

Memorandum



Recipient:

The Accreditation Council

Assessing quality assurance systems at institutions

This memorandum is based on the Accreditation Council's discussions on assessment and decision to award accreditation to higher education institutions at the meetings on 9 April and 20 June 2014. This is an English translation of a document written in Danish.

The memorandum provides a preliminary suggestion of what requirements the Accreditation Council will make of institutions applying for institutional accreditation. The memorandum is based on the information that can be derived from the Accreditation Act, the ministerial order on accreditation and the guide to institutional accreditation (hereafter "the guide").

The memorandum is addressed to the chairmen and ordinary members of the accreditation panels that have been established in connection with institutional accreditation.

The memorandum is organised so that it first describes the framework within which the assessments and decisions are made. Next, the memorandum describes what the Accreditation Council will emphasise when granting a positive accreditation, conditionally positive accreditation or refusal of accreditation.

In order to better and more precisely communicate what the Accreditation Council expects from institutions that are being accredited, the memorandum also includes a number of examples. These examples do not replace the comprehensive and complex requirements stipulated in the Accreditation Act, the ministerial order or the guide to institutional accreditation. However, they do point to some of the central issues that the Accreditation Council expects to emphasise in its assessment.

The Accreditation Council bases its decisions on assessments made by an accreditation panel and on recommendations made by the Danish Accreditation Institution.

Framework for the assessment

The Accreditation Act provides a framework that, with some degree of accuracy, establishes what standard must be reached in the institution's quality assurance work. First, the explanatory notes to the Accreditation Act contain a description of what characterises quality assurance at an institution that can be awarded positive

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accreditation, conditionally positive accreditation or refusal of accreditation respectively. These notes are summarised in the guide.

The ministerial order on accreditation determines five criteria that, along with their subsidiary points, indicate the thematic focus of the assessment of the higher education institutions' work on assuring the quality of their programmes. The five criteria thereby define the areas that must be included in quality assurance. The five criteria are included in the guide.

In addition to this, the guide emphasises six cross-cutting, basic expectations to the institutions quality assurance work. These expectations are based on the Accreditation Act, the explanatory notes to the act and the ministerial order on accreditation. The cross-cutting expectations pertain to the character of the institution's quality assurance, and they will therefore be included in discussions on the functioning of the individual institution's system and its implementation.

The guide calls for each institution to define its structures and working methods for quality assurance so that they best reflect the characteristics of the individual institution. This is based on the assumption that structures and working methods that work in one place might not work equally well at another institution, which e.g. is of a different size or has a different organisational culture. The guide therefore stresses the importance of tried and tested practice: it is only in the concrete dynamics at the individual institution that it can be seen whether a policy, strategy and division of responsibilities proves to function well in practice, and does not, for example, meet local opposition that obstructs implementation, or produces unforeseen and unfortunate side effects that weaken the organisation's work. A memorandum on well-functioning practice can be found at www.akkr.dk.

Based on the Accreditation Act's description of the three possible outcomes, the ministerial order's five criteria with subsidiary points and the guide's six basic expectations to quality assurance work, the Accreditation Council has initially settled on the following requirements for an institutions quality assurance.

Requirements for a positive institutional accreditation

As mentioned previously, the guide stresses that each institution must define its structures and working methods for quality assurance so that they best reflect the individual institution's characteristics.

The following characterises an institution that meets the requirements for positive accreditation:

It must be the assessment that the institution fully fulfils the five criteria.

First, this means that the institution continuously carries out the initiatives described in the subsidiary points to the five criteria. For an institution to be eligible for positive institutional accreditation when the accreditation panel identifies a problem, cf. e.g. the explanatory notes to the Accreditation Act, this will be a minor, clearly defined problem, which management at the institution is already aware of and which, in the panel's assessment, is already being addressed in a satisfying manner by the institution.

Second, it must be a prerequisite for a positive assessment of the five criteria that there is a high level of quality in the implementation of quality assurance work. This means that the institution's initiatives are well-described and are based on tried, tested and systematic practice. Similarly, the institution has a well-developed information system with relevant data for the individual programme, and pre-defined policies for when and how management will take action if a programme is exhibiting problems. There will also be good information flows, both vertically and horizontally, that support well-founded initiatives. The institution also carries out continuous adjustments to its quality assurance practice, and there is a broad-based commitment among institution staff and management, which leads to the development and application of acquired experience in future initiatives.

Among other things, emphasis will be put on the institution's ability to find good solutions to problems that, in the experience of the Danish Accreditation Institution, have proven challenging in the quality assurance work at institutions of higher education. This includes:

- That on-going and recurrent evaluations of whole programmes are carried out, that the results of these evaluations of each programme are analysed, and that management takes action based on the results of evaluations
- That the institution acts in an effective and timely manner when problems are identified so that quality problems are addressed as quickly as possible
- That it is clear to the panel that strategic discussions at management level lead to substantial actions, including merging of programs, changes to contents or decisions to change the allocation of resources to one or more programmes
- That the institution is engaged in on-going contact with potential employers, where individual, whole programmes are discussed. The contact is not limited to formal annual meetings with potential employers, but is characterized by an on-going contact and concrete initiatives, which reinforces the relevance and quality of programmes
- That the institution has explicitly and independently considered the knowledge base of its programmes and on this basis developed processes that ensure that programs are connected to academic/professional environments of high quality

It should be stressed that this is not an exhaustive list, but merely illustrative examples.

Requirements for a conditionally positive institutional accreditation

What characterizes an institution that meets the demands for a conditional positive accreditation?

Also here it must be the assessment that the institution generally fulfils the five criteria.

First, this again means that the institution continuously carries out the initiatives described in the subsidiary points to the criteria. However, the panel also perceives that the institution's quality assurance system is generally "well-described, well-

argued and reasonably well-functioning in practice”, while there are less well-functioning areas that demand follow-up by the institution’s quality initiatives, as described in the guide on the basis of the explanatory notes to the Accreditation Act.

Second, it must be a prerequisite for a conditionally positive accreditation that there is a high level of quality in the implementation of quality assurance work. It must be “reasonably well-functioning in practice”, even though there are “less well-functioning areas”, cf. e.g. the explanatory notes to the Accreditation Act.

Therefore, the expectations to the quality assurance work are mainly the same: i.e., that the institution generally meets the six cross-cutting, basic expectations.

Examples of "less well-functioning areas", as mentioned above, could e.g. be:

- That the panel finds that central key figures across programmes are not sufficiently reliable and are not processed on an ongoing basis alongside other important information, and that it is therefore the assessment of the panel that management information is not effective.
- That the panel observes that it is a relatively new quality assurance policy, which in some areas has only been tried out in practice to a limited extent, and that the panel therefore finds it difficult to assess whether it will work in practice and/or whether it will be fully implemented at the institution as intended.
- That the panel finds that concrete activities mentioned in the subsidiary points to the criteria do not function at the institution at present
- That the panel observes that the quality assurance system does not cover all of the relevant educational activities at the institution

It should be stressed that this is not an exhaustive list, but merely illustrative examples.

At the same time, it is a basic requirement in the Accreditation Act that the "education institution is able to remedy shortcomings within a short period of e.g. one to two years ". If this is not found to be realistic, then there is no basis for awarding the institution a conditionally positive accreditation.

Requirements for refusal of institutional accreditation

What could characterise an institution that is recommended for refusal of accreditation?

With references to the explanatory notes to the Accreditation Act the guide states that this applies to institutions at which "there are several significant shortcomings in the structure or practical functions of [the] quality assurance system".

This could be the case in many different scenarios:

- It could be an institution that has a well-described and well-argued quality assurance system that is not well-functioning in practice

- It could also be an institution where the quality assurance system does not cover significant parts of the institution's overall organisation
- A third scenario, among many possible, could be that in reality there is no overall quality assurance system, but rather a number of dispersed individual activities
- Finally, is the situation mentioned above where an institution will not realistically be able to improve less well-functioning areas within a short period of e.g. one to two years, and refusal of accreditation must therefore be given