
CRITERIA FOR INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND PROGRAMMES (FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF A GERMAN ACCREDITATION AGENCY)

Hendriks, B., Dr., Managing Director, FIBAA (Germany, Bonn)
Bekker, J., Special Representative, FIBAA (Germany, Bonn)

Abstract

This article focuses on the international quality criteria of FIBAA, which is a European, internationally oriented accreditation agency, with its head office in Bonn, Germany. To fulfill its mission of fostering quality, transparency and comparability in higher education, FIBAA has developed its own methods and instruments of quality assessment, based on both European and national requirements and standards. The FIBAA Assessment Guides for Programme and Institutional Accreditation define the quality criteria for international accreditation procedures and serve as the basis for the self-assessment by HEIs, the external assessment by expert teams, as well as the final decision-making on accreditation by the FIBAA Accreditation Commissions. The article reviews the objectives and the focal points of the different Assessment Guides, the mechanism for developing and updating the quality criteria as well as the way FIBAA rewards universities and programmes, which have exceeded the quality requirements in studies and teaching.

Абстракт

Статья посвящена международным критериям качества FIBAA - европейского, международно-ориентированного аккредитационного агентства, с головным офисом в Бонне, Германия. С целью осуществления своей миссии по укреплению качества, прозрачности и сопоставимости высшего образования, агентство FIBAA разработало свои собственные методы и инструменты оценки качества, основанные на европейских и национальных требованиях и стандартах. Руководства по оценке для программной и институциональной аккредитации FIBAA определяют критерии качества для процедур международной аккредитации и служат основой для самообследования высших учебных заведений, внешней оценки со стороны экспертных групп, а также для принятия решений об аккредитации Аккредитационными комиссиями FIBAA. В статье рассматриваются цели и ключевые аспекты различных руководств по оценке, механизм разработки и обновления критериев качества, а также возможность поощрения университетов и образовательных программ, которые превзошли требования FIBAA к качеству учебной деятельности.

How universities take advantage of international accreditation?

One of the characteristic features of the Bologna Process is the increasing importance of external quality assurance in the European higher education [1, p. 89]. Amongst the instruments used to externally assess the quality of higher education institutions (HEIs) and study programmes are the evaluation, audit, and accreditation, which represents the most common method for external quality assurance. In most Member States of the Bologna Process, including Kazakhstan and Germany, external quality assurance is mandatory [2, p. 28]. At the same time, there are universities, which voluntarily undertake to go through procedures of international accreditation, as well as there are internationally active agencies offering these procedures. So why are universities interested in non-compulsory accreditation?

The extensive experience of FIBAA has shown that universities use the voluntary international accreditation in many cases to enhance their reputation and foster international recognition of their studies and diplomas. Supporting these objectives is one of the core concerns of our agency. FIBAA has made it possible to boost universities' international reputation by means of international accreditation operating in two ways: 1) by building its own reputation in academic community and business world both on the national and European level for over two decades as well as 2) by taking internationally recognized standards as the basis for the agency's quality criteria.

FIBAA's international reputation: What is it built on?

FIBAA's reputation has both national and international pillars. As a non-profit foundation registered in Switzerland, FIBAA is has been nationally recognised in Germany by the German Accreditation Council, in Austria by the Federal Ministry for Science and Research and in Netherlands by the Nederlands Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie (NVAO). Since 2014, our agency has been listed in the Kazakh National Register of Accreditation Bodies, which means that FIBAA's decisions on accreditation of study programmes at Kazakh universities are thus recognised by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Being a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) as well as being listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) provides a solid foundation for FIBAA's reputation as a European agency and makes the FIBAA Quality Seals internationally recognised. A membership of further European and international bodies, such as European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA), European University Association (EUA), European QUALity Link (EQUAL), Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA) and International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), as well as the wide network of partner agencies in different countries also contribute to the international reputation of FIBAA.

The international reputation of accreditation agencies is also a matter of experience. Our agency can draw on 22 years of expertise in quality assurance and quality development in higher education, which has been gained by operating in all German-speaking countries, Northern and Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa. To date, FIBAA has accredited more than 1900 study programmes and has successfully conducted more than 20 institutional procedures. The list of higher education institutions and programmes accredited by FIBAA, includes a number of renowned universities, such as Technical University of Berlin, University of Cologne, RWTH Aachen University, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Tomsk State University, Vienna University of Technology, WHU - Otto Beisheim School of Management and many other institutions with strong positions in international and national rankings.

As the only European Agency, which was founded by the leading trade and employers' associations of Germany, Austria and Switzerland, FIBAA has strong connections with industry and enjoys excellent reputation on the employment market. Representatives of industry and professional practice, together with representatives of universities and (most commonly) students, participate in all statutory bodies and committees of FIBAA, from the expert teams, accreditation commissions and appeals committee to the FIBAA Foundation Council [3, pp. 11-12].

Last, not least, the reputation of accreditation agencies in the international academic community strongly depends on the reputation of its assessors. FIBAA has

a pool of assessors at its disposal made up of about 600 proven experts in their respective fields. In order to ensure that FIBAA assessors exhibit a high degree of expertise, a strict set of criteria has to be met when appointing new experts and composing the expert teams, including the requirements for active membership in scientific or professional community, good reputation and extensive knowledge in the relevant subject areas.

FIBAA Quality Criteria for International Accreditation: On what basis are they designed?

FIBAA sees its mission in fostering quality in education by evaluating higher education institutions and study programmes as well as in making the studies offered more transparent and comparable for the labour market, business, students and the universities themselves. To achieve these objectives, our agency has developed its own methods of assessment and instruments defining the quality criteria for different kinds of accreditation procedures. These quality guidelines, which contain all relevant quality standards for programmes and HEIs in form of questions and definitions of benchmarks, are called „catalogues of questions and evaluations“ or FIBAA Assessment Guides. They serve universities as the basis for their self-evaluation reports. For the expert teams and Accreditation Commissions of FIBAA, the Assessment Guides are also the key documents, providing a common basis for assessing programmes and institutions.

The quality criteria of FIBAA for all accreditation procedures follow both the national and the international requirements and standards. As a full member of ENQA and as a registered agent in the EQAR, FIBAA has committed itself to comply with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which form a viable basis for all Assessment Guides of our agency.

From a legal point of view, FIBAA performs two basic types of accreditation procedures: 1) accreditation procedures in accordance with national legislation and 2) accreditation procedures in accordance with international requirements of FIBAA.

The first type includes procedures for programme accreditation of Bachelor and Master programmes as well as the systemic (institutional) accreditation procedures in accordance with the requirements of the German Accreditation Council, and the procedures of Institutional Audit in Austria. For this type of procedures, FIBAA has developed Assessment Guides based on the relevant German and Austrian national regulations as well as the ESG.

International comparability of qualifications and a greater mobility for students and highly educated professionals are the most important goals of the Bologna Process. FIBAA supports the achievement of these goals by integrating European standards in its procedures of external quality assurance. Against this background, the Assessment Guides for the international Programme and Institutional Accreditation procedures, which are carried out in accordance with FIBAA's own requirements, are designed on the basis of the key documents of the European quality assurance and the Bologna Process: the ESG, the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (EQF), the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the ECTS Users' Guide as well as the EQAL European MBA-Guidelines.

Thus, the accreditation criteria and procedures of FIBAA support universities in ensuring and developing quality of higher education in accordance with European standards. At the same time, when carrying out the procedures of international

Programme and Institutional Accreditation leading to the FIBAA Quality Seal, the agency takes into account the national legislation of the countries where the accreditations take place. For each of the international accreditation procedures, FIBAA defines a list of national regulations and standards to be followed. This is due to the fact that the national legal requirements in some cases are contrary to the ESG and other European standards. In the event of conflict between the national and the European provisions, FIBAA gives priority to the legal requirements of the respective country.

At the heart of all quality guidelines of FIBAA lies the principle “fitness of purpose (adequacy of goals) / fitness for purpose (adequacy of means to reach these goals)”. First, the experts on the basis of the FIBAA Assessment Guide must determine whether the purpose of the study programme or the HEI, as formulated by the HEI itself, is clear and convincing. Then, they prove whether these objectives can be achieved within the framework of the study programme, the system of strategic management or the quality management system of the university concerned.

FIBAA Quality Criteria for Programme and Institutional Accreditation: Objectives and contents

In terms of evaluation subject, FIBAA offers two types of international accreditation procedures: procedures at the programme level (Programme Accreditation) as well as procedures at the institutional level (Institutional Accreditation and Institutional Strategic Management Accreditation).

To assist universities in the procedures of international programme accreditation, FIBAA has developed two catalogues of questions and evaluation: one for the accreditation of Bachelor and Master programmes (“Assessment Guide for the accreditation of programmes in law, social and economic sciences for HEIs”), and one for the post-graduate / doctoral / PhD programmes (“Assessment Guide for the accreditation of Doctoral programmes for HEIs”), both containing quality requirements based on the European standards and formulated as questions and definitions of certain quality parameters.

In accordance with these Assessment Guides, in the procedures of Programme Accreditation FIBAA evaluates the following five key issues of the study programmes: 1) objectives and positioning of the study programme; 2) admission standards and procedure; 3) contents, structure and didactical concept of the study programme; 4) academic environment and framework standards; 5) quality assurance, quality development and documentation. In all those areas FIBAA puts a special focus on internationality, employability and economic relevance, which represents a distinguishing feature and trademark of FIBAA as an accreditation agency.

The purpose of assessing a study programme on the basis of the FIBAA quality criteria is to evaluate in particular: the attainability of the goals of the study programme, its international dimension, its studyability, its practical economic relevance, the employability of its graduates as well as its positioning in the European, national or regional higher education area.

In the procedure of international Programme Accreditation, FIBAA uses the catalogues of criteria to determine whether the objectives and the positioning strategy of the study programme («fitness of purpose») can be achieved by adopting appropriate measures on the university's part to formulate the conditions of students' admission, to self-define the structure and the content of the

programme, to attract external partners from the academic community and the labour market, as well as to assure quality («fitness for purpose»).

The Assessment Guides for programme procedures also contain the FIBAA Quality Profile, which defines to which extent the FIBAA quality requirements for each criterion have been fulfilled. The possible assessment ratings are “meets quality requirements”; “exceeds quality requirements”; “exceptional”; “does not meet quality requirements”; “not relevant”.

The international Institutional Accreditation provides a university with a detailed review on the institution in all its entirety. On the basis of the corresponding Assessment guide, FIBAA’s experts assess whether the following eight areas of the HEI correspond with European standards: 1) mission and profile of the HEI; 2) governance; 3) quality management; 4) teaching and studies; 5) research; 6) support processes; 7) resources; 8) publication / public relations. The Institutional Accreditation is in line with usual international “benchmarks”, that allow determining the institution’s own quality beyond national scopes. Hence, the procedure is particularly relevant for internationally-oriented universities.

The Institutional Strategic Management Accreditation focusses particularly on innovative, entrepreneurial and internationally-oriented universities. The procedure contains a comprehensive evaluation of the institutional strategy. HEIs receive feedback on the future prospects of their structures and processes as well as impetus for further development. The five relevant areas of the HEI in this procedure are: 1) management; 2) networking; 3) teaching and learning; 4) research; 5) dynamics. The procedure gives the HEI a detailed evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses and shows them the essential future opportunities and threats. This enables the HEI to identify and take efficient measures to achieving the self-imposed goals.

Each FIBAA Assessment Guide contains all the requirements for quality to be taken into account in the respective accreditation procedure, including the differentiated evaluation levels. Thus, the Assessment Guides provide universities with transparent, accurate and complete description of the quality criteria to be examined in the framework of the accreditation procedure.

All FIBAA Assessment Guides serve as the basis for the self-assessment report by the HEIs, the external assessment of education programmes by groups of experts during the on-site visit, the creation of the accreditation report by the FIBAA experts and supervisors as well as the final decision-making on accreditation by the responsible FIBAA Accreditation Commission. Using these catalogues of criteria ensures the comparability of self-evaluation reports, experts’ recommendations and accreditation decisions.

FIBAA Quality Criteria for International Accreditation: Internal decision-making and the role of stakeholders

FIBAA is consistently developing and updating the requirements and principles of accreditation procedures in accordance with external regulations and guidelines emanating from both national authorities and international organizations. To do so, FIBAA regularly participates in panels and committees of the international networks in the field of quality assurance, and is in constant contact with the authorities and structures responsible for the national accreditation systems as well as with other accreditation agencies. FIBAA catalogues of criteria are regularly checked for their relevance.

To ensure that concerns of different stakeholder groups in the field of higher

education are adequately taken into account, FIBAA involves representatives of these groups not only in the procedures of assessing programmes and universities, but also in the preparation and further development of the quality assurance instruments. The decisions on adoption and update of the FIBAA Assessment Guides are taken by the relevant Accreditation Commissions comprising representatives from academia, professional practice, business, and students.

If necessary, the relevant FIBAA Accreditation Commission makes changes to the criteria catalogues in accordance to the innovations in the European or national guidelines, standards or legal norms in the field of accreditation. To facilitate interpretation of external guidelines, which require adjustment of the procedural principles of FIBAA, the corresponding Accreditation Commission establishes working groups and takes decisions with regard to the internal quality assurance of FIBAA.

In recent years, to increase the relevance and expediency of the accreditation processes and quality standards, all the Assessment Guides of FIBAA have been revised or further developed. On the one hand, this update has been performed thanks to the feedback and recommendations from universities, experts and project managers, which have been considered in the catalogues of criteria. On the other hand, there was a need to adapt the Assessment Guides, taking into account the new versions of the basic European documents like the ESG, the ECTS Users' Guide, the new MBA Guidelines as well as the amended national regulations.

An adequate representation of different interested parties in all bodies and committees is certainly one of the strengths of our agency. Another special feature of our decisive bodies, from the experts groups and Accreditation Commissions to the Foundation Council, the supreme body of FIBAA, is their international composition. For instance, the FIBAA Accreditation Commissions currently in force, are composed of representatives of Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Spain, and the Netherlands, which further enhances the international dimension of FIBAA's activities.

FIBAA Quality Seals: Reward for excellence and impetus for improvement

To study programmes and universities, which have successfully been accredited according to the international quality standards of FIBAA, our agency awards the FIBAA Quality Seal. This seal confirms the high quality of the respective study programme or HEI.

Accreditation has been sometimes criticised for ensuring only minimum quality standards and ignoring individual characteristics and exceptional quality of study programmes and HEIs. To solve this problem, FIBAA has developed a unique instrument to reward outstanding quality of higher education. By awarding the FIBAA Premium Seal, we honor universities and programmes, which have exceeded the quality requirements in studies and teaching. FIBAA sets particular standards in all of its assessment areas when awarding the Premium Seal to a study programme or university. The FIBAA Premium Seal provides those interested in studies, such as students, graduates, higher education institutions as well as the employment market with reliable orientation on the excellent quality of the institution and its programmes.

With the help of its quality criteria, the expert teams of FIBAA prove, whether programmes and institutions comply with international standards. Still, FIBAA considers quality assurance primarily as a task of universities for which an external quality assessment plays an important facilitative role.

FIBAA supports universities in attaining their self-imposed quality targets. FIBAA Assessment Guides allow checking if universities can achieve their own educational goals on the programme or institutional level. Moreover, as part of FIBAA's accreditation reports, universities receive experts' recommendations on the further development of their study programmes. With these recommendations, FIBAA offers universities significant added value over assessment alone and provides vital impulses for the further development of quality in higher education.

References:

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