

# Accreditation and EADI's Role in Development Studies

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The European higher education landscape is changing fairly rapidly. In Bologna in 1999 a declaration was adopted creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as an area of mobility of students, graduates and academics and labour market-oriented learning. The Bologna Declaration extends beyond the EU, including Switzerland and Eastern European countries. The implications of this include co-operation in quality assessment and accreditation of programmes of higher education. Since 1999 these intentions have indeed been seen to materialise and it is time for EADI, as an organisation of institutes (and professionals) in the field of development, many of which are active in tertiary education and research in development studies and related disciplines, to develop a strategy towards these various challenges and opportunities. The 2005 EADI General Conference (Bonn, 21-23 September) looked at a vision paper. The thrust of the vision paper was adopted and is currently being explored further by a new task force at the request of the new EADI Executive. In this article we will present some of the views embodied in this paper.

The EADI institutes wish to influence proactively the process of accreditation and quality assurance as far as development studies is concerned. EADI will develop options to play a part in the accreditation process at the European level and to more generally influence the discussion about specific accreditation criteria. As regards the latter, our main concern is that the accreditation frameworks and criteria used are appropriate given the specific nature of development studies.

## Defining development studies as an "object" of accreditation

Development studies and its goals can be described as:

- a multidisciplinary and inter-disciplinary field of study (i.e. not a discipline) that seeks to understand social, economic, political, technological and cultural aspects of societal change, particularly in developing countries;
- aiming to contribute to possible solutions to societal problems that development or its absence may produce. And, as such, is normative and intervention-oriented;
- a context-sensitive academic pursuit, examining societal change within a historical, comparative and global perspective, taking into account the specificity of different societies in terms of history, ecology, culture, technology etc. and how these differences both can and often should translate into varied 'local' responses to regional or global processes, and varied strategies of development and methods;
- a changing and evolving field of study, at present covering topics and concerns such as poverty, environmental and socio-political sustainability; women's empowerment and gender equality, globalisation, sustainable development and human development, and development issues and poverty in industrialised countries.

As a case-oriented, issue-oriented and policy-oriented field, development studies is taught in a particular way:

- It needs to deepen and broaden the understanding of development issues and hence draw on various disciplines. In most cases, programmes and courses are interdisciplinary and/or multidisciplinary. In other cases, deepening the grasp of a single discipline is prioritised but accompanied by steps to enhance the ability to use and integrate concepts from other disciplines.
- Which disciplines receive priority attention will depend on the particular societal and policy issues considered. Anthropology, cultural studies, natural sciences and

engineering, agriculture, ecology, economics, history, geography, management/planning/administration, politics, sociology are each important.

- Methodological enrichment, including from cultural studies, ethics, gender studies, history and the humanities, participatory and action research is emerging; with increasing attention to general skills and tools such as in problem analysis, objectives analysis, concept mapping, participatory methods and evaluation, and broad-based assessment methodologies.
- A gradual shift from ad hoc case study work towards more comparative and integrative approaches is occurring.
- Education in development studies in the North is based on partnership with sister organisations in the South. Enhanced complementarity, building on the respective comparative advantages, and increasing North-South multilocational delivery of teaching programmes pave the way towards a more demand-driven co-operation in education between North and South.

This leads to a set of specific learning objectives or outcomes:

- Education in development studies needs to (a) deepen, contextualise and broaden disciplinary understanding, and (b) investigate societal problems in a way that both provides students with relevant analytical tools and theories and provides them with a wide range of examples, cases and histories. It needs to (c) give students a coherent specialisation focus and yet (d) flexibly accommodate their particular needs and interests given their academic and work background and career path. And it needs (e) to build in ways for students to reflect on their own experience and to learn from each other's diverse experiences and backgrounds.

- Graduates are to be able to deal with the complexities of development processes and issues and to carry out analyses in a broad perspective, using conceptual frameworks sensitive to relevant socio-economic and politico-ethical aspects. They must recognise the need to bring in features, concepts and tools from relevant ranges of disciplines and to relate these elements with scientific rigour.
- Graduates must be able to select and apply relevant tools for collecting, interpreting and assessing (qualitative and quantitative) information on development processes and their impacts, including knowledge and know-how from a variety of relevant sources.
- They must be able to communicate the results of their analyses to a variety of audiences, ranging from professional (research-oriented as well as policy-oriented) to non-professional (stakeholders, other users).

## Bologna and accreditation

Key elements of the Bologna process:

### (i) Quality assurance (QA):

QA is the process of assessing, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving the quality of a higher education institution or a programme, allowing an organisation to reach the standards or objectives it - or an external agency - has set. Academic institutions are required to set up internal QA mechanisms, while QA agencies perform the external part, through evaluation and accreditation. The European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) is to provide the general, consensual European quality standards.

### ii) Accreditation:

Accreditation is the process through which an independent external body (Accrediting Organisation, or AO) evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole (institutional accreditation) or a specific higher education programme (programme accreditation) in order to formally recognise it as having met certain criteria or standards. The effect of accreditation will typically be the recognition of the institution's entitlement to issue degrees, and often an entitlement also to funding from public sources. AOs need to be recognised by competent (national) public bodies and to belong to a European network.

### iii) Qualifications framework (QF):

A QF is a systematic description of an education system's qualifications where all learning achievements are measured and related to each other, with reference points on workload and credits, level, learning outcomes, competencies and profiles.

## Accreditation in Practice

The vision paper reviews the programme accreditation processes in three countries: Switzerland, the Netherlands and the UK.

A comparison of the criteria applied shows that:

- The criteria applied are very similar. Broadly they all specify criteria and related sub-criteria for 1) the definition of aims and objectives, 2) internal quality assurance, 3) curriculum and teaching methods, 4) results, 5) teaching staff, and 6) learning resources.
- The systems all appear flexible enough to integrate specific sub-criteria as they relate to development studies, including its interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary dimension, the blend of empirical and theoretical approaches, the normative concerns, the need for policy-orientation, as well as partnerships with sister organisations in the South.

A comparison of the procedures shows that:

- The three countries all have a phase of self-evaluation, an external evaluation and a final decision on accreditation.
- The differences relate to the possibility which is provided in Switzerland of using a third-party evaluation instead of the evaluation by the national accreditation body. This element is interesting for EADI.
- Other differences relate to the organisation of peer reviews, which tend to be more institutionalised in the Netherlands and more ad hoc in Switzerland. The UK system shows slightly less convergence, but the overall philosophy remains similar.

Thus, accreditation follows similar criteria and procedures in the selected countries, which should allow a harmonised integration and deployment of development studies criteria in those systems.

## EADI and accreditation

Given the complex European context, the possible role of EADI in the accreditation process can be more or less ambitious. Two main elements present themselves:

1. The first, to be pursued in the reasonable short term, is to contribute to the national peer review processes. EADI could develop criteria and benchmark elements at a European level and bring real added value compared to current, national accreditation frameworks. A framework, or more concretely a "Guide for the Evaluation of Development Studies", with which EADI members could agree to comply, could guarantee that development studies specificities are taken into account.
2. The second element is to empower EADI to act as an accreditation agency for development studies programmes or to have EADI set up one. This has been done, for example, for public administration, where accreditation is effectively, at programme level, carried out by a European association. EADI could potentially evolve in a similar direction.

At the Accreditation Workshop and Directors Meeting in Bonn EADI was asked to act as, or set up an accreditation agency for MA programmes in development studies in Europe. A new task force, which met for the first time in Vienna on 31 March 2006, is now exploring practical ways of implementing these proposals by the EADI Executive Committee. It has defined the following results to be achieved by the end of 2006:

- a. Development of a "Guide for the Evaluation of Development Studies" by developing standards and benchmarks for criteria and sub-criteria for development studies accreditation;
- b. Development of an "EADI register of development studies peer reviewers", endorsed by EADI directors;
- c. Elaboration of a vision and an action plan on EADI as actor in accreditation at the European level.