

Code of Good Practice for the Members of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA)

Introduction

Based on Article 4 of the Agreement of Cooperation of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education and taking into consideration the conclusions of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin (2003) regarding Quality Assurance:

- The European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) agrees on a common Code of Good Practice (Code).
- The member organisations of the ECA commit themselves to sign and implement the 17 standards of the Code. These 17 standards should be implemented before the end of 2006.
- New member organisations are obliged to sign the Code upon membership and implement all standards of the Code before the end of 2006.
- In 2007, a panel of independent experts will carry out an external evaluation of all member organisations to establish whether all the standards of the Code are met.

ECA Code of Good Practice: the Standards

The accreditation organisation:

1. Has an explicit mission statement.
2. Is recognised as a national accreditation body by the competent public authorities.
3. Must be sufficiently independent from government, from higher education institutions as well as from business, industry and professional associations.
4. Must be rigorous, fair and consistent in decision-making.
5. Has adequate and credible resources, both human and financial.
6. Has its own internal quality assurance system that emphasises its quality improvement.
7. Has to be evaluated externally on a cyclical basis.
8. Can demonstrate public accountability, has public and officially available policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria.
9. Informs the public in an appropriate way about accreditation decisions.
10. A method for appeal against its decisions is provided.
11. Collaborates with other national, international and/or professional accreditation organisations.

The accreditation procedures:

12. Accreditation procedures and methods must be defined by the accreditation organisation itself.
13. Must be undertaken at institutional and/or programme level on a regular basis.
14. Must include self-documentation/-evaluation by the higher education institution and external review (as a rule on site).
15. Must guarantee the independence and competence of the external panels or teams.
16. Must be geared at enhancement of quality.

The accreditation standards:

17. Must be made public and be compatible with European practices taking into account the development of agreed sets of quality standards.



Signatures

The following ECA member organisations commit themselves to implement the 17 standards of this Code of Good Practice before the end of 2006:

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Zurich, 3rd December 2004

Annotations

The Code of Good Practice guarantees comparability of accreditation procedures throughout Europe and defines internal quality assurance measures of accreditation organisations. The Code contains a series of normative standards with correlating questions and points of reference. Relying on concrete evidence, the reference points will illustrate how the pre-defined standards can be met by the various accreditation organisations. Documents of the accreditation organisation, e.g. a mission statement and strategic plan with regard to standard 1, can serve to provide evidence.

The 17 standards are binding for ECA members and should all be met. The reference points serve as possible illustrations of the standards and should not be used as a check list. External evaluation of the accreditation organisations is necessary and will guarantee that ECA members fulfill the standards of the Code of Good Practice.

Specifically, the Code fulfils the following purposes:

- The Code provides transparency for politicians, the governments and other stakeholder groups in higher education.
- The Code guarantees reliability of the accreditation procedure for higher education institutions.
- The Code defines necessary requirements for accreditation organisations. All members of the ECA must fulfill these requirements and should review their procedures regularly against this code.
- The Code serves as a yardstick for external evaluations of all members of the consortium.
- The Code serves to support the internal quality assurance policies of an accreditation organisation and provides suggestions for the continuous improvement of its quality.
- The Code shall not lead to predominance of one single point of view, but should instead promote good practices and prevent bad quality.
- The Code should be updated when necessary to conform to the international state of the art of good practices.

The accreditation organisation:

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| <i>Standard</i> | 1. Has an explicit mission statement |
| <i>Question</i> | <i>What is the organisation's mission statement?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation has an explicit mission statement or a set of objectives • The mission statement is coherent in scope and content and is revised on a cyclical basis • The mission statement is communicated publicly • The statement makes clear that accreditation is a major activity of the accreditation organisation • The accreditation organisation has a strategic plan enabling it to implement its mission statement |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 2. Is recognised as a national accreditation body by the competent public authorities |
| <i>Question</i> | <i>What are the official status and the legal basis of the accreditation organisation?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation has been established by law as a corporate body or is based on agreements of national authorities • Accreditation is regulated in the relevant legislation/rules |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 3. Must be sufficiently independent from government, from higher education institutions as well as from business, industry and professional associations |
| <i>Question</i> | <i>How does the accreditation organisation demonstrate its independency?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation is carrying out its operations independently (setting up of accreditation framework, carrying out accreditation procedures, etc.) • Independency of the decision making process is guaranteed; there is evidence that no party has unjustified influence on the outcome of the decision. |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 4. Must be rigorous, fair and consistent in decision-making |
| <i>Questions</i> | <i>How are decisions taken within the accreditation organisation?</i> <i>How are decisions on assessments taken and how are they communicated?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rules leading to the accreditation decision are transparent and warrant equal treatment • Decisions on accreditation must be based on predefined quality standards and have to be comprehensible |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 5. Has adequate and credible resources, both human and financial |
| <i>Question</i> | <i>What are the financial and human resources of the accreditation organisation: actual situation and perspectives?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation has adequate human and financial resources to achieve its objectives and fulfil its mission in a effective and efficient manner • There is sufficient evidence for a secured midterm financing of the organisation • Human resources development for its staff is provided |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 6. Has its own internal quality assurance system that emphasises its quality improvement |
| <i>Questions</i> | <i>Which quality assurance mechanisms does the accreditation organisation routinely use?</i> |
| | <i>Are the organisation's procedures being evaluated (on process and effect)?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation has a functioning system for assuring and improving quality which is embedded in the organisation's overall strategy • Quality assurance covers all operations of the accreditation organisation • Responsibilities for quality assurance are defined and documented • The quality policy of the accreditation organisation is published, including the organisation's goals, processes and methods • The accreditation organisation has internal feedback mechanisms that include procedures for reflections and subsequently revision of processes and methods • The accreditation organisation has mechanisms that provide feedback from expert panels and external stakeholders (e.g. institutions/programmes that have been accredited); results of such feedback are used for improvements • Process and effect of accreditation are systematically reviewed by the accreditation organisation; the results are used for quality enhancement |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 7. Has to be evaluated externally on a cyclical basis |
| <i>Question</i> | <i>How and how often is the accreditation organisation evaluated externally?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External evaluations of the accreditation organisation have to be carried out • These external evaluation committees control if the code of good practice is fulfilled by the accreditation organisation • The results of the external assessment must be made public |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 8. Can demonstrate public accountability, has public and officially available policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria |
| <i>Questions</i> | <i>How does the accreditation organisation include the public in its activities?</i> |
| | <i>How is the public informed?</i> |
| | <i>How are the higher education institutions informed?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about the accreditation organisation's policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria are publicly available • The information must be up-to-date • The accreditation organisation's public accountability is demonstrated by reporting regularly on the outcomes and the effects of accreditation procedures and related activities • The accreditation organisation provides higher education institutions with a clear documentation about the accreditation framework and the accreditation procedures (guidelines for self-evaluation, external evaluation) |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 9. Informs the public in an appropriate way about accreditation decisions |
| <i>Questions</i> | <i>How is the public informed about accreditation decisions?</i> |
| | <i>Do legal requirements or other documents regulate the publication of reports?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The outcome of the accreditation must be made public • The format of publication refers to standardised European templates • Expert reports and the reports of the accreditation organisation must be published according to national regulations |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 10. A method for appeal against its decisions is provided |
| <i>Question</i> | <i>What is the accreditation organisation's method for appeal?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a possibility to appeal against accreditation decisions • Procedures of appeal are specified • Equal and fair treatment of all applicants is guaranteed |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 11. Collaborates with other national, international and/or professional accreditation organisations |
| <i>Question</i> | <i>With which European networks or agencies in the field of quality assurance and accreditation does the accreditation organisation collaborate on a regular basis?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation organisation collaborates actively with other national/professional accreditation organisations • The accreditation organisation acts conformly with overarching European frameworks in the field of quality assurance/accreditation |

The accreditation procedures:

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| <i>Standard</i> | 12. Accreditation procedures and methods must be defined by the accreditation organisation itself |
| <i>Question</i> | <i>Is the accreditation organisation independent in defining its terms of procedures?</i> |
| <i>Reference point</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processes and methods of accreditation are in the responsibility of the accreditation organisation and are not defined by other bodies |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 13. Must be undertaken at institutional and/or programme level on a regular basis |
| <i>Questions</i> | <i>Is the accreditation organisation active in programme or institutional accreditation?</i> <i>Which are the regulations for reaccreditation?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The accreditation organisation has regular accreditation activities at institutional and/or programme level Reaccreditation and validity of accreditation decisions are regulated |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 14. Must include self-documentation/-evaluation by the higher education institution and external review (as a rule on site) |
| <i>Question</i> | <i>How is the accreditation procedure structured?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-documentation/-evaluation and external review are part of the accreditation procedure External reviews encompass on site visits at the higher education institutions The external review team is instructed clearly about its tasks The accreditation organisation provides specific regulations in case of ex ante-accreditations |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 15. Must guarantee the independence and competence of the external panels or teams |
| <i>Question</i> | <i>How is the independence of external panels guaranteed?</i> <i>Are selection criteria for expert panels set up?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Selection criteria for external panels/expert committees are set up and published by the accreditation organisation. Selection criteria assure competence and independence of external experts Independence of the experts is assured by a written statement The decision about the composition of the expert team is made by the accreditation organisation in a transparent way |

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| <i>Standard</i> | 16. Must be geared at enhancement of quality |
| <i>Question</i> | <i>Which elements and mechanisms within the accreditation process are used to enhance quality at the higher education institution?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accreditation process contains elements that promote quality development and improvement of the higher education institution • The accreditation process should respect autonomy, identity and integrity of the higher education institutions |

The accreditation standards:

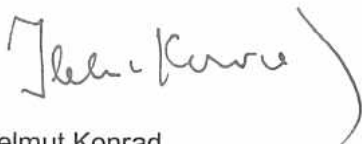
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| <i>Standard</i> | 17. Must be made public and comply with European practices taking into account the development of agreed sets of quality standards |
| <i>Questions</i> | <i>Which are the quality standards and criteria used for accreditation procedures?</i> |
| | <i>Do they meet international standards?</i> |
| <i>Reference points</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality standards and criteria used in the accreditation procedures correspond to European good practices • The quality standards and criteria are made public • The process of formulation of the quality standards and criteria is transparent and involves all important stakeholders |

Sources

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Zurich, 3rd December 2004