

*The general framework of the accreditation
system for higher education in Germany*

*El marco general del sistema de acreditación en
la enseñanza superior en Alemania*

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Abstract

The ENAEE (European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education) is a non-profit international association based in Brussels. It aims at building a pan-European framework for the accreditation of engineering education programmes, in order to enhance the quality of engineering graduates, to facilitate the mobility of professional engineers and to promote quality and innovation in engineering education. Its main activities include the definition and management of the EUR-ACE label, that may be awarded to Engineering programmes at Master or Bachelor level, that are compliant with common standards and guidelines – the EAFSG, EUR-ACE Framework Standards and Guidelines. However the aim is not uniformity but trust building among all stakeholders of engineering education. This paper discusses how ENAEE copes with the diversity of accreditation practices and with the diversity of the legal implications of accreditation in different countries.

1. General Framework

A prerequisite to understanding the system of accreditation in Higher Education in Germany lies in the recognition of the fact that Germany is a federal country. It consists of 16 States (Länder) that are sovereign in terms of cultural and educational affairs. The federal level has very little to no involvement compared to the State Ministries when it comes to learning and teaching in Higher education. The Standing Conference of the German Ministers for Education and Culture (KMK)¹ is the institution where joint decisions of the Ministers are taken. The KMK is the central platform for discussion and decision for all aspects where comparable standards across Germany are desirable.

Reflecting the complexity of the above-mentioned system the framework for accreditation in Germany is not defined by the federal level, but resulted in a system with different actors with different responsibilities. The legal basis of the accreditation system is defined in the Law for the establishment of the “Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany”. The central decision body of this foundation is the Accreditation Council. It consists of 17 members which are jointly appointed by the German Rectors’ Conference and the KMK for a term of office of four years. These 17 members are separated in four representatives from Higher Education Institutions; four members from the Länder, four representatives from professional practice, two students, two international experts, and one representative of the accreditation agencies without voting rights). It is the mission and responsibility of this council to define criteria for the accreditation of programmes and quality assurance systems and to supervise that the procedures in place are transparent, reliable, create accountability, and are also in line with European / international standards. The “Rules for the Accreditation of Study Programmes and for System Accreditation” are the central document adopted by the Accreditation Council setting the standards for procedures in Germany.

Beyond these rules a second document - that is also referenced in these rules - is of importance for the accreditation in Germany: the “Common structural guidelines of the Länder for the accreditation of Bachelor's and Master's study courses”. This document is designed and approved by the KMK and aims to make sure that study programmes in different States follow the same structure to create comparability and allow mobility within Germany. The regulations in place allow Higher Education Institutions to choose between programme accreditation and system accreditation. The latter one assesses the internal quality assurance system of an institution. Institutions opting for this approach do not have to undergo programme accreditation by an external agency afterwards.

2. Agencies

Within this legal framework ten agencies are allowed to operate and award the accreditation seal of the German Accreditation Council. By law, only agencies that are accredited by the Accreditation Council are allowed to accredit degree programmes and quality assurance systems of institutions. The German Accreditation Council itself

¹ Information regarding its structure and mission are published by the Standing Conference of the German Ministers for Education and Culture at <https://www.kmk.org/kmk/information-in-english.html>

does not run any procedures leading to such accreditation; instead it monitors and accredits agencies who then provide this service. As a specific feature of the German system, Higher Education Institutions are free to choose which agency they entrust to accredit their programmes. Some agencies are only allowed to operate field specific while others use a methodology that allows them to operate in all disciplines. The following agencies are allowed to award the seal of the German Accreditation Council (September 2016):

- AAQ: Swiss Agency of Accreditation and Quality Assurance (general)
- ACQUIN: Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (general)
- AHPGS: Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Health and Social Sciences (disciplinary)
- AKAST: Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Canonical Study Programmes (disciplinary)
- AQA: Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (general)
- AQAS: Agency for Quality Assurance by Accreditation of Study Programmes (general)
- ASIIN: Accreditation Agency for Degree Programmes in Engineering, Informatics/Computer Science, the Natural Sciences and Mathematics (disciplinary)
- Evalag: Evaluation Agency Baden-Württemberg (general)
- FIBAA: Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (disciplinary)
- ZEvA: Central Evaluation and Accreditation Agency Hannover (general).

While the design of the procedures might differ between the agencies, they all have to guarantee that the standards of the German Accreditation Council and the KMK are reflected and fulfilled in their procedures. Also the legal status of agencies differs; some are foundations while others are membership organisations with Higher Education Institutions as members. All agencies charge the institutions for their services and based on the conditions set by the German Accreditation Council these fees must reflect the costs of the procedure, not allowing any cross-subsidization or profit orientation.

3. Rules for Programme Accreditation

The German Accreditation Council defines the standards for programme accreditation. Initial accreditation period is five years, while the period for programmes that have already undergone initial accreditation then can be up to seven years (re-accreditation). The rules for both procedures are identical, however the focus of the procedures shifts from the concept to the realization. The standards are as follows:

1. **Qualification Objectives of the Study Programme Concept**
This standard requires the clear definition of objectives to be achieved by the programme. It also requires the programme to cover employability aspects and foster personality development of the students.

2. **Conceptual Integration of the Study Programme in the System of Studies**
This standard reflects the full requirements of the KMK and also the Framework of Qualification for German Degrees.
3. **Study Programme Concept**
This standard requires programmes to cover specialised knowledge, interdisciplinary knowledge as well as knowledge of technical procedural and generic competences.
4. **Academic Feasibility**
This standard focuses on the appropriate design of the curriculum, it requires a plausible workload calculation and considers the interest of students with special needs.
5. **Examination System**
This standard requires examinations to be module-related as well as knowledge and competence oriented. Every module, as a rule, concludes with an examination covering the entire module.
6. **Programme-related Co-operations**
This standard requires the Institution to reassure proper implementation in case there are external partners involved in the implementation of the programme.
7. **Facilities**
This standard requires appropriate qualitative and quantitative facilities with regard to staff, material and space. Also measures for staff development have to be on place.
8. **Transparency and Documentation**
This standard requires that the course of study, examination requirements and the prerequisites for admittance are published as well as regulations for the compensation of disadvantages are in place.
9. **Quality Assurance and Further Development**
This standard demands that evaluation results, studies of the student's workload, academic accomplishment and the whereabouts of the graduates are considered for the future development of the programme.
10. **Study Programmes with a Special Profile Demand**
This standard references to special requirements resulting from special profiles of programmes such as distance education or franchise models. It allows interpreting the other standards in the light of this special profile.
11. **Gender Justice and Equal Opportunities**
This standard requires that concepts of the Higher Education Institution for gender justice and for the promotion of equal opportunities of students in special situations such as students having health impairments, students having children, foreign students, students with migration background and/or from so-called educationally disadvantaged classes are implemented at the level of the study programme.

Based on these criteria accreditation decisions can come with recommendations or conditions. Recommendations are not legally binding and the institution is free to decide if and how these recommendations are implemented. Conditions on the other hand have to be fulfilled. Their fulfilment has to be reported to the agency in charge of the procedure that will then submit the documentation to the expert panel that reviewed the programme. In case the programme doesn't meet a number of standards or the findings are interconnected, the accreditation procedure can also be suspended for up to 18 months allowing the institution to improve the programme. In case this attempt remains unsuccessful the accreditation is rejected. The option to reject an accreditation does not require prior suspension.

The majority of procedures in programme accreditation ends with a conditional accreditation while the nature of conditions varies from more formal conditions addressing the need to publish the examination regulations to more severe ones addressing the learning outcomes or feasibility of the programme. Only one to two percent of the procedures end with a rejection.

4. Rules for System Accreditation

Since 2009 German Higher Education Institutions can opt for System Accreditation to replace the need for external programme accreditation. The German Accreditation Council defines the standards as well as the rules of procedure for system accreditation. Subject matter of the system accreditation is the internal quality assurance system of a Higher Education Institution in the field of teaching and learning. The structures and processes relevant for teaching and learning are assessed with regard to their appropriateness for achieving the qualification objectives and for ensuring high quality of the study programmes, with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG), the guidelines of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) and the criteria of the Accreditation Council being applied.²

The standards for System Accreditation are as follows:

1. **Qualification Objectives**
This standard requires a defined and published education profile of the institution and for its study programmes. It also asks for methods to assess that its programmes reflect this profile.
2. **Internal Management in Teaching and Learning**
This extensive standard references large parts of the rules of the Accreditation Council for Programme Accreditation, the German Qualifications Framework for Higher Education. Consequently it addresses examinations, workload and ECTS, qualification objectives and the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

²The rules are published by the German Accreditation Council at http://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/fileadmin/Seiteninhalte/AR/Beschluesse/en/AR_Regeln_Studiengaenge_en_aktuell.pdf

3. **Internal Quality Assurance**
This standard requires the institution to use an internal quality assurance system in the field of teaching and learning that meets the requirements of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. In some areas it also outlines specifically which instruments must be in place or which areas must be covered.
4. **Reporting System and Data Collection**
This standard requires the institution to continuously use an internal reporting system that documents the structures and procedures in the development and implementation of study programmes as well as the structures, procedures and measures of quality assurance, its results and effects.
5. **Responsibilities**
This standard requires a clear definition and publication of the decision procedures, competencies and responsibilities within the management system for teaching and learning and internal quality assurance.
6. **Documentation**
This standard requires the institution to inform the bodies in charge of teaching and learning at least once per year and in addition the general public and the responsible ministry in an appropriate manner about the procedures and results of the quality assurance measures.
7. **Cooperation**
This standard requires the institution to have procedures in place that ensure the quality of the study programmes and their continuous improvement if other organisations are involved or commissioned. This also applies for Joint programmes

Like in programme accreditation decisions can come with recommendations, but also conditions. The time period for the fulfilment of conditions is also nine months. Suspensions of the procedure are also possible for generally 12 months with a maximum suspension period of 24 months. An accreditation is valid for six years and in case of re-accreditation up to eight years.

5. Current developments

Based on the experiences of the last years of a successfully running accreditation system the Accreditation Council decided to update its rules for both programme and system accreditation. This development was aligned to the update of the European Standards and Guidelines in 2015 and originally the new rules were expected in 2017. However, due to a ruling of the German Federal Constitutional Court on 17. February 2016³ the constitutional foundation of the German accreditation system requires adjustments. While this process is preferred to be completed until the end of 2017 it leads to a slow down of the discussions concerning the new standards. While there seems to be general agreement between the key stakeholders regarding the basic

³ Details regarding the ruling, its background and effects are published by the German Federal Constitutional Court and available at <http://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/EN/2016/bvg16-015.html>

structure of the future system in Germany, currently many questions are under discussion with no consensus in site. On a positive note it can be assumed that within the next 12 months some major adjustments will be made to the German system that will definitely bring change. If this change will only lead to a stronger formalization resulting in longer procedures and extra costs for the institutions, or substantive improvement can be achieved, remains subject for discussion in the next months.