

Guidelines on the appointment of experts and the composition of expert groups for accreditation procedures

Resolution of the
23rd General Assembly of the HRK in
Potsdam on 14 November 2017,
updated at the
24th General Assembly of the HRK in
Mannheim
on 24 April 2018

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0. Use of the guidelines

According to the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty Art. 3 Para. 3, it is the task of the HRK to propose a procedure for appointing the experts.

"(3) 1The German Rectors' Conference shall develop a procedure to ensure sufficient participation of the scientific community in the appointment of university teachers within the meaning of paragraph 2, sentence 1, number 5. 2The procedure shall require the approval of the Foundation Council. 3The agencies shall be bound by this procedure with regard to the appointment of reviewers within the meaning of paragraph 2, sentence 1, number 4."

The HRK fulfils this mandate with the resolution of a binding guideline in the sense of Art. 3 Para. 3 of the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty. ¹Furthermore, with these "Guidelines on the Nomination of Experts and the Composition of Expert Groups for Accreditation Procedures", it presents key points for the nomination of all members of expert groups. This should contribute to comparable criteria and procedures for the appointment of all experts.

¹ Resolution of the HRK General Meeting in Mannheim on 24 April 2018

1. Fundamental considerations

In order to ensure the alignment within the European Higher Education Area, the guidelines for the appointment of reviewers and the composition of reviewer groups must comply with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

" 2.4 Peer review experts

Standard:

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

Guidelines:

At the core of external quality assurance is the wide range of expertise provided by peer experts, who contribute to the work of the agency through input from various perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students and employers/professional practitioners.

In order to ensure the value and consistency of the work of the experts, they

- are carefully selected;
- have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;
- are supported by appropriate training and/or briefing.

The agency ensures the independence of the experts by implementing a mechanism of no-conflict-of-interest.

The involvement of international experts in external quality assurance, for example as members of peer panels, is desirable as it adds a further dimension to the development and implementation of processes." ²

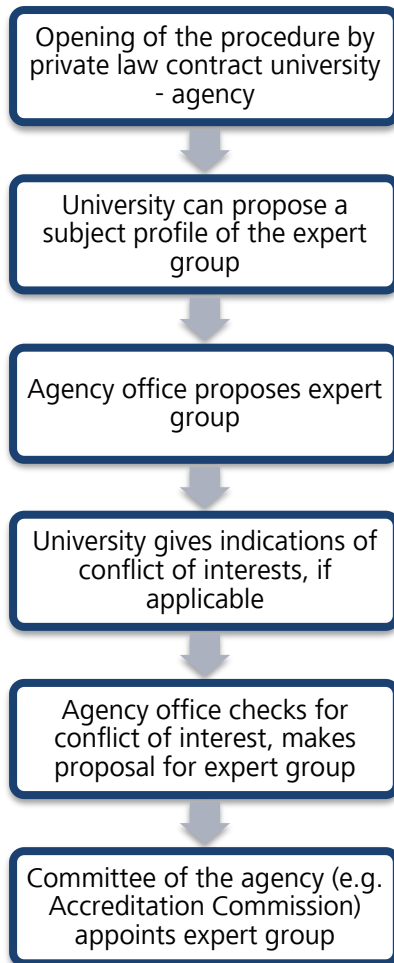
The quality of the entire review system depends on these persons being carefully selected and adequately prepared for their task. Therefore, care should be taken to ensure that the quality of the reviewers is assured and that they are particularly qualified within the academic field, but also for quality assurance, so that they are able to grasp and assess either the degree programme and/or the overall system of the institution in its complexity. ³

² https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-10-Publikationsdatenbank/Beitr-2015-03_Standards_und_Leitlinien_ESG_2.pdf

³ cf. [Resolution of the 21st General Assembly of the HRK on 8 November 2016 in Mainz: Reorganisation of the Accreditation System](#)

2. Expert groups in programme accreditation

2.1 Process of designation for programme accreditations



The Agency shall propose a review panel for the procedure, taking into account the criteria set out in the ESG and in 2.3 and 2.4, and including proposals from the HEI for the academic profile of the review panel.

The agency decides on the composition of the expert group without further influence from the higher education institution, combined with a check of conflict of interests, if applicable. The right to select the experts lies solely with the agency and is ideally exercised there by a committee (e.g. Accreditation Commission) in which academics and scientists have the majority of votes and in which all status groups are involved.

The offices of the agencies cannot check all circumstances that could lead to a conflict of interest of the experts. Therefore, the appointed persons themselves are obliged to inform the agency in case of an appearance of bias and to withdraw from the procedure in question.

The universities may lodge a complaint or an appeal. If the differences of opinion between the agency and the university cannot be settled, the Clearing House shall be⁴ involved.

2.2 Task of the expert group

In programme accreditation, it is the task of the experts to evaluate a study programme according to technical and academic criteria.

"The academic criteria include

1. The qualification goals of a study programme corresponding to the intended degree level, amongst other things related to the field of the scientific/academic or artistic proficiency as well as the competence for qualified employment as well as the development of personality,
2. The conformity of the qualification goals with the coherent study programme concept and its implementation through appropriate resources, corresponding qualification of the teachers and corresponding competence-oriented examinations as well as the academic feasibility, including self-study,
3. Subject-content standards at the latest level of science and research,
4. Measures to achieve an adequate academic success,

⁴ see below, 7.

5. Measures to ensure gender equality and to compensate disadvantages for students with a disability or chronic illness,
6. The concept of the quality management system (goals, processes and instruments) as well as the measures to implement the concept".⁵

The requirements for the reviewers are derived from these criteria. The external review must be conducted with the substantial participation of external, independent experts from the fields of society relevant for quality assurance, in particular representatives of science and professional practice as well as students.⁶ The representatives of science must always have the majority of votes in the committee when assessing the subject-related criteria.

2.3 Selection criteria for peer review experts

All persons who participate in external quality assurance as experts perform this task on the basis of their professional and personal competence and not as representatives of organisations or interest groups, even if they have been proposed for the task by these. This independence is essential to ensure that procedures and decisions are based solely on expertise.⁷

1. Academics

The representatives of science must have the competence to be able to assess study programmes from an academic/scientific point of view. It should be noted that they

- a. are actively involved in the academic community of their subject and therefore have expertise in the field of the degree programme to be accredited and, if possible, in related fields;
- b. have experience in the development, organisation, implementation and monitoring of study programmes;
- c. engage in the further development of university teaching;

⁵ Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty, Art. 2 Para. 3

⁶ cf. Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty, Art. 3 Para. 2 and 3

⁷ cf. ESG 3.3

- d. if possible, are able to demonstrate promotion of teaching beyond their own sphere of influence.

2. Students

The student members of the review panel need study experience in the subject area of the degree programme they are to assess. They should therefore

- a. be currently actively studying in this subject area at a higher education institution or
- b. have completed such studies at the level of the HQR to be assessed no more than 12 months ago,
- c. be able to demonstrate experience with accreditation or internal quality assurance, if applicable.

3. Representatives of professional practice

The representatives of professional practice evaluate the study programmes from the perspective of one of the occupational fields in which graduates can take up employment. They should therefore

- a. be active themselves in one of the areas named in the programme profile;
- b. have an interest in programme development;
- c. have personnel responsibility or selection responsibility for new hires;
- d. have experience with accreditation or internal quality assurance, if applicable.

4. Further reviewers for individual fields of study

Art. 4 Para. 2 of the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty provides that special regulations may apply to individual fields of study (e.g. artistic study programmes at colleges of art and music as well as study programmes that teach the prerequisites for a teaching profession).

Furthermore, according to Art. 4 Para. 3 Sentence 1 No. 7, the accreditation procedures may be combined with procedures which decide on the suitability of a study programme for professional admission (e.g. state recognition in social or educational professions). In these cases, further persons authorised by the competent bodies shall be involved in the procedures.

2.4 Composition of the expert group

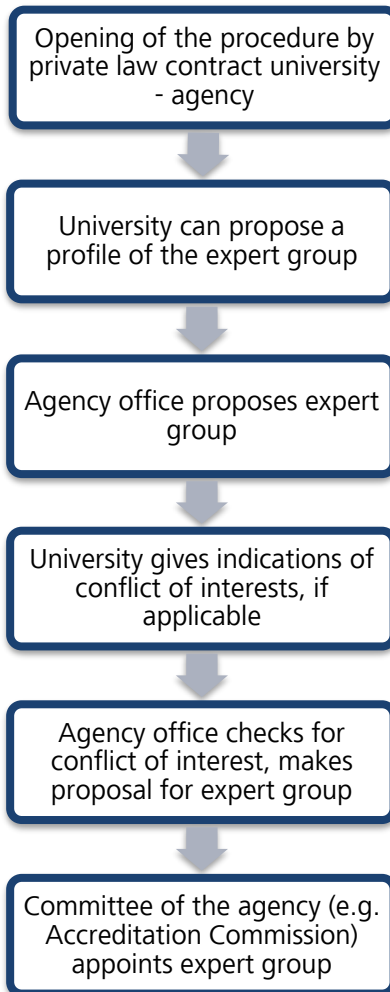
The composition of the review group does not only depend on the degree programme that is to be reviewed. The following should be taken into account

1. the experience with the type of univer at which the degree programme is offered;
2. prior participation in accreditation procedures (experienced experts / newcomers);
3. a broad representation of the field;
4. Observance of rules for conflict of interest (cf. 4.4);
5. diversity of the group (age, regional distribution, international representatives, gender, etc.);
6. complementing each other to round off the profile of the expert group.

Representatives of academia, students and professional practice are represented in the expert group. The representatives of science must have the majority of votes. In the case of cluster accreditations, the professional expertise for the various study programmes is to be ensured, if necessary, by expanding the expert group.

3. Expert groups in system accreditation

3.1 Process of designation for system accreditations



The Agency shall propose a review panel for the procedure, taking into account the criteria set out in the ESG and in 3.3 and 3.4, and including proposals from the university for the profile of the review panel.

The agency decides on the composition of the expert group without further influence from the university, combined with a check for possible conflict of interest, whereby indications from the university of the appearance of such conflicts are included. The right to select the experts lies solely with the agency and is ideally exercised there by a committee (e.g. Accreditation Commission) in which academics and scientists have the majority of votes and in which all status groups are involved.

The agencies' offices cannot check all circumstances that may lead to a conflict of interest of the reviewers. Therefore, the appointed persons themselves are obliged to inform the agency in case of the appearance of such a conflict and to withdraw from the procedure in question.

The universities may lodge a complaint or an appeal. If the differences of opinion between the agency and the university cannot be settled, the Clearing House⁸ shall be involved.

3.2 Task of the expert group

Instead of assessing individual study programmes, the system accreditation should examine whether the quality management system of the university ensures that study programmes meet the requirements in terms of subject content (cf. 2.) and formal requirements⁹ and whether it is regularly checked whether the study programmes achieve the goals set and meet the needs of students and society.¹⁰

⁸ see below, 7.

⁹ "Formal criteria are study structure and duration, study programme profiles, access requirements and transitions between study programmes, degrees and degree designations, modularisation, mobility and credit point system, equal status of Bachelor's and Master's study programmes to the previous Diplom, Staatsexamen and Magister study programmes, measures for the recognition of achievements in the case of a change of higher education institution or study programme and of achievements made outside higher education." Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty, Art. 2, Para. 2

¹⁰ cf. ESG 1.9

3.3 Selection criteria for reviewers

All persons who participate in external quality assurance as experts perform this task on the basis of their professional and personal competence and not as representatives of organisations or interest groups, even if they have been proposed for the task by the latter. This independence is essential to ensure that procedures and decisions are based solely on expertise.¹¹

In addition to the requirements for experts in programme accreditation, they should fulfil the criteria listed below.

1. Academics

The representatives of academia must be able to assess that the performance of internal quality management systems at universities are quality assured. Therefore, in addition to their professional-scientific competence, academics should

- a. have experience in the field of higher education governance and internal quality assurance or
- b. have experience in the development, organisation, implementation and monitoring of study programmes or
- c. have accreditation experience.

2. Students

The student members of a peer expert group must be able to look beyond their own actively studied degree programme and other individual degree programmes to the quality management of the university as a whole.

They therefore need

- a. experience in academic self-governance or
- b. experience in internal university QA procedures or
- c. accreditation experience.

3. Representatives of professional practice

The representatives of professional practice evaluate the quality management of a higher education institution on the one hand from the perspective of the professional fields in which graduates can take up

¹¹ cf. ESG 3.3

employment, and on the other hand from the perspective of people who know processes in companies. They should therefore

- a. have experience with quality management systems, including in business;
- b. know the expectations of the labour market for graduates in different fields;
- c. preferably have leadership experience.

4. Additional experts for individual study areas

Art. 4 Para. 2 of the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty provides that special regulations may apply to individual study areas (e.g. artistic study programmes at colleges of art and music as well as study programmes with which the requirements for a teaching profession are taught).

Furthermore, according to Art. 4 Para. 3 Sentence 1 No. 7, the accreditation procedures may be combined with procedures which decide on the suitability of a study programme for professional admission (e.g. state recognition in social or educational professions). In these cases, further persons authorised by the competent bodies shall be involved in the procedures.

3.4 Composition of the expert group

The composition and size of the expert group depends on the profile, size, subject range and type of the university whose quality management system is up for review. The following should be considered

1. the experience with the type of university;
2. prior participation in accreditation procedures (experienced experts / newcomers);
3. a broad representation of subject cultures;
4. observance of rules for conflict of interest (cf. 4.4);
5. diversity (age, regional distribution, gender, etc.);
6. complementing each other to round off the profile of the expert group.

Ideally, there are foreign peers or members with experience in international reviews in the group.

Representatives of academia, students and professional practice are represented in the expert group. The academic representatives must have the majority of votes.

Additional experts may be involved in the review process in an advisory capacity.

4. Appointment of experts when using alternative accreditation procedures

Several options are conceivable for these procedures according to the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty.

1. The university turns to an agency - as in the case of programme or system accreditations - and places the organisation of the procedure in its hands. Then the selection of experts is to be carried out according to these guidelines, depending on the focus of the procedure on study programmes or quality management systems, as for programme or system accreditations. The expert group can be selected

- a) by the Agency; or
- b) the Commission for Teaching and Learning of the German Rectors' Conference ¹².

2. The university decides to organise the procedure under its own responsibility and to have a group of peers appointed by the Commission for Teaching and Learning of the German Rectors' Conference. Even then, the selection of experts is carried out in accordance with the principles of these guidelines, depending on the focus of the procedure on study programmes or quality management systems, as for programme or system accreditations. In these cases, the expert group must appoint a spokesperson who is responsible for the delivery of the report to the Accreditation Council and, if necessary, an oral report.

¹² see the appendix

5. Reasons for the appearance of conflict of interest

All persons involved in accreditation procedures are obliged to ensure the greatest possible independence of the experts. This duty of care also extends to the experts themselves. Reasons for the appearance of conflict of interest are to be explained as soon as possible and, if necessary, a replacement for the expert is to be found.

In principle, anyone who is employed or enrolled at the university submitting the application for accreditation; who is employed or enrolled at one of the universities involved in the study programme in the case of cooperative study programmes or joint degree programmes; or who is considered biased according to rules customary in academia is excluded as an expert.¹³

Reasons for the appearance of bias in programme accreditations may also be:

- Kinship or close personal connections to members of the faculty or department,
- doctorate or habilitation at the faculty or department concerned, retroactively for up to five years,
- activity at the faculty or department concerned, retrospectively for up to five years,
- participation in application or appointment procedures, retrospectively for up to five years,
- close academic cooperation with persons at the faculty or department concerned, retrospectively for up to five years,
- advisory activity in the design of the study programme,
- membership in the university council or in academic advisory boards of the university, retroactively up to five years.

Reasons for the appearance of bias in system accreditations can also be:

- Kinship or close personal connections to members of the university,
- Doctorate or habilitation at the university, retroactive up to five years,

¹³ cf. Specimen Decree, § 25 para. 5

- activity at the university concerned, retroactively for up to five years,
- participation in application or appointment procedures, retroactively for up to five years,
- close scientific cooperation with persons at the university, retroactively for up to five years,
- advisory activity in the design of the quality management system,
- membership in the university council or in academic advisory boards of the university, retroactively up to five years.

6. Expert supervision and quality assurance

"To ensure the value and coherence of the experts' work,

- they are carefully selected;
- they have the necessary skills and are qualified for their task;
- they receive appropriate training and/or preparation."¹⁴

In all procedures supervised by the agencies or the HRK, the agency or HRK is responsible for supervising and ensuring the quality of the reviewers.

6.1 Preparation for the procedures

When carrying out accreditation procedures, a number of requirements are placed on the experts. In order to meet these, careful preparation for the role within the review process is necessary. Systematic preparation for participation in expert groups includes

- General training on the regulations in the accreditation system (Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty, Specimen Decree, criteria catalogues, etc.),
- a preparation for the individual procedures,
- the regular exchange of experience between evaluators,

¹⁴ ESG 2.4

- training in the differentiation between technical-content criteria, which are to be assessed by the expert group, and organisational-structural criteria, the assessment of which is carried out by the agency, as well as, if applicable.
- training in the evaluation of quality management systems in higher education (processes, responsibility structures, results, feedback loop),
- the training in conversation skills,
- the discussion of the role and task of expert groups.

6.2 Further development of the expert pool

1. Feedback after the conclusion of the procedure

The agencies obtain feedback from the universities after completion of the accreditation procedure. In the case of programme accreditations, this can be done in the form of questionnaires; in the case of system accreditations, a discussion between representatives of the university or the agency is recommended. The result feed back into the quality management of the agency.

If feedback from the universities refers to individual peer review experts, it is documented by the agency and, if the university agrees, passed on to the persons concerned. In the case of repeated negative feedback, the agency conducts a clarifying discussion with the peer review experts, which may also lead to a decision not to cooperate.

The systematic exchange between experienced and newly appointed members of review panels ensures the transfer of experiential knowledge within the review pool.

2. Expansion of the circle of experts

In order to interest further scientists in participating in accreditation procedures beyond personal recommendations, the agency regularly contacts the state rectors' conferences, the scientific societies, the faculty organisations as well as higher education networks in the area of studies and teaching or the Standing Commission for Teaching and Learning of the German Rectors' Conference. To expand and supplement its pool of experts, it is in contact with the relevant networks of students (e.g. Student Accreditation Pool) and professional practice (e.g. social partners).

The agency checks whether the proposed persons meet the criteria for the selection of peer experts, contacts them and systematically prepares them for participation in review groups (cf. 5.1).

7. Clearing house

" 2.7 Complaints and appeals

Standard:

In designing external quality assurance procedures, clearly defined complaints and appeals procedures are also established and universities are informed about them." ¹⁵

A clearing house for conflicts and complaints in all types of procedures should be located at the Accreditation Council. For this purpose, the Accreditation Council can also consult external scientific expertise.

The university has the right to take legal action against the decisions of the Accreditation Council¹⁶; in addition, the Specimen Decree provides for a number of rights of the university to information, hearing and comment before the decision is made.¹⁷ In the course of the entire procedure, however, discrepancies may arise (e.g. due to different assessments

¹⁵ ESG 2.7

¹⁶ cf. Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty Art. 3 Para. 8

¹⁷ e.g. Specimen Decree §§ 22, 24, 25

regarding the suitability of experts, their appearance or conduct of - interviews), which are not clearly covered by these rights and which must be handled professionally. A complaints procedure gives universities the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with the implementation of the procedure or the implementers.¹⁸

Since the Accreditation Council is not entrusted with the operational implementation of the assessment procedures, the establishment of a clearing office is to be assigned to its responsibility.

Here, the development is to be observed and evaluated in the course of the planned evaluation of the overall system with regard to the necessity of establishing a clearing office.

¹⁸ cf. ESG 2.7, Guidelines

Appendix

Supervision of procedures by the HRK (to 4., No. 2 above)

The Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty allows for accreditation - procedures to be supervised by the HRK, as was demanded in the recommendation of the HRK General Assembly.¹⁹

The HRK should be assigned the task of appointing expert groups exclusively for alternative accreditation procedures if a higher education institution wishes to carry out the alternative procedure without agency participation. For this purpose, the HRK should be provided with personnel resources, which should be measured according to the development of the overall system.

¹⁹ cf. [Resolution of the 21st General Assembly of the HRK on 8 November 2016 in Mainz: Reorganisation of the Accreditation System](#)