The main policy objectives of the Danish quality assurance system in higher education

Quality assurance in Danish higher education aims to create a more coherent and transparent education market in Denmark for the benefit of students, the labour market and the educational institutions. This is done by accrediting all types of higher educational institutions and their educational programmes.

The purpose of the accreditation is to strengthen the work carried out at educational institutions to develop programmes to an increasingly high level of academic quality and relevance. This means that institutional accreditation must be goal-oriented in such a way as to help the given institution focus primarily on quality assuring and developing its own programmes – and not solely on documentation with regard to the accreditation process itself. Institutional accreditation must therefore be organised so that it supports the continued development of the quality and relevance of programmes. In this sense, the Danish accreditation system has an advisory orientation.

Major reforms: New Accreditation Act on Higher Education Institution from 2013

On 16 May 2013, the Accreditation Act on Higher Education Institutions was passed unanimously by the Danish Parliament. The Act came into force on 1 July 2013 and has replaced the original Accreditation Act from 2007. This new Accreditation Act should be seen in relation to a number of reforms of the higher education legislation. This concerns, in particular, the Institution Act from 2003, the new decentralised governance concept for the institutions under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science as well as the tertiary artistic education acts of 2000 and 2008. All these law reforms have resulted in increased responsibility to the educational institutions for their own systematic quality assurance and improvement.

With the new Accreditation Act on Higher Education Institutions, significant changes have been made to the Danish accreditation system. The main element of the new accreditation system is:

- From programme accreditation to institutional accreditation

The Act replaces programme accreditation with institutional accreditation by stating that the task of accreditation should be based on institutional accreditation. The transition from programme accreditation to institutional accreditation will be phased in over the course of four years from the time that the first institutional accreditations were initiated in the autumn of 2013. Programme accreditation will continue until all institutions have been accredited.

Institutional accreditation enables institutions to establish a system that best strengthens and develops the quality and relevance of all their programmes. It involves an assessment of the institution’s overall quality assurance system by the Danish Accreditation Institution.
• Review of educations with special challenges

The Accreditation Council and the Minister of Higher Education and Science can select educations with special challenges for review.

• Gathering of the accreditation function at the Danish Accreditation Institution

Prior to 1 July 2013, i.e. before the new Accreditation Act on Higher Education Institutions came into force, accreditation of professional bachelor educations and business academy educations was performed by the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA). Since 1 July 2013, however, accreditation of these types of education has been the responsibility of the Danish Accreditation Institution (the former “ACE Denmark”). Today, the accreditation of all higher education institutions in Denmark is performed by the Danish Accreditation Institution.

• Cross-sectoral evaluations at the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA)

In the new accreditation system, EVA is responsible for cross-sectoral evaluation projects that can contribute to new knowledge and lead to the development of the sector.

• Prequalification of new educations

The Act establishes the framework for the accreditation of new and existing programmes and local provisions of programmes which, especially during the transitional phase, will be performed in parallel with the institutional accreditations. A programme is defined as a national course established by ministerial order that can be provided in several places and by different education institutions. A local provision of a programme refers to the specific, geographically fixed provision of a programme at an education institution.

Furthermore, the Act states that all applications for the establishment of new programmes and local provisions of programmes under the new accreditation system must be submitted for ministerial pre-qualification and approval by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science prior to the accreditation procedure.

Responsible bodies

The Accreditation Institution

Accreditation of all higher education institutions in Denmark is performed by the Danish Accreditation Institution. The mission of the Accreditation Institution is to create value for the Danish society by being strongly committed to raising the quality and the relevance of the higher educational programmes in Denmark. In addition, it is the mission of the institution to provide the public debate on higher educational programmes with evidence-based knowledge. The vision of the institution is to continuously develop the accreditation task.

The Accreditation Institution consists of a director and four units covering the following tasks:

• The Management Secretariat
• The area for Professional, Vocational and Maritime Institutions
  ○ Handles the accreditation of new and existing programmes and local provisions of programmes within the area
- Handles the accreditation of university colleges, business academies and maritime education institutions
- Takes part in Danish and international cooperation and development projects
- Documents and communicates activities and results
- **The area for Universities and Educational Institutions of Arts and Culture (UNIK)**
  - Handles the accreditation of new and existing programmes within the area
  - Handles the accreditation of universities and art academies
  - Takes part in Danish and international cooperation and development projects
  - Documents and communicates activities and results
- **Analysis and Council Management**

The Accreditation Institution is subject to state rules and regulations, including the Danish Public Administration Act, the Danish Access to Public Administration Files Act (“Offentlighedsloven”) and the Ministry of Finance’s Budget Guidelines (“Finansministeriets Budgetvejledning”). According to the Accreditation Act, the Accreditation Institution is an independent institution within the public administration. Independent means that the institution is operationally independent of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science as well as of the institutions and other ministries and stakeholders. Thus, the institution is not subject to the power of instruction of the minister in relation to accreditation issues.

**The Accreditation Council**

A main body within the Danish Accreditation Institution is the independent Accreditation Council. The Accreditation Council’s aim is to ensure continuous quality assurance efforts at the Danish higher education institutions in order to develop the quality and relevance of higher education in Denmark.

The Accreditation Council’s decisions constitute an overall assessment based on accreditation reports made by the Danish Accreditation Institution. In the reports, the institution recommends one of three possible outcomes:

- A positive accreditation
- A conditionally positive accreditation
- A refusal of accreditation

The Accreditation Council then makes the final decision. In addition to the above mentioned reports, the Council has access to a further source of information in the form of documentation reports and other documents submitted to the Danish Accreditation Institution by the higher education institutions during the accreditation process. The methods and processes used by the Accreditation Institution to examine the quality of institutions and study programmes are under continuous improvement and oversight by the Council.

The Council operates in accordance with the European Standard Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the Higher Education Area (ESG). As an independent body, its decisions cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or government. In other words, the Council is not subject to the power of instruction of the Minister in relation to accreditation issues.

Various mechanisms are in place to ensure independence in the Council's decisions. First of all, in accordance with the rules of procedure of the Council, a member of the Council is obliged to inform the Council if, in connection with a specific accreditation case, there are matters which may give rise to doubt as to the independence of the member. In the event of a conflict of interest, the member in question leaves the room while the case is being considered. The conflict of interest is recorded in the minutes. Secondly, the decisions made by the Accreditation Council cannot be referred to other administrative authorities, and the Minister for Higher Education and Science or other parties cannot affect or reverse the Council’s decisions concerning accreditation. However, the Act allows for appeals...
against legal errors and omissions in connection with the process to be referred to the Ministry of Higher Education and Science.

Council decisions and accreditation reports are published in order to provide higher education institutions, students and other stakeholders with an insight into the expert panels’ assessments of institutions’ quality assurance systems and of the quality and relevance of educational programmes. The expert panels consist of experts recruited according to fixed procedures which ensure that the panels cover relevant expert perspectives, employer perspectives and student perspectives. Thus all panels possess in-depth knowledge about the educational standards of the programmes, the labour market, a pedagogical and didactic insight into the structure of the programmes, and knowledge about the institutions’ work on quality. All experts receive training that provides them with knowledge about the accreditation system, the Danish educational system, the accreditation criteria and the allocation of responsibilities between experts and accreditation officers. A new database [2] has been introduced containing all of the decisions of the Accreditation Council to make it easier to access the accreditation decisions and reports.

In addition to its principal task of accreditation, the Accreditation Council aspires to draw attention to the quality of institutions and educational programmes. The Council invites stakeholders to seminars and conferences and engages in debates on the quality of higher education. Moreover, the Council aims to draw on international expertise within accreditation in order to ensure that the quality assurance systems of Danish higher education institutions meet international standards.

The Accreditation Council consists of a chairman and eight members:

- The Minister for Higher Education and Science appoints the chairman.
- The Minister for Higher Education and Science appoints the remaining members. However, two student representatives are appointed upon nomination by student bodies from the higher education institutions within the competence of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science.

The chairman and members of the Council can be appointed for a maximum of eight years, comprised of at least two terms of appointment. Student representatives can be appointed for a maximum of two years, comprised of at least two terms of appointment. Together, the Council must hold experience within and knowledge of:

- Quality assurance
- The higher education sector
- Scientific research and research-led education
- Labour market conditions for graduates

At least one of the Council members must have international experience within accreditation. In accordance with its Rules of Procedure, the Council holds at least four annual council meetings during which the Council makes decisions on accreditation matters.

**International standards**

In 2010, the Danish Accreditation Institution (then ACE Denmark) and the Accreditation Council received full membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) upon being evaluated by an international panel and was adopted in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The panel concluded that the methods used by the Institution and the Council fully meet the ESG criteria.

The Accreditation Institution and the Council were successfully reassessed by ENQA in 2016.
Approaches and methods for quality assurance

External quality assurance

Accreditation is a method for creating external quality assurance. The Danish Accreditation Institute performs accreditation according to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) for accreditation. The independent Accreditation Council decides on accreditation based on reports from the Accreditation Institution.

A distinction is made between institutional accreditation and programme accreditation (of both new and existing programmes).

Programme accreditation is performed on the basis of five statutory criteria:

1. Needs and relevance
   a. An assessment carried out solely by the Danish Accreditation Institution in connection with accrediting existing programmes. The assessment of relevance when accrediting new programmes is carried out by the pre-qualification system under the Ministry of Higher Education and Science.
2. Knowledge base
3. Objectives of learning outcomes
4. Organisation of the programme and completion rate of students
5. Internal assurance and development of quality

As mentioned previously in this chapter, the main emphasis of the new accreditation system is on the accreditation of institutions, but it also includes the accreditation of programmes and the local provision of programmes during a transitional period of four years from the time that the first institutional accreditations were initiated in the autumn of 2013.

Where programme accreditation is concerned, an accreditation panel assesses whether a programme or the local provision of a programme lives up to the five above mentioned criteria. The accreditation of existing programmes and local provision of programmes is performed at institutions where institutional accreditation has not yet begun and at institutions that have been refused institutional accreditation.

More information on the criteria and procedure in connection with programme accreditation can be found in the Danish Accreditation Institution’s guide to programme accreditation.

Institutional accreditation is based on five statutory criteria:

1. Quality assurance policy and strategy
2. Quality management and organisation
3. The knowledge base of the programmes
4. The level and content of the programmes
5. Relevance of the programmes

Institutional accreditation is based on a holistic assessment, both in terms of the individual criteria and across criteria. The holistic assessments are carried out by an accreditation panel consisting of people who possess expertise in the field of quality assurance at institutional level; expertise in connection with the higher education sector in general and knowledge of relevant labour market conditions; international experts and student representatives. The institution’s educational activities revolve around the students so they play an important role in connection with institutional accreditation. The holistic assessment is based on key figures, the institution’s self-evaluation report, site visits at the institution and documentation for the performance of quality assurance in selected areas at the institution.

More information on the criteria and procedure in connection with institutional accreditation can be found in the Danish Accreditation Institution’s guide to institutional accreditation, in the Ministerial
As mentioned, the Accreditation Council’s decisions are given on a three-point scale; positive, conditionally positive or refusal of accreditation:

- **Positive (green light):**
  - Decision: The quality assurance system of the institution is – perhaps with the exception of a few, well-defined problems – well described, well-argued and well-functioning in practice.
  - Consequence: The possibility of establishing new educational programmes and a new supply of educational programmes when these have been prequalified and approved by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, as well as adjusting existing educational programmes.

- **Conditionally positive (yellow light):**
  - Decision: The main part of the quality assurance system is well described, well-argued and works reasonably in practice. The Council will, in its decision, point out areas that are less well-functioning and which the institution needs to follow up within a certain time frame.
  - Consequence: All new educational programmes and a new supply of educational programmes must be programme accredited before being established. A plan for follow-up will be drawn up.

- **Refusal of accreditation (red light):**
  - Decision: There are several significant deficiencies in the structure and/or the functioning of the institution’s quality assurance system.
  - Consequence: The institution cannot establish new educational programmes or a new supply of educational programmes. Existing educational programmes must be programme accredited following a rota system.

In terms of the frequency of quality assurance, a rotation plan for both institutional and programme accreditation is established with the participation of the higher educational institutions. The institutions decide themselves when they are ready for institutional accreditation, and a programme accreditation plan is established in a process including a formal hearing of the institutions. Institutions that are in the process of an institutional accreditation are not programme accredited. The plan is approved by the Minister for Higher Education and Science.

The accreditation of existing university programmes performed before 1 July 2013 and the accreditation of new university programmes performed before or applied for before 1 July 2013 will be handled in accordance with the previous guides from what was then ACE Denmark.

Council decisions and accreditation reports are published in order to provide higher education institutions, students and other stakeholders with an insight into the expert panels’ assessments of institutions’ quality assurance systems and of the quality and relevance of educational programmes.

**Internal quality assurance**

Institutional accreditation places the responsibility for the quality of programmes with the institution and the institution management. This means that the institution must have established a quality assurance system that reflects the programmes at the institution. Institutional accreditation gives the institution room to organise its quality assurance system as long as it can show that it lives up to the five criteria for quality and relevance laid down in the ministerial order. All higher education institutions must work with the same model for institutional accreditation. The Accreditation Act on Higher Education Institutions [4] and the Ministerial Order on the Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and the Approval of Higher Education Programmes [5] follow the European standards for quality assuring higher education programmes (European
Standards and Guidelines – ESG).

The Accreditation Act, the criteria in the ministerial order and the more detailed points of the criteria constitute the foundation for an evaluation of the work carried out at education institutions to ensure and develop the quality and relevance of their programmes.

The Accreditation Act and the ministerial order state that quality assurance must be ongoing and systematic, that there must be a clear division of responsibility and labour, that quality assurance must be firmly anchored at management level, that institutions must have an inclusive quality culture and that quality assurance must focus on programmes as a whole and on concrete teaching. Institutional accreditation involves assessing whether the institution’s quality assurance system is described in detail, is well-argued and well-functioning in practice. This means that it is insufficient for the system to fulfil the criteria on paper. The day-to-day performance of quality assurance at the institution must show that the system works and ensures the quality of programmes both before and after institutional accreditation.

References


