

Quality Report 2009

Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany

The Accreditation Council's Resolution Adopted on 12 February 2010

Introduction

In accordance with its quality policy¹, the Accreditation Council has set up the internal project group "Quality Assurance", dedicated entirely to internal quality assurance in the operations of the Foundation for the Accreditation of Study programmes in Germany. Through continuous assessment and (where required) refining of internal processes, the foundation aims to ensure both a high quality and highly efficient fulfilment of its statutory tasks. The quality measures also contribute to ensure consistency of decisions filed by bodies of the foundation.

For the 2009-2013 term of office the internal project group "Quality Assurance" is composed of the following members: Prof. Dr. Reinhold R. Grimm, Ms Regina Görner, represented by Bernd Kaßebaum and Herr Moritz Maikämper. The team is supported by Ms Agnes Leinweber of the head office.

The project group "Quality Assurance" hereby presents its first annual quality report, which provides information on the implementation of measures defined in the quality policy and contains suggestions for improvement where necessary.

The quality report was approved by the Accreditation Council in its 62nd session held on 12 February 2010.

¹ Accreditation Council's resolution "The Internal Quality Assurance System of the Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany" as amended on 8 December 2009

1. Performance Generating Processes

1.1 Accreditation of Agencies

Quality Standards²:

The Accreditation Council accredits agencies in a swift, transparent and efficient procedure, whereby decision-making criteria and procedural rules are normatively defined to ensure greater predictability and consistency in decision-making. The criteria and procedural rules are comprehensible, easily applicable and are widely accepted by all parties involved.

In 2009, three agencies were approved by the Accreditation Council: the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA) for system accreditation procedures on 9 June 2009, the Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ) on 9 June 2009 and the Evaluationsagentur Baden-Württemberg (evalag) for programme and system accreditation procedures on 1 October 2009. The procedure for the reaccreditation of the Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Health and Social Sciences (AHPGS) was completed on 3 March 2009. Thus, for the first time in the foundation's history, 10 agencies were authorised to award the Accreditation Council's seal of approval at the end of 2009.

In 2009, the quality objective which set the goal to approve agencies with an efficient procedure was achieved: in the case of the accreditation of the AQA and the OAQ only three months passed between the submission of the self-documentation and the accreditation decision in June 2009. The AHPGS submitted the rationale for its application in October 2008 and was approved at the first session of 2009, which took place in March. The accreditation of the evalag took place six months after the presentation of a rationale for application in October 2009, due to the summer break.

As stated in the quality policy, all relevant documents concerning the procedures for accrediting agencies such as the application rationale, report and resolution of the Accreditation Council were published on its website, blanking out confidential data. The council's reports and resolutions were also translated into English, in order to ensure the greatest possible transparency of the procedures at an international level.

² Accreditation Council's resolution "The Internal Quality Assurance System of the Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany" as amended on 8 December 2009

As a follow-up of the accreditation process, members of the council, experts and managing directors of the agencies were asked their opinion on the procedure itself and on how it could be improved. These enquiries revealed high approval and satisfaction rates by all parties concerned. The support via the head office in procedural processes was rated very highly in particular (School grade 1,0).

Essentially, the enquiries had the following results:

- Several respondents criticised that some editorial changes to the “Criteria for the Accreditation of Agencies” should be adopted in order to achieve more differentiation and to avoid redundancies. This suggestion was able to be implemented on 8 December 2009 in the course of the revision process of the Accreditation Council's resolutions. Redundancies were removed in the restructured resolution “Criteria for the Accreditation of Agencies”.
- According to many Accreditation Council members, the hearing of the agency's management during the council's session prior to the decision was not necessary in every case, and the resolutions should be adjusted accordingly. This suggestion was able to be implemented on 8 December 2009 in the course of the editorial revision process of the Accreditation Council's resolutions. According to section 1.7 of the resolution “Rules of the Accreditation Council for the Accreditation of Agencies“ of 8 December 2009, the Accreditation Council can conduct a hearing of the agency for the clarification of open questions, prior to filing the decision.
- One agency suggested including biographical information in the notification about the composition of the expert group. The Accreditation Council's office will gladly do this in the future.
- It was also suggested that a "guideline" containing a detailed process description could facilitate orientation in the procedure for the agencies. In February 2010, the office will produce such a hand-out.

For next year's procedures for reaccreditation and accreditation of agencies, a preliminary meeting for all experts will be planned, which will supplement the procedure-specific preparation on the eve of the on-site visit.

1.2 Defining Criteria and Procedural Rules

Quality Standards:

The Accreditation Council elaborates criteria and procedural rules in a swift, transparent and efficient process, defines them normatively and thus ensures the greatest possible predictability and consistency in decisions. The criteria and procedural rules are based on the council's understanding of quality and are easy to understand, easily applicable and are widely accepted by all parties involved.

In 2009, as a response to experiences in recent years, the council's resolutions regarding the accreditation of agencies and programme accreditation were subject to an editorial revision process, were freed of red tape and simplified.

The draft resolutions were discussed on 1 October 2009 at a first reading in the Accreditation Council. Prior to the first reading, agencies, members, the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (KMK) were given the opportunity to present suggestions for changes and additions. The agencies received the edited versions of the resolutions in accordance with § 2 of the agreements made with the agencies, and they were discussed at the round table held on 13 November 2009. Following a thorough debate, the council's resolutions were approved on 8 December 2009 in course of a second reading. Agencies as well as council members were involved in the development of the new resolutions.

Adaptations to international practice were also made. Item 1.1.9 of the resolution "Rules of the Accreditation Council for the Accreditation of Study Programmes and for Quality Assurance System Accreditation" of 8 December 2009, provides for the publication of expert reports once the decision for accreditation of study programmes (if necessary with conditions) has been filed.

1.3. Monitoring Agencies' Work

Quality Standards:

The Accreditation Council verifies the accreditations carried out by the agencies in a swift, transparent and efficient procedure.

Among all accreditation procedures concluded by those agencies which had been approved for programme accreditation to date (ACQUIN, AHPGS, AQAS, ASIIN, FIBAA and ZEvA); in 2009 four procedures per agency were checked in the framework of the customary annual random sample. Additionally, two special-purpose checks were carried out in the period under review.

The results of the assessment procedures conducted in 2008 and 2009 were discussed in depth at the Council meeting on 12 February 2010.

Findings from the assessment of the agencies' procedures were used on several occasions in 2009 in order to address quality concerns during the accreditation process. For example, on the 8 October 2009 a chairman's newsletter was sent to the agencies and it was published in order to clarify rules on how to deal with the requirement by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (KMK) for 300 ECTS points for a Master's Degree (see chapter V for conclusions).

2. Support Processes

2.1 Strategic Planning

Quality Standards:

The Accreditation Council orientates its activities towards strategic plans.

At every Accreditation Council meeting, an update of the council's medium-term work plans is presented under agenda item 4 "Reports". It shows relevant tasks and main focus of activities for each quarter for the guidance of the members. A list ("watchlist") detailing the current issues is also kept and presented as an item on the agenda. In 2009, a few of the items listed there were used in the course of the editorial revision of the council's resolutions. One of the questions listed relates to how Higher Education Institutions can adapt their accreditation terms in the future in order to create clusters of study programmes for accreditation, if very different accreditation terms arise for professionally affine study programmes through the gradual introduction of Bachelor's and Master's Degrees. This problem could be resolved through an alteration of the council's rules regarding the organisation of accreditation terms. In the course of the editorial revision of the Accreditation Council's resolutions on programme accreditation, section 2, clause 4, sentence 2 of the resolution "Decisions of the Accreditation Agencies: Types and Their Effects" was removed, which stated that in the case of reaccreditations the accreditation term had to start once the previous one has expired. According to section 3.2 of the resolution "Rules of the Accreditation Council for the Accreditation of Study Programmes and for System Accreditation" of 8 December 2009, it is now possible to harmonise accreditation terms of a Higher Education Institution via strategically prioritising a procedure for the reaccreditation of a study programme.

The watchlist also contained a question on whether the regulation contained within the resolution "Decisions of the Accreditation Agencies: Types and Their Effects" could prevent Higher Education Institutions from making improvements to already accredited study programmes. In order to prevent such situations, it was determined in the course of the editorial revision of the resolutions on 8 December 2009 section 3.6.3 of the resolution "Rules of the Accreditation Council for the Accreditation of Study Programmes and for System Accreditation" that in the case of significant changes in the concept or profile of a study programme, the agency decides whether the change decreases the quality and therefore a renewed accreditation is required.

Furthermore, the agency decides whether the procedure can be shortened in individual cases.

2.2 Financial Planning

Quality Standards:

The foundation has a transparent financial plan that ensures performance of its tasks at any time. Bookings are made promptly.

The financial plan for the year 2009 was approved on the 31 October 2008 by the Accreditation Council and on the 25 January 2010 by the Foundation Council.

An examination by the Nordrhein-Westfalen State Court of Auditors did not take place during this reporting period.

2.3 Staff Recruitment and Training

Quality Standards:

All persons employed by the Foundation have relevant expertise which is constantly enhanced by means of appropriate measures.

At the beginning of the new term of office in February 2009 six new members were appointed into the Accreditation Council: Prof. Dr. Stefan Bartels (University of Lübeck), Prof. Dr. Ute von Lojewski (Münster University of Applied Sciences), Ms Regina Görner (IG Metall, Chairman Board), Dr. Sijbolt Noorda, President of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (vereniging van universiteiten - VSNU) and Professor Dr. Andrea Schenker-Wicki, University of Zürich and Moritz Maikämper (University of Cottbus). Due to the retirement of the State Secretaries Prof. Dr. Nevermann and Prof. Dr. Bauer-Wabnegg, two new members were nominated in December: State Secretary Prof. Dr. Thomas Deufel (Thuringia) and Ministerial Director Tappeser (Baden-Württemberg). The appointment of the members of the Accreditation Council was made in accordance with section 7, Clause 2 of the German Law on the Establishment of a Foundation "Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany" as amended on 1 April 2008 jointly by the German Rectors' Conference and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder.

In 2009 among other things an “Expert Discussion on Accreditation” between members took place regarding the topic of academic feasibility during reaccreditation. Furthermore, members are enabled to attend conferences if desired.

In 2009, the council's head office participated as part of the monitoring process and to exchange experiences with the agencies in six procedures for accreditation of study programmes. With regard to one agency in particular, there were no new procedures selected for observation audit, as a procedure from a previous year still had to be completed due to a suspension.

The member of the head office responsible for the observation audit received all necessary documents regarding the Higher Education Institution and participated in the on-site visit of the institution as well as in the corresponding meeting of the decision-making panel. The general impressions were summarised in a confidential written report and handed over to the agencies. The feedback included indications which could serve for reflection on how to improve the processing of the procedures.

During the reporting period a new consultant joined the head office. Mr [...], who has been employed at the head office on a fixed-term contract since May 2008, left earlier than originally planned in order to take up the position as a consultant for accreditation procedures at Hamburg University on 1 October 2009. The selection of the new staff member was made on the basis of a quality profile approved by the Executive Board. The position was advertised accordingly. A structured training programme was developed and applied which included reading of selected papers, independent work assignments and assistance by experienced colleagues.

With regard to the human resource development, individual feedback is given in the framework of annual personnel development reviews. These evaluation meetings are also used to discuss further training measures. During the period under review, all academic employees at the head office participated in diverse (also international) events in the field of quality assurance at Higher Education Institutions (see also chapter 3.3).

2.4 Personnel Administration

The personnel administration is currently performed by the Stiftung zur Förderung der Hochschulrektorenkonferenz ("Foundation for Promoting the German Rectors' Conference").

2.5 Servicing Bodies

Quality Standards:

Meetings of the bodies are organised by the head office punctually and with effective application of resources. The head office provides all members of the bodies with the information required for the activity in due time,

In 2009, four meetings of the Accreditation Council were prepared and followed-up:

03.03.2009 58th Accreditation Council Meeting (Berlin)

09.06.2009 59th Accreditation Council Meeting (Bonn)

01.10.2009 60th Accreditation Council Meeting (Berlin)

08.12.2009 61st Accreditation Council Meeting (Berlin)

The Foundation Council met only once at a meeting on 16 April 2009 in Bonn.

The first round table for 2009 took place on 15 May in Berlin. The following subjects were discussed, amongst other things: financing the student pool, separation of consulting and accreditation in system accreditation, exchanges of experience regarding the evaluation of student workload and employability in the reaccreditation procedure of study programmes; involvement of third parties in the accreditation process and public relations work in the accreditation system.

At the second round table held on 13 November 2009 the modification of the resolutions on programme accreditation and the planned draft decision regarding the recognition of accreditation decisions of foreign agencies were intensively discussed. Furthermore, the agencies expressed the wish to introduce the opportunity for a discussion prior to the board's decision as an additional step in the assessment procedure. The practicability of this shall be tested in an accreditation procedure next year.

The project group "Quality Assurance" held its first meeting in the new term of office on 1 October 2009 in order to discuss upcoming tasks and to plan its work.

As the term of office only began in February 2009, no survey was conducted among the members in order to enquire about their satisfaction with the work organisation of the Accreditation Council. The next survey is planned for 2010.

3. Cross-Process Quality Assurance Procedures

3.1. External Feedback on the Foundation's Work

The Board uses the annual discussions held with the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder and the German Rectors' Conference to evaluate the Accreditation Council's and the Foundation's overall work. The chairman reports to the Accreditation Council and the Foundation Council.

On 2 July 2009 the Chairman and the Managing Director of the Accreditation Council were guests at the Committee on Higher Education of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (KMK), in order to discuss current issues relating to accreditation and the relationship between common and state-specific structural standards.

In particular the representatives of the Länder referred to the importance of assessing academic feasibility in the accreditation procedures of study programmes. This point was included in the revision of resolutions for programme accreditation on 8 December 2009. In section 2.4 of the resolution "Rules of the Accreditation Council for the Accreditation of Study Programmes and for System Accreditation", the rules on academic feasibility were summarised in order to further highlight the importance of these requirements.

The annual meeting on feedback regarding the work of the Accreditation Council with the German Rectors' Conference will take place on 22 February 2010.

The current discussion about higher education policy which has been brought about by student protests was debated in detail at an Accreditation Council meeting on 8 December 2009. Subsequently, the planned draft documents for the revision of the resolutions on programme accreditation were approved. Furthermore, there was consensus that a further need for clarification will require an additional analysis by the Accreditation Council.

3.2. International Networking

Quality Standards:

The Accreditation Council actively participates in European and international associations and quality assurance projects and their decision-making processes. In this way, the Accreditation Council ensures that international developments are considered in the German system.

In the period under review the Accreditation Council actively engaged in the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) networks and moreover took part in numerous international events. At a members' assembly on 29 September 2009 the Director of the Accreditation Council was elected president of ENQA for a year.

Some examples for the variety of international activities carried out during the report period which have importance for the German system are mentioned below:

On 15/16 June 2009 a representative of the head office participated in the annual meeting of the ENQA team for "Internal Quality Assurance" in The Hague. These meetings serve to promote networking between the staff members of the head office responsible for internal quality assurance and ENQA members and they regularly give important impetus regarding the further development of internal quality assurance measures. At this year's meeting the agencies QAA and FINHEEC presented their systems for internal quality assurance. Furthermore, discussions were held on what criteria should underlie the appointment of expert groups and how consistency can be ensured in the evaluation reports and between the evaluation reports and decisions.

On 27/28 April 2009 the head office participated in the second "Audit Spring Seminar", an informal networking meeting of international agencies to exchange views on institutional evaluation/accreditation procedures. The meeting was organised by ANECA, AQA and NOKUT; in total eight agencies took part. Apart from the presentation of audit processes by ANECA and AQA, the discussion focused in particular on the relationship between quality development and/or consulting and the external assessment in the practice of the agencies involved, an aspect which also plays a particular role in system accreditation procedures conducted in Germany.

When editing the framework guidelines for accreditation of Joint Programmes in the course of the revision of the resolutions on 8 December 2009, the Accreditation

Council specifically collected data concerning experiences made by agencies and by affected Higher Education Institutions. The head office supported, for instance, a procedure for accreditation of a German-Dutch Joint Programme (Universities of Muenster and Nimwegen). Furthermore, the head office conducted a survey on the difficulties experienced by Higher Education Institutes during the accreditation of Joint Programmes. The objective was to establish a better factual basis for developing regulations for these procedures. The head office contacted coordinators from a total of 176 study programmes, including 126 study programmes of the Franco-German University (DFH-UFA) and 50 Erasmus Mundus study programmes. In total, 50 responses were received. The survey results were discussed at the 61st meeting of the Accreditation Council on 8 December 2009 and contributed to the elaboration of chapter 1.5 of the resolution "Rules of the Accreditation Council for the Accreditation of Study Programmes and for System Accreditation" on 8 December 2009.

The Accreditation Council's involvement in the ECA was also useful for gaining insights into (international) accreditation of Joint Programmes. The workshop organised by the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) took place on 11/12 June 2009 in Zürich. Amongst others, the recommendations for the mutual recognition of "Institutional Evaluations" and for "General Principles Regarding Learning Outcomes in Accreditation Procedures" were adopted on this occasion.

Within the framework of the EU-financed ECA project "TEAM 2", the Accreditation Council is participating in a pilot procedure for accreditation of five international study programmes; these study programmes are to be accredited each by one accreditation institution and according to the criteria of the participating partner institutions. The objective of this project is to achieve recognition of the decision by the accreditation institutions of all countries involved.

3.3. Quality Assurance of the Head Office's Internal Processes

Quality Standards:

The head office fulfils the duties allocated to it by law, by statute and by assignments of its bodies swiftly and professionally. In addition, it develops impetus for the work of the Foundation from its daily work.

Internal meetings of the head office are used regularly to coordinate work assignments, to exchange information about running projects and for internal communication. The Foundation Board also met regularly for meetings.

Texts, such as annotations to the assessment procedure of accreditations conducted by agencies, were read and discussed by staff members in joint editorial conferences.

In the case of important documents and when sending plenary documents by electronic mail, the head office practises the four eyes principle in order to avoid careless mistakes.

IV. External Quality Assurance

An external evaluation of the work carried out by the Accreditation Council took place in 2008. The respective report of May 2008 was also published on the Website of the Accreditation Council. At the Accreditation Council's 61st meeting on 8 December 2009, an internal team (consisting of State Secretary Prof. Dr. Walter Bauer-Wabnegg, Ernst Baumann, Prof. Dr. Reinhold R. Grimm, Johanna Thünker) presented the report on the implementation of measures arising from the external evaluation. The Accreditation Council instructed the chairman to undertake further necessary measures.

V. Conclusions

In view of the debates regarding the academic feasibility of graded study programmes, the project group "Quality Assurance" calls upon the Accreditation Council to consider whether to emphasise its public role in higher education policy in accordance with the Accreditation Foundation Law. The project group is aware that the improvement of teaching and study programmes by Higher Education Institutions are subject to external conditions, for example greater financial resources. In this context, the project group is critical in assessing that state-specific structural standards could stand in the way of the goal to create comparability and mobility in graded study programmes.

According to the project group's point of view with particular regard to procedures of reaccreditation, taking the student criticism denounced during the protests seriously means to focus on aspects of academic feasibility and employability and to preferably assess these aspects on an empirical basis. Through the expert discussion held on 9 December 2009, the Accreditation Council started a dialogue with agencies, experts and Higher Education Institutions which shall be continued next year. This opportunity should be used to communicate the Accreditation Council's expectation to the competent persons to consider its criteria when developing a study programme, since the responsibility for the quality of the study programmes must lie with the Higher Education Institutions. Next year, the Accreditation Council and the Higher Education Institutions should deepen their dialogue on that issue.

From the results of the random sample assessments of the accreditations conducted by agencies (reporting period: 1 August 2008 to 31 December 2009) the project group deducts that general and process-specific preparation of experts in agency procedures should be further intensified. The Accreditation Council should create transparency on the different qualification concepts adopted by the agencies and, if necessary, the briefing standards should be defined in more concrete terms.

According to the project group "Quality Assurance" the assessment procedures are not sufficient, if fundamental weaknesses of the accreditation system are to be recognised and rectified. In the case of supposed "error profiles", the project group suggests a more targeted assessment of a higher number of procedures for these aspects, in order to establish an empirical basis that includes more data than random samples could provide. In particular, the head office should conduct a specific-purpose assessment, in order to verify if an agency has remedied a previously criticised practice. Furthermore, the results of assessment procedures should be

made available to the public once a year in a suitable form, in order to increase transparency.

With regard to methodology, the project group established that the head office's current assessment practice to verify whether all criteria for the accreditation of study programmes were completely evaluated may lead to increasingly standardised texts, which could reduce their significance. On the other hand, students rightly count on the fact that an accredited study programme has been fully assessed with regards to compliance with the Accreditation Council's criteria.

Instead of assessing the completeness of an accreditation, the assessment procedure could alternatively focus in a more targeted and detailed way on the evaluation of certain criteria like feasibility or employability. If the Accreditation Council instructs the project group accordingly, new assessment tools would be discussed by the group in the coming year.

According to the team's point of view, particular attention must be directed towards intensive study programmes and dual study programmes when the Accreditation Council discusses study programmes with a special profile demand during their meetings next year. The project group therefore suggests that the Accreditation Council uses specialist expertise for the on-site assessment of concrete study programmes.