL ENGINEERING EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE

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ABSTRACT

In a globally interconnected engineering education landscape, the role of accreditation is pivotal in assuring that graduates are equipped for professional practice and global mobility. The credibility and trust in qualifications hinge not only on technical standards but significantly on the perceived and actual independence of accreditation agencies. This workshop explores the meaning, challenges, and implications of independence in the context of engineering accreditation, drawing on international standards such as the EUR-ACE Framework.
Participants engaged in interactive discussions and analyses centered on real-world scenarios that highlight threats to independence, such as political interference, financial dependencies, and institutional conflicts of interest. Using the EUR-ACE criteria on agency status and resources as a lens, attendees explored how different national systems address autonomy, transparency, and impartiality.
By the end of the workshop, participants gained tools to identify structural vulnerabilities and formulate strategies to foster independent and credible accreditation structures aligned with international expectations.

1 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

In the global context of engineering education, accreditation serves as a mechanism to ensure that graduates are adequately prepared for professional practice [2]. As the profession increasingly operates across borders, mutual recognition of qualifications hinges on trust in the standards and procedures used by accreditation agencies.

This trust depends fundamentally on the perceived and actual independence of the accrediting body. Independence implies impartiality in decision-making, transparency of processes, and protection from undue influence—whether governmental, institutional, or financial. The ENAEE's EUR-ACE Framework Standards and Guidelines underscore the necessity of agency autonomy [1], [4], particularly in standard regarding Status and Resources. Agencies must not only be operationally independent but also be perceived by the engineering profession as credible authorities capable of unbiased judgment.

2 WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

2.1 Target audience

This workshop was designed for higher education quality assurance professionals, engineering educators, policymakers, members of accreditation bodies, and other stakeholders involved in developing or overseeing engineering education quality frameworks. It is also highly relevant to professionals engaged in implementing or monitoring international accreditation practices.

2.2 Expected learning outcomes

By the end of the workshop, participants were able to identify core indicators that demonstrate the independence of accreditation agencies and recognize potential risks and structural weaknesses that may compromise their impartiality. They were also able to explain global trends in quality assurance systems and assess how these trends influence the independence of such bodies. In addition, participants applied the EUR-ACE Framework Standards to evaluate accreditation bodies and to formulate strategies aimed at enhancing or establishing independent accreditation structures [1], [4].

3 WORKSHOP DESIGN

3.1 Time plan

The structure of the workshop was designed to progressively engage participants in understanding and critically reflecting on the concept of agency independence in the context of engineering accreditation. The session began with a concise introduction to key definitions and international frameworks, followed by two interactive segments that encouraged collaborative discussion and applied analysis of practical scenarios. The activities aim to foster both conceptual clarity and practical insight, supporting the workshop's learning outcomes. Table 1 below outlines the time allocation and purpose of each component of the workshop.

Table 1. Time plan

Run time	Activity	Notes
8 min	Introduction	Context and definitions related to accreditation independence
15 min	Interactive activity 1	Group brainstorm on real-world threats to agency independence
7 min	Discussion	Summarize issues and reflect on their impact
20 min	Interactive activity 2	Analyze a hypothetical case of compromised agency independence
10 min	Discussion and conclusions	Summarize issues and reflect on their impact

3.2 Interactivity

The workshop interactivity was ensured through structured group analysis of scenarios where independence was challenged. Participants were guided to identify vulnerabilities, propose solutions, and discuss best practices informed by the EUR-ACE framework and other global models[1], [3], [4], and some new approaches like the one presented in the Digital Resilience project (https://digitalresilienceproject.eu). Small group discussions allowed for contextual sharing, followed by plenary debriefs.

4 WORKSHOP OUTCOME

This section includes a summary of workshop discussions, participant insights, and conclusions reached regarding the global state of agency independence in engineering accreditation.

4.1 Overview of Discussions

The workshop attracted participants from over a dozen countries across Europe, Asia and America, representing quality assurance agencies, professional bodies, universities, and government-linked organisations. The session focused on examining the global state of agency independence in engineering accreditation, using the different types of Independence framework Standards and Guidelines as a benchmark for analysis. The participants began by mapping their national systems against the dichotomy of “hard-power” and “soft-power” quality assurance models. Many participants identified a gradual shift from regulatory, compliance-driven systems (hard power) to more collegial, improvement-oriented approaches (soft power). However, this transition was reported as uneven, some systems remain closely linked to ministerial oversight, while others have achieved operational autonomy through professional self-regulation.

During the discussion, it was clear that across many systems particularly emerging or heavily state-funded ones, accreditation bodies face persistent governmental or political influence. Their financial models often depend on accreditation fees or public grants, creating vulnerabilities that can compromise impartiality, while governance structures in which universities or ministries appoint board members introduce clear risks of conflicts of interest. At the same time, there is a growing recognition that

genuine peer-review independence and the transparent publication of methods and results are key markers of trustworthiness.

4.2 Analysis of Case Studies: NERB and BAQE

The participants worked in small groups to assess the fictional agencies the Northern Engineering Review Board (NERB) and the Baltic Alliance for Quality in Engineering (BAQE) using the different types of Independence framework (governance, financial, operational, procedural, peer-review, transparency, and professional recognition).

The participants judged that the NERB was generally to be independent, with minor reservations. Its board decisions are self-executing, its funding is diversified between fees and a professional trust, and its peer-review process includes international experts. The participants highlighted its public transparency, low government presence, and robust conflict-of-interest procedures as strong indicators of compliance with the ENAEE EAFSG Independence framework. They suggested improvements included publishing anonymised conflict-of-interest data and formally firewalling the small government observer grant.

The BAQE, by contrast, was deemed not independent under ENAEE EAFSG Independence framework. Despite its professionalism and operational maturity, the agency's heavy reliance on annual state funding (≈60%), ministerial majority on the board, and deferment of decisions pending policy alignment were considered clear breaches of governance and procedural independence. The participants understood that administrative confirmation of decisions and the presence of government officers at site visits undermine impartiality. They recommended reforms that included reducing public funding below 30%, legally insulating board decisions, and publishing complete accreditation reports.

4.3 Cross-Country Insights

Participants noted that, in their own systems, many of the same vulnerabilities seen in the case studies persist. Agencies established within ministerial frameworks struggle over the long term to achieve recognised autonomy, while financial sustainability remains a universal concern—particularly in smaller or developing economies where fee income is limited.
Some mature agencies have responded by adopting risk-based accreditation and commissioning external audits to reinforce their independence. Cultural expectations also diverge: in some countries, state oversight is equated with credibility; in others, it is perceived as interference. Overall, participants agreed that perceived independence is as critical as formal autonomy; an agency can be structurally independent yet still lose credibility if transparency or accountability mechanisms are weak.

4.4 Conclusions

The workshop concluded that agency independence is both a structural and cultural construct, requiring balanced governance, diversified funding, and explicit separation of professional judgment from political or institutional agendas. Globally, a convergence toward soft-power, enhancement-based quality assurance is visible, yet many systems remain hybrid.

Key takeaways were that governance independence must be enshrined in statutes to prevent policy-driven interference; financial sustainability hinges on mixed but balanced revenue streams; transparency and external peer review are the most trusted indicators of impartiality; and sustained dialogue among government, the profession, and academia can maintain trust without compromising autonomy.

Overall, the workshop reaffirmed that achieving true independence is a dynamic equilibrium, not a fixed status. It depends on transparency, accountability, and a shared professional ethos rather than the complete absence of state involvement. Participants endorsed the ENAEE EAFSG Independence framework as an effective diagnostic framework and recommended its broader use in agency self-evaluation and peer review worldwide.

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