Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany

Accreditation Council ▐■

**Activity Report
2009**

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Activity Report 2009

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1. New Rules for Accreditation

One of the key tasks of the Accreditation Council is to define binding criteria for the agencies' work, which comply with the European guidelines ("Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area"), which are widely accepted by all parties involved and lead to predictable and consistent decisions by different accreditation agencies. In order to achieve this task, the Accreditation Council is committed to constantly assessing and enhancing its internal processes by taking account of its practical experiences in accreditation. The past year has been used for a fundamental revision of the council's entire regulations with regard to its structure primarily, but also in terms of content. This review aimed for improving the readability and manageability of the guidelines by restructuring and grouping already existing resolutions, by deleting redundant guidelines and by adopting an intelligibility-oriented writing style. The Accreditation Council took advantage of this opportunity in order to adjust also the content of the reviewed resolutions. Among other things, the criteria for programme accreditation are now focusing more strongly on "academic feasibility" and "examination load".

The student protests in 2009 affirmed the council's approach to define the quality of a study programme not only with regard to its content but rather with regard to academic feasibility in terms of continuous assessment and adjustment of student work load as well as in terms of a study organisation responsive to the needs of the students. Academic feasibility is thus set as a quality attribute of equal importance for its accreditation (see also chapter 2.8). In this context, the members of the Accreditation Council

agreed upon a measure, which aims to reduce the number of exams. The criteria for programme accreditation will in the future provide that in general the modules should be completed by just one exam. The criticism expressed during the student protests that accreditation does not sufficiently fulfil the standards that it had set itself may be justified for some procedures. But stated as a general allegation this criticism is to be considered unsubstantial since the students, due to their rights of participation within the expert groups as well as within the respective decision-making committees, do have considerable influence on the evaluation of study programmes and accordingly on the evaluation of the academic feasibility of the study programmes subject to accreditation. This fact is confirmed by the accreditation agencies and it reflects also the experiences, which the Accreditation Council has been able to make when monitoring some of the procedures for accreditation.

In order to provide agencies and higher education institutions with a clear and complete overview of all relevant guidelines for the accreditation of study programmes and accreditation agencies the previously rather numerous resolutions were conflated into two basic resolutions:

1. "Rules of the Accreditation Council for the Accreditation of Study Programmes and for System Accreditation": This resolution contains all necessary criteria, procedural and decisional rules for study programme and for system accreditation, including the special provisions for accrediting joint programmes and intensive study programmes.

2. "Rules of the Accreditation Council for the Accreditation of Agencies": This resolution contains all necessary criteria, procedural and decisional rules for the accreditation of agencies.

As part of the development of the resolutions and as a measure that has been adopted independently from this structural revision, the Accreditation Council has agreed upon further modifications. The key points may be summarised as follows:

- In accordance with international standards, expert reports will be published once the procedure for accreditation is successfully completed. This applies to procedures for accreditation instituted after 01.06.2010 (see chapter 4.1).

- Re-accreditation will be henceforth considered the normal case and first-time accreditation will be considered an exception.

- In order to facilitate the accreditation of joint programmes, the council has created a framework for joint procedures for the accreditation of foreign and German agencies. In addition, the accreditation decisions made by foreign agencies may be recognised by the council under specific circumstances.

- Conflating all aspects regarding academic feasibility into a separate criterion emphasised the importance of the demands on academic feasibility of tiered study programmes.

- In order to reduce the number of exams to a reasonable amount, the criteria for programme accreditation will in the future provide that in general the modules should be completed by just one exam.

- The criteria for programme accreditation will in the future demand proof of personnel development and qualification measures as well as information about the implementation of a diversity management concept for students with special needs.

By reviewing the resolutions with regard to content, structure and style the council should have been able to optimise the quality and the manageability of the accreditation rules and regulations, reducing their number to a reasonable amount. In addition, the council repealed numerous resolutions that have become obsolete.

Since at the end of 2009 the revision of the common structural guidelines of the Länder was still discussed by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder, the Accreditation Council will address the discussion on the norms for the interpretation of the common structural guidelines of the Länder in 2010.

2. Activities of the Accreditation Council in 2009: Tasks and Results

2.1 Accreditation of Agencies

Certifying accreditation agencies is part of the Accreditation Council's core business. The certification of agencies (accreditation or re-accreditation) is based upon defined criteria and rules of procedure and it is issued for a maximum of five years. The accreditation entitles the agency to award Bachelor's and Master's study programmes with the official seal of the Accreditation Council. This kind of quality control ensures that the procedures carried out by accredited agencies are highly comparable, transparent and reliable, which is an essential prerequisite for evaluation results being recognised at an international level. In case of accreditation with conditions, the Accreditation Council verifies the compliance with the conditions. The agencies are obliged to provide evidence for this compliance.

In 2009, the Accreditation Council accredited three agencies, one agency was re-accredited. First-time accreditation was performed for the "Centre of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities" (OAQ - Organ für Akkreditierung und Qualitätssicherung der schweizerischen Hochschulen), the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA - Österreichische Qualitätssicherungsagentur) and the Evaluation Agency Baden-Württemberg **(evalag - Evaluationsagentur Baden-Württemberg)**. The Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Health and Social Sciences (AHPGS - Akkreditierungsagentur für Studiengänge im Bereich Gesundheit und Soziales) was re-accredited. Thus there are cur-

rently ten certified agencies, which are entitled to award the council's quality seal. With accrediting Austrian and Swiss agencies, the international attractiveness of the German accreditation system has been proven. This is a step of internationalisation of the accreditation system, which clearly shows that the members of the European Higher Education Area are moving closer together in terms of quality assurance.

Besides accrediting and re-accrediting agencies, one of the most important tasks of the Accreditation Council consists in verifying the compliance with the conditions as a follow-up to accreditation. In 2009, the Accreditation Council ascertained compliance with the conditions in due course by the Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Health and Social Science (AHPGS), the Austrian Quality Assurance Agency (AQA) and the Central Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation (ZEvA - Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur Hannover). The Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Canonical Programmes of Studies in Germany (AKAST - Agentur für Qualitätssicherung und Akkreditierung kanonischer Studiengänge in Deutschland) provided evidence for compliance with six out of seven conditions. The agency has to deliver proof of compliance with the last condition by 01.04.2010. The content of the single conditions and their compliance status are reported in the resolutions published on the council's website.

2.2 Monitoring Agencies' Work

The accreditation system in Germany provides that the accreditation procedures for study programmes and internal quality assurance systems are performed by accreditation agencies, which are subject to procedures and criteria set down by the Accreditation Council. In order to

permanently ensure adherence to these guidelines as well as assuring the quality and the comparability of the procedures, the agencies must be certified regularly by the council (see chapter 2.1). According to § 2 para. 1 no. 4 of the Accreditation Foundation Law the Accreditation Council is obliged to perform random sample assessments of procedures for accreditation as an additional measure for continuous quality control. The Accreditation Council meets this mission on the basis of a procedure which is transparent and comprehensible to the agencies providing both random sample and specific-purpose assessments as well as observation audits, during which accreditation procedures are followed by a representative of the Accreditation Council - from the submission of application or on-site visit to the final decision of the agency's accreditation commission. The main objective of this monitoring procedure is to gain direct insight into the agencies' accreditation practice and to communicate them observations and perceptions from an external perspective. In general, there are four random sample assessments per agency each year. Specific-purpose assessments are performed if there is any evidence that procedures have been carried out deficiently and/or that accreditation agencies have taken irregular decisions.

These assessments as well as the observation audits are performed usually by head office members. The procedures are evaluated by file-based assessment. The head office receives for this purpose the documentation of the procedure, which contains also the self-evaluation report of the higher education institution, information about the selection and appointment of experts, information about the realisation of the on-site visit, the agency's evaluation report and the response of the higher education institution as well as the agency's accreditation decision.

Should the head office ascertain flaws in accreditation procedures, the board of the Accreditation Council will decide on how to proceed. The possible steps to be taken range from issuing an instruction to modify the agency's accreditation practice to the obligation to amend a specific accreditation decision as well as to imposing an administrative fine or, in case of permanent and serious infringements of the council's criteria and rules of procedure, the withdrawal of accreditation. In the course of the assessment procedure, the agency is given the opportunity to lay down a detailed statement in order to ensure that the decision is taken on a reliable factual basis.

In the report period, the Accreditation Council evaluated a total random sample of 36 selected accreditation procedures by file-based assessment. The assessment results revealed the following: In five cases, the council's objections led to subsequent issuing of conditions. In a further 18 cases flaws were detected which generally concerned procedural issues and did not directly affect the quality of the accredited study programme. Three out of four specific-purpose assessments led to objections, in two cases the assessment induced the withdrawal of accreditation and one led to a retrospective review.

The figures indicated in this report result from the total outcome of the assessment of the procedures, which does not allow for conclusions to be drawn on the work of a single agency. The results of the detailed analysis of the assessment procedures, performed according to the internal quality assurance system adopted by the Accreditation Council, will be submitted for debate to the council in its 62th meeting on 12.02.2010.

One agency has appealed against one of the council's decisions concerning the subsequent

issuing of conditions. The council's complaints committee discussed it in detail recommending to the council to grant the agency's appeal. The Accreditation Council followed the recommendation of the complaints committee and repealed its decision. This procedure may be considered as evidence that the council's instruments for the revision of decisions are efficient.

The objectives of the quality control that takes place by assessing the accreditation procedures is twofold: First, decisions that turn out to be significantly incorrect will be revised in order to protect the students affected by these decision in question from disadvantages. The second objective is to avoid mistakes in future procedures while pointing at an overall improvement of quality. In this context, the analysis of the assessment procedures uncovered a positive trend. Even if the percentage of procedures under objection is still high, it has been shown that the amount of flaws deriving from the agencies' practice in evaluation and decision-making has significantly decreased. This progress is to be judged as evidence of the efficiency of the council's instruments for assessment.

In most cases, the detected deficiencies do not show a specific pattern and they are concerning single procedures where certain rules of accreditation had not been applied or incorrectly applied. In this context, need for action is given in particular with regard to the quality level of the expert reports, which often do not state clearly if all accreditation criteria have been taken into account when assessing a study programme. In light of the contemplated obligation to publish the expert reports of accreditation procedures (see chapter 4.1), the higher education institutions are likely to emphasise this particular aspect.

2.3 Resolutions adopted by the Accreditation Council

Besides a comprehensive revision of already existing resolutions (see chapter 1), the Accreditation Council adopted additional resolutions:

► Special Rules for the Accreditation of Joint Programmes

During the past years, both higher education institutions and accreditation agencies pointed out that the difficulties they encounter when accrediting *joint programmes* are become a more and more pressing issue. The planning of cross-border programmes needs to be supported with specific measures instead of being obstructed by contradictory quality assurance procedures. Therefore the Accreditation Council has revised its "Rules for the Accreditation of Degree Programmes Leading to Double Degrees and Joint Degrees" adopted in 2004 by taking into account the experiences gained in the meantime (see chapter 3). In addition specific rules for joint programmes has been approved. This revision aimed at reducing the effort needed to accredit cross-border programmes to a minimum, without having to accept a negative impact on the quality of the accreditation procedure and thus also on the quality of the joint programmes which have been accredited.

There are three different scenarios contemplated by the regulations: In the first case, the procedures could be performed by agencies certified by the Accreditation Council, which are obliged to ensure that both the criteria set by the council as well as the common structural guidelines of the Länder are taken into account. Under specific circumstances, the number of the on-site visits may be reduced in order to minimise the effort for the procedural organisation. The second scenario allows procedures in co-

operation with foreign agencies if they have pre-viously drawn up a common catalogue of criteria to be applied to the assessment. Under certain circumstances, the Accreditation Council may lastly recognise accreditation decisions adopted by foreign agencies if they are listed in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) or if they are full members of the European As-sociation for Quality Assurance in Higher Educa-tion (ENQA).

In case of accrediting joint programmes, it must be generally ensured that experts with appropri-ate international experience are involved when appointing the expert group. Ideally, it should also be ensured that an expert with specific knowledge of the country participates in the pro-cedure.

If applying one of the council's criteria or one of the guidelines of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder would presumably prevent the accredita-tion of the study programme due to being in-compatible with a particular specification of an-other accreditation institution involved or a na-tional specification of one of the partner coun-tries, the Accreditation Council may allow, on application of the responsible agency, not to ap-ply the guideline in question to the accreditation procedure. Allowing deviation from national guidelines - but only *in individual cases* - is an important step to iron out the difficulties encoun-tered in accrediting joint programmes.

► Code of Conduct for the Members of the Accreditation Council

Ensuring independence is one of the central in-ternationally accepted quality requirements, which has to be fulfilled by those operating in the field of quality assurance in higher education. This is also expressed by standard 3.6 of the

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which demands that quality assurance agencies should be independent with regard to their re-sponsibility for both defining procedures and regulations as well as for decisions and recom-mendations.

It is understood that the Accreditation Council also feels obliged to fulfil said requirement and that its members are experts in quality assur-ance and that their actions and decisions are thus exclusively quality-driven without being bound by statute to be compliant with any third party directives. The procedure rules underpin-ning the decisions and criteria for the accredita-tion of agencies as well as the appointing of ex-perts for the certifying procedures of agencies are subject solely to the competence and re-sponsibility of the Accreditation Council. In order to avoid potential conflicts of interest and to document the importance of independent ac-creditation decisions to the public, the council has adopted in its 58th meeting a code of con-duct for its members, which contains basic guidelines as well as specific instructions. The members of the Accreditation Council are thus obliged to keep confidentiality and to prevent that information that was gained in the course of their activity could be abused. Their duties in-clude adverting to the existence of a conflict of interest as well as informing the chairperson about their partiality regarding an item on the agenda immediately after the opening of the meeting. In this case, they do not participate at the meeting while the council is discussing and deciding about the item in question. Accordingly, the council's members do not participate in pro-cedures and committees of accreditation agen-cies that are certified by the seal of the Accredi-tation Council as far as decisions regarding the German accreditation system are concerned.

► Summary of the State-specific Structural Guidelines

According to the accreditation foundation law, one of the tasks of the Accreditation Council consists in conflating the existing state-specific structural guidelines into binding guidelines for the agencies. The council has conducted a survey among the Länder in order to identify the state-specific guidelines. In its 59th meeting on 09.06.2009 the council adopted a framework document not only containing the relevant state-specific regulations but also highlighting potential contradictions between the higher education acts of the Länder and the common structural guidelines of the Länder.

2.4 Internal Quality Assurance

Assessing and enhancing internal work flows and processes are one of the basic tasks of the Accreditation Council. The quality assurance system implemented for this purpose defines the Accreditation Council's demand for quality as well as the corresponding quality assurance measures for both performance generating processes (accreditation of agencies, definition of criteria and rules for accreditation procedures and monitoring of the work of the agencies) as well as for support processes (strategic planning, financial planning, personnel recruitment and training as well as servicing bodies). To ensure a sustainable and consistent implementation of the internal quality assurance system, the council has set up a project group, which is composed of three members of the Accreditation Council. The project group "Quality Assurance" is an integral part of the quality assurance system and it is working independently. The group reports annually to the Accreditation Council putting forward proposals on how to enhance the internal quality assurance system.

In 2009, the project group "Quality Assurance" presented its first quality report containing detailed information on how the various quality assurance measures have been implemented. The report contains also some suggestions for improvements. At completion of the accreditation procedures the head office has carried out an enquiry among all parties involved which has produced a very positive result. These enquiries are a powerful instrument for gaining feedback because they are a means to make available the experiences made by agencies, experts and by the council's members in order to enhance the accreditation procedures. The enquiries concerning the procedures performed in 2009 revealed high approval and satisfaction rates by all parties concerned. In particular, the support via the head office in procedural processes was evaluated positively by the experts. Several respondents had suggested creating more differentiation among the criteria regarding the accreditation of agencies. This suggestion could be implemented in the course of the editorial revision process of the Accreditation Council's resolutions (see chapter 1). It was also suggested to provide the agencies with a guide containing a detailed process description in order to facilitate orientation in the procedure. The council's head office will act on this idea by presenting an appropriate manual in 2010.

According to the project group "Quality Assurance" room for improvement is still given with regard to the Accreditation Council's public presentation that should emphasise its public role more clearly. In light of the criticism denounced by the students during their protests, it is also necessary to focus even more strongly academic feasibility and employability when re-accrediting a study programme. Through the expert discussion entitled "Preserving Academic Feasibility and Employability in Re-accreditation"

held on 09.12.2009 (see chapter 2.7), the Accreditation Council has already started an intense dialogue with agencies, experts and higher education institutions which shall be continued next year.

According to the project group's point of view, particular attention must be also directed towards the accreditation of intensive study programmes and dual study programmes. The Accreditation Council has already adopted this suggestion with its decision to set up a project group, which will focus on "Accreditation of Study Programmes with a Special Profile Demand" in 2010.

2.4 Follow-up of the Evaluation of the Accreditation Council

The Accreditation Council has taken its evaluation not only as an opportunity to enhance its procedures and work flows, the results of the evaluation were also used to apply for the reconfirmation of the council's status as a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The procedure of evaluation has given rise to a critical introspection and it became the starting point for adopting a series of measures, which had been already announced in 2008 in the council's response to the evaluation report.

The reconfirmation of the ENQA full membership was connected with an instruction to report on the measures which have been adopted by the Accreditation Council with regard to the improvement of the foundation's staffing, to the assessment of the council's structural organisation for preserving its independence as well as to the monitoring activities of the implementation of system accreditation. In this context, the council has set up a project group in May 2009 which was instructed to present a report about the sin-

gle follow-up measures. The Accreditation Council approved this report in December 2009. Its substantive points may be summarised as follows:

1. Monitoring the implementation of system accreditation

Measure: In compliance with the request of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder, the Accreditation Council will undertake the evaluation of the system accreditation after a period of five years. In addition, the practicability of the criteria and rules of procedure for system accreditation as well as their efficiency will be assessed based on an analysis of the first six procedures in order to apply modifications, if necessary.

Implementation: The Accreditation Council has decided to monitor the first two procedures for system accreditation, which are carried out by an agency, Two monitoring procedure have been already initiated during the reporting period.

2. Assessment of the council's structural organisation for preserving its independence

Measure: The Accreditation Council will start a dialogue with the representatives of the Länder in order to determine whether the common European system, which is funded by the state and safeguards the interests of the state without representation in the bodies responsible for quality assurance, may be applied also o the German accreditation system.

Implementation: The Accreditation Council aims, in dialogue with the Länder, at least at a clarification of the accreditation foundation law which states that no member of the Accreditation Council is subject to any directives and that the council's members are appointed in their function as experts. The "Code of Conduct for the

Members of the Accreditation Council" already contains suitable statements (see chapter 2.3). In addition, the council will discuss the measures, which allow to take into account both the interest of the state of being represented in the Accreditation Council as well as the requirements of international standards.

3. Improvement of the council's staffing

Measure: Particularly in light of the increasing expenditure needed for monitoring and assessing the procedures for system accreditation and for effective public relation, the Accreditation Council will apply for additional financial resources from the Länder.

Implementation: The Accreditation Council has presented to the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (KMK) an amending budget for 2010/2011, which contains substantial additional expenses for human resources. Even though the KMK has refused to increase the budget with reference to the budget volume that has been defined until 2011 by the Standing Conference of Finance Ministers (FMK), the Accreditation Council applies for increasing the budget for human resources for the financial year of 2011. Furthermore, the council is planning to apply for funding issued by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) for measures for international collaboration.

2.7 Meetings of the Accreditation Council

In December 2009, the Accreditation Council has organised its third expert discussion entitled "Preserving Academic Feasibility and Employability in Re-accreditation", which took place at the Monbijou-Center in Berlin. The debate attracted over 30 participants - from Accreditation Council members to representatives of the Länder and external experts. With this expert discussion, the council addressed also the debate about success and failure of the Bologna Process which focuses on the academic feasibility and the promotion of employability in Bachelor's study programmes. Based on case studies from higher education institutions it was discussed to what extend the determination of student work load may help preventing academic feasibility and how alumni survey results may support improving the employability of study programmes.

Dr. Phillipp Pohlenz, from the Potsdam Evaluation Portal (PEP - Potsdamer Evaluationsportal) of the University of Potsdam reported on methods for the determination of student workload and on how the results could be used to preserve academic feasibility and to enhance study programmes. Dr. Marianne Ravenstein, prorector for instruction, study reform and student affairs, addressed in her speech the validation of qualification objectives through alumni surveys

2.8 Future Tasks

Analysis of the Experiences Gained from System Accreditation

The pilot phase for this new quality assurance instrument has begun in 2009 when the first procedures for system accreditation have been initiated. Form the Accreditation Council's point of view, it is indispensable to monitor intensively the first procedures performed by the agencies, regardless of the KMK's instruction to present an evaluable report five years after the implementation of system accreditation. Since system accreditation is not only a completely new but also a rather complex procedure, most probably only practice will tell to which extent enhancement is needed and which possibilities for improvement are given. Involving the Accreditation Council as

well as analysing, in close coordination with the agencies, the experiences gained in the first procedures are thus considered essential prerequisites for a further enhancement of system accreditation and accordingly for its sustainable success.

Academic Feasibility and Employability

During the student protests, academic feasibility and employability were recurrent key words of the criticism denounced by the students. The Accreditation Council takes this criticism very seriously. The students as well as the public legitimately expect that accreditation procedures provide for an accurate assessment of the academic feasibility of Bachelor's and Master's study programmes.

Academic feasibility must play a decisive role in accreditation. Even if academic feasibility of Bachelor's and Master's study programmes as well as employability are two important criteria for accreditation, it is obvious that the judgements made in the course of the accreditation procedures performed during the past years were not persistently supported by sufficient empirical data. With its expert discussion, entitled "Preserving Academic Feasibility and Employability in Re-accreditation" held on 09.12.2009, as well as by revising of the regulations for accreditation the Accreditation Council has reacted to the student criticism (see chapter 1). Nevertheless, the higher education institutions must also initiate or at least continue their learning process, which should aim at sharpening the qualification objectives with special focus on employability. This process should furthermore promote an examination culture where competence-oriented monitoring of learning outcomes does prevail over an examination practice that is only focused on negative sanctions. The future task of the Accreditation Council as

well as of the agencies is to emphasize more effectively than before the importance of academic feasibility and employability when re-accrediting a study programme. In this context, the council is conducting an internal enquiry in order to analyse the procedures for re-accreditation as well as the results of these procedures with regard to the academic feasibility of the study programmes.

Study Programmes with a Special Profile Demand

In light of the variety of course types and of the heterogeneity of study programmes with a special profile demand, the Accreditation Council has so far avoided to elaborate specific accreditation criteria for advanced study programmes, e-learning and distance learning study programmes as well as for dual and part-time study programmes. It is now incumbent upon the council to ensure the comparability of the procedures and thus also the equivalence of the procedures' results. The question that arises in this context is to which extent it is possible to increase transparency in accreditation procedures by defining rules of procedure and criteria specific to study profiles. In addition, this task could be an opportunity to raise awareness among higher education institutions as well as among the experts that specific requirements do apply to the accreditation of study programmes with a special profile demand. A project group will be set up which will be instructed to present a report with recommendations by the end of the year 2010.

3. International Cooperation

Strengthening and intensifying international co-operation in accreditation and quality assurance is one of the major tasks of the Accreditation Council. The efforts in furthering the mutual understanding of the quality assurance systems and elaborating comparable criteria, methods and standards of quality assurance as well as improving transparency in study courses are not ends in themselves. They aim rather at the promotion of the mutual recognition of qualifications and thus at promoting student mobility in terms of transnational mobility in order to advance the realisation of the European Higher Education Area as well as to strengthen the collaboration with non-European partners. The international orientation of the German accreditation system is reflected in structural terms by the representation of international experts in the Accreditation Council or by the council's guidelines for the appointment of expert groups. The interest of foreign agencies to be certified by the German Accreditation Council is to be seen as an encouraging sign for this internationalisation. By accrediting the "Centre of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities" (OAQ) and the "Austrian Quality Assurance Agency" (AQA) in 2009, there have been added two foreign agencies to the circle of agencies certified by the Accreditation Council (see chapter 2.1). Equally important in this context is the cooperation in the pertinent European and international quality assurance networks, which is indispensable for concordance of common standards in quality assurance. As an active member of the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA), the *International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education* (INQAAHE) and the *European Consortium for Accreditation* (ECA), the Accreditation Council is closely connected with the most

important quality assurance networks. The following overview of the activities and of the council and of its members illustrates the efforts made in terms of international cooperation:

ENQA: At a members' assembly of the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* on 29.09.2009 in Barcelona the Director of the Accreditation Council, Dr. Hopbach, was elected president of ENQA. This role will be an opportunity for important contribution to further intensify the relationships between the national and the European level.

ECA: The intensive exchange within the ECA network has contributed in the past years not only to improve the mutual understanding of the agencies' working methods as well as of the different systems for quality assurance but also to the development of extensive common standards for important aspects regarding the activities of the accreditation institutions. Other key objectives of the European Consortium are the mutual recognition of qualifications and accreditation decisions, the simplification of accreditation of joint programmes as well as the creation of the European database 'Qrossroads', which already contains comprehensive information on the accreditation systems, quality assurance institutions and accredited study programmes in many countries represented in ECA.

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 (joint 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.

The programme managers represent the council in the four ECA working groups, which cover the topics of "New Developments in Accreditation", "Mutual Recognition", "European Initiatives" and "Information Tool for Accreditation Decision".

Framework guidelines for the accreditation of joint programmes: As a reaction to the increasing importance of joint programmes, which are in particular a symbol for the realisation of the European Higher Education Area, the framework guidelines for the accreditation of these international programmes have been extensively revised by the Accreditation Council (see chapter 2.3). During this revision, the Accreditation Council made use of experiences acquired by agencies and higher education institutions by supporting, for instance, the accreditation procedure 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. This survey was carried out in cooperation with the Franco-German University (DFH-UFA) and the department of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) responsible for the Erasmus Mundus project. The objective was to establish a better factual basis for developing regulations for these procedures.

Information exchange: Mutual understanding of quality assurance systems in the international context is not only promoted through the networks mentioned, but also through the cooperation of members of the Accreditation Council in commissions, expert groups or foreign quality assurance institutions as well as through informal contacts during meetings and workshops. These international contacts and cooperation represent an opportunity for the Accreditation Council to contribute expertise on an interna-

tional level and to be able in return to consider the experiences made by its partners in the council's own activities. The Chairman of the Accreditation Council is, for instance, the Vice Chairman of the University Council of the University of Vienna. The council's Managing Director is the President of the ENQA and still a member of the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ). In addition, the council's head office welcomed in the past year foreign delegations from Japan (29.01.2009) and Saudi Arabia (26.04.2009).[1]

The members of the Accreditation Council are regularly informed at the council's meetings on new international developments in accreditation and quality assurance.

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[1] Selected appointments are: EQF Working Group on 03.02.2009 in Brussels, Erasmus Workshop on 19./20.03.2009 in Brussels, E4-Meeting on 27.02.2009 and 12.10.2009 in Brussels, Audit Spring Seminar on 27./28.04.2009 in Madrid, Conference of Ministers Leuven on 27.-29.04.2009 in Leuven, HEEACT on 04/05.06.2009 in Taiwan, ECA Workshop on 10.-12.06.2009 in Zürich, ENQA AG IQA on 15./16.06.2009 in Den Haag, ENQA Seminar E-Learning on 07./08.10. in Stockholm, ENQA expert training on 23.10.2009 in Brussels, ECA WG 1 on 26.10.2009 in Vienna, BFUG on 01.12.2009 in Brussels.

4. Information and Communication

4.1 Presentation, Information and Consulting

The Accreditation Council considers it an integral part of its work to inform the public regularly and extensively about the council's activities and decisions and about the enhancement of the accreditation system in Germany. The Accreditation Council presents its activities primarily using electronic media. Besides the publication of press releases on the Informationsdienst Wissenschaft (idw) (information service science) and the Qm newsletter published the Quality Management project of the HRK, the Accreditation Council uses its regularly updated website to inform the interested public extensively on the accreditation system and on criteria and procedures for the accreditation of study programmes and of accreditation agencies as well as for system accreditation, on the council's resolutions and on the agencies accredited by the council. All central documents are available as PDF files on the easily accessible website of the Accreditation Council. Since the beginning of 2009, the website is furthermore use to publish the most important results of the council's consultations immediately after the respective meetings. As far as the procedures for accreditation of accreditation agencies are concerned, the Accreditation Council is following the basic principle of ensuring transparency in a particular manner. This is achieved by publishing not only the council's resolution but also the agency's application, the expert group's report and, if available, the response of the agency on the council's website as soon as a procedure is completed. The council's activity report, which informs each year about the activities the Accreditation Council has undertaken within the report period, is

published in print as well as PDF document. The electronic version is publicly available as a PDF file on the council's website, both in German and English.

After an intensive discussion with the agencies, the Accreditation Council has agreed on its meeting in December to apply its high transparency standards for accreditation decisions also for the accreditation of study programmes. As a consequence, the agencies are not only obliged to publish the decision and the names of the experts involved but also the expert report. This new policy will be applied on all procedures started after 01.06.2010. Making the documents that form the basis for accreditation decisions publicly accessible reflects the council's intention to improve not only the procedures in terms of comprehensibility but also the overall transparency of the accreditation system. The council's decision complies additionally with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) and thus with common practice in Europe.

Besides providing information, the Accreditation Council is endeavouring to continuously improve the level of knowledge of the relevant interested groups as well as of the national and international public about the accreditation system. The council achieves this on the one hand by answering a large number of queries by telephone and letter addressed by students, higher education institutions, ministries, special associations and agencies on general information about accreditation and on the council's resolutions.

The head office of the Accreditation Council is usually available from 08:00 to 18:00 for gratuitous information and consultation. On the other hand, the presence of the Accreditation Council at conferences, seminars and expert discussions is used by the members and employees of

the head office to contribute with their speeches to issues concerning accreditation, quality assurance or the studies reform in a broader sense.

Additionally the Accreditation Council is consulted as an adviser on issues concerning the study reform and in particular on questions related to the Bologna process. These consultations are far exceeding the council's immediate accreditation tasks. Formal as well as informal communication structures play an important role in this context. The council's managing director represents the Accreditation Council for instance at the National Bologna Work Group (Nationale Bologna AG), the programme advisory committee "Quality Management" of the Donors' Association for the Promotion of Sciences and Humanities in Germany (Stifterverband für die deutsche Wissenschaft), the work group for the elaboration of the "German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning" and at the ERASMUS Mundus advisory board of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Furthermore, the managing director represented the council at a hearing of the education council of the German Bundestag. An additional opportunity for exchanging information is the participation of the employees of the head office at meetings, expert discussions, workshops or round table meetings organised by German academic and scientific organisations. Furthermore, the numerous discussions, which the board of the foundation conducted along with higher education institution representatives, faculty associations, federations, professional associations and church representatives have proved to be helpful as well. These informal meetings represent also an opportunity to discuss possibilities for collaboration and cooperation.

4.2 Publication of Accreditation Data

All study programmes, which have been successfully accredited and are thus certified with the seal of the Accreditation Council, are listed in the database of the Accreditation Council. The database is linked with the Higher Education Compass of the German Rector's Conference and it is available on the council's website providing information on accreditation terms as well as on conditions that may be issued with accreditation. It provides also information on the profile of the study programme, the experts involved as well as on the expert's evaluation of the study programme. Besides the study programme-related accreditation data, the website of the Accreditation Council also provides statistics concerning the accredited study programmes, information on the number of currently accredited study programmes itemised according to study duration, type of qualification, subject groups, higher education institution type, German states and standard periods of study times. The accreditation data are maintained and updated in the database by the agencies accredited by the Accreditation Council. The release of data records takes place after formal examination by the council's head office.

In order to adapt the database at the requirements of the system accreditation, the Accreditation Council, in collaboration with the German Rectors' Conference, has developed a model for a specific data acquisition. This model aims at minimising the effort for data input and data administration for the agencies without lowering data quality. Before these modifications become effective, the council will conduct an internal trial run of the database in the first half of 2010 in order to be able to start smoothly with the data acquisition within the framework of system accreditation.

The Accreditation Council is participating, in collaboration with the German Rector's Conference, in the European database project *Qrossroads*. The database was created under the participation of accreditation institutions from Belgium (Flemish part), Germany, France, Norway, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Austria and it provides its users with extensive information on the accredited study programmes as well as on the higher education institution and accreditation systems of the participating countries under *www.qrossroads.eu*.

4.3 Communication with the Agencies

A constructive and close collaboration between the Accreditation Council and the agencies needs a sound communicative structure, which ensures reciprocal information by all parties involved. The involvement of agency representatives in various work groups of the Accreditation Council and in round table discussions held with the agencies and organised by the council as well as the membership of an agency representative in the Accreditation Council have proven to be reliable communication instruments in the previous years. The member, which was appointed by the agency and which participates with a consultative vote at the council's meeting, takes over the task of representing the agencies and of informing them on the outcomes of the consultations at the end of the Accreditation Council's meetings.

Before adopting resolutions with fundamental significance for the accreditation system and the accreditation procedures, the Accreditation Council consults with the agencies. Hence, it is assured that the practical experiences the agencies have made in accreditation will be taken appropriately into account without questioning the council's sovereignty concerning the definition of regulations. In 2009 the foundation's board and the agencies met for two round table discussions on 15.5. and 13.11. in order to deliberate on resolutions of the Accreditation Council and to discuss various issues on accreditation. The participants discussed among other things the implementation of system accreditation, the consideration of ESG in the framework of procedures of accreditation of agencies, options for a clear and open public relations strategy, the participation of third parties in accreditation procedures, the agencies' experiences in re-accreditation procedures for study programmes, the recognition of accreditation decisions adopted by foreign agencies as well as the importance of the Lisbon Recognition Convention for accreditation.

The Accreditation Council promptly informs the agencies on new or amended resolutions adopted by the council as well as on amendments of requirements common or specific to Länder by sending circulars or e-mails.

The monitoring of the accreditation procedures (see chapter 2.2) carried out by the Accreditation Council has given further insight for both the council as well as the agencies, which thus led to a better understanding of the different point of views of the various parties involved. Discussing the council's observation audit reports with the agencies, which considered their outcome as constructive criticism to be used for enhancing and improving their own procedures, has proved to be a meaningful measure in this context.

4.4 Statistical Data

A total of 5,673 Bachelor's and Master's study programmes, which were offered by state or state-recognised higher education institutions in Germany bore the seal of the Accreditation

Council by the end of December 2009.[2] With this, the number of accredited study programmes increased by about 1,500 study programmes within a year. From this follows that currently over 50% of the offered Bachelor's and Master's study programmes, which by now are constituting over 75% of the total number of study programmes listed in the Higher Education Compass of the German Rectors' Conference, have been accredited. Since the statistics of the Accreditation Council returns the study programmes at the time of query from the database, the number of 5,673 accredited study programmes does not say anything about the total number of accreditation procedures performed by the agencies.

Out of the 5,673 Bachelor's and Master's study programmes accredited in December 2009, over 70% have been accredited with conditions, whereas the accreditation has been denied by the resolution of the responsible accreditation commission only in 60 cases. In comparison to the previous year's figures, the share of study programmes that were accredited with conditions has increased by 15%.

The Foundation website provides current figures at: *www.akkreditierungsrat.de.*

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[2] The mentioned numbers are based on the dataset of the Accreditation Council's database. All accredited study programmes or study possibilities are listed in this database, provided that the accreditation agencies entered them into the database.

5. Resources

5.1 Finances

According to § 4 para. 1 of the accreditation foundation law, the Accreditation Council is jointly financed by the 16 Länder. Furthermore, pursuant to § 4 of the accreditation foundation law, the council is allowed to impose fees for fulfilment of its tasks to cover its administrative expenses. The federal states only offer funding if the administrative expenses of the Accreditation Council are not covered by fees.

The Standing Conference of Finance Ministers has determined the annual allocation by the Länder to the Accreditation Council at 330,000 Euro. Fees exceeding this amount will remain with the Accreditation Council up to a maximum of 40,000 Euro; surpluses have to be paid to the Länder. This regulation was resolved for the budget years 2008 to 2011.

The annual financial statement of the Accreditation Council reports for 2009 revenues of 396,580.09 Euro and expenses of a total of 391,649.85 Euro therefore a remaining amount of 4,930.24 Euro.

5.2 Personnel, Spatial and Material set up

The personnel set-up of the council's head office is consisting in a managing director, three consultants (3.25 full time equivalents) and an assistant (50%). All employees are higher education graduates. All employment contracts are, with one exception, permanent contracts. The remuneration is according to the directives of the Collective Agreement for the Public Service of the Federal States (TV-L - Tarifvertrag für den Öffentlichen Dienst der Länder).

Including the head office in the Adenauerallee 73 in Bonn, the Accreditation Council disposes of four rented office spaces with a total of 120 square meters available.

The EDP infrastructure of the currently six work places comprises of a Pentium IV each or higher, a flat screen, a telephone and internet connection.