

Event Report:

“Three Actors, One Objective (?) – The Roles of Higher Education Institutions, Agencies, and the Accreditation Council in System Accreditation”

Joint event organized by ACQUIN e.V. and the Accreditation Council Foundation, March 7, 2024

The restructuring of the accreditation system also led to changes in the process of system accreditation. For universities, this process is now divided into two parts: an evaluation procedure conducted by the accreditation agency and an application procedure overseen by the Accreditation Council Foundation. It is not always clear how the different parts of the process are distinguished from one another and how the respective responsibilities of all three involved parties are structured in detail.

To provide a better understanding of this issue, ACQUIN e.V. and the Accreditation Council Foundation held March 7, 2024. Due to the rail strike, the event—originally planned as an in-person gathering at Leibniz University Hannover—had to be moved to an online format at short notice. Prof. Dr. Julia Gillen, Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of Hannover, and Prof. Dr.-Ing. Hans-Joachim Bargstädt, Chairman of the Board of the Accreditation Council Foundation, welcomed the participants. The event was moderated by Prof. Dr. Stefan Handke (HTW Dresden).

Presentation on the preparatory phase and review process

First, Dr. Alexander Rudolph, Executive Director of the accreditation agency ACQUIN, provided an overview of the three key phases of system accreditation and the key stakeholders involved in each phase. During the preparatory phase (1), the institution focuses on designing or adapting its internal quality management system, while the evaluation process (2) is coordinated by the agency. In the final application process (3), the Accreditation Council plays a central role.

Depending on whether it is an initial accreditation or a reaccreditation, higher education institutions face different tasks during the preparatory phase (1).

Preparing for an initial system accreditation usually begins with an analysis and a decision regarding the specific objectives and expectations that the institution or its individual stakeholders have for system accreditation. The internal system must then be designed and structurally implemented so that one or more pilot procedures can be carried out. In addition, the selection of an accreditation agency approved by the Accreditation Council must be made—usually as part of a bidding process.

In the case of system reaccreditation, an analysis is typically conducted to determine whether and to what extent the existing system aligns with current external requirements and whether any adjustments are necessary. Processes and structures may be modified or optimized; furthermore, degree programs that qualify for potential spot checks based on the guidelines can already be identified. And in this case as well, an agency must be selected and secured in a timely manner.

Following the preparatory phase and the selection of an agency, the evaluation process begins (2). This typically starts with coordination and joint planning of the process with the agency and focuses primarily on establishing a realistic timeline, as this phase can last up to 24 months. Various formats of kick-off meetings and informational events can be designed and conducted during this time. The institution and the agency determine the profile of the evaluation team and agree on any specific details of the process (such as third-party involvement, etc.).

This phase also includes the preparation of the self-evaluation report by the institution. In doing so, compliance with the relevant criteria for the internal quality management system for studies and teaching is documented accordingly. Additionally, further information relevant to the process may be useful, such as the institution's internal quality criteria or specific procedures that go beyond the MRVO.

These documents form the basis for two site visits, which serve the purposes of information gathering and in-depth evaluation, as well as for spot checks (consisting of a program sample, a criteria sample, and, if applicable, a regulatory sample). These may be conducted at intervals ranging from a few weeks to one year.

The results of the two evaluations and the spot checks are documented in the accreditation report, which serves as the basis for the application to the Accreditation Council. However, as with program accreditation, there is also the option in this case to undergo a quality improvement cycle prior to submitting the application in order to address any identified shortcomings before the application is submitted to the Accreditation Council.

Presentation of the Application Process

Ulf Schöne, a representative of the Accreditation Council Foundation, then provided an overview of the application process (3) following the evaluation process (2): Before submitting the application to the Accreditation Council, the institution should review the accreditation report prepared by the agency. This pertains, for example, to any misunderstandings in the description of the system and the question of whether references are made to the current documents governing the system and whether any corrective action cycle that may have been completed is clearly documented. It is also advisable to compare the decision recommendation in the accreditation report with the actual report section; for example, if observations can be derived from the expert group's presentation that were not included in the decision recommendation, the institution may address these in its statement to the Accreditation Council.

The statement, as part of the application documents, is optional. It can be used to make factual corrections, to assess the evaluation of the system in the accreditation report from the university's perspective, or to provide information on the measures already being implemented to address the issues identified by the review panel.

Since the application documents are read by a diverse audience, the Accreditation Council's office requests that they be made as accessible as possible, i.e., by creating a list of all attachments and verifying that the attached documents are up to date.

After the application is submitted via the Electronic Information and Application System (ELIAS), it is first reviewed by an officer, who then prepares a draft decision

prepared. This is first reviewed by the Secretariat before the application, along with the Secretariat's proposed decision, is forwarded to a member of the Accreditation Council, who reports on the application to the Accreditation Council at its meeting. The rapporteur may deviate from the Secretariat's proposed decision.

Taking into account the application documents, the proposed decision, and the report, the Accreditation Council then decides on the accreditation of the university's quality management system. The Accreditation Council may grant accreditation with or without conditions, reject the accreditation (negative decision), postpone consideration of the matter for the time being, or return the application to the institution for revision.

If the Accreditation Council deviates from the Agency's and the review panel's proposed decision—for example, by imposing additional conditions—the institution is given the opportunity to submit comments. During the subsequent comment period, the institution has four weeks to respond to the Accreditation Council's proposed decision. Like the application, the institution's response undergoes review and cross-review by the Secretariat as well as reporting by a member of the Accreditation Council. As a rule, at the subsequent meeting of the Accreditation Council, the application is reconsidered with special consideration given to the institution's response, and the Accreditation Council reaches its final decision.

If the decision includes conditions, the institution is typically given a period of twelve months to demonstrate that the identified deficiencies have been remedied. The process for fulfilling these conditions follows a similar pattern of review and reporting as the application process.

The institution receives notification of the Accreditation Council's decision via ELIAS. In addition to legal recourse, the institution may also initiate an appeal process.

Summary of the Initial Accreditation Session

Over 40 representatives from higher education institutions participated in the session on initial system accreditation. Since the participating institutions are at different stages—ranging from initial considerations to concrete procedural steps already taken—the session opened with a brief keynote presentation by speakers from the accreditation agency ACQUIN, Dr. Julia Menzel and Nina Soroka. In addition to the general information on the evaluation and application process, the following was discussed:

a. discussed the requirements and criteria of the MRVO relevant to initial system accreditation, as well as the potential opportunities and challenges for the universities.

Gerda Rösch from the Quality Management department at the University of Music in Würzburg, which was successfully accredited for the first time by the Accreditation Council in March 2023, then reported on the experiences of a university in system accreditation that had not previously conducted any external program accreditations. She outlined

, among other things, the decision-making process regarding institutional accreditation, the milestones in its development, and the implementation of the internal QMS. Particular attention was paid to the university's internal accreditation process. Finally, Ms. Rösch reported on the specific challenges faced by a small university with a distinctive academic profile and shared her recommendations ("tips") for the path to institutional accreditation.

During the subsequent discussion and exchange session, participants addressed the issue of decision-making as well as the potential implications of system accreditation with regard to organizational development, areas of authority and responsibility, and resources. In addition, the university representatives exchanged views on the various approaches to designing internal management and quality assurance systems in the area of teaching and academic programs. Of particular interest were the alternative forms of external subject-specific evaluation of degree programs and the planning of pilot procedures within the newly implemented internal QMS. Furthermore, questions regarding the continuous quality development of degree programs, documentation requirements, and internal communication within the university were addressed.

Summary of the Reaccreditation Session

Just under half of the participants attended the session on system reaccreditation. Dr. Sonja Kiko, Executive Director of the heiQUALITY Office at Heidelberg University—which was successfully system-reaccredited in 2020 under the new legislation—opened the session with a keynote address in which she identified commitment to one’s own system as a decisive factor in the reaccreditation process. This relationship can be observed on three levels: While the normative level focuses on knowledge of how to apply the criteria (“How well do we ‘master’ our study program accreditation regulations?”), the strategic level addresses the questions of which further developments should be pursued and with what degree of sustainability (“Which requirements do we ‘want’ or ‘do not want’?”). Furthermore, at the operational level, it must be clarified which deficiencies can or should be remedied in advance. In all of the areas mentioned, concrete practical descriptions of the university’s own experiences provided a vivid impression of which approaches proved effective and for what reasons.

The subsequent discussion and exchange session addressed, among other things, professionalization processes within the current system (“spreading a culture of quality throughout the university”). Another focus was on the different ways in which system-accredited universities handle external expertise with regard to their respective QM systems, with the coordination between internal and external evaluators also being addressed. Considerations regarding adjustments to procedures for re-re-system accreditations were discussed, as was the identification of internal benchmarks.

Summary of the panel discussion

The panel discussion that concluded the day was titled “How Can We Promote Acceptance of Our Own Quality Management System Within the University?” The following representatives from QM departments and university administrations of system-accredited universities, invited for their expertise, participated: Dr. Anne-Dörte Balks (Head of the ZQS/Quality Assurance Team, Leibniz University Hannover), Prof. Dr. Anja Geigenmüller (Vice President for Academic Affairs, Technical University of Ilmenau), Anne Sedlmayer (Quality Management Office, Free University of Berlin), Andrea Voigt (Head of Central Quality Management, Schmalkalden University of Applied Sciences), and Susanne Zemene (Head of Department 3: Studies and Teaching, University of Hamburg).

Here, they primarily discussed the question of how to motivate one’s own institution regarding the topic of quality management and what challenges must be overcome in the process.

There was broad agreement among the panelists that a well-functioning system helps maintain acceptance among all members of the university community. If one succeeds in making the value of quality-assuring measures in the area of teaching tangible for each and every individual—e.g., through optimized processes and improved communication—this experience of effectiveness fosters approval and contributes to successful system (re)accreditation.

However, the participants in the discussion had differing views on how “strict” quality management should be allowed to be. Here, the spectrum ranged from a clear demand for consequences—even uncomfortable ones—that are usually part of larger change processes, to a strategy of creating opportunities for dialogue and promoting QM as a contribution to the success of good teaching.

Overall, according to the final assessment by the university representatives, the goal is to establish a culture of continuous feedback in order to keep quality at the forefront of attention. While the Accreditation Council and the agencies can create a framework within which universities can develop and provide support through transparency and guidance, each university must independently explore its own scope for action and actively engage in quality development.