

UKAS Accreditation for Laboratories

The AGS View

Introduction

UKAS accreditation is mandatory for analytical and materials testing laboratories working on most Government funded projects, with the former also being required to achieve a second tier of accreditation, MCERTS. However, geotechnical testing is different in that not all laboratories are accredited.

Working Group Objectives

Two of the five objectives of the Laboratories Working group set out in the AGS Strategic Plan 2003 to 2005 focus on quality issues; the other three on commercial issues. The two quality objectives are: -

- Encourage and assist members to provide high quality, appropriate and reliable testing services.
- Promote the value of independent testing to clients and their advisors.

To achieve these objectives the working group would need to encourage the provision of quality and reliable (e.g. repeatable) geotechnical testing that can be seen to be free of commercial pressures. To provide evidence of achieving this goal independent assessment and assurance as to compliance will be required, i.e. external accreditation.

Background to Geotechnical Laboratory Accreditation

Accepting that there are a small number of independent laboratories, the majority of geotechnical laboratories are part of a ground investigation business that offers a full service to the geotechnical market. Before external accreditation, “quality” of the testing was subjective based on client experience (i.e. “word of mouth”) and marketing information which is difficult to use for comparison purposes and cannot be considered to be an independent or impartial view.

Some fifteen years ago, Government departments, in particular the then Department of Transport decided to establish a “level playing field” on which to judge geotechnical laboratories. The level playing field was external accreditation which was established by insisting all geotechnical testing on their contracts must be undertaken by an accredited laboratory. The accreditation was to be undertaken by NAMAS, which was then part of the National Physics Laboratory and is now more independent of the government and renamed UKAS.

Other government departments, local government and the larger consultants followed the initiative until market perception was that to obtain “quality geotechnical testing” that would stand scrutiny post investigation, a UKAS accredited laboratory had to be used. In addition, because of the external assessment required to achieve and maintain UKAS accreditation there is a further assumption that there is a degree of independence to commercial pressures by the in-house laboratory that would not exist but for the accreditation.

Therefore the AGS must support external accreditation of Laboratories if we: -

- Accept the above rationale
- Do not wish to be seen as a champion of a lowering of quality standards for geotechnical laboratories
- Wish to support the working group objectives

The Quality Standards and Accreditation Body

There are a number of quality standards, e.g.

ISO 9000	Quality Management Systems
ISO 14001	Environmental Management Systems
ISO 17025	General Requirements for the Competence of Testing and Calibration Laboratories

The standard for laboratories is therefore ISO 17025 and UKAS is not only the sole national body in the UK recognised by government for accreditation of testing laboratories and calibration laboratories; it is also the sole national body recognised by government for accreditation of certification bodies.

It may be possible to seek alternative laboratory accreditation bodies but UKAS has become synonymous with laboratory accreditation in the UK to the point that it is quoted as the standard, e.g. “our laboratory is UKAS accredited” rather than “our laboratory is accredited to ISO 17025”. This is unusual, if not unique for an accreditation body.

Whilst it is generally desirable to seek alternatives suppliers, in this case it appears that UKAS has no effective competition. The only alternative to UKAS would be to use a foreign laboratory accreditation body. However, using an overseas accreditation body might not be financially viable and could place a laboratory using it in a “second division” of testing houses.

Conclusions

It is doubtful whether an in-house quality system would gain the external recognition and acceptance to meet the two strategic quality objectives. In addition, UKAS is so synonymous with laboratory accreditation (no viable competition) it must be the accreditation organisation recommended to laboratories.

Therefore, the AGS as an organisation should encourage geotechnical laboratories to achieve accreditation by external assessment and accreditation to a recognised standard (ISO 17025) by an approved external organisation (UKAS).

AGS Policy Statement

The AGS encourages and will assist members to provide high quality, appropriate and reliable geotechnical and analytical testing services that are independent of commercial pressures by supporting external accreditation to ISO 17025. In the UK this accreditation is provided by UKAS