

# **Guidelines on the Appointment of Experts and the Composition of Expert Groups for Accreditation Procedures**

Resolution of the  
23rd General Assembly of the HRK in  
Potsdam on November 14, 2017,  
updated at the  
24th General Assembly of the HRK in  
Mannheim  
on April 24, 2018

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# 0. Use of the guidelines

According to Article 3, Paragraph 3 of the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty, it is the task of the HRK to propose a procedure for appointing the experts.

"(3) 1The German Rectors' Conference shall develop a procedure to ensure sufficient participation of the academic community in the appointment of university faculty members within the meaning of paragraph 2, sentence 1, number 5. 2The procedure shall require the approval of the Foundation Council. 3The agencies shall be bound by this procedure with regard to the appointment of reviewers within the meaning of paragraph 2, sentence 1, number 4."

The HRK fulfills this mandate by adopting a binding guideline within the meaning of Art. 3 Para. 3 of the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty.

<sup>1</sup>Furthermore, with these "Guidelines on the Nomination of Experts and the Composition of Expert Groups for Accreditation Procedures," it presents key points for the nomination of all members of expert groups. This should contribute to comparable criteria and procedures for the appointment of all experts.

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution of the HRK General Meeting in Mannheim on April 24, 2018

# 1. Fundamental considerations

To ensure alignment within the European Higher Education Area, the guidelines for the appointment of reviewers and the composition of reviewer groups must comply with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

## " 2.4 Peer review experts Standard:

**External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include one or more student members.**

### **Guidelines:**

At the core of external quality assurance is the wide range of expertise provided by peer experts, who contribute to the agency's work by offering perspectives from various stakeholders, including institutions, academics, students, and employers/professional practitioners.

In order to ensure the value and consistency of the experts' work, they

- are carefully selected;
- have the appropriate skills and are competent to perform their tasks;
- are supported by appropriate training and/or briefing.

The agency ensures the independence of the experts by implementing a mechanism to prevent conflicts of interest.

The involvement of international experts in external quality assurance, for example as members of peer panels, is desirable as it adds a further dimension to the development and implementation of processes." <sup>2</sup>

The quality of the entire review system depends on these individuals being carefully selected and adequately prepared for their task. Therefore, care should be taken to ensure that the quality of the reviewers is assured and that they are particularly qualified within the academic field, but also in quality assurance, so that they are able to grasp and assess either the degree program and/or the overall system of the institution in its complexity. <sup>3</sup>

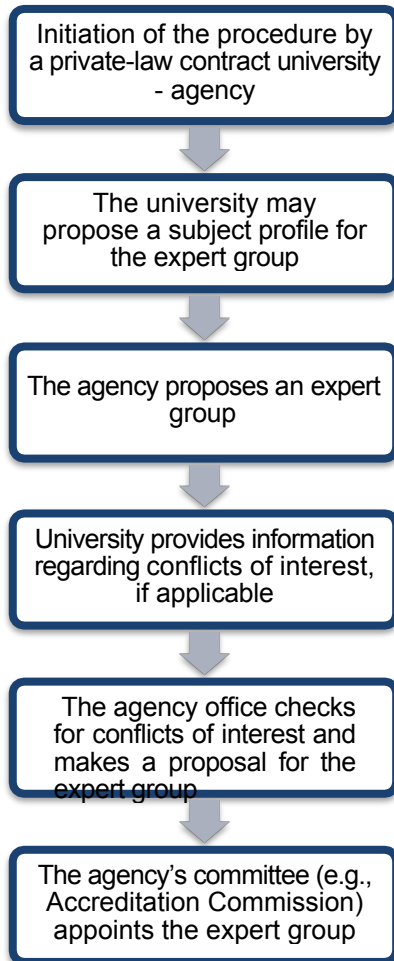
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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-10-Publication Database/Beitr-2015-03\\_Standards\\_and\\_Guidelines\\_ESG\\_2.pdf](https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-10-Publication Database/Beitr-2015-03_Standards_and_Guidelines_ESG_2.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See [the resolution of the 21st General Assembly of the HRK on November 8, 2016, in Mainz: Reorganization of the Accreditation System](#)

## 2. Expert groups in program accreditation

### 2.1 Process for designating program accreditations



The Agency shall propose a review panel for the procedure, taking into account the criteria set out in the ESG and in 2.3 and 2.4, and including proposals from the HEI regarding the academic profile of the review panel.

The agency determines the composition of the expert group without further influence from the higher education institution, subject to a conflict-of-interest review, if applicable. The right to select the experts rests solely with the agency and is ideally exercised by a committee (e.g., the Accreditation Commission) in which academics and scientists hold the majority of votes and in which all stakeholder groups are represented.

The agencies' offices cannot verify all circumstances that could lead to a conflict of interest among the experts. Therefore, the appointed individuals themselves are obligated to inform the agency in the event of an appearance of bias and to withdraw from the procedure in question.

The universities may file a complaint or an appeal. If the differences of opinion between the agency and the university cannot be resolved, the Clearing House shall be<sup>4</sup> involved.

## **2.2 Task of the expert group**

In program accreditation, it is the task of the experts to evaluate a study program according to technical and academic criteria.

"The academic criteria include

1. The qualification goals of a study program corresponding to the intended degree level, including, among other things, the field of scientific/academic or artistic proficiency, as well as the competence for qualified employment and the development of personality,
2. The alignment of the qualification goals with a coherent study program concept and its implementation through appropriate resources, appropriately qualified faculty, and competency-based examinations, as well as the academic feasibility, including self-study,
3. Subject-content standards at the cutting edge of science and research,
4. Measures to ensure adequate academic success,

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<sup>4</sup> see below, 7.

5. Measures to ensure gender equality and to compensate for disadvantages faced by students with a disability or chronic illness,
6. "The concept of the quality management system (goals, processes, and tools) as well as the measures for implementing the concept."<sup>5</sup>

The requirements for the reviewers are derived from these criteria. The external review must be conducted with the substantial participation of external, independent experts from fields relevant to quality assurance, in particular representatives of academia and professional practice as well as students.<sup>6</sup> Representatives of academia must always hold the majority of votes on the committee when assessing subject-related criteria.

## **2.3 Selection criteria for peer review experts**

All persons who participate in external quality assurance as experts perform this task on the basis of their professional and personal competence and not as representatives of organizations or interest groups, even if they have been proposed for the task by these. This independence is essential to ensure that procedures and decisions are based solely on expertise.<sup>7</sup>

### **1. Academics**

The representatives of the academic community must have the expertise to evaluate degree programs from an academic and scientific perspective. It should be noted that they

- a. are actively involved in the academic community of their discipline and therefore possess expertise in the field of the degree program to be accredited and, if possible, in related fields;
- b. have experience in the development, organization, implementation, and monitoring of study programs;
- c. are engaged in the further development of university teaching;

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<sup>5</sup> Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty, Art. 2, Para. 3

<sup>6</sup> cf. Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty, Art. 3, paras. 2 and 3

<sup>7</sup> cf. ESG 3.3

- d. if possible, are able to demonstrate the promotion of teaching beyond their own sphere of influence.

## 2. Students

The student members of the review panel must have academic experience in the subject area of the degree program they are to evaluate. They should therefore

- a. be currently actively studying in this subject area at a higher education institution or
- b. have completed such studies at the level of the HQR to be assessed no more than 12 months ago,
- c. be able to demonstrate experience with accreditation or internal quality assurance, if applicable.

## 3. Representatives of professional practice

The representatives of professional practice evaluate the study programs from the perspective of one of the occupational fields in which graduates can find employment. They should therefore

- a. be actively engaged in one of the areas listed in the program profile;
- b. have an interest in program development;
- c. have personnel responsibility or be involved in the selection of new hires;
- d. have experience with accreditation or internal quality assurance, if applicable.

## 4. Additional reviewers for specific fields of study

Article 4, Paragraph 2 of the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty provides that special regulations may apply to individual fields of study (e.g., artistic study programs at colleges of art and music, as well as study programs that teach the prerequisites for a teaching profession).

Furthermore, pursuant to Article 4, paragraph 3, sentence 1, item 7, accreditation procedures may be combined with procedures that determine the suitability of a study program for professional admission (e.g., state recognition in social or educational professions). In such cases, additional persons authorized by the competent bodies shall be involved in the procedures.

## **2.4 Composition of the expert group**

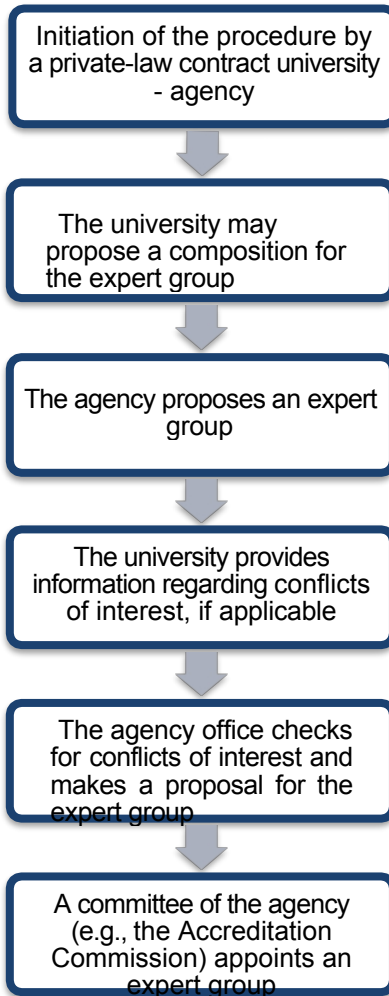
The composition of the review group does not depend solely on the degree program to be reviewed. The following should be taken into account

1. experience with the type of university at which the degree program is offered;
2. prior participation in accreditation procedures (experienced experts / newcomers);
3. a broad representation of the field;
4. compliance with conflict-of-interest rules (see 4.4);
5. diversity of the group (age, regional distribution, international representatives, gender, etc.);
6. complementing one another to round out the profile of the expert group.

The expert group includes representatives from academia, students, and the professional field. Representatives from academia must hold a majority of the votes. In the case of cluster accreditations, professional expertise for the various study programs must be ensured, if necessary, by expanding the expert group.

### 3. Expert groups in system accreditation

#### 3.1 Designation process for system accreditations



The Agency shall propose a review panel for the procedure, taking into account the criteria set out in the ESG and in 3.3 and 3.4, and including proposals from the university regarding the profile of the review panel.

The agency determines the composition of the expert group without further input from the university, subject to a review for potential conflicts of interest, which includes any indications from the university regarding the existence of such conflicts. The authority to select the experts rests solely with the agency and is ideally exercised by a committee (e.g., the Accreditation Commission) in which academics and scientists hold the majority of votes and in which all staff categories are represented.

The agencies' offices cannot verify all circumstances that may lead to a conflict of interest among the reviewers. Therefore, the appointed individuals themselves are obligated to inform the agency in the event of such a conflict and to withdraw from the procedure in question.

The universities may file a complaint or an appeal. If the differences of opinion between the agency and the university cannot be resolved, the Clearing House<sup>8</sup> shall be involved.

## **3.2 Task of the expert group**

Instead of assessing individual study programs, the system accreditation should examine whether the university's quality management system ensures that study programs meet the requirements in terms of subject content (cf. 2.) and formal requirements<sup>9</sup> and whether it is regularly verified that the study programs achieve the set goals and meet the needs of students and society.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See below, 7.

<sup>9</sup> "Formal criteria include study structure and duration, study program profiles, admission requirements and transitions between study programs, degrees and degree designations, modularization, mobility, and the credit point system, the equal status of Bachelor's and Master's study programs relative to the previous Diplom, Staatsexamen, and Magister study programs, and measures for the recognition of academic achievements in the event of a change of higher education institution or study program, as well as achievements obtained outside of higher education." Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty, Art. 2, Para. 2

<sup>10</sup> cf. ESG 1.9

### 3.3 Selection criteria for reviewers

All persons who participate in external quality assurance as experts perform this task on the basis of their professional and personal competence and not as representatives of organizations or interest groups, even if they have been proposed for the task by the latter. This independence is essential to ensure that procedures and decisions are based solely on expertise.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the requirements for experts in program accreditation, they should meet the criteria listed below.

#### 1. Academics

Representatives of academia must be able to assess whether the performance of internal quality management systems at universities is quality assured. Therefore, in addition to their professional and scientific competence, academics should

- a. have experience in the field of higher education governance and internal quality assurance, or
- b. have experience in the development, organization, implementation, and monitoring of study programs or
- c. have accreditation experience.

#### 2. Students

The student members of a peer expert group must be able to look beyond their own degree program and other individual degree programs to the quality management of the university as a whole.

They therefore need

- a. experience in academic self-governance or
- b. experience with internal university quality assurance procedures or
- c. accreditation experience.

#### 3. Representatives of professional practice

The representatives of professional practice evaluate the quality management of a higher education institution, on the one hand, from the perspective of the professional fields in which graduates can take up

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<sup>11</sup> cf. ESG 3.3

employment, and on the other hand from the perspective of people who are familiar with processes in companies. They should therefore

- a. have experience with quality management systems, including in business;
- b. be familiar with the labor market's expectations for graduates in various fields;
- c. preferably have leadership experience.

#### 4. Additional experts for specific fields of study

Article 4, paragraph 2, of the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty provides that special regulations may apply to individual fields of study (e.g., artistic study programs at colleges of art and music, as well as study programs that teach the requirements for a teaching profession). Furthermore, according to Art. 4 Para. 3 Sentence 1 No. 7, the accreditation procedures may be combined with procedures that determine the suitability of a study program for professional admission (e.g., state recognition in social or educational professions). In these cases, additional persons authorized by the competent bodies shall be involved in the procedures.

### **3.4 Composition of the expert group**

The composition and size of the expert group depend on the profile, size, range of subjects, and type of the university whose quality management system is under review. The following should be considered

1. experience with the type of university;
2. prior participation in accreditation procedures (experienced experts / newcomers);
3. a broad representation of academic disciplines;
4. compliance with conflict-of-interest rules (see 4.4);
5. diversity (age, regional distribution, gender, etc.);
6. complementing each other to round out the profile of the expert group.

Ideally, the group includes foreign peers or members with experience in international reviews.

Representatives from academia, students, and professional practice are represented in the expert group. The academic representatives must hold the majority of votes.

Additional experts may be involved in the review process in an advisory capacity.

## **4. Appointment of experts when using alternative accreditation procedures**

Several options are conceivable for these procedures under the Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty.

1. The university turns to an agency—as in the case of program or system accreditations—and entrusts the organization of the procedure to it. The selection of experts is then to be carried out in accordance with these guidelines, depending on whether the procedure focuses on study programs or quality management systems, as is the case for program or system accreditations. The expert group can be selected

- a) by the agency; or
- b) the Commission for Teaching and Learning of the German Rectors' Conference <sup>12</sup> .

2. The university decides to conduct the procedure under its own responsibility and to have a peer review panel appointed by the Commission for Teaching and Learning of the German Rectors' Conference. Even in such cases, the selection of experts is carried out in accordance with the principles of these guidelines, depending on whether the procedure focuses on study programs or quality management systems, as is the case for program or system accreditations. In these cases, the expert group must appoint a spokesperson who is responsible for submitting the report to the Accreditation Council and, if necessary, presenting an oral report.

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<sup>12</sup> see the appendix

## 5. Reasons for the appearance of a conflict of interest

All persons involved in accreditation procedures are obligated to ensure the greatest possible independence of the experts. This duty of care also extends to the experts themselves. Reasons for the appearance of a conflict of interest must be explained as soon as possible and, if necessary, a replacement for the expert must be found.

In principle, anyone who is employed by or enrolled at the university submitting the application for accreditation; who is employed by or enrolled at one of the universities involved in the study program in the case of cooperative study programs or joint degree programs; or who is considered biased according to customary academic standards is excluded from serving as an expert.<sup>13</sup>

Reasons for the appearance of bias in program accreditations may also include:

- Kinship or close personal connections to members of the faculty or department,
- a doctorate or habilitation at the faculty or department in question, retroactively for up to five years,
- activity at the relevant faculty or department, retroactively for up to five years,
- participation in application or appointment procedures, retroactively for up to five years,
- close academic cooperation with individuals at the relevant faculty or department, retroactively for up to five years,
- advisory role in the design of the study program,
- membership on the university council or on academic advisory boards of the university, retroactively for up to five years.

Reasons for the appearance of bias in system accreditations may also include:

- Kinship or close personal connections to members of the university,
- Doctorate or habilitation at the university, retroactive up to five years,

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<sup>13</sup> cf. Model Decree, § 25 para. 5

- activity at the university in question, retroactively for up to five years,
- participation in application or appointment procedures, retroactively for up to five years,
- close scientific cooperation with individuals at the university, retroactively for up to five years,
- advisory work in the design of the quality management system,
- membership on the university council or on academic advisory boards of the university, retroactively for up to five years.

## 6. Expert supervision and quality assurance

"To ensure the value and consistency of the experts' work,

- they are carefully selected;
- they possess the necessary skills and are qualified for their task;
- they receive appropriate training and/or preparation."<sup>14</sup>

In all procedures supervised by the agencies or the HRK, the agency or HRK is responsible for supervising the reviewers and ensuring their quality.

### 6.1 Preparation for the procedures

When conducting accreditation procedures, a number of requirements are placed on the experts. To meet these, careful preparation for the role within the review process is necessary. Systematic preparation for participation in expert groups includes

- General training on the regulations of the accreditation system (Interstate Agreement on Study Accreditation, Model Decree, criteria catalogs, etc.),
- preparation for the individual procedures,
- the regular exchange of experience among evaluators,

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<sup>14</sup> ESG 2.4

- training in distinguishing between technical-content criteria, which are to be assessed by the expert group, and organizational-structural criteria, the assessment of which is carried out by the agency, as well as, if applicable,
- training in the evaluation of quality management systems in higher education (processes, accountability structures, outcomes, feedback loops),
- training in conversation skills,
- the discussion of the role and responsibilities of expert groups.

## **6.2 Further development of the expert pool**

### **1. Feedback following the conclusion of the procedure**

The agencies obtain feedback from the universities after completion of the accreditation procedure. In the case of program accreditations, this can be done in the form of questionnaires; in the case of system accreditations, a discussion between representatives of the university or the agency is recommended. The results are incorporated into the agency's quality management.

If feedback from the universities refers to individual peer review experts, it is documented by the agency and, if the university agrees, passed on to the persons concerned. In the case of repeated negative feedback, the agency conducts a clarifying discussion with the peer review experts, which may also lead to a decision not to cooperate.

The systematic exchange between experienced and newly appointed members of review panels ensures the transfer of experiential knowledge within the review pool.

## 2. Expanding the pool of experts

To encourage additional scientists to participate in accreditation procedures beyond personal recommendations, the agency regularly contacts the state rectors' conferences, scientific societies, faculty organizations, as well as higher education networks in the fields of studies and teaching, and the Standing Commission for Teaching and Learning of the German Rectors' Conference. To expand and supplement its pool of experts, it maintains contact with relevant student networks (e.g., Student Accreditation Pool) and professional practice (e.g., social partners).

The agency verifies whether the proposed individuals meet the criteria for the selection of peer experts, contacts them, and systematically prepares them for participation in review groups (see 5.1).

# 7. Clearing house

" 2.7 Complaints and Appeals Standard:

When designing external quality assurance procedures, clearly defined complaints and appeals procedures are also established, and universities are informed about them."<sup>15</sup>

A clearing house for conflicts and complaints in all types of procedures should be located at the Accreditation Council. For this purpose, the Accreditation Council may also consult external scientific expertise.

The university has the right to challenge the decisions of the Accreditation Council<sup>16</sup>; in addition, the Model Decree grants the university a number of rights to information, a hearing, and the opportunity to comment before a decision is made.<sup>17</sup> However, discrepancies may arise during the course of the entire procedure (e.g., due to differing assessments

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<sup>15</sup> ESG 2.7

<sup>16</sup> cf. Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty Art. 3 Para. 8

<sup>17</sup> e.g., Model Decree §§ 22, 24, 25

regarding the suitability of experts, their appearance, or the conduct of interviews), which are not clearly covered by these rights and which must be handled professionally. A complaints procedure gives universities the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with the implementation of the procedure or the implementers.<sup>18</sup>

Since the Accreditation Council is not responsible for the operational implementation of the assessment procedures, the establishment of a clearing office is to be assigned to its purview.

Here, the development is to be monitored and evaluated as part of the planned evaluation of the overall system with regard to the necessity of establishing a clearing office.

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<sup>18</sup> cf. ESG 2.7, Guidelines

# Appendix

## **Supervision of procedures by the HRK (re 4., No. 2 above)**

The Interstate Study Accreditation Treaty allows for accreditation procedures to be supervised by the HRK, as was demanded in the recommendation of the HRK General Assembly.<sup>19</sup>

The HRK should be tasked with appointing expert groups exclusively for alternative accreditation procedures if a higher education institution wishes to carry out the alternative procedure without agency participation. For this purpose, the HRK should be provided with personnel resources, which should be scaled according to the development of the overall system.

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<sup>19</sup> See [the resolution of the 21st General Assembly of the HRK on November 8, 2016, in Mainz: Reorganization of the Accreditation System](#)