Accreditation Across Borders: The Problem of the Unit

Whether a Programme, an Institution or a Consortium Is the Object of Review

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Accreditation systems are built on units, and the units differ: a programme, a faculty, an institution, a consortium. This article examines what the choice of unit determines, why a transnational programme fits none of the existing units, and what an accreditation that took the consortium as its object would have to review. It argues that the unit is a political decision rather than a technical one, because the unit determines who is answerable for what.

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1. The Unit as a Decision

Every accreditation system has a unit, and the unit is rarely discussed because it is inherited. A system that accredits programmes presumes that quality resides in a curriculum; a system that accredits institutions presumes that it resides in an organisation; a system that accredits faculties presumes that it resides in a discipline.

The choice determines a great deal. It determines who prepares the self-evaluation, who receives the findings and who may be sanctioned. It determines the cost, since a programme review multiplied by three hundred is a different operation from an institutional review. And it determines the kind of evidence that is produced: a programme review generates curriculum documents, an institutional review generates policy documents, and the two are not interchangeable.

The unit of accreditation decides who can be sanctioned

A transnational programme fits none of the inherited units, which is why the accreditation of joint programmes has been addressed by an addition rather than by a redesign. The addition is a European approach that allows a joint programme to be reviewed once, and it requires the participation of the agencies of the countries involved, which is the condition that limits its use.

2. What the Programme Unit Misses

A programme review asks whether a curriculum is coherent, whether its staff are adequate and whether its outcomes are achieved, and it takes the institution's capacity as a given.

For a joint programme the capacity is not given. The library that the students use depends on the partner, the language support depends on the coordinator, the examination regulations depend on four systems. A programme review conducted by one national agency inspects the fragment that falls inside its jurisdiction and reports on the programme, which means that a report can describe a programme as adequate while the arrangement that delivers it is fragile.

The reverse error is also possible. An institutional review that takes the consortium as its object would examine the arrangement and would say nothing about the curriculum, since a curriculum is a disciplinary object and an institutional reviewer is a generalist. The two units answer different questions and neither answers the question that a student asks, which is whether this programme, delivered by these institutions, will teach her what it promises.

3. The European Addition and Its Limits

The European approach for joint programmes provides for a single review against the standards, conducted by a consortium of agencies, with one report and one decision recognised by the participating systems.

The instrument is well designed and its use is limited by three conditions. The first is that the agencies must agree to conduct the review together, which requires a working relationship that most agencies have not established. The second is that the participating systems must accept the outcome, which requires a legal basis in each system and which some systems do not provide. The third is that the programme

must be delivered by institutions whose national reviews are compatible, which is the condition that the approach cannot create.

The result is an instrument used by a minority of joint programmes, mostly the ones that are large enough to afford the process and confident enough to invite the scrutiny. The programmes that most need a joint review are the ones least able to organise one.

4. Accreditation and the Consortium

An accreditation of the consortium would be a new unit, and its logic would be the logic of the arrangement rather than the programme or the institution.

Such a review would examine four things: the agreement, including the allocation of competence and the dispute procedure; the arrangement for delivery, including the mobility, the recognition and the infrastructure; the academic governance, including the board's record and the programme's amendments; and the outcomes, including the evidence that graduates have achieved what the programme claims.

The fourth element requires a programme-level judgement, which means that a consortium review cannot replace a programme review; it can only make it possible. The relationship between the two is the design question, and the answer that the sector has not adopted is a two-stage review: a consortium review that establishes the arrangement, and a programme review that takes the arrangement as given.

Unit	Establishes	Cannot establish
Programme	Curriculum coherence	The arrangement
Institution	Organisational capacity	The discipline
Consortium	The arrangement	The curriculum
Two-stage	Both, at a cost	Nothing, in principle

Table 1 Three units and what each can establish

5. The Cost and the Politics

A two-stage review doubles the cost of accreditation for a programme that is already reviewed four times, and the cost falls on the consortium.

The politics are harder than the cost. A consortium review requires the agencies to accept each other's judgements, which is a transfer of authority that a national agency is reluctant to make, because its authority is the reason for its existence. A system in which an agency cannot decide alone is a system in which the agency's role changes from the sovereign reviewer of a national programme to the participant in a European judgement.

The change is the one that the European framework has been moving toward since the register of agencies was created, and it has been slower in accreditation than in review because accreditation carries a legal consequence. A review produces a report; an accreditation produces a permission, and a permission is the instrument that a state does not delegate easily.

6. A Practical Sequence

A sequence that a consortium can follow without waiting for a legal change has three steps.

The first is to commission a consortium review voluntarily, against the standards, from a group of agencies that agree to conduct it jointly, and to publish the report. The second is to present the report to each national agency as part of the evidence for its own review, so that the national review examines the arrangement rather than discovering it. The third is to propose to the agencies a memorandum of understanding in which the joint review is accepted as a component of each national procedure.

The sequence is slower than a legal change and it is available now, and it has the property that the institutions control it. Consortia that have followed it report that the second step changes the national review more than the first changes the consortium, because a reviewer who receives a joint report must engage with it.

7. Conclusions

Accreditation is organised around units, and the units decide who answers for what. A transnational programme fits no inherited unit, and the addition that was made for it is used by the programmes that need it least.

Three conclusions follow. The unit should be chosen from the question that is being asked rather than from administrative tradition, which means that a consortium review and a programme review answer different questions and both are needed. The voluntary consortium review presented as evidence to national agencies is the sequence available without a legal change, and it gives institutions the initiative. And the acceptance of a joint decision among agencies is the reform that would make the European approach operate at scale, which is a matter of authority rather than of method.



Figure 1 A two-stage accreditation

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