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# CROSSING BORDERS IN QUALITY MANAGEMENT

## Practical Implications for the Internationalisation of Teaching and Learning at Saarland University

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### ABSTRACT

As a university with a clearly international profile, Saarland University's quality management system in teaching and learning is not confined to national aspects. Internationalisation itself is considered as a key quality criterion and therefore plays an important part throughout the four elements of the quality management system: (i) the quality checks carried out whenever a study programme is introduced or revised, (ii) the support structures to enhance the quality of studies, (iii) the monitoring instruments and (iv) the university's incentive system. Thus, the first major success could be achieved in the field of recognition of studies abroad. Yet the European cross-border dimension of quality assurance still has to be extended, as Saarland University has recently launched the project "University of the Greater Region", a common cross-border area of higher education consisting of seven partner universities in four countries.

### PAPER

#### 1 Saarland University: An International Profile

Saarland University (SU) is a university within the Saar-Lor-Lux region, a dynamic part of Europe defined by the shared borders between Germany, France and Luxembourg. An international perspective has been a defining feature of SU ever since it was established in cooperation with France in 1948. Currently, 16,400 young people are studying in Saarbrücken and Homburg (Faculty of Medicine), 17 per cent of whom are international students.

The university provides a broad spectrum of disciplines. "Europe and internationality", "informatics" and "nanotechnology and biosciences" are the key disciplines that shape the university's profile. The university offers a wide range of international study programmes and a number of multi-lingual degree-level qualifications. Joint degree courses are organised by Saarland University and foreign partner universities in the fields of business administration, physics, chemistry, biology, materials science, music science and in the interdisciplinary programme 'Cross-border Franco-German Studies'. A broad

range of cross-border academic programmes is covered within the “University of the Greater Region” (UGR), a common cross-border area of higher education (Bologna en miniature) which consists of seven partner universities in four countries in the greater region. SU also maintains lively academic exchange programmes with universities around the world.

In the context of the Bologna process, all study programmes at SU except the state examinations have been converted to bachelor and master programmes and the education of teachers has been comprehensively modularised.

Since there had been no explicit quality assurance methods before, the implementation of the Bologna process in Germany also included the introduction of quality assurance processes in higher education. Therefore, the introduction of bachelor and master programmes was accompanied by compulsory accreditations of study programmes.

## **2 Accreditation in Germany and Implementation at Saarland University**

In Germany, the accreditation of study programmes is carried out pursuant to a resolution adopted by the Accreditation Council<sup>1</sup> in accordance with a resolution of the German Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs<sup>2</sup>. Both resolutions contain regulations and define basic requirements and criteria for the accreditation of study programmes.

At SU, the accreditation of bachelor or master programmes is regulated by the University Act. New bachelor or master programmes generally require accreditation prior to the final approval by the federal ministry. However, the accreditation can also be started after a study programme has been launched.

So far, only a minority of bachelor and master programmes at SU has undergone the process of programme accreditation. Yet instead of focussing on the accreditation of every single study programme, the university aims at the overall accreditation of its internal quality management system for teaching and learning. The university pursues the policy of taking institutional responsibility for its quality assurance processes and therefore aims at receiving a so-called “system accreditation” approval.

In system accreditation, the relevant structures and processes for teaching and learning are reviewed to see whether they are capable of meeting the qualification objectives and to ensure high quality standards. The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality

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1 Rules of the Accreditation Council for the Accreditation of Study Programmes and for System Accreditation. Resolution of the Accreditation Council of 08.12.2009.

2 Common structural guidelines of the Länder as set out in Article 9 Clause 2 of the Framework Act for Higher Education (HRG) for the accreditation of Bachelor's and Master's study courses. Resolution of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany of 10 October 2003 as amended on 18 September 2008.

Assurance<sup>3</sup> and the criteria set up by the Accreditation Council are applied. System accreditation is a multistage procedure made up of different elements to determine the effectiveness of process quality. The procedure of system accreditation includes both, feature and programme random samples. Study programmes, which are set up after system accreditation or have already been subject to internal quality assurance in accordance with the requirements of the accredited system, are therefore accredited.<sup>4</sup>

SU has submitted an application for system accreditation and has been successfully approved for the whole process on the basis of a preliminary evaluation conducted by the accreditation agency. The procedure of system accreditation has recently started and will presumably be finalized in the summer semester of 2012.

### 3 Quality Management System for Teaching and Learning at Saarland University: Aims and Principles

At Saarland University the quality management system for teaching and learning has been developed and implemented systematically since 2008. Meanwhile, the university has established a quality office for teaching and learning which is part of the presidential office and led by the vice-president for teaching and learning. The staff members of the quality office are responsible for the conceptual design and active promotion of the quality management system. Although the quality management system is primarily focussed on the field of teaching and learning, there are strong links to the fields of research, administration and leadership.

The system for teaching and learning is based on the overall university strategy and aims at the initiation and continuation of quality processes which:

- ensure high quality standards of study programmes,
- help to achieve defined qualification objectives and
- create a quality culture which is supported by broad quality awareness throughout the university.

In detail, the system is characterised by four guiding principles:

1. The principle of a *participatory* and *integrative* understanding of quality: university members participate in quality assurance processes; quality aspects are an integral part of the decision-making process.
2. The principle of *informed decision*: university members continuously receive all relevant information and knowledge for decision-making.
3. The principle of *subsidiary* with a clear definition of responsibilities on different levels: it is acknowledged that all stakeholders at departmental, faculty or university level have the expertise to decide on quality aspects in their field of activity.
4. The principle of the *systematic exchange* of information according to the *quality*

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3 Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Helsinki, 2005.

4 q.v.: <http://www.akkreditierungsrat.de>

*cycle*: the relevant stakeholders exchange their views in a systematic manner and deduce measures for quality improvement collectively. The quality cycle is applied to all processes in the field of teaching and learning.

These guiding principles form the framework for a number of quality assurance methods which focus on the development, implementation and refinement of quality aspects in the field of teaching and learning.

#### **4 Quality Management System for Teaching and Learning at Saarland University: Quality Assurance Methods**

Basically, four major quality assurance methods are applied in the internal quality management system at SU:

1. Comprehensive, multistage *quality checks* are carried out whenever a study programme is introduced or revised. In case that defined quality standards are fulfilled within this process, the university awards a “*quality seal*” for the corresponding study programme.
2. *Support structures* are implemented to enhance the quality of studies and to support the relevant stakeholders in their efforts to integrate quality aspects in their decision-making. For example, common quality standards regarding the organisation of studies and exams are provided in the form of systematised handouts.
3. Several *monitoring instruments* are set up to continuously supervise the quality of teaching and learning. The university has established an overall evaluation concept which covers different groups of university and defines the underlying processes and contents of evaluations (such as course evaluations, students’ feedback, surveys, rankings or complaint management).
4. As a part of *strategic quality development*, awards and other incentives are granted either within the university or externally. Furthermore, external peer-reviewed evaluations at the departmental level are conducted at regular intervals and thus contribute to the further development of teaching and learning.

The single quality assurance methods are closely interconnected and complement one another. Thereby the relevant information and communication structures are provided to facilitate continuous quality development processes at different levels (departmental, faculty or university). The results of the application of the different methods are reported and documented systematically.

#### **5 Internationalisation of Study Programmes: a Key Quality Criterion**

Internationalisation is one of the central aims of Saarland University (see section 1) and is expressed both in its mission statement as well as in its university development plan. Within the quality management system of teaching and learning, internationalisation also plays an important role as a key quality criterion itself, because “internationalisation at home” enriches the learning environment of all SU students, providing them with intercul-

tural learning situations and thus preparing them for the international labour market. By the same token the mobility of SU students is also actively promoted by offering possibilities to spend part of their studies abroad. Hereby mobility can be realised in different ways:

1. to pursue a double degree or joint degree study programme which includes several semesters at a partner university abroad (“structured mobility”),
2. to spend a whole semester or a whole year abroad (e.g. at a partner university),
3. to go abroad for a shorter period of time (e.g. to attend a language course, a summer school or do an internship),
4. to attend specific courses at our partner universities in the Greater Region, while the rest of the study programme is carried out at SU.

## 6 Internationalisation of Study Programmes: Curriculum Design

In order to foster both the internationalisation of teaching and learning and student mobility, study programmes have to be designed in a way that permits the inclusion of international elements. Therefore, the internal quality checks (see section 4) also cover international aspects. This can be seen in the following questions, which are raised and assessed by staff members of the quality office and discussed in the responsible senate committee before the decision about the implementation is taken:

a) Regular SU study programmes:

- Does the study programme fit into the university’s development plan and major focus areas (such as internationalisation, Europe and the Greater Region)?
- Are the admission criteria for master programmes set out in such a way that bachelor graduates from our partner universities can apply without additional barriers?
- Do bachelor programmes include modules for transferable skills, such as knowledge of foreign language or intercultural communication skills?
- Is the study programme modularised according to the principles of the Bologna process? Are the learning outcomes of each module transparently described so that it can be used for stating their equivalence in case of recognition from abroad?
- Are all instruments of the ECTS (European Credit and Transfer System) applied correctly?
- Does the design of the curriculum include so-called “mobility windows”, which students can easily attend abroad, e.g. internships, elective modules, language courses etc.?
- Do the study regulations contain recommendations for studying abroad?
- Do the examination regulations contain transparent regulations concerning the recognition of studies abroad and the use of Learning Agreements?

- Are the special needs of international students taken into consideration, such as the possibility of taking exams in a language other than German?
- If modules are in English, is the whole study programme in English so that even students without any knowledge of German can apply?
- Is the information about the study programme on the SU website (Information Package) also in English and is it sufficiently understandable for prospective students from abroad?

b) Specific aspects for double degree or joint programmes:

- Is there already a cooperation agreement between the two institutions?
- Are language courses included in the curriculum so that the students are prepared for their stay abroad or are language skills required as an admission criterion?
- Is the award of a joint degree justified, e.g. do the students spend an equal amount of time at each partner institution?
- Is there a transparent “study plan” indicating where the students spend each semester and how many credit points they can receive?
- Is there a transparent scheme for the conversion of grades?
- Are all legal requirements fulfilled in all of the countries involved?
- Does the Diploma Supplement contain all the relevant information for all countries involved?

## 7 Internationalisation of Study Programmes: Monitoring Instruments

Although mobility is being recommended in the study and examination regulations of each single study programme, many problems and mobility barriers can arise in daily practice. Therefore, monitoring instruments used in the quality management system for teaching and learning (see section 4) also help to identify existing problems in that area. There are mainly three instruments that particularly help to identify the practical implications of internationalisation at SU:

- To get an overall impression of what day-to-day student life at Saarland University is like, a *university-wide student survey* was conducted via internet in the summer semester of 2010. The questionnaire included questions about the reasons for studying at SU, their previous experiences as a student at home or abroad and their degree of satisfaction with studying at SU. The main objective of the survey was to identify and initiate possible improvements in the field of study qualities and internationalisation aspects at SU. The questionnaire was also provided in English.
- A special form of evaluation is the so-called “*critical students’ feedback*”. This type of evaluation accompanies the introduction of study programmes and examines their overall practicability. In detail, students of a specific study programme are interviewed by staff members of the quality office. The guided interviews are focus-

sed on vital aspects of the feasibility of a certain study programme, and students are encouraged to address problems forthrightly. The results are then discussed with the departmental representatives, particularly aiming at possible measures for improvements in the field of teaching and learning. The realisation of these measures is continuously monitored.

- Further feedback is gathered through a *complaint management system* in the form of an email account to which students and teachers can anonymously send questions, criticism and/or problems, which will be taken care of by staff members of the quality office. Through the complaint management system, contact persons for particular advice are arranged and staff members of the quality office work as a link between students and the concerned university members.

## 8 Barriers and Problems Revealed

The university-wide *student survey 2010* revealed that the main problem hindering student mobility lies in the field of recognition. Only 35 % of those who have been abroad said that their achievements had been fully recognised and only 27 % confirmed that their studies could be accomplished without losing time. The fear of non-recognition and delaying the completion of a degree programme are the main reasons why students haven't been abroad so far. 55 % said they had not been abroad yet because of the non-compatibility with their curriculum. Asked what preconditions would have to be fulfilled in order to study at one of our partner universities in the Greater Region, even 81 % chose the full recognition as a major aspect.

These results are supported by the findings from the *critical student's feedback*. In various disciplines it became evident that the recommendation for studying abroad was often included in the study and examination regulations, yet in their daily office hours, professors often advised their students to go abroad not during but after finishing their studies. It turned out that recognizing achievements from abroad was seen by many as another bureaucratic burden, with a lot of detailed questions that professors did not know how to deal with.

Through the *complaint management* email-account, very detailed problems of recognition could be stated as well: some students complained that the conversion of grades was "unfair" because of the different assessment cultures in the different countries; others complained that recognition had been denied because they had taken "an academic year off", which means they were not enrolled at SU while studying abroad.

Apart from the topic of recognition, other, minor organisational problems were also revealed: sometimes, studying abroad and recognition was supported, yet the exam dates at SU were inflexible and not compatible with the academic calendar of the institution abroad so that a stay abroad could hardly be integrated into the academic year.

The critical student's feedback in joint degree study programmes shed light on specific organisational problems: these students complained about too much bureaucracy, as they had to enrol in several institutions simultaneously while filling out all kinds of forms

with different requirements in different languages.

## 9 Tools Applied to Overcome the Problems and Successes Achieved so far

In order to solve existing problems and reduce barriers to student mobility, SU has decided to optimise recognition procedures. Using the “support structures” of the quality management system in teaching and learning (see section 4), staff members of the quality office and the team of the UGR organised - in cooperation with the International Office - a workshop with professors and teachers from all disciplines, where unresolved questions in the field of recognition were discussed and solutions proposed. Departments, in which recognition was not a problem at all, presented their approaches and procedures as best-practice examples. Subsequently, the quality office gathered even more feedback from teachers and students and worked out an extensive document, which contains (i) general guidelines and principles concerning recognition at SU, (ii) a detailed FAQ catalogue listing all practical and organisational questions teaching staff and examination officers have to face as well as (iii) a list of best-practice examples. This document was submitted to the Senate Committee responsible for teaching and learning and has been recently approved. One of the major achievements was the possibility of studying abroad while “taking a year off” at SU without having to enrol and pay fees, and thus even shortening the prescribed period of study. The university’s Enrolment Regulations will be modified accordingly in September and hopefully more students will make use of this incentive for studying abroad.

Other incentives for promoting quality in an international teaching and learning environment are also part of the quality management system for teaching and learning. Thus, the joint degree programme in the Saar-Lor-Lux region in physics was awarded “Saarland’s teaching award” for excellence in teaching in this international programme.

Another way of enhancing student mobility and removing existing bureaucratic burdens can be seen in the work of the UGR, in which SU cooperates very closely with its partners in the Greater Region in facilitating access to the single institutions and in designing complementary study offers. An international working group has been established, where members of the student advisory centres of each institution regularly meet. Together they are working on developing a common UGR database which displays all the study offers within the UGR. In existing joint degree study programmes, programme coordinators, members of the UGR team, the quality office and international office together developed a simplified enrolment formula as well as an English and French version of the key enrolment documents. Currently, access to the institutions’ libraries is being facilitated and further cooperation projects are being initiated.

## 10 Lessons Learned and Key Issues still to be Mastered

While the introduction of study programmes at SU has so far mainly been a national affair (except, of course, for the introduction of double degree or joint degree programmes), some international input (e.g. peer reviews) into the process of curriculum design would

certainly have been useful. Therefore, the introduction of new programmes will henceforth include an even closer cooperation with UGR partners who can provide an international perspective at a very early stage of curriculum design. The same applies for the involvement of students in the same process.

Concerning quality assurance processes at SU, future challenges will imply the stronger integration of research, the commitment of the involved members and the sustainability of the introduced support structures. Apart from that, the European cross-border dimension of quality assurance has to be further extended, as there is clearly a need for the development of common methods of assessment (e.g. international peer reviews, international accreditation of joint degree programmes). A first small step in this direction can be seen in the fact that the instrument of the “critical student’s feedback” will soon be applied in some of our partner universities in the framework of common joint degree programmes. A major challenge in this field will be to find the right contact persons in the partner institutions, as there are often no equivalent institutions and often internal quality management structures are only rudimentarily existent.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. What can be done about the fact that some countries do not issue certain documents, such as Diploma Supplements, ECTS-Grades or Transcripts of Records?
2. Which other methods can be applied in order to assess student and teaching staff mobility qualitatively?
3. How can international peer reviews be conducted in practice (e.g. experiences with international programme accreditations)?

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*Both authors will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.*