

Conformity assessment bodies – Accreditation

Accreditation is the term applied to the third party assessment of the conformity of conformity assessment bodies with the relevant standards. It is defined in ISO/IEC 17000:2004 as:

Clause 5.6

accreditation

*third party **attestation** (5.2) related to a **conformity assessment body** (2.5) conveying formal demonstration of its competence to carry out specific tasks*

The key words in this definition are “*competence*” and “*specific conformity assessment tasks*”. It is important to note that recognition of competence is the principal objective of accreditation and such recognition is for specific tasks. Some accreditation bodies have specific capabilities, such as accreditation of the competence of laboratories, for example, or for accreditation of certification bodies. Some accreditation bodies are multi-functional and cover a broad range of conformity assessment bodies and others are more narrowly- focussed on speciality areas.

Accreditation bodies are often appointed by national governments and hold an important position in the conformity assessment hierarchy. They provide confidence in the impartiality and competence of conformity assessment bodies. The criteria for accreditation bodies are specified in ISO/IEC 17011:2004. As accreditation bodies are at the top of the confidence pyramid, there is no higher level body to assess their conformity with the requirements. Instead, accreditation bodies from different countries have formed multi-lateral agreements through which they carry out peer assessments on each other.

Role of accreditation in support of governments

There are many ways in which accreditation can support and interact with governments. Governments themselves are often the operators of their economy’s national accreditation bodies. Some governments also view accreditation as a public interest activity and have proposed that there should be no forms of commercial competition between accreditation bodies. This view is strongly evident, for example, in the European Commission’s development of its policy on accreditation in its revision of its “New Approach” technical regulations.

In other economies and regions there may be a mixture of government and non-government accreditation bodies, or solely non-government bodies. Many of the non-government accreditation bodies also operate on a not-for-profit basis, and may have formal government support and recognition of their roles on behalf of government.

Within national quality infrastructures, governments often accept responsibility for national systems for legal metrology, provision of standards of measurement (national measurement institutes) and accreditation services. Where commercial bodies deliver some or all of a particular service, governments often accept the responsibility for the appropriate delivery of the service. These services are rarely commercial and often require government financial support.

Accreditation support for government

Some of the specific ways in which accreditation supports governments include:

As a client of accreditation services

Governments may operate their own laboratories, inspection activities, and certification systems. This provides the clients (or other affected parties) of government laboratories, certification systems, etc, and the public at large, with reassurance that the Government's own conformity assessment capabilities are *independently* evaluated and recognised for their technical competence.

As a user and/or purchaser of services from accredited facilities

Governments are significant users of non-government services, including goods and services requiring conformity assessment. Accreditation of the bodies which carry out conformity assessment provides governments with additional confidence for their purchasing needs that compliance with their specifications has been confirmed by competent bodies.

As a specification body for conformity assessment services

Government departments, regulatory authorities and agencies will often specify the use of accredited bodies. References to accredited bodies may be found in their public policies, government specifications and regulations. This again provides governments with additional confidence that consumers and society in general have been protected by the use of competent bodies in determining compliance with laws, regulations and specifications.

For underpinning government-to-government mutual recognition agreements for conformity assessment activities

Some governments have recognised (or designated) their national accreditation bodies as the bodies which will demonstrate competence of conformity assessment activities in their economy, relevant to specific regulated sectors covered by government-to-government MRAs.

For liaison on trade and technical barriers to trade

Some governments work closely with their accreditation bodies, at various levels of formality, in their negotiation of trade and technical barriers to trade issues with foreign governments. The availability of a well-established accreditation body also provides governments with a resource to demonstrate that their economy has a process available to achieve the objectives of acceptance of foreign conformity assessment certificates and data as sought in the WTO Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade.

Role of accreditation in support of private sector

Accreditation also supports the private sector in many ways. Firstly, *for accredited conformity assessment bodies operating in the private sector* accreditation provides the following support:

As a benchmark for performance

Many conformity assessment bodies operate in isolation from their peers. By being subjected to assessments by experts for compliance with accreditation criteria, these bodies are able to have independent confirmation that they are operating at levels that others have judged to be competent. Where deficiencies are revealed, through the accreditation process, the bodies also have the opportunity to initiate corrective action and thus improve their ongoing performance.

As a recognition of competence

Accreditation provides a publicly available recognition of the specific competencies of the accredited conformity assessment bodies. This enhances the acceptance of the outputs of accredited bodies by regulators, suppliers, purchasers, consumers, etc., including both the direct clients of the conformity assessment bodies, and other parties which may have an interest in their reports, certificates, qualifications of personnel, etc.

As a marketing advantage

Accreditation can provide a marketing advantage for conformity assessment bodies. Customers of conformity assessment bodies that are accredited should have more confidence, knowing that such bodies have been subjected to independent evaluation of their competence through the accreditation process.

For international recognition

Where conformity assessment bodies are accredited by bodies which are signatories to the MLAs of IAF, ILAC, or their regional Cooperation Bodies (APLAC, EA, IIAC, PAC and SADCA), they have access to international recognition as competent bodies in multiple foreign markets.

Secondly *other groups in the private sector, which do not operate their own conformity assessment activities*, should also receive support from the accreditation process. These include:

Private sector specification and purchasing bodies

Such bodies reduce their risks if they use accredited conformity assessment bodies. They may also avoid costly re-testing, inspecting or certifying if a non-accredited body's results are not acceptable. Use of accredited bodies should also enhance the purchaser's own customers' confidence in their goods and services.

Importers and exporters

Exporters may be able to reduce costly duplication of conformity assessment of their exported goods and services if their compliance with foreign requirements is provided by accredited conformity assessment bodies. Similarly, importers may be able to accept imported goods and services with additional confidence if they are covered by foreign conformity assessment bodies that are accredited. This often will be facilitated even more if the foreign accreditation body is a signatory to the ILAC or IAF MLAs.

Trade associations, industry bodies, professional bodies and consumer associations

Trade associations, and bodies representing industry groups, professional societies, and consumer associations, may be supported by accreditation in a variety of ways. Often, for example, such bodies may be represented on the governing bodies, and the advisory and technical committees of accreditation bodies. They therefore have opportunities to contribute to the operations of accreditation bodies and to have their own members' interests considered in the delivery of appropriate services by the accreditation bodies and the conformity assessment bodies they accredit. (*ISO/IEC 17011 requires accreditation bodies to ensure that there are appropriate balances of interests in their governance*).