

Quality Report of the Accreditation Council Foundation for the Year 2020

1. Fundamentals of Quality Management at the Accreditation Council Foundation

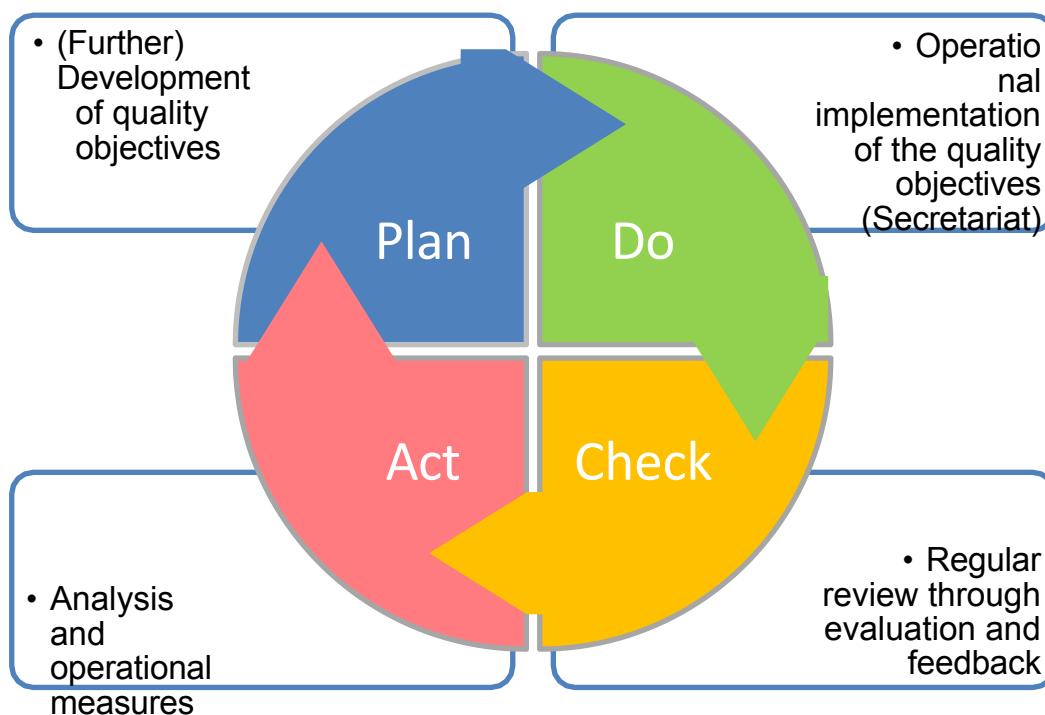
Quality management is intended to meaningfully link the existing goals, concepts, and processes of the Accreditation Council Foundation, particularly those of the Secretariat, through a quality cycle, thereby providing impetus for sustainable further development.

Process-integrated quality management is intended to ensure a continuous process of quality assurance and development. Thus, the focus is not on a single process, but on cyclical development: the quality cycle.

The quality cycle is based on a continuous, cyclical process that is generally recognized within the framework of quality management concepts: the PDCA cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act) according to Walter Deming.

Implementing the quality cycle as a PDCA cycle does not require entirely new processes or process descriptions, but rather an initial assessment and classification of existing work areas and processes within the respective phases of the PDCA cycle.

Fig. 1 Quality cycle of the Accreditation Council Foundation



The phases of the cycle are structured as follows:

a) Plan: What are the quality objectives and concepts of the Accreditation Council Foundation?

The Accreditation Council has already established quality objectives and concepts in its mission statement (Drs. AR 51/2019) and in its quality management concept (Drs. AR 67/2019). These include:

- The Accreditation Council Foundation ensures that accreditation procedures are conducted swiftly, reliably, on time, and transparently, from the submission of the application through to the decision-making by the Accreditation Council. In particular, the administrative burden associated with the application process for universities and agencies should be kept to a minimum.
- The Foundation operates in accordance with the *European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)* and the State Treaty on Study Program Accreditation, as well as its implementation through relevant state regulations.
- It ensures that accreditation decisions are made independently of third parties and that potential conflicts of interest are prevented through appropriate measures.
- It promotes dialogue among all actors involved in the accreditation process and works toward a trusting collaboration among all represented stakeholders.

b) Do: How do the Accreditation Council and the Secretariat implement the individual quality objectives operationally?

The quality objectives are implemented operationally at the Secretariat through the regular processing of accreditation applications, the preparation and follow-up of accreditation decisions, the preparation and implementation of resolutions, and other tasks of the Accreditation Council.

The core operational processes include:

- The introduction, use, and further development of ELIAS for application processing (including process descriptions)
- Communication with all stakeholders in the accreditation system
- Preparation of internal process descriptions and guidelines (subject allocation, division of duties, office organization, program accreditation manual)
- Preparation of external guidance materials (decisions, FAQs)

c) Check: How do structured evaluation and feedback processes work?

The implementation of quality objectives through core operational processes is subject to both regular and ad hoc reviews. This is ensured, on the one hand, by structured evaluations in ELIAS following application procedures (questionnaire tool), which are regularly analyzed. A further regular external evaluation will be conducted through an ENQA review.

Additionally, various feedback mechanisms are available for all stakeholders in the accreditation system (universities, students, agencies, federal states, etc.), which can initiate an ad hoc review of core operational processes.

Examples of these feedback mechanisms include:

- The members of the Accreditation Council serve as important communicative interfaces between their respective stakeholder groups and the Accreditation Council.
- The Accreditation Council invites the executive boards of all agencies to an annual joint conference, thereby ensuring regular communication with the agencies.
- Through the Quality Dialogue format, the Accreditation Council offers an annual forum for exchange on topics related to the accreditation system.
- The Executive Board and the staff members participate in working groups, departmental days, conferences, etc., thereby facilitating direct communication with all stakeholders in the accreditation system.
- The Secretariat conducts feedback sessions on program accreditation with the agencies.
- The office offers ELIAS training sessions for user groups as needed.
- The Secretariat ensures regular and transparent communication for various target groups through the publication of decisions and outcome letters, FAQs, a newsletter, and the use of social media.

All of these feedback channels provide stakeholders in the accreditation system with the opportunity to provide regular and/or ad hoc feedback on the Accreditation Council's core operational processes.

d) Act: How are operational or conceptual measures derived from the review?

The further handling of structured and ad hoc feedback is differentiated based on the recipient and relevance:

- Feedback concerning core operational processes within the Secretariat is addressed during office meetings and regular meetings. This may lead to measures such as the further development of ELIAS processes, the refinement of internal guidelines, or the creation of external guidelines.
- Feedback concerning ongoing business pursuant to § 12(2) of the Bylaws is addressed by the Executive Board. This may result in measures in the form of Executive Board resolutions or draft resolutions submitted to the Accreditation Council for a decision.
- Feedback relevant to the accreditation system as a whole is addressed by the Accreditation Council. This may lead to measures in the form of resolutions or adjustments to the quality objectives.

All three levels represent closed yet complementary control loops and constitute the quality management system of the Accreditation Council Foundation.

The Secretariat also prepares an annual quality report documenting the findings from the structured evaluation in ELIAS as well as the results from the feedback formats.

2. Status of Quality Management Implementation

Since this is the first quality report for the Foundation's newly established quality management system, the focus is primarily on planning, the instruments and processes implemented to date, and an outlook on upcoming measures.

Going forward, the quality report will regularly document results from the review and evaluation of core processes, as well as the measures derived from them and the further development of quality objectives and processes.

2.1 Planning

With the adoption of the mission statement (Drs. AR 51/2019) and the quality management concept (Drs. AR 67/2019) in 2019, the Accreditation Council established quality objectives and concepts for itself. At the same time, the Quality Management Concept already contains fundamental framework guidelines that translate the implementation of quality assurance and development at the Accreditation Council Foundation into concrete processes and responsibilities. In particular, the responsibilities of the various stakeholders and their participation in control loops were defined.

The Accreditation Council thus determined that the implementation of quality management takes place in two areas, both of which are highly relevant to the work of the Accreditation Council: On the one hand, the quality management concept stipulates that structured evaluations are to be conducted both regularly as part of accreditation procedures and through a regular external evaluation in accordance with Article 15 of the State Treaty on Study Accreditation.

Second, the Accreditation Council employs various feedback formats for all stakeholders in the accreditation system (universities, students, agencies, federal states, etc.), which can also initiate a review of core operational processes on an ad hoc basis.

Contrary to the original plans of the

101st meeting of the Accreditation Council, the quality management concept could not be implemented by the end of 2020; the main reasons for the delay lie primarily in the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the (necessary) shift in priorities regarding the further development of the ELIAS portal, as well as a sharp increase in the volume of applications, also had a negative impact on implementation.

2.2 Overview of the instruments and processes established to date

a) Structured Evaluation of Accreditation Procedures

Higher education institutions are given the opportunity to provide feedback following the application process via a questionnaire tool in ELIAS. This feedback can address both organizational,

content-related, and technical aspects of the application process. The feedback is collected anonymously as part of process step *c) Check* and documented in aggregated form by the Secretariat once a year. The results are also published in aggregated form in the quality report and thus form the basis for the further development of operational processes and conceptual frameworks in process step *d) Act*.

The survey tool has not yet been set up at this time, but is expected to be operational by summer 2021 as part of the 16th ELIAS Sprint.

b) External Evaluation in Accordance with Article 15 of the State Treaty on Study Program Accreditation

At the 96th meeting of the Accreditation Council, it was decided to apply for “affiliate” status with ENQA. In addition, the foundation’s listing in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) was announced. The associated ESG evaluation was initiated at the 103rd meeting of the Accreditation Council, during which the Secretariat was tasked with preparing the self-evaluation report for the ESG evaluation. The self-evaluation report is scheduled to be approved by the Accreditation Council in June 2021. The ENQA site visit will take place at the end of 2021, coinciding with the last Council meeting of the year.

c) Feedback Formats

Communication strategy

At the 103rd meeting, a communication strategy was adopted that, in addition to the information available on the Accreditation Council’s website and the established communication channels—such as press releases and letters reporting results to the KMK, the HRK, the agencies, the KASAP, and the system-accredited universities, also introduced additional proactive communication formats in the form of a Twitter account and a redesigned newsletter (with a subscriber list of over 1,000 addresses).

The communication concept serves as an essential foundation for the various feedback formats by ensuring a regular and transparent flow of information from the Accreditation Council to all stakeholders in the accreditation system.

Quality Dialogue

In September 2019, the first annual Quality Dialogue of the Accreditation Council Foundation took place in Frankfurt in cooperation with the University of Oldenburg. The topic of the Quality Dialogue was quality standards and quality assurance in academic continuing education. The

next Quality Dialogue was originally scheduled to take place in June 2020 on the eve of the 104th meeting of the Accreditation Council at the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the roundtable discussion was postponed to 2021.

The second Quality Dialogue will discuss how the contractual, organizational, and content-related integration required by the MRVO can be taken into account in the review and evaluation of dual degree programs during accreditation procedures. Representatives from the various stakeholder groups will be invited to participate.

Feedback meetings with agencies

The joint meeting of the Accreditation Council held at the beginning of each year provides an opportunity for dialogue with representatives of the accreditation agencies from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. At the 103rd meeting in March 2020, a mid-term review of the current term was presented and discussed with the agencies. Overall, the Accreditation Council and the accreditation agencies concluded that the accreditation system, which was reformed in early 2018, has proven its effectiveness and that the Accreditation Council and the agencies generally work well together.

To optimize cooperation at the operational level, feedback meetings were held as early as 2019 between the Secretariat and the agencies evalag and ACQUIN, as well as a feedback meeting with AHPGS in 2020.

Exchange Forum for System-Accredited Universities

Members of the Executive Board and/or the Secretariat regularly participate in the “Exchange Forum for System-Accredited Universities” initiated by Münster University of Applied Sciences, in which up to 50 system-accredited universities are represented. This allows for active participation in the discussions among system-accredited universities, thereby ensuring regular exchange and feedback even outside of system accreditation procedures. The next exchange forum will take place on March 18, 2021.

ELIAS training sessions for user groups

In November 2019 and in March and May 2020, the office conducted ELIAS training sessions for university staff. Further training sessions could not take place initially due to the COVID-19 pandemic; in addition, interest in training on the part of the universities has declined.

d) Internal Tools

An important complement to regular evaluations and feedback mechanisms is the establishment of internal tools and process descriptions for quality development and assurance of core processes. The FAQs provided on the Accreditation Council's website and regularly updated translate the requirements of the State Treaty and state regulations into operational guidelines for applicants. Likewise, the FAQs reflect decisions made by the Accreditation Council and the Executive Board regarding the operational processes of application processing.

To ensure consistent standards in the review of accreditation applications, the Secretariat developed "Guidelines for the Review Process in Program Accreditation" as early as 2019. In 2020, work also began on the creation of a "Program Accreditation Handbook." The aim of the handbook is to systematically document the Accreditation Council's decision-making processes regarding issues that regularly arise in review practice, thereby creating a central repository of knowledge for the Secretariat.

3. Outlook for upcoming implementations

By the end of 2021, two major milestones for quality management will have been achieved. First, with the 16th ELIAS Sprint, the questionnaire tool for applications for program and system accreditation will be ready for use starting in the summer of 2021.

Second, the ENQA review will be conducted in December 2021, subjecting the Accreditation Council Foundation to an external evaluation and thereby providing important impetus for the further development of the accreditation system.

Together with the instruments and processes already initiated, these two milestones complete the quality management framework and create a broad foundation for the implementation and further development of the Akkreditierungsrat Foundation's quality objectives.

Future quality reports will therefore place an even stronger focus on the areas of

c) Check and *d) Act*. Consequently, future reviews, evaluations, and measures for implementing the quality objectives through the core operational processes—including both regular and ad hoc reviews—will take center stage in the future.