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Accreditation procedures as a factor of quality assurance of higher education in Germany

Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the accreditation procedures launched in higher education system in Germany during current period, and accents that accreditation procedures are significant factor in ensuring the quality of higher education in Germany at present time. The article considers that the term "accreditation" means the formal recognition of an educational program or institution of higher education by an authorized external body on the basis of an established procedure. The article reveals that in Germany, the accreditation system is organized on the principle of decentralization. It also reveals that in current period there are four types of accreditations in Germany, namely program accreditation, cluster accreditation, institutional accreditation, and system accreditation.

The article discusses that accreditation system in Germany has three levels, namely the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of Federal Lands of Germany, the Accreditation Council, the Accreditation agencies. It is shown that the Accreditation Council assumes its overall responsibility for the accreditation system by ensuring the consistency and coherence of its accreditation decisions, supporting the states in the further development of the German quality management system, promoting international cooperation in the field of accreditation and quality assurance, and contributing to the realization of a common European Higher Education Area. It is also shown that the Accreditation Council of Germany recognizes ten agencies including eight from Germany, one from Austria, and one from Switzerland. Accreditation agencies are independent, they develop educational standards, criteria and procedures used by independent experts. It has been proven that accreditation agencies, which have already received permission from the Accreditation Council to carry out their activities, conduct accreditation of educational programs and internal quality assurance systems in universities.

Special emphasis in the article is done on the analysis of accreditation agencies registered in Germany, namely ACQUIN, AHPGS, AKAST, AQAS, ASIIN, EVALAG, FIBAA, ZEvA. The article highlights that the main purpose of quality assurance agencies is to help to create high-quality educational programs in various fields, rather than meticulous bureaucratic procedures as well as that accreditation itself is less controlling in nature, and more focused on development of entire university.

Key words: accreditation procedures, accreditation council, accreditation agency, program accreditation, institutional accreditation, higher education system in Germany.

Global higher education is undergoing radical changes in current conditions of international integration and the rapid development of information technology. Due to this, the processes of modernization of higher education require improving the quality of educational services. Quality assessment system of German higher education institutions was formed within the framework of Bologna when a system of accreditation and quality assurance was introduced. Ensuring the quality of higher education in Germany is one of the fastest growing areas, and accreditation as part of it, plays a significant role in improvement of quality assurance measures at both the institutional and national levels.

Issue of current accreditation activities of the system of higher education within European Higher Education Area investigate B. Kehm[1], M. Fortes[2], N. Ponomarenko[3], M. Pevzner[4], M. Mykhailichenko[5], N. Vasylkova[6], and others.

The *aim of this article* is to analyze the accreditation procedures launched in higher education system in Germany during current period which serves as a factor of its quality assurance.

The *term "accreditation"* means the formal recognition of a particular educational program or institution of higher education by an authorized external body on the basis of an established procedure. Accreditation states the fact of compliance with the minimum standards and requirements at the moment.

Let's highlight the main goals of accreditation: (i) to give to higher education institutions or educational programs a certain status; (ii) to reflect the recognition of assigned degrees by third parties.

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1 B. Kehm, *Germany. The Quest for World-Class Universities*, "International Higher Education" 2015, March, p. 18–20.

2 M. Fortes, B Kehm, T. Mayekiso, *Evaluation and Quality Management in Europe, Mexico, and South Africa*, in: *Globalization and Its Impacts on the Quality of PhD Educatio*n, eds. M. Nerad, B. Evans, Rotterdam 2014, p. 81–109.

3 N. Ponomarenko, *Expert activity in higher education in Germany*, "Continuing professional education: theory and practice" 2015, № 4 (45), p. 60–63 [in Ukrainian].

4 *Management and organizational development of higher education* ed. M.N. Pevzner, Dnepropetrovsk 2012, 528 p. [in Russian].

5 M. Mykhailichenko, L. Makodzei, *Expert activity in higher education: approaches and criteria*, "Humanitarian Bulletin" 2014, № 34, p. 269–280 [in Ukrainian].

6 N. Vasylkova, *Accreditation system in higher education in Germany*. [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/43282137.pdf [in Ukrainian].

In Germany, the accreditation system was formed over many years, and the process of its formation was completed only in 2008. It is organized on the principle of decentralization and includes the following types of accreditations:

1) accreditation of educational programs;
2) institutional accreditation (accreditation of internal quality systems).

Besides, in Germany there are four types of accreditations: program accreditation, cluster accreditation, institutional accreditation, and system accreditation[7].

Program accreditation is an individual examination of a separate course / educational program implemented by higher education institution, including program planning, teaching qualifications, equipment, compliance with labor market conditions, gender issues, etc. The main areas for program evaluation are goals and objectives, concept, implementation of the program and improving the quality of its implementation.

Since 2005, in addition to program accreditation, *cluster accreditation* has been implemented in German higher education institutions, when more than two educational programs undergo the accreditation procedure at the same time. Of course, this is the accreditation of programs of the same profile and programs that belong to the same area. It is due to the reduction of costs for this procedure and the optimization of all processes.

Institutional accreditation is an accreditation of a higher education institution in general, when the objects of expertise are its mission, goals, and objectives; process planning and efficiency; leadership and management; educational programs; teaching efficiency; students; financial, logistical, library and information resources.

The object of *system accreditation* is the internal system of quality assurance of a higher education institution.

The accreditation procedures assess the availability of positions in a higher education institution that provide, control, and improve the quality of educational programs of this institution. These positions include organization and coordination of the educational process, student support service (technical and professional issues), reporting system and data collection, management responsibility, the availability of a documented system in a higher education institution, the implementation of joint degree programs.

There are *three-level accreditation system* in Germany[8]:

1. *German Rectors' Conference* and the *Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of Federal Lands of Germany* makes major decisions concerning requirements for the structure of the education system for all the lands of Germany.

[7] N. Ponomarenko, op. cit., p. 60–63.

[8] N. Vasylkova, op. cit.

2. The *Accreditation Council*[9]*,* established in 1999, coordinates the procedures of quality assurance system through the certification of accreditation agencies, as well as the definition of requirements for the structure and further development of the quality assurance system. In legal form it is the Public Law Foundation. The Accreditation Council was given the task of deciding on the accreditation of study programmes (programme accreditation) and the accreditation of quality management systems (system accreditation) based on experts' reports. The Accreditation Council assumes its overall responsibility for the accreditation system by ensuring the consistency and coherence of its accreditation decisions, supporting the states in the further development of the German quality management system, promoting international cooperation in the field of accreditation and quality assurance, and thus contributing to the realization of a common European Higher Education Area.

The German Accreditation Council is committed to academic freedom and autonomy of higher education institutions and sees the primary responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning at higher education institutions. It understands accreditation as a regular, external quality assurance process, which is carried out as a scientifically guided procedure with peer review and the participation of the relevant stakeholders.

The Accreditation Council is responsible for the following aspects: (i) definition of criteria, process, and rules of decision-making (for authorization of accreditation agencies); (ii) definition of criteria, process, and rules of decision-making (for accreditation of educational programs); (iii) definition of criteria, process, and rules of decision-making (for accreditation of internal quality systems); (iv) summary of common and specific accreditation requirements for different German lands; (v) formulation of agreements governing the rights and obligations of the Accreditation Council and independent accreditation agencies.

3. *Accreditation agencies* conduct accreditation and develop their own instructions, approaches and criteria catalogs based on the decisions of the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of Federal Lands of Germany and the Accreditation Council. The Accreditation Council of Germany recognizes ten agencies including 8 from Germany, 1 from Austria, and 1 from Switzerland. Accreditation agencies are independent, they develop educational standards, criteria and procedures used by independent experts. Accreditation agencies, which have already received permission from the Accreditation Council to carry out their activities, conduct accreditation of educational programs and internal quality assurance systems in universities.

[9] German Accreditation Council [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: https://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/en/welcome-german-accreditation-council

There are 8 accreditation agencies registered in Germany. These are ACQUIN, AHPGS, AKAST, AQAS, ASIIN, EVALAG, FIBAA, ZEvA[10]. Some of them are specialized, they accredit programs of only one profile, such as engineering or medical. Others are regional, they can accredit any announced programs. Accreditation procedures used by German accreditation agencies are fully in line with European standards.

The activities of accreditation agencies in Germany are regulated by national documents: recommendations developed by a group of ministers in education and land culture (regional education authorities); criteria established by the Accreditation Council.

We will consider the features and aspects of the activities of accreditation agencies in Germany.

ACQUIN – the *Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute* – is a registered association with recognized non-profit status. Its members include more than 150 higher education institutions in Germany and abroad. ACQUIN's goal is to carry out nationwide and cross-university accreditations of bachelor's and master's degree programmes in all disciplines to ensure a high quality of degree programmes, to create market transparency, to increase the attractiveness of HEIs for foreign students and to contribute to ensure the comparability of the quality of higher education qualifications.

ACQUIN was founded in 2001 and accredited by resolution of the Accreditation Council. In accordance with the mission statement of ACQUIN, the promotion and further development of quality assurance at higher education institutions is not seen as a nationally limited task, but as a global project. In line with the idea of Bologna, ACQUIN contributes to the implementation of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area and other world regions.

ACQUIN engaged in international institutional accreditation, international programme accreditation, and international certification procedure. ACQUIN is free from state influence and independent in the spirit of academic standards and traditions. ACQUIN's accreditation procedures comply with the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area"[11].

AHPGS – *Accreditation Agency in Health and Social Sciences* – is the accreditation agency in the field of health and social affairs. It promotes the quality and transparency of universities and their study programs through accreditation procedures in Germany and abroad. AHPGS is accredited by the German Accreditation Council. In 2016, the Swiss Accreditation Council authorized AHPGS to conduct procedures of programme accreditation and institutional accreditation in Switzerland according to Swiss law ("Higher Education Act, HEdA"). Since

[10] Ibid.

[11] ACQUIN. The Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: https://www.acquin.org/en/

2015, AHPGS has been entitled to carry out audits at universities and colleges in Austria in accordance with § 22 (2) of the Austrian Quality Assurance Act.

It is an interdisciplinary and multi-professional organization whose main task is to provide bachelor's and master's degrees (program accreditation) and the internal control and quality assurance systems (system accreditation) at universities, technical colleges, and accredit universities of music and dual universities. The AHPGS works across all university types and subjects with special competencies in the field of health and social sciences[12].

AKAST – *Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Canonical Programmes of Studies* in Germany – operates primarily conduct of peer-review procedures of canonical study programmes. AKAST was first accredited as an accreditation agency in 2008 and entitled to accredit canonical study programmes and to award them the quality seal of the Accreditation Council. The agency dedicates subject specific promotion of university didactic and information exchange about current developments in the field of higher education. The freedom to develop a profile in research and teaching is of fundamental importance for the work of AKAST. The agency engaged in programme accreditation and institutional evaluation. The Accreditation Council authorizes AKAST in Germany until 31 December 2023. AKAST works with the Accreditation Council on the one hand and the Holy See on the other hand[13].

AQAS – *Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes* – is an agency for quality assurance in the higher education area. AQAS is accredited by the German Accreditation Council and authorized to award its seal to German study programmes and institutions. The agency carries out accreditation procedures for program accreditation in all disciplines provided by higher education institutions and for system accreditation. AQAS has wide experience in the accreditation of joint and double degree programmes.

AQAS attaches particular importance to supporting and accompanying the universities in all procedural steps. Before signing a contract, the agency offers a free, non-binding initial consultation in its Cologne office. The agency agrees with the universities on a proposal for the professional profile of the expert group and prepare the experts for the on-site visit. In the run-up to the on-site visit, the agency sends preliminary reports from the experts so that the university can prepare for the discussion during the on-site visit. Each AQAS inspection ends with feedback from the expert group. Based on this summary of the results, the agency gives the opportunity to eliminate any deficiencies identified in the assessment process.

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[12] AHPGS. Accreditation Agency in Health and Social Sciences [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: https://ahpgs.de/

[13] AKAST. Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Canonical Programmes of Studies in Germany. [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: https://www.akast.info/?lang=en

AQAS is a non-profit association founded by universities in Germany in 2002, which is approved in Germany and in Europe to carry out external assessment procedures for universities. Members of the association are currently 92 national and international universities and technical colleges[14].

ASIIN – *the Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Engineering, Informatics, Natural Sciences and Mathematics* – is a non-profit association founded in July 1999. Since then, it has provided expert support to German and international universities in the implementation of accreditation procedures on the programme and institutional level. It is a leader nationally and internationally in the accreditation of programmes in engineering, the natural sciences, mathematics, computer sciences as well as in medicine and economics. ASIIN is funded solely through membership fees and accreditation fees. ASIIN is authorized to award European quality labels in engineering, informatics, and chemistry.

While in the field of programme accreditation, ASIIN is specialized in reviewing degree programmes in engineering, informatics, mathematics, and the natural sciences, at the institutional level it undertakes reviews of quality management systems at higher education institutions.

ASIIN is supported by an alliance encompassing universities, faculty associations, technical and scientific societies, professional organizations, and business associations that are jointly committed to quality development in higher education. The ASIIN Industry Advisory Board supports the formulation of the requirements of professional practice for a modern university education. Within ASIIN, universities and the business communities work together on an equal footing to develop internationally recognized quality standards. The agency makes a decisive contribution to ensuring high educational standards and market transparency, while facilitating academic and professional mobility both nationally and internationally[15].

EVALAG – *Evaluation Agency Baden-Württemberg* – was founded in 2000 as a foundation under the terms of Public Law, a non-governmental body which is partly funded by the Ministry of Science, Research and the Arts of Baden-Württemberg. In its activities, EVALAG is independent from government as well as from higher education institutions. The organs of the foundation are the international foundation council, the seat of the office is Mannheim.

EVALAG is a center of excellence for quality assurance and enhancement. It supports higher education institutions and other scientific institutions with its broad range of external quality assurance procedures, workshops, and consulting services. It is accredited as an accreditation agency for programme and system accreditation in Germany.

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[14] AQAS. Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes. [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: https://www.aqas.de/

[15] ASIIN. The Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Engineering, Informatics, Natural Sciences and Mathematics. [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: https://www.asiin.de/en/about-asiin.html

In addition to its focus on Baden-Württemberg, EVALAG is active in all German federal states and internationally. The agency works according to internationally recognized standards[16].

ZEvA – *Central Evaluation and Accreditation Agency* – has been active in the field of quality assurance in higher education since 1995. Evaluation and accreditation in teaching and learning, higher education governance and management are ZEvA's main fields of activity. In this context ZEvA has successfully cooperated with higher education institutions in Germany, Europe and beyond. Since 2000, ZEvA has accredited more than 3000 study programs at universities, universities of applied sciences and universities of cooperative education. The procedures for national accreditations applied by ZEvA are based on the regulations formulated by the German federal states and on the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area for international procedures. The agency is based in Hanover.

Transparency, reliable procedures, comprehensive professional support, and high competence in the evaluation of teaching, learning and quality assurance contribute to the high quality of ZEvA's evaluation procedures[17].

FIBAA – *Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation* –is a European accreditation agency (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Netherlands). FIBAA is a member of the European Register for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (EQAR), recognized by the German Accreditation Council, the Federal Department of Economics, Education and Research of Switzeland (EAER), the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands (NVAO), the Federal Ministry of Science and Research of Austria, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), USA and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine[18].

The purpose of FIBAA is to promote the quality and transparency in education and science by awarding quality certificates to educational programs and educational institutions in the areas of higher education and continued professional development. This accreditation organization is recognized in Europe and, furthermore, by the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Many well-known universities in the world have FIBAA accreditation.

It accredits according to the standards of the German Accreditation Council. FIBAA awards its Quality Seal to higher education institutions and programmes of high quality worldwide. Excellent performances, especially those that demonstrate a strong strategy-based and international profile, receive the FIBAA Premium Seal. The agency promotes quality and transparency in academic educa-

[16] EVALAG. Evaluation Agency Baden-Württemberg. [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: https://www.evalag.de/en/agency/

[17] ZEvA. Central Evaluation and Accreditation Agency. [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: https://www.zeva.org/english-version

[18] International Accreditation. [Electronic resource]. – Access mode: https://www.concordia.edu.ua/global-projects/international-accreditation-gp/

tion by assessing Higher Education Institutions, Business Schools, study programmes and further study offers nationally and internationally. FIBAA's procedures on institutional level (system accreditation, institutional accreditation) are interdisciplinary; they are directed at all HEIs and other education providers[19].

To conduct accreditation, a higher education institution may independently choose one of the ten competing accreditation agencies. To eliminate the threat of monopolization or restrict the free choice of agencies and to ensure high market transparency in terms of results and pricing, the Accreditation Council is obliged to ensure fair competition between agencies.

Conclusions. It is obvious that a significant factor in ensuring the quality of higher education in Germany is accreditation procedures. The term "accreditation" means the formal recognition of an educational program or institution of higher education by an authorized external body on the basis of an established procedure. In Germany there are four types of accreditations: program accreditation, cluster accreditation, institutional accreditation, and system accreditation. Accreditation system in Germany has three levels, i.e. the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of Federal Lands of Germany, the Accreditation Council, the Accreditation agencies. There are 8 accreditation agencies registered in Germany, namely ACQUIN, AHPGS, AKAST, AQAS, ASIIN, EVALAG, FIBAA, ZEvA. Some of them are specialized. They accredit programs of only one profile. Others can accredit any programs.

The main idea of independent accreditation of educational programs is to assess their quality. This process is transparent and open. The main purpose of quality assurance agencies is to help to create high-quality educational programs in various fields, rather than meticulous bureaucratic procedures. Accreditation itself is less controlling in nature, and more focused on development of entire university.

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Procedury akredytacyjne jako czynnik zapewniający jakość szkolnictwa wyższego w Niemczech

W artykule przedstawiono analizę procedur akredytacyjnych wprowadzonych ostatnio do systemu szkolnictwa wyższego w Niemczech, podkreślając, że procedury akredytacyjne są istotnym czynnikiem zapewniającym jego jakość. Termin „akredytacja" oznacza formalne uznanie programu edukacyjnego lub instytucji szkolnictwa wyższego przez uprawniony organ zewnętrzny na podstawie ustalonej procedury. W artykule wykazano, że w Niemczech system akredytacji jest zdecentralizowany. Wskazano również, że obecnie w Niemczech funkcjonują cztery rodzaje akredytacji: programowa, klastra, instytucjonalna i systemowa.

W artykule podkreślono, że system akredytacji w Niemczech składa się z trzech poziomów: Rady Ministrów Edukacji i Kultury Krajów Związkowych Niemiec, Rady Akredytacyjnej oraz agencji akredytacyjnych. Rada Akredytacyjna ponosi ogólną odpowiedzialność za system akredytacji, zapewniając konsekwencję i spójność swoich decyzji akredytacyjnych, wspierając kraje związkowe w dalszym rozwoju niemieckiego systemu zarządzania jakością, promując współpracę międzynarodową w dziedzinie akredytacji i zapewniania jakości oraz przyczyniając się do realizacji wspólnego Europejskiego Obszaru Szkolnictwa Wyższego. Wskazuje się również, że Niemiecka Rada Akredytacyjna uznaje dziesięć agencji, w tym osiem z Niemiec, jedną z Austrii i jedną ze Szwajcarii. Agencje akredytacyjne są niezależne, opracowują standardy edukacyjne, kryteria i procedury stosowane przez niezależnych ekspertów. Agencje akredytacyjne, które otrzymały już zgodę Rady Akredytacyjnej na prowadzenie swojej działalności, przeprowadzają akredytację programów kształcenia i wewnętrznych systemów zapewniania jakości w uczelniach.

Szczególny nacisk położono na analizę agencji akredytacyjnych zarejestrowanych w Niemczech, a mianowicie ACQUIN, AHPGS, AKAST, AQAS, ASIIN, EVALAG, FIBAA, ZEvA. W artykule podkreślono, że głównym celem agencji ds. zapewniania jakości jest pomoc w tworzeniu wysokiej jakości programów edukacyjnych w różnych dziedzinach, a nie drobiazgowe procedury biurokratyczne, jak również, że sama akredytacja ma charakter mniej kontrolny, a bardziej ukierunkowany na rozwój całej uczelni.

Słowa kluczowe: procedury akredytacyjne, rada akredytacyjna, agencja akredytacyjna, program akredytacji, akredytacja instytucjonalna, szkolnictwo wyższe w Niemczech.