



7th European Quality Assurance Forum

22 – 24 November 2012

Tallinn University, Estonia

How does quality assurance make a difference?

Author(s)

Name: Aras Viligaila Vėbra

Position: Deputy Head of Strategic Development

Organisation: Vilnius University of Applied Engineering Sciences

Country: Lithuania

Name: Harald Scheuthle

Position: Project Manager

Organisation: evalag

Country: Germany

Title: International Accreditation – Effects of National and Cultural Differences

Abstract:

The foundation of the ESG was a step towards a pan-European Quality Assurances market. Nevertheless, the majority of evaluation or accreditations still remain within the national frameworks. The current paper presents a case study of a truly international accreditation of Lithuanian study programs by a German quality assurance agency. The case is presented from the points of view of the two partners and cultural differences discussed, as well as the differences in the higher education and quality assurance systems of the two countries, and how these affected the accreditation. The paper concludes with the specific impact of the international accreditation on the further development of the study programs.

Text of paper:

International Accreditation

While the Bologna Process stands for the European Higher Education Area, the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) are its equivalent for quality assurance in Europe. The objective is a common methodological base for quality assurance in Europe (ESG) and to allow quality assurance agencies to



operate throughout Europe (EQAR). Whereas the methodological base is already widely accepted, the European market for quality assurance is only developing. Most countries still have a national quality assurance system that is implemented by one or several national agencies. Even if foreign agencies are admitted in principle, external quality assurance remains predominantly national.

The following paper presents a case study of ten program accreditations at Vilnius University of Applied Engineering Sciences (VTDK) in Lithuania carried out by the German quality assurance agency **evalag**. While the HEI and the agency both operate within the Bologna process, the case study points out the advantages and difficulties of implementing a European accreditation. Many of the difficulties encountered are rooted in different national cultures of the higher education and quality assurance system. The paper presents the case from the perspectives of VTDK and **evalag** and draws conclusions for the organization of international external quality assurance procedures.

Accreditation Systems in Lithuania and Germany

Central to the accreditation process are the assessment criteria and the procedural regulations which differ from country to country. As institutions, peers, and agencies are most acquainted with their national criteria and procedural regulations only, a thorough preparation is necessary. Particularly difficult—at least in the case of Lithuania and Germany—is that criteria and procedural rules are often split into many documents and different versions with rules, interpretations of rules, annotations, and exceptions published by different regulating bodies which may refer to each other. Often, these documents are structured according to a very different logic in the different countries. Additionally, these documents may only be available in the national language.

Because of the unfamiliarity peers do not know the possibilities of interpretation of criteria and the latitude of judgment. This makes it very difficult to operate in a foreign external quality assurance system. Therefore, it is essential for a higher education institution that hires a foreign agency to point out specifically what is important in terms of interpreting the criteria and carrying out the procedures to avoid misunderstandings.

The accreditation criteria for study programs in Lithuania are very similar in substance to German criteria. In Lithuania, the six criteria cover the learning outcomes, curriculum design, teaching staff, facilities and learning resources, study process and students' performance assessment and finally program management. In the eleven Germany criteria, these aspects are also covered. The main differences are rather of formal nature and apply to definition of study degrees or the concept and implementation of modularized study programs as well as certain subject specific contents of programs. As the Lithuanian criteria are well structured and clearly explained by sub-criteria, they are easier to work with than the German.

A main difference in the accreditation procedure is the lack of a conditional accreditation in Lithuania. In Germany, conditions—which are specific requirements on how to change a study program—are widely used by the peer experts to initiate changes in study programs in cases where the experts see a criterion as not fully fulfilled or where structural requirements are not followed completely. In Lithuania, on the other hand, yet-to-be implemented study program criteria are rated on a numerical scale and the rating determines the duration of the accreditation, but peer experts do not have the possibility to initiate specific changes, except through recommendations.



Case Study

Decision making process for the international accreditation

The decision to pursue an international accreditation was not an easy one for VTDK: first, no other non-university institution of higher education has done so in Lithuania; second, if any universities have done so, they have done it without much help from the Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (CQAHE), which was sometimes unprepared to advise VTDK or provide necessary documents in English. Thus, VTDK did the translation.

Why did VTDK do it, then? There were several factors. The most simple was financial: because an EU funded project would compensate the cost of the international accreditation, there was a general feeling of “we’d be foolish not to do it,” said Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, Anna Limanovskaja. Employing the local accreditation authority as usual would have been an opportunity missed. Without the project the international accreditation would not have been feasible, and another such project may not be available for many years.

Quality? The Lithuanian CQAHE provides high quality accreditation services, but are they best in the world? Indeed, they ensure their quality by including foreign experts in their teams. The pursuit of the best feedback available was important to the program coordinators. Throughout the EHEA, a standard goal for institutions is achieving European standards in study programs; it is important enough that the VTDK strategy includes this goal. “Who else to better instruct VTDK on that but a European expert team,” recalls the Head of Strategic Development, Ana Aleknavičienė.

Finally there was a cultural element to our choice. Aleknavičienė remembers a feeling of traveling through a “grey zone.” She believes that “risk-taking is characteristic of Lithuanians; westerners may not be willing to include so many ‘unknowns’ in the process, but we’ll go for the gold when we get the chance even if it’s a more winding road.”

Procurement negotiations

A public procurement for an evaluation was completely new to VTDK—and very time-consuming—because in the past the only national agency had always filled that role. Two dozen accreditation agencies were contacted throughout Europe—all that fit the project specifications. Half were unresponsive. Half of those that responded only conduct evaluations locally. A few of those that do international accreditations only do certain fields of education, and therefore could not evaluate all ten study programs—not a necessity, but suboptimal. Four accreditation agencies were left, but two of them could not get the evaluation done in the given timeframe. This is shocking because the Lithuanian CQAHE evaluates programs in up to eight weeks; one German agency could not evaluate the programs in less than one year.

Two agencies made it to the public procurement, another German agency, and one Spanish agency. Here, again, a national quirk came into play—unless this is a transnational prejudice. The personnel at VTDK chatted, unofficially, about which agency would be preferable. The Germans will be “work-minded, specific, exact, pedantic, and strict,” recalls Rūta Buivydienė, one of the project managers. But on the other hand, they won’t let anything slide: “we’d have an easier time of it with the Spanish.” In the end there was general appreciation at VTDK that the German agency, **evalag**, won the procurement.

Accreditation procedure



The tender included an evaluation of the ten study programs according to Lithuanian accreditation criteria and procedures and in addition – upon successful evaluation – the award of an international quality label. The Lithuanian evaluation required an assessment of the program with external experts but no site visit as the programs were “yet-to-be implemented”, i.e. new programs. For the **evalag** quality label, a site visit was, however, necessary. It is also the only step in the accreditation procedure that allows a direct exchange between institution, experts, and agency. This is especially important in international procedures as it allows the experts to better understand the institution and the study program and helps clear up potential misunderstandings that may arise on the assessment of the self documentation. Therefore, it was important for **evalag** to include a site visit in the accreditation procedure in order to allow experts to get acquainted with the foreign higher education system and to discuss differing expectations.

For **evalag** the schedule of the procedure was very tight. The agency needs to identify experts and find a common date for the site visit. This has to be done several months before the site visit as the expert’s schedules are usually filled. After the site visit the report has to be drafted, commented by the experts, redrafted and checked by the institution for correction of factual errors. Then, the report is submitted to the accreditation commission for the decision. All these steps lead to a regular duration of the drafting process of about three to four months.

Site Visit

For several reasons, the preparation was a first for everybody involved. In Lithuania, only study programs already underway are visited; because these study programs were yet-to-be implemented, they did not require site visits, and nobody at VTDK was sure what could be inspected besides the documents. While, regardless of who carries out the accreditation, the procedures and standards are identical, this is only true on paper: if the people are different, the process is different, and the preparation must be different accordingly.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that not a single person expected the site visits. Because it is not mandatory visit costs were not covered by the project (meaning no reimbursement to the agency). This is one point where cultural differences came into play: first, it would be rather unusual for a Lithuanian enterprise to incur such significant expenses voluntarily; and second, 80% of the administration at VTDK grew up living under the USSR, so their understanding of a “visit” is an “inspection,” and not one seeking mutual benefit. In fact, the CQAHE has a special unofficial term for site visits: they call them “friendly visits.” After years of going from one HEI to another, they know what to expect and try to alleviate it: anxiety. This anxiety was heightened because **evalag** insisted on visiting VTDK when it was not mandatory.

VTDK felt a greater responsibility preparing for this site visit. Buivydienė remembers feeling that “it won’t just be Lithuanians taking a look at us this time, and they won’t just be comparing us to other Lithuanians.” Everybody knows more or less how VTDK compares to its counterparts within Lithuania, but looking in from abroad may mean raising the bar.

But “the greatest benefit,” says Limanovskaja, “was to hear the opinions of the experts on how to improve and develop our programs, take them in different directions, and make them more attractive internationally. The experience was priceless.”



One apparent difference in the accreditation of VTDK was the different type of institution: the Lithuanian kolegija versus the German Fachhochschule (university of applied sciences) with which the German experts were acquainted and what they implicitly expected to find in Lithuania as well. Whereas the Lithuanian kolegija provides higher professional training and educates professional specialists the German Fachhochschule provides a practice-oriented science-based education. This is also reflected in the higher level of applied research that is carried out in German Fachhochschulen compared to Lithuanian kolegijas. Therefore, the academic level of the degrees of the two types of institutions differs, which is reflected in the higher participation rates of tertiary education in Lithuania—about 45% of the 25-29 year old, versus 30% in Germany (Eurydice: Key Data on Education in Europe 2012)—and the fact that the professional bachelor degree in Lithuania requires graduates to complete one to one and a half years of bridge courses to continue a master degree at a Lithuanian university.

Most of the study programs accredited were in the engineering field and labeled as engineering degrees. The term “engineering,” however, is understood differently in Lithuania and in Germany. Whereas in Lithuania the term is also used for activities of a technical specialist, in Germany it comprises knowledge of technical designing and planning. This knowledge is not a focus of the programs of the kolegijas but only at universities in Lithuania.

During the site visits, these issues could be discussed and contributed to the experts’ understanding of the Lithuanian national context and the situation of VTDK. This understanding is a prerequisite for an appropriate assessment of the study programs.

Language was another critical issue. As not all VTDK staff was fluent in English, VTDK provided interpretation during the interview session. Despite the excellent translator, interpretation is always time consuming and thus limits the time for discussion and exchange between institution and experts during the site visit.

To better understand the cultural, national, and institutional differences in an international accreditation, **evalag** tries to integrate at least one expert in the team with regional knowledge. This helps the team to better and more easily grasp the system under review. In the case of the accreditation at VTDK the site visits were scheduled in a sequence that allowed **evalag** to build on the experience of the first visit and inform the following teams accordingly. The open atmosphere during the site visits in Vilnius also helped a great deal to understand VTDK.

Accreditation Decision

After the site visit, the expert group gives an accreditation recommendation to **evalag**’s accreditation commission for confirmation, while the final accreditation decision is taken by CQAHE. Therefore, the accreditation commission also has to discuss the key issues of the study programs.

One serious issue was the professional bachelor of the Lithuanian study programs. Such a degree does not exist in Germany and German HEIs are in general opposed to it. Although the vocational sector in Lithuania is separate from higher education just as it is in Germany, universities in both countries generally fear a professional bachelor would allow providers of vocational degrees to enter the higher education market in large part due merely to the wording of the degree. Therefore, some members of the accreditation commission felt uneasy accrediting a professional bachelor degree in Lithuania while at the same time opposing it in Germany.



Another issue was again the different connotations of the word “engineering.” To avoid confusion in the German context, the reports named the study programs in their original Lithuanian names in order to avoid calling the degrees “engineering degrees.”

Similarly, the accreditation commission did not consider the English name University of Applied Sciences appropriate to the academic level of the sector because of insufficient research, despite all of Lithuania’s kolegijas’ longstanding membership in the European Network for Universities of Applied Sciences (UASnet). Therefore, the commission opted for the use of the Lithuanian original name kolegija.

Accreditation Experiences and Results

VTDK “considers the international accreditation a very positive experience,” agrees Aleknavičienė. “We believe the two programs that have not yet received unconditional approval will next year—but each visit costs a lot of time and feels like a stressful inspection.”

And although the visits were priceless, Limanovskaja goes on to regret the short duration of the accreditation period, even though the periods are identical in Lithuania. “Three years is too little. Half of the students are part time students, so we won’t even have a single full set of graduates yet. How can we be evaluated again when we haven’t even gone through one cycle?”

Buivydienė’s coordinated programs were all evaluated the most positively, and unconditionally, so she is “pleased to the rooftop!” She elaborates that having the judgment made by Germans makes it more valuable: “it’s one thing to stew in your own kettle, but quite another to get a fresh perspective off the street... They were all very efficient.” The evaluation brought her an unexpected affirmation as well, as she reiterates, “we were so pleased they were impressed with our material base—that let us be sure that our pride in VTDK is well founded.” Nijolė Kikutienė, Rector of VTDK, is also convinced that despite the difficulties of the international accreditation the experience was well worth it.

The VTDK staff can only speculate on how things may have gone differently with a local accreditation. It would be reasonable to say, or hope, that the two programs that received the most criticism may have been better received, explains Aleknavičienė: “Personally, I think the CQAHE would have given us more credit; the labs were just updated with a million litas project, which was a huge investment for any Lithuanian institution.”

The conclusions made by **evalag** have been evaluated and many will be put into action. It is not possible to say exactly which, because the yet-to-be-implemented programs have naturally not begun. When they do this September 1 students’ progress will be closely monitored, and if shortfalls coincide with problems the experts predicted, they will be corrected. Generally, VTDK plans to implement the recommendations as much as possible under the law and realistic circumstances: legislation in Lithuania makes requirements of study programs, e.g., the number of general subject hours cannot be reduced to focus more on field subjects or professional subjects or vice versa; additionally, certain laboratory equipment recommended may simply be unaffordable.

In order to find out how VTDK perceived the accreditation procedure, after the end of the accreditation **evalag** launched an online survey to all participants of the four site visits to get feedback on the procedure and its results. The questionnaire was answered by about 30% of the participants. In general, the site visit participants were quite satisfied with the site visits,



scoring 4.3 of 5. Satisfaction with the composition of the expert team, the assessment of the study programs, and the opportunity to contribute during the site visit score between 4.2 and 4.6. The concrete recommendations of the expert teams average 3.7: more critical but still positive.

This view is also reflected in the respondents' comments. Here they appreciated the visits' positive and professional atmosphere. The respondents further appreciated the external view of the experts and did see chances in the procedure of external evaluation and the possibility to improve the program in this way. Some of the comments reflected the hope that the external procedure will initiate changes and signal the management. The cultural topic, however, was also an important issue of the comments. Many respondents referred to the lack of understanding of the Lithuanian situation by the expert group. These comments referred to the unawareness of the local, economic, and social situation in Lithuania, which makes it difficult to compare it to a higher education system in a country like Germany.

Conclusion

The experiences of VTDK and **evalag** in this international accreditation project clearly show the benefits and the challenges of international and intercultural quality assurance. The international experts can give new perspectives to an institution and relate the performance to an international context. On the other hand, cultural differences and differences in the higher education system and the economic situation remain a challenge and a source of misunderstanding that can most easily be avoided by open-minded experts and institutional staff which use the site visit as an opportunity to exchange their views and come to a common understanding of their different situations. In order to ease such a process, it is of great help to have persons with regional knowledge or experience on the expert team.

The accreditation by **evalag** was somewhat unexpected to both administrative and academic staff at VTDK: some areas considered strong turned out not to be, and others where some criticism was expected did not receive it. An evaluation by complete outsiders turned out to be an impetus for a much more detached and rigorous self-evaluation than usual.

Despite all differences encountered, for all sides, VTDK, experts, and **evalag**, this accreditation remains a great experience to learn from each other and to open one's mind to new approaches and solutions.

References:

Eurydice: Key Data on Education in Europe 2012

Questions for discussion:

How can experts and agencies clearly distinguish between their own national and destination country criteria?

Do international accreditations increase the acceptance of recommendations?



Does the added value of an international accreditation outweigh its higher costs?

Should expert teams in general be international?

What could be done to speed up international accreditation, considering local accreditation is performed within eight weeks?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of evaluation conducted by an entirely foreign group of homogenous experts versus a half local, half foreign team that is more heterogeneous?