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Accreditation in Higher Education
- an introduction -

presented by

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I.

By signing the Bologna declaration in June 1999 29 European ministers have committed their governments and their countries to create a European Higher Education Area. There is a multilateral agreement that institutions of higher education, especially universities, have to play an important role in creating and structuring this area. It was the Sorbonne Declaration signed roughly one year before that stated that a European area for higher learning "requires continuous efforts to remove barriers and to develop a framework for teaching and learning, which would enhance mobility and an even closer cooperation"

II.

Accreditation could be an important tool to enhance and improve crossborder education. The term accreditation describes a process of certification and the result of it.

III.

Accreditation is not a new phenomenon. It is a long tradition in Europe beginning latest with the foundation of the university of Prague (1347), that if you want to found and run a university and to award special degrees you need the privilege of the pope and / or the Emperor. Since the end of the 18th century in many European countries a system of universities has developed which is widely and deeply dependant on and influenced by the state.

IV.

Nowadays in most countries of Europe either a law or a bylaw or a governments decision, which normally has to be based on law, is necessary to establish a new university and an institution of higher education needs the governments approval or licence for establishing a new programme.

V.

One of the reasons for this is of course that in public universities the state has to provide the institution with financial means i.e staff and equipment to run the programmes. Another reason is to guarantee a certain standard of quality with regard to the students expectations and their mobility, the expectations of the labours market and also of the "academic world."

VI.

Even if you want to establish and run an institution of higher education with private, i.e non-state money but to award "normal" degrees you need - as a rule - a sort of recognition normally certified by the government. In this case the reason is not a financial commitment of the state but quality assurance.
VII.

Quality assessment and assurance is not only a responsibility of the state, it is even more a responsibility and commitment of the scientific community and it is - as the Confederation of European Union Rector's Conferences has always stressed - an essential of the institutions of higher education.

VIII.

Accreditation is a part of quality assurance certifying the result of a quality assessment or evaluation.

IX.

If one wants to be more precise one is facing a lot of problems raising from rather different concepts and practices of accreditation all over the world.

X.

You are on the safe side, if you state that there is accreditation of institutions, programmes and degrees. So in Germany the Conference of ministers of culture and the Rectors' Conference have established an Accreditation Council affiliated to the Rectors' Conference - which is responsible for the accreditation of now newly established Bachelor and Master-Programmes of universities and Fachhochschulen, thus certifying minimum standards and requirements of quality. In Austria by law an Accreditation Council has been established to accredit private institutions of higher education and thus authorizing an institution to call itself "Privatuniversität", to award the official academic degrees and opening to the academic staff the right to use the titles of the university system.

XI.

Is thus accreditation based on or at least including governmental, i.e. state action, there is also accreditation without any participation of the state.

In particular in USA accreditation is organized and certified by associations e.g. Of universities or their departments or of professions. It concerns institutions, programmes and degrees happens on a voluntary basis, but to be accredited is of importance in the competition for students and staff and for receiving public funds and grants.

XII.

Facing these differences the question is whether it may be useful to develop a system of accreditation and how to organize and structure it.
XIII.

The aims could be

• to promote crossborder mobility of students and staff
• to protect students (consumer protection)
• to contribute to transparency and to accountability and so to the justification of public or private funding
• to promote recognition of courses, transfer and convertibility of credits and exams.
• to open access to certain professions

XIV.

To achieve these aims could be necessary because

• there is no doubt that crossborder mobility should be enhanced
• students are very much interested to engage themselves in learning to acquire knowledge and skills that enable them to meet the competition on the labour market
• the public sector of higher education is involved in a competition for public funds that becomes due to limited state budgets more and more rigorous. Therefore an increase of transparency and accountability is at least desirable.
• In many European countries institutions of higher education from all over the world are increasingly offering programmes and degrees at high costs and undefined quality. Modern Information and Communication- Technologies push the possibilities of distance learning. In both cases a student or user or employer as well as an Institution of higher education will hardly be able to assess the quality of all programmes offered.
• Scientific continuing education for several reasons is becoming a more and more important issue for institutions of higher education. As it is or will be in most cases not free of fee or charge an accreditation of the programmes may prove to be necessary under the viewpoint of consumer protection as well as under the viewpoint of awarding credits.

XV.

The way to meet these challenges can be to guarantee minimum standards or requirements by accreditation

• of institutions
• of programmes
• of degrees.

XVI

While evaluation answers the question, whether a programme or an institution is meeting the targets set by the programmers or the institution themselves, which can be of different - between rather high (Elite) or rather low - profile, accreditation checks whether a programme, degree or an institution meets certain standards or requirements set from outside.
XVII.

The question is, who is setting the standards and defining the requirements and how. Many and different interests are involved and may require consideration in this rather complex process of setting these standards.

Among the stakeholders and interests involved are
- the institutions of higher education because the recognition of credits and exams awarded by another institution of higher education is part of their autonomy,
- responsibility for quality is one of the essentials of a university the government because access to higher education means access to a - at least to a certain extent - public good institutions and programmes are publicly financed,
- the students because they expect a higher education of good quality opening access to the labour market and enabling them to find a job,
- the representatives of the labour market (employers and trade unions) because the profile and development of the demand of the labour market is important,
- Private entrepreneurs because they may want to establish and run a university / a programme

XVIII.

The questions have to be answered
- which of these interests
- and to what extent they have to be considered when deciding an accreditation and
- how the expertise to assess the quality of an institution or a programme or the capability for a profession is made available

XIX.

Further questions are
- whether accreditation has to be compulsory or voluntary
- whether there is a commitment of the state to make accreditation possible - as the World Bank says.
- how to finance accreditation

It has to be decided, who has to pay the cost of accreditation
- the applicants
- the state
- any other institution or association
XX.

To perform accreditation you need an organisation - a Council, Committee or Agency of Accreditation - and a procedure.

XXI.

Accreditation may be organised
- on regional
- on national
- European
- global

level.

There are tendencies or attempts in the field of engineering and technology to organise a global accreditation (ABET=US-Accreditation agency for engineering and technology programmes/dates), in the field of transnational education (GATE = Global Alliance for Transnational Education) and business management (AACSB = US accreditation agency for business management education)
CRE started in 1994 a series of institutional reviews and quality audits which include also universities in Latin America. Equis is a European organisation dealing with the accreditation of programmes of business management education following top standards.

XXII.

In 1999 a European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies has been established, as has been claimed years ago by the Confederation of European Union Rectors’ Conferences as a follow up to the EU-Pilot-Projekt on Evaluation. It aims at promoting the exchange of information, ideas and experiences, contents and methods in the field of evaluation within the EU by organising forums, workshops etc.
Though the idea has been discussed the outcome of the discussion has not been a European Evaluation Agency established by or at least affiliated to the EU-Commission. The objections based on national competence reservations were rather strong.

XXIII.

Looking at accreditation we have to be aware of the fact that recognition of credits and exams awarded by another university or institution of higher education for academic reasons is part of the autonomy of universities or their faculties. Therefore there are nowadays a lot of crossborder bilateral or multilateral agreements of mutual recognition between institutions of higher education, many of them due to the Erasmus and Socrates programme. The Sorbonne Declaration
recommends to promote further agreements of this sort. This is indeed one way to enhance mobility by making the risks of it more calculable.

XXIV.

On the other hand in many European countries the state has to approve the establishment of a new programme. Therefore a complementary step could be to guarantee minimum standards or requirements of quality of institutions, programmes and degrees by national accreditation systems and to recognize the results of national accreditation procedures in a multilateral agreement - like the Bologna-Declaration - but then open for joining to all institutions of higher education concerned.

XXV.

This could also be the way to promote the introduction of the two main cycles system as it has been claimed by the Sorbonne- and the Bologna- Declaration. It could even be considered to define in this agreement a European common frame of reference.

XXVI.

The process of accreditation is initiated by the institution that wants to be accredited or wants to have a programme / degree accredited. It should be based on a self-presentation taking account of the accreditation criteria and be reviewed by experts selected by the accrediting council, committee or agency. It ends with a formal statement according to the criteria defined and published by the accrediting body saying yes or no, sometimes "not yet" or "yes but." The accreditation should normally be limited (5-10 years). The consequences of a non accreditation can be exclusion from public financing and licensing.

XXVII.

Dangers of accreditation are
- problems of self reference
- promote closed shop tendencies (this can refer to special scientific views. It can also aim at avoiding or diminishing competition with no accredited institutions programmes).
- paralyse competition among institutions / programmes accredited
- profit making

XXVIII.

The alternative to accreditation is to leave recognition of institutions, programmes and degrees to the market.