



Accreditation in the European Higher Education Area

In preparation for the Conference of European Ministers for Education in Bergen, 2005

Executive summary

The European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) was founded by twelve accreditation organisations from eight countries to help realise the European Higher Education Area, by means of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. Mutual recognition of these decisions should lead to a greater mobility of students and staff; should inform the labour market on the values of degrees; and, should contribute to the recognition of higher education credits and degrees.

The European Ministers for Education can contribute to these goals by creating the conditions under which mutual recognition of accreditation decisions can be realised. Therefore, the European Ministers should call upon the Bologna signatory states to recognise accreditation decisions which are based on shared guidelines, practices and standards for accreditation organisations; to implement accreditation decisions in national recognition procedures; and, to apply the practice of accreditation to both public and private programmes and institutions of higher education.

ECA calls upon the European accreditation organisations to act independently, according to the Code of Good Practice; to publish accreditation decisions in a standardised format; and, to look for ways to keep the costs and the administrative burdens of accreditation as low as possible.

Table of Contents

Executive summary	1
1. Introduction	3
2. Significance of Accreditation in Europe	3
3. Definition, Specific Features, and Purpose of Accreditation	3
4. Transnational Recognition of Accreditation Decisions	4
4.1 Code of Good Practice	4
4.2 Qualification frameworks and shared quality criteria and descriptors	5
4.3 Publication Format	5
4.4 Selection Criteria for External Experts	5
4.5 Other forms of mutual cooperation between accreditation organisations	6
5. Political requests	6
Literature	7
Annex Code of Good Practice	

1. Introduction

This report was compiled in the context of the forthcoming meeting of European Ministers for Education in Bergen in 2005. It is designed to introduce the shared views of twelve accreditation organisations in Europe to the Bologna Follow-up Group. The purpose of the report is to define accreditation and to explain its usefulness and significance with regard to the development and implementation of the European Higher Education Area. Furthermore, it considers the latest developments in the field of accreditation and describes the current state of coordination efforts among individual accreditation organisations. Finally, it contains some political requests for the future use of accreditation in Europe.

2. Significance of Accreditation in Europe

The Berlin Declaration of 19 September, 2003 reads as follows: "The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area." Ministers "commit themselves to supporting further the continued development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level". They also stress that, "consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself", and emphasise that "this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework."

Considering the individual responsibility of the institutions of higher education on the one hand, and the responsibility of the overall national quality assurance systems on the other hand, the Berlin Declaration of 19 September, 2003 lists both evaluation and accreditation as important tools for quality assurance. It has been agreed "that by 2005, national quality assurance systems should include the following: (...)

- Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results,
- A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures (...)"

These political concepts have been largely implemented to date: practically all countries in Europe have established national quality assurance systems in the domain of higher education, and accreditation procedures have become an important method for external quality assurance (1).

Since accreditation decisions facilitate international recognition of study programmes and degrees, and since accreditation results have become increasingly important for regulating trans-border education and global trade of educational services, it can be expected that accreditation will become even more significant in the future.

3. Definition, Specific Features, and Purpose of Accreditation

The terminology of external quality assurance is anything but unified. Terms like external evaluation, review, audit and accreditation are being used at random. In the international debate on quality assurance, accreditation is increasingly defined as every formalised decision by an appropriately recognised authority as to whether an institution of higher education or a programme conforms to certain

standards. The European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) defines accreditation as “a formal and independent decision, indicating that an institution of higher education and/or programmes offered meet certain standards.” This definition also covers some quality assessments that are described as “accreditation like procedures” (2).

Accreditation is achieved through a multi-step process (self-evaluation/documentation submitted by the unit undergoing accreditation; external assessment by independent experts; the accreditation decision). The accreditation decision depends upon a quality assessment based on internationally accepted quality standards. The final decision of the accreditation procedure itself is authoritative in nature, has been determined by an external process, and results in a “yes” or “no” judgment with a limited validity.

Accreditation procedures contribute to the continued quality development of the accredited academic unit: Institutions receive advice about quality improvement throughout the accreditation process, which may extend beyond the “yes/no” decision itself.

The present concept of accreditation in the area of higher education serves to assure and develop quality: it can focus on institutions, constituent parts thereof, and study programmes, in order to:

- ensure or facilitate recognition of “credits” and university degrees in an academic context, such as, for example, when changing from one institution of higher education to another, in order to promote mobility,
- inform current and prospective students on the value of certain study programmes (consumer protection),
- allow employers to check the value and status of qualifications,
- give institutions of higher education the opportunity to demonstrate appropriate allocation and use of public funds.

4. Transnational Recognition of Accreditation Decisions

In order to facilitate international acceptance of academic institutions, degrees and studies, it will be necessary that future accreditation decisions in one country will also be recognised in another country. This goal is being realised by regional alliances as well as by the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA), which was founded on a pan-European level in November 2003. Twelve founding members have signed an ad-hoc cooperation agreement which seeks to achieve “mutual recognition of accreditation decisions within member states” no later than 2007. A first step towards this goal is to draft common guidelines (Code of good practice/Annex 1) and criteria for accreditation. This section of the document provides an up to date description of accreditation in Europe.

4.1 Code of Good Practice

Members of the ECA network have already agreed on a joint “Code of good practice”. This “Code of good practice” guarantees comparability of accreditation procedures throughout Europe and defines the internal quality assurance measures of accreditation organisations. The Code contains a series of normative standards with correlating questions and points of reference. Relying on concrete evidence, the latter will illustrate to what extent pre-defined standards should be

implemented by the various accreditation organisations. All members of the ECA network must fulfil these requirements and will have to review their procedures regularly against this code. External evaluation of the accreditation organisations is necessary and will guarantee that they fulfil the requirements of the “Code of good practice”.

4.2 Qualification frameworks and shared quality criteria and descriptors

Transnational recognition of accreditation decisions should be based upon Europe-wide consensus with regard to generic quality criteria for awarding degrees. ECA agrees that common descriptors such as the “Dublin descriptors” as worked out by the “Joint Quality Initiative” provide a basis for distinguishing between the various Bologna degrees (3).. They must be calibrated with efforts to draw up national and European “qualification frameworks”.

Apart from output-oriented quality criteria for completed studies as described above, European accreditation organisations have also agreed a series of input and process oriented quality criteria for higher education institutions and their programmes. These are being examined through the various accreditation processes (e.g. objectives of study programmes, design of curricula, student workload, quality of teaching staff, didactic principles, mission statement of institutions, internal quality mechanisms, infrastructure, etc.).

Although the development of shared quality criteria and descriptors is an important element in the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions, such a process of standardisation must respect national cultures and should not hinder diversity in higher education.

4.3 Publication Format

ECA members are currently working on a standardised format for the publication of accreditation results. It serves to enhance the transparency of the quality of study programmes or institutions.

International transparency of accreditation decisions also helps build a better understanding of international quality standards in higher education as well as comparability of university degrees and other qualifications. Furthermore, it allows implementation of one of the Bologna objectives – i.e. easily readable diplomas which would facilitate the mobility of students.

4.4 Selection Criteria for External Experts

The selection of external experts is of key importance for any quality-oriented accreditation procedure. The transnational recognition of accreditation decisions is closely linked to the implementation of accepted selection criteria and procedures involving external experts. The ECA members agreed on the following principles:

- Any decision regarding the composition of the expert team is to be based on the rules and regulations of the accreditation organisation or on pertinent legislation; the selection process must be fully transparent.
- Institutions or other units undergoing accreditation are given the opportunity to object to the selection of experts.
- The accreditation decisions are not made by the group of experts themselves, but by the accreditation organisation.

- Experts must be independent and in a position to make unbiased judgments.
- Depending on the objectives of the accreditation procedure, expert teams should bring together the relevant expertise.

4.5 Other forms of mutual cooperation between accreditation organisations

A survey of the legal frameworks in all ECA member countries and its implications for mutual recognition of accreditation decisions has been carried out. Based on these results all ECA members are now establishing a “road map” that will outline the steps necessary to achieve ECA goals.

In order to enhance trust among the accreditation organisations, many ECA members have commenced “practice oriented cooperation projects”. These include mutual participation in each others accreditation procedures; exchange of external experts; a shared review of accreditation proposals; and, standardised platforms for exchange of information.

Finally a working group of ECA is analysing, discussing and looking for different approaches to accreditation (e.g. programme versus institutional accreditation). This involves discussing new developments in higher education/quality assurance and searching for possible innovations in accreditation.

5. Political requests

Aiming at:

- Facilitating Europe-wide recognition of “credits” and university degrees
- Promoting mobility of students and teaching staff
- Informing the labour market on the value of degrees
- Providing mechanisms to ensure that higher education institutions are accountable for the effective use of public funds.
- Protecting consumers against false information and low-quality university degrees and other qualifications.

The ECA members call upon the European Ministers for Education to decide on the following in the Meeting of Bergen 2005:

1. Governments of Bologna signatory states should recognise the accreditation decisions in all member states where an underlying agreement on common guidelines, practices and standards exists between the accreditation organisations.

2. In accordance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary texts (4), accreditation decisions should be incorporated into the national recognition procedures of degrees and qualifications in the domain of higher education.

3. Accreditation should be an essential part of the recognition of private higher education institutions and of their programmes. It should be equally essential for mainly privately financed programmes of public higher education institutions.

4. Accreditation organisations should extend their activities both to public as well as to private post-secondary educational institutions/programmes. They should be flexible and willing to adapt their procedures to new developments in academic teaching (e.g. accreditation of study programmes offered in the area of distance learning/E-learning).

The members of ECA call upon the European accreditation organisations to respect the following issues:

1. Accreditation organisations must be independent from government, from higher education institutions as well as from business, industry and professional associations.
2. With respect to the variety of European higher education systems and traditions, accreditation processes and policies in the European Higher Education Area should be governed by a “Code of good practice” which should be binding for all accreditation organisations in Europe. The Code shall establish basic guidelines for accreditation procedures and list quality assurance measures for accreditation organisations.
3. Accreditation decisions should be published in a standardised format within Europe. This publication should provide all stakeholders with the relevant information about the quality of the unit or programme undergoing accreditation.
4. The cost of accreditation and bureaucracy associated with the process should not unduly burden the unit being accredited or outweigh the advantages of accreditation.

Literature

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Code of Good Practice for the Members of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA)

Introduction

Based on Article 4 of the Agreement of Cooperation of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education and taking into consideration the conclusions of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin (2003) regarding Quality Assurance:

- The European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) agrees on a common Code of Good Practice (Code).
- The member organisations of the ECA commit themselves to sign and implement the 17 standards of the Code. These 17 standards should be implemented before the end of 2006.
- New member organisations are obliged to sign the Code upon membership and implement all standards of the Code before the end of 2006.
- In 2007, a panel of independent experts will carry out an external evaluation of all member organisations to establish whether all the standards of the Code are met.

ECA Code of Good Practice: the Standards

The accreditation organisation:

1. Has an explicit mission statement.
2. Is recognised as a national accreditation body by the competent public authorities.
3. Must be sufficiently independent from government, from higher education institutions as well as from business, industry and professional associations.
4. Must be rigorous, fair and consistent in decision-making.
5. Has adequate and credible resources, both human and financial.
6. Has its own internal quality assurance system that emphasises its quality improvement.
7. Has to be evaluated externally on a cyclical basis.
8. Can demonstrate public accountability, has public and officially available policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria.
9. Informs the public in an appropriate way about accreditation decisions.
10. A method for appeal against its decisions is provided.
11. Collaborates with other national, international and/or professional accreditation organisations.

The accreditation procedures:

12. Accreditation procedures and methods must be defined by the accreditation organisation itself.
13. Must be undertaken at institutional and/or programme level on a regular basis.
14. Must include self-documentation/-evaluation by the higher education institution and external review (as a rule on site).
15. Must guarantee the independence and competence of the external panels or teams.
16. Must be geared at enhancement of quality.

The accreditation standards:

17. Must be made public and be compatible with European practices taking into account the development of agreed sets of quality standards.



Signatures

The following ECA member organisations commit themselves to implement the 17 standards of this Code of Good Practice before the end of 2006:

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Detlev Kran
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Kurt Sohm
Fachhochschulrat, Austria

Francisco Marcellán
Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad
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Karena Maguire
the Higher Education and Training Awards
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Zurich, 3rd December 2004

Annotations

The Code of Good Practice guarantees comparability of accreditation procedures throughout Europe and defines internal quality assurance measures of accreditation organisations. The Code contains a series of normative standards with correlating questions and points of reference. Relying on concrete evidence, the reference points will illustrate how the pre-defined standards can be met by the various accreditation organisations. Documents of the accreditation organisation, e.g. a mission statement and strategic plan with regard to standard 1, can serve to provide evidence.

The 17 standards are binding for ECA members and should all be met. The reference points serve as possible illustrations of the standards and should not be used as a check list.

External evaluation of the accreditation organisations is necessary and will guarantee that ECA members fulfill the standards of the Code of Good Practice.

Specifically, the Code fulfils the following purposes:

- The Code provides transparency for politicians, the governments and other stakeholder groups in higher education.
- The Code guarantees reliability of the accreditation procedure for higher education institutions.
- The Code defines necessary requirements for accreditation organisations. All members of the ECA must fulfill these requirements and should review their procedures regularly against this code.
- The Code serves as a yardstick for external evaluations of all members of the consortium.
- The Code serves to support the internal quality assurance policies of an accreditation organisation and provides suggestions for the continuous improvement of its quality.
- The Code shall not lead to predominance of one single point of view, but should instead promote good practices and prevent bad quality.
- The Code should be updated when necessary to conform to the international state of the art of good practices.

The accreditation organisation:

<i>Standard</i>	1. Has an explicit mission statement
<i>Question</i>	<i>What is the organisation's mission statement?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation has an explicit mission statement or a set of objectives • The mission statement is coherent in scope and content and is revised on a cyclical basis • The mission statement is communicated publicly • The statement makes clear that accreditation is a major activity of the accreditation organisation • The accreditation organisation has a strategic plan enabling it to implement its mission statement

<i>Standard</i>	2. Is recognised as a national accreditation body by the competent public authorities
<i>Question</i>	<i>What are the official status and the legal basis of the accreditation organisation?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation has been established by law as a corporate body or is based on agreements of national authorities • Accreditation is regulated in the relevant legislation/rules

<i>Standard</i>	3. Must be sufficiently independent from government, from higher education institutions as well as from business, industry and professional associations
<i>Question</i>	<i>How does the accreditation organisation demonstrate its independency?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation is carrying out its operations independently (setting up of accreditation framework, carrying out accreditation procedures, etc.) • Independency of the decision making process is guaranteed; there is evidence that no party has unjustified influence on the outcome of the decision.

<i>Standard</i>	4. Must be rigorous, fair and consistent in decision-making
<i>Questions</i>	<i>How are decisions taken within the accreditation organisation?</i> <i>How are decisions on assessments taken and how are they communicated?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rules leading to the accreditation decision are transparent and warrant equal treatment • Decisions on accreditation must be based on predefined quality standards and have to be comprehensible

<i>Standard</i>	5. Has adequate and credible resources, both human and financial
<i>Question</i>	<i>What are the financial and human resources of the accreditation organisation: actual situation and perspectives?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation has adequate human and financial resources to achieve its objectives and fulfil its mission in a effective and efficient manner • There is sufficient evidence for a secured midterm financing of the organisation • Human resources development for its staff is provided

<i>Standard</i>	6. Has its own internal quality assurance system that emphasises its quality improvement
<i>Questions</i>	<i>Which quality assurance mechanisms does the accreditation organisation routinely use?</i>
	<i>Are the organisation's procedures being evaluated (on process and effect)?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation has a functioning system for assuring and improving quality which is embedded in the organisation's overall strategy • Quality assurance covers all operations of the accreditation organisation • Responsibilities for quality assurance are defined and documented • The quality policy of the accreditation organisation is published, including the organisation's goals, processes and methods • The accreditation organisation has internal feedback mechanisms that include procedures for reflections and subsequently revision of processes and methods • The accreditation organisation has mechanisms that provide feedback from expert panels and external stakeholders (e.g. institutions/programmes that have been accredited); results of such feedback are used for improvements • Process and effect of accreditation are systematically reviewed by the accreditation organisation; the results are used for quality enhancement

<i>Standard</i>	7. Has to be evaluated externally on a cyclical basis
<i>Question</i>	<i>How and how often is the accreditation organisation evaluated externally?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External evaluations of the accreditation organisation have to be carried out • These external evaluation committees control if the code of good practice is fulfilled by the accreditation organisation • The results of the external assessment must be made public

<i>Standard</i>	8. Can demonstrate public accountability, has public and officially available policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria
<i>Questions</i>	<i>How does the accreditation organisation include the public in its activities?</i>
	<i>How is the public informed?</i>
	<i>How are the higher education institutions informed?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about the accreditation organisation's policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria are publicly available • The information must be up-to-date • The accreditation organisation's public accountability is demonstrated by reporting regularly on the outcomes and the effects of accreditation procedures and related activities • The accreditation organisation provides higher education institutions with a clear documentation about the accreditation framework and the accreditation procedures (guidelines for self-evaluation, external evaluation)

<i>Standard</i>	9. Informs the public in an appropriate way about accreditation decisions
<i>Questions</i>	<i>How is the public informed about accreditation decisions?</i>
	<i>Do legal requirements or other documents regulate the publication of reports?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The outcome of the accreditation must be made public • The format of publication refers to standardised European templates • Expert reports and the reports of the accreditation organisation must be published according to national regulations

<i>Standard</i>	10. A method for appeal against its decisions is provided
<i>Question</i>	<i>What is the accreditation organisation's method for appeal?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a possibility to appeal against accreditation decisions • Procedures of appeal are specified • Equal and fair treatment of all applicants is guaranteed

<i>Standard</i>	11. Collaborates with other national, international and/or professional accreditation organisations
<i>Question</i>	<i>With which European networks or agencies in the field of quality assurance and accreditation does the accreditation organisation collaborate on a regular basis?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation collaborates actively with other national/professional accreditation organisations • The accreditation organisation acts conformly with overarching European frameworks in the field of quality assurance/accreditation

The accreditation procedures:

<i>Standard</i>	12. Accreditation procedures and methods must be defined by the accreditation organisation itself
<i>Question</i>	<i>Is the accreditation organisation independent in defining its terms of procedures?</i>
<i>Reference point</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processes and methods of accreditation are in the responsibility of the accreditation organisation and are not defined by other bodies

<i>Standard</i>	13. Must be undertaken at institutional and/or programme level on a regular basis
<i>Questions</i>	<i>Is the accreditation organisation active in programme or institutional accreditation?</i> <i>Which are the regulations for reaccreditation?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The accreditation organisation has regular accreditation activities at institutional and/or programme level Reaccreditation and validity of accreditation decisions are regulated

<i>Standard</i>	14. Must include self-documentation/-evaluation by the higher education institution and external review (as a rule on site)
<i>Question</i>	<i>How is the accreditation procedure structured?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-documentation/-evaluation and external review are part of the accreditation procedure External reviews encompass on site visits at the higher education institutions The external review team is instructed clearly about its tasks The accreditation organisation provides specific regulations in case of ex ante-accreditations

<i>Standard</i>	15. Must guarantee the independence and competence of the external panels or teams
<i>Question</i>	<i>How is the independence of external panels guaranteed?</i> <i>Are selection criteria for expert panels set up?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Selection criteria for external panels/expert committees are set up and published by the accreditation organisation. Selection criteria assure competence and independence of external experts Independence of the experts is assured by a written statement The decision about the composition of the expert team is made by the accreditation organisation in a transparent way

<i>Standard</i>	16. Must be geared at enhancement of quality
<i>Question</i>	<i>Which elements and mechanisms within the accreditation process are used to enhance quality at the higher education institution?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation process contains elements that promote quality development and improvement of the higher education institution • The accreditation process should respect autonomy, identity and integrity of the higher education institutions

The accreditation standards:

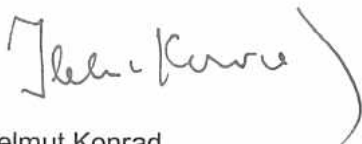
<i>Standard</i>	17. Must be made public and comply with European practices taking into account the development of agreed sets of quality standards
<i>Questions</i>	<i>Which are the quality standards and criteria used for accreditation procedures?</i>
	<i>Do they meet international standards?</i>
<i>Reference points</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality standards and criteria used in the accreditation procedures correspond to European good practices • The quality standards and criteria are made public • The process of formulation of the quality standards and criteria is transparent and involves all important stakeholders

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Signatures

The following ECA member organisations commit themselves to implement the 17 standards of this Code of Good Practice before the end of 2006:



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Zurich, 3rd December 2004