# i-brief

A service for AAALAC International accredited organizations

*The "AAALAC International i-brief" (short for "Issue Brief"), is designed to help clarify specific elements of the accreditation process and is published as a service to accredited institutions. Feel free to distribute this i-brief to others at your organization.*

# AAALAC International standards: The review and adoption process explained

According to the AAALAC International Rules of Accreditation, the *Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals* (*Guide*), Eighth Edition (National Research Council 2011), serves as a basic guide to the establishment of specific standards for accreditation. However, there are additional standards that have been identified by the Council on Accreditation (Council) for the assessment of animal care and use programs. This i-brief provides an overview of the different categories of standards and how they are reviewed and adopted by the Council.

## Primary Standards

The Primary Standards form the foundation of standards (minimum requirements) used for AAALAC's evaluation process. They address multiple areas of the animal care and use program. While Council does not author the Primary Standards, it does provide interpretations and caveats regarding their implementation through the issuing of Position Statements, Guidance Statements and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Because these standards can result in mandatory findings that must be corrected by accredited programs, public comment is required before their adoption.

AAALAC's Rules of Accreditation indicate that the *Guide* serves as a basic guide for accreditation, representing the minimum standards needed to obtain accreditation, especially where there is no legislation in place, or the legislative requirements are below the *Guide's* standards. These standards help the Council identify program gaps in the form of "Mandatory Findings" that require correction, and "Suggestions for Improvement" for different program areas.

In addition to the *Guide*, ETS 123 is considered a Primary Standard for organizations that are in Europe, while the "*Ag Guide*" is a Primary Standard for organizations that have agricultural programs.

## Legislation/Regulations

As indicated in the Rules of Accreditation, programs are expected to comply with implementing legislation that applies to all areas of the animal care and use program in the country/region where they are located. These applicable local and national regulations, along with the Primary Standards, serve as the basis for AAALAC's program evaluation. Accredited programs are expected to comply with the strictest of the two standards and follow the recommendations of the Primary Standards for topics that are not well addressed in the legislation. No additional review of legislation or regulations is required due to the regulatory authority behind these documents. The list of applicable legislation/regulations is maintained by the AAALAC International office.

## Position Statements

Position Statements are developed by Council to provide in-depth guidance on AAALAC's expectations regarding more fundamental aspects of an animal care and use program. They can either extend or clarify the recommendations in the Primary Standards, or establish new standards for program aspects that are not well addressed by the Primary Standards. Position Statements normally include "should" or "must" language that serves to identify "Suggestions for Improvement" vs. "Mandatory Findings" related to important program areas. Position Statements provide enduring direction for the Council and the accreditation community on key aspects of animal care and use (in addition to the Primary Standards, Guidance Statements, Reference Resources and FAQs).

Because Position Statements can result in Mandatory Findings, a 30-day public comment period is required as one of the final steps in the development of a new or revised AAALAC Position Statement.

## Guidance Statements

This is a new category of standards that was approved by the Council in early 2025 to supplement the existing category of FAQs. Guidance Statements are developed by AAALAC and provide clarification on Council's interpretation of expectations for specific aspects of accreditation. They generally include specific recommendations ("shoulds") that can serve to identify a potential Suggestion for Improvement for a particular point and provide guidance to the accreditation community. In rare situations a Guidance Statement might be used to help support a Mandatory Finding ("musts") in conjunction with a relevant standard (such as a Primary Standard, legislation, and/or Position Statement).

Council officers and members provide the primary review for these Guidance Statements. Because they are not generally anticipated to result in mandatory items, public comment is not required. Because this is a new category of standards, the Council is in the process of reviewing existing FAQs to determine if they should be revised and migrated to this new category.

## Reference Resources

Reference Resources are not developed by AAALAC but are adopted by the Council after they are reviewed and determined to be important adjunct resources. Reference Resources are published documents that reflect evolving industry and expert recommendations and practices on animal care and use program oversight and management. Some may be used to help develop more specific Position Statements, Guidance Statements, and FAQs. Examples of the types of documents that can potentially serve as Reference Resources are:

- **Consensus reports**: documents published by working groups with representation from different national and/or international organizations with expertise on a particular program management topic.

- **Review papers/literature references**: published peer-reviewed papers/book chapters that don't just show the conclusions of a single study but summarize state-of-the-art of science on a particular program management topic.

- **Guidelines/recommendations from national/international agencies and organizations** which are accepted internationally as good practice on a particular program management topic.

   *Note that national documents that are applicable only in the national environment will rarely be Reference Resources—they will serve as country-specific guidance to Council when performing site visits in that specific country.*

**Depending on the significance given by the Council, there are three tiers of Reference Resources**:

- **Primary Reference Resources**: includes recommendations that can be used to support Mandatory Findings or Suggestions for Improvement. These require review by Council officers and members and might require public comment should the Reference Resource result in the potential for new Mandatory Findings.

- **Secondary Reference Resources**: includes recommendations that can be used to support Suggestions for Improvement. These require review by the Council officers and members.

- **Items of interest**: includes information that can be used as examples of emerging trends and practices. These would require review by Council officers and, at the officers' discretion, the full Council.

## FAQs

Periodically Council, the AAALAC Board of Directors and staff identify specific topics that need further clarification. These topics may be identified for several reasons including: administrative questions; common findings repeated in many programs on the same topic; and/or a lack of clarity on existing standards that is resulting in different interpretations among programs. FAQs are intended to be limited to topics that are truly frequently asked questions. In general, Council officers will review these FAQs, often after input from the Senior Directors and/or a dedicated working group, before they are adopted.

Links to all standards are available on AAALAC's website:
**www.aaalac.org/accreditation-standards/accreditation-standards-overview**

# Overview of Standards and Guidance Documents and the Review Process

| Category | Objective | Example | Requires Council comment period | Requires Public Comment Period | Requires Officer Review | Requires Council Majority Vote |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Primary Standards | Foundational values used to benchmark institutions | Guide, ETS 123, Ag Guide | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Legislation/ Regulations | Expected to comply with implementing legislation that apply to all areas of the animal care and use program, in the country/region they are located | | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| Position Statements | "White papers" that provide in-depth guidance on AAALAC's expectations regarding more fundamental aspects of an animal care and use program.<br><br>Includes expectations that may exceed or supersede The Guide and could result in a mandatory finding due to potential for severe harm to personnel or to animal welfare. | e.g. The Attending Veterinarian and Veterinary Care Safety Requirements for Walk- In Cage/Rack Washers and Bulk Sterilizers | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Guidance Statements[1] | Specific aspects of ACU not covered by primary standards that provide recommendations to units (suggestions for improvement) Too specific to be covered by a PS | e.g. Behavioral management (draft still in progress) FAQ from paragraphs: C, D, E, F | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| Reference Resources (RRs) | Published documents that reflect evolving industry and expert recommendations and practices on animal care and use program management. | Biosafety in Microbiological and Biomedical Laboratories 6th ed. | Yes | Possibly | Yes | Yes |
| Frequently Asked Questions[2] | Administrative aspects of the accreditation process. | FAQs from paragraphs A, B, G, H and I | No | No | Yes | No |

[1]  New guidance on behavioral management being drafted by Subcommittee on Housing might be a good example of a guidance statement.
[2]  Existing FAQs will be reviewed as appropriate by the Senior Directors and suggestions for recategorization presented to the Officers for further discussion and review. It is likely that many existing FAQs will be recategorized as Guidance Statements, and/or incorporated into existing Position Statements.

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