

Quality assurance and accreditation in Germany

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1. Developments in quality assurance in Germany and at European level

In Germany the **Federal States (*Länder*) are responsible for the shape and development of higher education and research**. To a certain extent the **accreditation of higher education (HE) institutions** (universities and Universities of Applied Sciences (*Fachhochschulen*)) has been combined with the decision of the German Science Council (*Wissenschaftsrat*) to include a HE institution in the list of federal funding for buildings and large equipment. The institutional accreditation of private HE institutions has recently been transferred to the *Wissenschaftsrat*.

The responsibility for the contents and organisation of studies and examinations as well as for the quality of higher education has until recently been in principle with the *Länder*. It is finally implemented by the licensing of programmes and definition of the requirements of the exams. According to the Higher Education Framework Act proposals for **standards of study courses and degrees** as well as for their mutual recognition have been for a long time made by **framework regulations for studies and examinations (*Rahmenprüfungsordnungen*)** which had to be jointly adopted by the *Länder* and the *Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*.

The creation of these framework regulations has proven to be an **extraordinarily ponderous procedure**, often taking many years and producing results which, at the time when they finally were adopted, had already become inefficient because of new developments and therefore proved to be counterproductive, especially with regard to study programmes competing in the international market.

Whereas quality assurance in teaching in Germany was primarily performed through quantitative regulations by the state in the way of *ex-ante* control, other countries increasingly pursued quality assurance in teaching on the basis of evaluation results (*ex-post* control). Following the international development and with a growing awareness of the necessity of quality assurance, a **change of paradigm** was claimed in Germany. Based on recommendations of *HRK* and *Wissenschaftsrat*, since the mid-1990s **evaluation procedures** for teaching have been introduced with the goal to increase transparency, strengthen institutional responsibility, support higher education institutions in the introduction of systematic quality-promoting measures as well as advancing the profile, image and competitiveness of German HE.

Since the beginning of 1998 the *HRK* runs a three-year national programme to enhance the exchange of information and experiences in the field of quality improvement measures in German HE – the **Quality Assurance Project**. Moreover, during the last years **evaluation agencies** have been established on regional level either by the federal states or by associations of universities. Besides the above mentioned activities a lot of departments in many HE institutions have started **evaluation initiatives using different approaches and different perspectives**.

As a part of the process initiated by the Sorbonne Declaration and advanced by the Bologna Declaration as well as the **Prague Communiqué**, it has become clear that the structure of studies and degrees in the **European Higher Education Area** in the future will be shaped by **"two main cycles"** and that the scientific community will have to play an important role in the **field of quality standard development and assurance**. The goals are to promote interna-

tional quality standards, to advance and secure student and graduate mobility, and to improve the employability of graduates on an international labour market.

2. Introduction of BA/MA study courses and accreditation

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The amendments to the Framework Act for Higher Education (HRG) of 1998 opened Germany's higher education system for the implementation of trends and developments at European level. Germany's higher education institutions were given the opportunity – initially for a test phase, meanwhile as normal case – to **introduce degree courses leading to the internationally-recognised academic degrees, namely Bachelor and Master**. This process especially aims to

- **raise the flexibility of study programmes offered,**
- **improve the international compatibility of German degrees, and thus**
- **increase student mobility and demand of foreign students for study places in Germany.**

The introduction of two cycles aimed at restructuring and reforming the system of programmes in HE in Germany. Highly adaptable and very flexible contents and time structure should enable HE institutions to meet more effectively than in the past to the various and constantly changing demands of science and education, of professional practice and of the students. As a consequence a quicker and more flexible procedure for quality assurance was necessary. Considering in addition the tendency to provide the HE institutions with more autonomy the **system of detailed state control was reduced** and accreditation as a new means of quality assurance was introduced.

Accreditation aims at guaranteeing the **national and international recognition** of (academic) degrees and, at the same time, at providing higher education institutions, students and employers with a **reliable guide to the quality of study programmes and degree courses**. Accreditation is a flexible tool with which quality assurance in the fields of studies and teaching can be organised. Beyond that higher education institutions can use the preparations for accreditation for their own quality assurance activities, while **the result can be used for the purpose of international higher education marketing**.

3. The creation and work of the *Akkreditierungsrat* (Accreditation Council)

Being aware of the different areas of competence and responsibility of the state and higher education institutions the Conference of *Länder* ministers of education and culture decided to stick to a final responsibility of the states implemented by licensing study programmes. However focussing on quality aspects they decided together with the HRK to create an accreditation system consisting of the *Akkreditierungsrat* (Accreditation Council) and agencies being accredited by the *Akkreditierungsrat* and thus being entitled to accredit BA- and MA-programmes. So the German Accreditation Council is established by an agreement between HRK and KMK, not by law.

The *Akkreditierungsrat* is **responsible for the establishment of comparable quality standards** for Bachelor's and Master's degree courses in an **decentralised accreditation proc-**

ess. The *Akkreditierungsrat* performs these responsibilities by accrediting, coordinating and monitoring the agencies.

The **17 Members** of the *Akkreditierungsrat* are HE institutions' rectors, scientists (among them foreign members), representatives of the states, representatives of the employers and the trade unions and students. The *Akkreditierungsrat* considers **student participation** in the organisation and practice of accreditation procedures to be desirable as a means of ensuring that their interests are met, and not least as a means of promoting student acceptance of the new degree courses.

The *Akkreditierungsrat* had to develop an **accreditation system**. Although experience had been gained abroad with the accreditation of degree courses, this was "new territory" in Germany. The decentralised system with agencies to be accredited and the *Akkreditierungsrat* responsible for the content and procedures, for the equivalency of results was without precedence and therefore the German accreditation system had to be completely designed and realized from scratch. In this process the conflicting interests between the responsibility of the state, the scientific community's competence in matters of course content, the profile- and image-building autonomy of the higher education institutions, and the interests of the labour market had to be balanced. Being aware of the new approval to a quality assurance system the *Akkreditierungsrat* has understood itself as a **learning system** being prepared and willing to react to mistakes and to cope with new challenges.

4. Measures for building an accreditation system

The present accreditation system has to guarantee minimum standards of quality of programmes leading to a BA- or MA-degree. Up to now the system does not allow to certify a special top quality. In order to be able to meet its responsibilities of providing comprehensive quality assurance and control, the *Akkreditierungsrat* adopted **principles and minimum standards** which agencies had to meet.

So the *Akkreditierungsrat* has passed some regulations obligatory for the organisation of the agencies: They must be independent from the state, HE institutions, associations of faculties (*Fakultätentage*) and disciplines (*Fachgesellschaften*), professional associations and business, they shall not be profit-oriented and they must perform accreditation for all types of HE institutions of the states. They have to be organised as a legal entity, having, according to the form of organisation chosen, a body which has finally to decide on the application and which has to be composed corresponding to the membership in the *Akkreditierungsrat*.

The accreditation procedure aims at ensuring equivalency, guaranteeing quality, creating transparency and also encouraging and facilitating diversity. Only if the agencies observe a **frame of reference**, i.e. agreed criteria, standards and procedures, when they accredit degree courses, accreditation results can be regarded to have met the condition of equivalency. One main task for the *Akkreditierungsrat* therefore was to develop **criteria** to be applied when agencies accredit **degree courses**. The intention of allowing higher education institutions as much freedom as possible in structuring their courses, without, however, jeopardising the comparability of future study programmes, led to relatively general criteria. In contrast to the somewhat rigid quantitative standards and specifications contained in the framework examination regulations, the criteria now provide a **flexible framework for the review of degree courses**. Since neither the Bachelor's degree nor the Master's degree are finally defined, **standards concerning level and work load had to be developed**. In the test phase for the new degree courses, which aims to promote innovation, it seemed acceptable to have only a few criteria serving as a rough orientation.

The accreditation procedure prescribed by the Accreditation Council (*Akkreditierungsrat*) starts with an application. The final decision of the agency has to be prepared by peers. The

peers shall not be submitted to criteria being very strict. The peers have to be selected following certain procedural and quality aspects.

The *Akkreditierungsrat* developed **special requirements for the accreditation application**. These specifications mainly cover:

- "reasons for the degree course" (e.g. mission statement, goals and aims of the degree course),
- the planned "degree course structure and requirements in terms of content and specialisation" (e.g. organisation, structure and content of the programme, professional qualification of graduates on the basis of a consistent and coherent programme, assessment of the foreseeable developments in potential field of labour market),
- "human, financial and infrastructural resources" (e.g. qualification of the staff, funding of the programme etc.),
- "quality assurance measures" (e.g. data on completion rates, student satisfaction etc.) and
- "study-related cooperation" (esp. concerning international programmes, e.g. cooperation with institutions abroad, students from other countries etc.).

The introduction of the new Bachelor's and Master's degree courses has at the end supported and encouraged growth in the introduction of innovative degree courses by higher education institutions and faculties.

After giving careful consideration to the fact that evaluation and accreditation ideal-typically serve differing goals, the *Akkreditierungsrat* tried to ensure that the various procedures are separated and that **evaluation and accreditation are carried out in separate consultative and decision-making committees** and on the basis of separate procedures. However, the *Akkreditierungsrat* supported the view that recent evaluation results must be considered in accreditation decision-making.

5. Accreditation and coordination of agencies

In the meantime, seven¹ German agencies have been accredited and are thus entitled to award the *Siegel des Akkreditierungsrates* (Quality Certificate of the *Akkreditierungsrat*) to the Bachelor's and Master's degree courses of state Higher Educations Institutions:

- *Akkreditierungsagentur für Studiengänge der Ingenieurwissenschaften, der Informatik, der Naturwissenschaften und der Mathematik* (Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Engineering, Informatics, Natural Sciences and Mathematics - ASIIN);
- *Akkreditierungs-, Zertifizierungs- und Qualitätssicherungs-Institut* (Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute - ACQUIN);
- *Akkreditierungsagentur für Studiengänge im Bereich Heilpädagogik, Pflege, Gesundheit und Soziale Arbeit* (Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Special Education, Care, Health Sciences and Social Work - AHPGS);
- *Agentur für Qualitätssicherung durch Akkreditierung von Studiengängen* – (Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes – AQAS);
- Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA);
- *Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur Hannover* (Central Evaluation and Accreditation Agency of Hannover - ZEVA).

Other agencies, also from abroad, have announced their intention to submit applications.

The *Akkreditierungsrat* guarantees equivalency and quality within diversity by defining minimum standards, certain procedures and organisational structures, by **coordinating the procedures** practised by the accreditation agencies and by undertaking follow-up **monitoring**

¹ Two agencies have merged so that there at the moment (November 2003) six agencies are operating.

measures. In particular, it monitors the observance of minimum standards of quality and procedure, the implementation of conditions imposed on the agencies as well as the execution of other resolutions adopted by the *Akkreditierungsrat*. The agencies have to report every accreditation of degree courses together with the review report to the *Akkreditierungsrat*. Beyond this, the agencies have to submit an annual report as part of their accountability obligation. Moreover, members of the *Akkreditierungsrat* may, in agreement with the agencies, attend, as guests, sessions of the agency's decision-making committee or peer-review team sessions. In order to guarantee transparency, the *Akkreditierungsrat* has resolved to make the **accreditation decisions public at the end of the accreditation procedure**. You find **information on accreditations** of study courses – by now about 380² – on our website.

6. Agreement and cooperation in the international field

The *Akkreditierungsrat* introduces and represents German views in **international discussions** on (academic) degrees, transparency, quality and standards in higher education. Contributing to information exchange and to cooperation in Europe aim at acceptance of the Quality Certificate of the *Akkreditierungsrat* in Europe and abroad. **Agreements on mutual recognition must be reached**, in order to avoid multiple accreditations. The goal is to ensure that **accreditation achieved abroad should to be recognised in Germany and vice versa**.

In order to reach this aim the *Akkreditierungsrat* maintains **contacts with international accreditation institutions and organisations** which perform comparable functions and responsibilities. The *Akkreditierungsrat* is a member of the International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (**INQAAHE**), the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (**ENQA**), the European Consortium for Accreditation (**ECA**) and the **D-A-CH** network, the network of accreditation institutions of Germany, Austria and Switzerland. These memberships promote exchange with agencies abroad and help make the Quality Certificate of the *Akkreditierungsrat* known at international level.

The option of accreditation which has become possible as a result of the introduction of an accreditation system has provoked an intensive discussion in the federal states (*Länder*) and higher education institutions on restructuring curricula, contents and on the quality assurance of new degree courses. Higher education institutions feel encouraged to implement new and innovative ideas.

The system established by the *Akkreditierungsrat* has to be stabilised in the future. The system of accreditation and its results must be made better known abroad and it must be **further developed** taking into account international developments.

The test phase has been finished by a new statute of the accreditation system in Germany which came into power at the 1st of January 2003. There are some modifications especially concerning the competences of the accreditation system. It will no longer be restricted to the accreditation of newly established BA- and MA-courses, but the range of competence is extended to new Diploma- and *Magister*-courses, to courses of private Higher Education Institutions and to opening access to higher public service.

² As of November 2003.