

Policies for Accreditation of Bachelor- and Master Course Programs in Germany

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Abstract

As a consequence of the Bologna process, a compulsory system of accreditation of study course programs has been implemented in parallel to existing mechanisms for controlling comparability and quality of study course programs of higher education in Germany. This paper describes the new accreditation processes, and the political framework that it is subject to.

1. Introduction

As a consequence of the Bologna process [1] – [5], European ministers in charge of higher education have committed themselves “to reach in the short term, and in any case within the first decade of the third millennium ...adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate”, and being finalised by degrees, which were required “to be easily readable and comparable” [2].

The conversion of the Bologna decisions into practice turned out to be particularly difficult in Germany, which was due to the federal structure of this country. In contrast to other countries, higher education is a matter of state laws. Federal laws give only a legal framework [6], while actual regulations are in the competency of the states. As a consequence, there is one

federal law, and there are 16 different sets of state-laws to be applied for higher education in Germany.

The following sections describe, therefore, political structures and decision-making processes as well as regulations that were installed to adopt the new system of higher education together with its accreditation procedures.

2. Policy of Higher Education in Germany

As it was already mentioned earlier, there are 16 different sets of state laws concerning higher education in Germany. In order to harmonise these laws, the 16 state ministers have founded a “board of the ministers in charge of higher education” (Kultusminister-Konferenz, KMK, [7]).

Since the states are governed by ministers belonging to different rival parties, the KMK is not a board that makes decisions easily. All its decisions might be seen as compromises on a minimum common basis.

The KMK informs the “board of the presidents of institutions of higher education (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz, HRK [8]) about their decisions. It is up to the individual members of the HRK to forward the given information to their institutions.

Since there is a smouldering controversy between the presidents of the universities and the rectors of the Fachhochschulen in the HRK, only few rigorous decisions are

made by that board, e.g. concerning information policies.

Therefore, it happened that the HRK did not react adequately and timely to the decisions of the ministers concerning the Bologna process.

Ministers exploited that situation to amend laws for institutions of higher education without being “interfered” by the expertise of specialists in the different fields of higher education. They pushed the laws through the state parliaments thereby completely ignoring the protest of the experts.

As a result, the amended laws mirror a simplistic and egalitarian view of a very complex subject, which leads to continuing requirements to shorten the traditional engineering education while adhering or even augmenting its quality. Objections that this would be a contradiction in itself, were dismissed. It was even alleged that professors would be too inflexible to recognize the advantages of a shortened duration of education.

Anyway, it was recognized that a watchdog was necessary in order to prevent the worst.

3. Accreditation in Germany

Therefore, the board of the ministers in charge of higher education in Germany decided to install an accreditation council [9] as a foundation under public law in North-Rhine Westphalia, the latter being one of the states of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Its task is ... not to accredit study course programs.

The reason is that ministers decided to introduce elements of competition into the German system of accreditation. They required thus that accreditation of study courses be done by one of a set of competing accreditation agencies. These in turn would need another watchdog, and that is the aforementioned accreditation council.

The latter has the following main tasks:

1. Accreditation and re-accreditation of accreditation agencies by giving them the right to accredit study courses for a limited time.
2. Summing-up the requirements of the KMK and the states to form a set of rules to be obeyed by the accreditation agencies.
3. Stipulation of minimum pre-requisites for accreditation processes.
4. Surveillance of accreditations granted by the accreditation agencies.

Presently, the accreditation council has accredited six accreditation agencies. These are in alphabetical order:

ACQUIN (www.acquin.org),
 AHPGS (www.ahpgs.de),
 AQAS (www.aqas.de),
 ASIIN (www.asiin.de),
 FIBAA (www.fibaa.de),
 ZEVA (www.zeva.uni-hannover.de).

Each of these agencies is different from the others [11], either by its legal form, or by an existing or missing specialisation to certain subjects, or by its funding, or by its additional tasks and dependencies.

4. SWOT analysis

Listening to some German state politicians imparts the impression that the introduction of the German system of accreditation be a sheer success story. As a particular strength of the system, they mention the distributed organisation, the elements of competition, the diverse organisational forms of the agencies, and the differing forms of funding.

However, some of these points might also be seen as the most important weaknesses of the system. Having different accredited agencies is a weak point, since then accreditation is no longer done following common criteria, even though the accreditation council tries to prevent large differences.

An example might demonstrate this point. In electrical and information engineering, there is one specialised agency available, and three agencies that are not specialised to some subjects. For cost reasons, the latter cannot possibly fall back on a large pool of auditors (persons who inspect the institutions, and who analyse the course program to be accredited). As a matter of fact, it might happen that a course program of electrical and information engineering (EIE) might be reviewed by a team, where there is only one auditor specialised to EIE, while the others might be specialised in languages, or in laws, or in economy, and where all of them have the same right to vote. It is hard to believe that these non-specialised agencies are accrediting the course program in the same way as a specialised agency.

Another weak point is the different funding of the agencies. Some must completely finance themselves by fees, others are supported by public authorities; still others are earning additional money by private reviews and projects. This makes the latter depending on their sponsors.

The threat is thus, that in the end it might happen that independent specialised agencies, who offer high-quality accreditation procedures, must compete with agencies, who might offer a less qualified accreditation at low costs.

However, the new system offers also new opportunities. If the accreditation council would decide only to accredit specialised and independent agencies that are funded solely by fees for accreditation, then this system might succeed. However, then the question is, why there is not only one big accreditation institution instead of an accreditation council plus several accreditation agencies.

5. Conclusion

In summary, it was demonstrated that the German system of accreditation is relatively

complex due to the political boundary conditions existing in Germany.

A SWOT-analysis has shown that presently there are more weak points and threats than strengths and opportunities.

It will turn out in the future whether this type of accreditation is working well enough such that accreditation institutions from other countries would acknowledge bachelor and master degrees from German institutions of higher education.

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