

Accreditation: a commodity or a quest for quality?

Ludka Kotarska

Accreditation is increasingly becoming the most dominant form of quality assurance in education at all levels and at both sectors – public and private. Does the growing accreditation market lead to enhancement of standards and promotion of continuous improvement? How does the system of compliance or non-compliance within a given frame of standards relate to a non-judgemental self-evaluation or a peer audit? Does it foster a quality of culture and reward excellence if it is based on the minimum standards principle? How quality should be assessed? What is the underlying principle? What are the benefits of accreditation? Has it become an end in itself or an important component of quality assurance?

The talk will present current trends in accreditation schemes based on the analysis of the UK schemes (QAA, BAC and the British Council) which have national and international dimensions, the Finnish audit model of quality systems in higher education institutions and the Equals international scheme designed specifically for language training providers.

The talk will focus on the scope of the schemes: quality standards and criteria, the role of self-assessment, accreditation processes and actions, procedures for selection and training of auditors, and will examine whether the schemes go beyond awarding quality labels and how they stimulate improvement incentives at the institutional level and facilitate programmes of continuous development for all stakeholders. It will attempt to identify an appropriate balance between external accountability, institutional autonomy and an added value of the schemes defined as their improvement function.