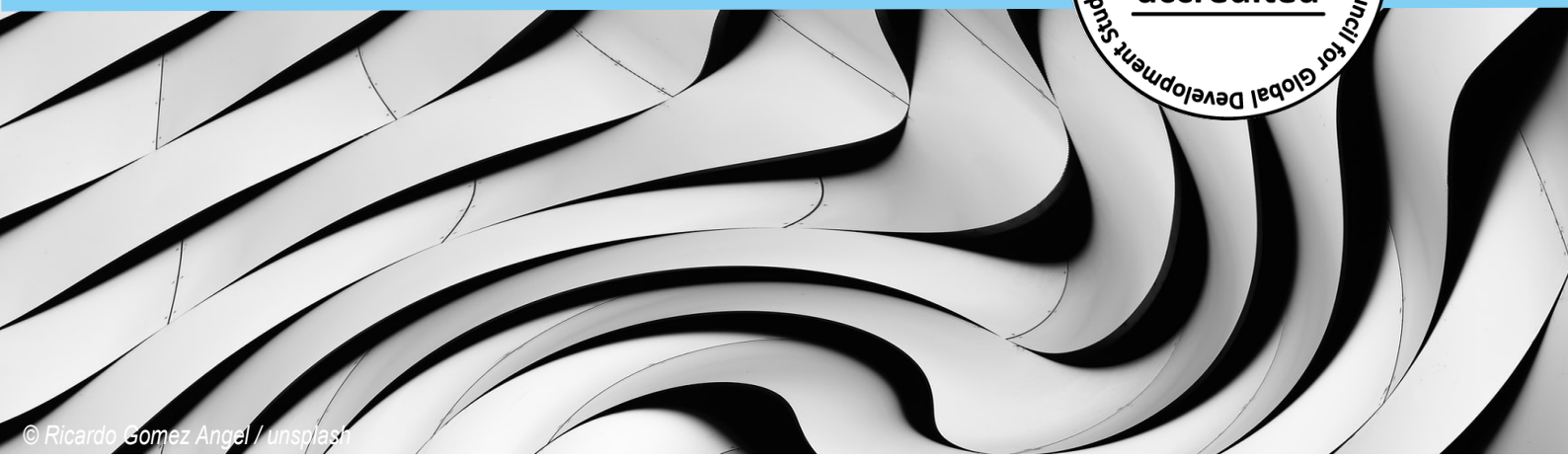
EADI European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes



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EADI's International Accreditation Council for Development Studies (IAC) celebrates its 10th anniversary: Looking back and moving forward

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Origin and remit of IAC

First discussions within EADI about the need for an accreditation system for Development Studies (DS) followed the start of the Bologna process for the harmonisation of European higher education in 1999 and the creation of the European Area of Higher Education (EHEA). A certain sense of urgency existed among development institutes that were going through an accreditation process, since they were facing accreditation frameworks that were not (fully) adapted to the specific (multidisciplinary) nature of development studies (DS). In the emerging EHEA, the EADI institutes wished, where possible, to influence proactively the options for accreditation and quality assurance as far as Development Studies was concerned.

The Bologna process established the so-called Dublin descriptors as the cycle descriptors for the framework for qualifications of the EHAE. The need was felt to formulate the domain-specific objectives of the multidisciplinary field of DS for a number of reasons: First as a service to the field by providing a basis on which individual MA teaching programmes or national consultations could base their specifications; second, as an attempt to prevent a proliferation of individual and national specifications that would eventually become counterproductive to the standing of international development studies; and third as a first attempt to define quality and as such contribute to the standing of international development studies as an multidisciplinary field of study.

To do this, a common understanding of the field of development studies was needed in order define specific accreditation criteria. On request by the EADI Directors and the EADI Executive Committee, a task force was therefore set up in 2004 to draft a vision paper with recommendations to EADI on generating

quality management and accreditation guidelines, especially in relation to multidisciplinary programmes in development studies. The specific objectives of the vision paper were to propose a demarcation of the field of developments studies and its distinctive and identifying characteristics as the "object" of accreditation. It aimed to analyse how DS can fit into (existing) accreditation frameworks and identify in what areas specific criteria and standards for accreditation should be developed, taking account of the specific nature of DS.

The International Accreditation Council for Global Development Studies and Research (IAC) was formally established in Amsterdam in 2011 because of this process and after having completed several pilot reviews in 2009 in Belgium and Norway to test and validate the framework. The IAC Guide for the Review of Development Studies was formalised with the following objectives:

- To define a coherent set of normative reference points as basis for self-evaluations and the subsequent external accreditation peer visitations of DS programmes.
- To form the substantive basis for the formal accreditation decision of the DS programme by IAC
- To offer this guide as an authoritative European and international reference guide in the frame of national accreditation processes and joint national IAC accreditations that set minimal professional standards for universities, student and external stakeholders.
- To define minimal quality standards that are sufficiently discriminatory to both clearly delimit the field of Development Studies and to contribute to the continuous improvement of the quality of DS programmes.

The IAC system was conceived in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA and later ESG 2015). IAC/EADI itself was accredited as a full member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), a global network of quality assurance agencies in higher education, an accreditation which significantly added to IAC's international standing and recognition. Since then, the strategy of the IAC has been twofold:

1. To offer a voluntary external quality assurance / accreditation opportunity to those programmes of International Development Studies not having that opportunity on a national level
2. To offer a voluntary external quality assurance / accreditation opportunity to those programmes of International Development Studies seeking a specific international quality label/distinctive label as added value over and above their accreditation at the national level.

Given that the accreditation is voluntary rather than mandatory, the IAC has needed to promote its existence, activities, and results to EADI members. It has contributed to several activities vital to EADI's image and the image of International Development Studies in general, such as the formulation and update of the domain-specific objectives for International Development Studies. It has also responded to an average of two requests for accreditation per year has successfully accredited over 20 MA programmes across Europe (UK, Netherlands, Spain, Germany, Norway, Czechia), China, Colombia, and Samoa.

Substance and process of accreditation

The criteria for accreditation are formulated in the IAC Guide for the Peer Review of Development Studies Programmes (2018) and are endorsed by the EADI Executive Committee. IAC proposes nine accreditation dimensions, summarized in the table below. While serving as a guiding framework for accreditation, IAC/EADI exercises flexibility in the application and contextualisation of these criteria.

Table 1: IAC's nine accreditation dimensions

IAC quality assurance dimensions	Short description of criteria/example of questions
Inter- and multidisciplinarity	At the institutional and structural planning level, how is your institution organized as an inter/ multidisciplinary learning organization? At the curriculum planning level, how are the different disciplines interwoven? At the pedagogical level, how is the inter- and multidisciplinary teaching and learning organized, what methodological foundations are taught and how many study credits/ECTS are devoted to methodology courses?
Learning objectives	What learning objectives have been formulated for the programme under review? How are the learning objectives formulated and what stakeholders are consulted? To what extent do these learning objectives correspond to the learning objectives stated by EADI? How is the coherence amongst the learning objectives ensured? How does the training improve the students' ability to engage with stakeholders through their research? What kind of management development and applied skills are taught? How are student-centred approaches integrated and promoted? Overall, what do you think is the distinguishing feature of your programme compared to similar programmes in your country or abroad?
Curriculum	Curriculum components, required courses, elective courses, general competencies, balance between theoretical and practical skills, multidisciplinary, integration of diverse perspective and sources from the South (decolonising curriculum)
Student assessments	Requirements and processes should be valid, reliable, independent and transparent to the students. The quality of interim and final examinations should be sufficiently safeguarded and meet the statutory quality standards. In a student-centered approach, the tests should also support the students' "own learning processes" and reflect the disciplinary and methodological variety of DS.
Partnerships with institutes in the South and the North	Quality and scope of partnership with sister organisations in the South and the North both at the student-, staff- and programme levels.
Prerequisites, admission criteria and background of students	General prerequisites; students' pre-entry writing skills; DS specific requirements; specific policy to promote the geographic, gender and age diversity of students? What sources of funding are available, and what proportion of students are funded by these? What percentage of students are self-funded and/or part-time?
Faculty	There should be an identifiable faculty nucleus that accepts primary responsibility for the Programme; a substantial percentage of the professional faculty nucleus actively involved in the programme should hold a doctorate or other equivalent terminal academic degree in their field. Any faculty lacking the terminal degree must have a record or sufficient professional or academic experience directly relevant to their assigned responsibilities. Where practitioners teach courses, there should be satisfactory evidence of the quality of their academic qualifications, professional experience, and teaching ability.
Quality assurance	The programme should assess the accomplishment of its objectives and assess students' workload, progression, and completion as well as the effectiveness of procedures for assessment. The student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme, the learning environment and support services and their fitness for purpose as well as the learning objectives are reviewed and revised regularly involving students and other stakeholders.
Supportive services and facilities	Funding for learning and teaching activities; learning resources and student support are provided. The needs of a diverse student population (such as mature, part-time, employed and international students as well as students with disabilities), and the shift towards student-centred learning and flexible modes of learning and teaching are taken into account when allocating, planning and providing the learning resources and student support.

Source: IAC/EADI external evaluation report, 2020

The process of accreditation, in compliance with international standards and best practice comprises appointment of a peer review team of at least two peer reviewers/experts, a secretary and a student or alumnus, an onsite peer review visit (1-2 days) consisting of meetings with teaching and support staff, students, alumni, senior management, and finally preparation of a draft peer review report by the peer review team. The peer review report is discussed with the institution that requested accreditation and then ratified by the IAC council who sends an accreditation letter with decisions and recommendations to the programme management.

This process ensures the independent forming of opinions by the review team and clear communication with the programmes and has never been challenged by the accredited programmes.

Advances along the road

Through the years, and thanks to the leadership of the IAC Chairs, the following main developments and improvements in the process and content of the IAC accreditation have been made:

Broadening of the scope of IAC accreditation: Requests made by certain MA programmes led to the broadening of scope and the eligibility of different types of programmes by developing adapted accreditation frameworks in two main categories, broadening the type and number of programmes that wish to apply for IAC accreditation:

- **Taught Masters**
  - Official Master recognised by national authorities
  - 60 - 120 ECTS
  - Possibility to pursue PhD (when relevant
  - Substantive eligibility according to IAC/ EADI criteria
- **Post-graduate** diplomas (Continuous education degrees) such as Master of Advanced Studies.
- Awarded by university
  - Minimum of 60 ECTS
  - Substantive eligibility according to IAC / EADI adapted criteria taking the postgraduate, professionalising nature of the programme into account.

Moving beyond Europe: Despite its initial European focus, interest emerged from different parts of the world (often via personal contacts or spontaneously), starting in China, where IAC performed the accreditation of Beijing Normal University, with support from the Ford Foundation (China). This was followed by the accreditation of DS programmes in Colombia (2017) and Samoa (2019). In all three cases, the "European" IAC Guide for the peer review of DS was used in a contextual way, while maintaining the criteria as defined in the Guide. This proved to work well, and the accreditation criteria were not questioned by the programme. The contextualization of the application of the criteria by the review team to the specific context of the programme, such as the specific nature of the institutional set up of the programme in Samoa as a Small Island Developing State, was a key factor to this success, showing the relevance and adaptability of the IAC criteria.

Recognition and joint accreditation with National accreditation bodies: Upon the initiative of the Dutch-Flemish accreditation agency NVAO, a joint framework for simultaneous NVAO and IAC accreditation was defined and an agreement was signed between the two organizations allowing for combined accreditation processes and on-site visits. The recognition of the IAC approach and framework by one of the leading European accreditation agencies allowed us to engage in a total of five accreditations in the Netherlands. A second and similar agreement was made with the accreditation agency AQAS in the Land North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany, allowing for combined accreditation processes and on-site visits according to a merger of the two accreditation frameworks.

Revision of the Guide: Ten years after the release of the first "Vision Paper on Development Studies, Accreditation and EADI", EADI launched a new international process for the drafting of a new Vision Paper in 2015. While the first document focused particularly

on Development Studies and accreditation procedures in Europe, the scope of the new project was to expand to a global level, by considering the perspectives of selected countries in the global South (in particular China and South Africa) and the global North through an invitation to all members of EADI to contribute to an online consultation process. This work was published by EADI and led to the adaption of a revised vison and definition of DS by the EADI Executive Committee and the drafting of the new Guide for the peer review of DS in 2018 (see below textbox).

Figure 1: Revised EADI/IAC definition and goals of development Studies

1. Development Studies (also known as 'international development studies' or 'international development') is a multi- and inter-disciplinary field of study rather than a single discipline. It seeks to understand the interplay between social, economic, political, technological, ecological, cultural and gendered aspects of societal change at the local, national, regional and global levels.
2. Development Studies, as an academic field of study, is also characterized by normative and policy concerns about inclusive and sustainable development. It aims to contribute to possible solutions to societal problems and is increasingly applied in focus and engaged with policy and practice.
3. Development Studies is context sensitive. It examines societal change using historical, comparative and global perspectives. It aims to take into account the specificity of different societies in terms of history, ecology, institutions, culture, knowledge, technology, etc. It further examines how these differences can – and often should and do – translate into varied local responses to regional or global processes, and varied development strategies.
4. Development studies is an evolving field of study, which covers an expanding range of concerns. Current concerns include poverty, inequality and exclusion, environmental sustainability and climate change, global governance; armed conflict and violence, urbanization, rural development, land tenure and agrarian change, migrations, health, education, labour, and gender equity. However, the range of concerns it addresses and the methods it uses evolves over time, as witnessed by an increasing interplay between social and 'hard' sciences and the emergence of novel concerns such as South-South cooperation, poverty and social exclusion in industrialized countries, technological innovation, and private sector actors in international development.
5. Though policy and practice are the primary focus of Development Studies, there has never been a consensus on these matters, nor should there be. There are too many uncertainties and too much diversity in situations and objectives around the world to make this possible.
6. Development Studies promotes and draws part of its strength from genuine partnerships and cross-fertilization between institutions and individuals anchored in different disciplines and traditions, and working in different parts of the world.

Read the full EADI definition of Development Studies

External evaluation of IAC and way forward

In 2020 IAC was externally evaluated by a group of eminent experts from Europe and South Africa, and a roadmap was consequently devised by the IAC Council laying out a way forward. The key findings were presented for discussion at a roundtable with evaluators, IAC council members, accredited institutions, and their students at the EADI 2021 conference. The evaluation, which included the review of a sample of IAC accredited programmes, largely provided a positive picture of IAC's work and added value for the DS community. IAC is widely seen to offer a valid quality assurance and accreditation process. It is not experienced as a mere «box-ticking» exercise but engages a collective learning process in terms of the vision, mission, strategy, and content of the programme. It helps it work on its identity, with other accredited programmes as possible benchmarks.

Three main levels of impact regarding IAC accreditation were highlighted, namely impact for 1) the Masters' programme and team; 2) the university; and the 3) external impact. Regarding the first level the report stressed the value of IAC accreditation as useful and relevant, capturing the particularities of the contexts in which these programs are taught. The set of criteria used by IAC/EADI appear to be relevant to trigger meaningful learning processes and reflections and to suggest actions to improve masters programs. The

accreditation panel plays the role of "critical friends". This impact can be seen in the changes made to the curriculum post-accreditation, the reflections on the specific identity of the masters, and even the self-confidence of the team. Another layer is the impact accreditation has in the University, and the way in which the accreditation strengthens their position within the faculties and increases their standing and reputation. The third level of external impact is mirrored in the "marketing" value of the accreditation, reflected in increased visibility, attractiveness, and student numbers. This effect varies across programmes where some see significant increases in numbers of students, while for more established programmes, this effect is less important. A final consideration regarding the impact of IAC accreditations can be observed in EADI and, more generally, in the broader DS community as it provides inspiration and insights for discussion about the nature of development studies and its pedagogies.

The report also identified areas of improvement for IAC in terms of its content and process. The report reflects concern around the number and specifications of certain criteria and invites IAC to explore ways to review and sharpen them, while also exploring "lighter" versions of accreditation and support to programmes in their quality assurance. Another question raised is the importance of making the accreditation process cheaper, especially if the targets are Southern European and non-European Masters. Different funding models and modalities should be explored, as IAC wishes to move more towards the South. Moreover, the importance of being more diverse in the composition of accreditation teams was stressed. The absence of non-European voices in IAC is problematic and could raise issues of credibility of IAC.

This last point begs the questions of the "European" anchoring of IAC and the ambition to turn into an international (non-European) organisation. In particular, the expansion of DS in the Global South is likely to result in an increased interest and need for accreditation of DS programmes. However, to be a faithful and trustworthy partner with these programmes, the IAC itself needs to demonstrate in every respect its adherence to the process of redefining development studies. As emphasized by the EADI president in his acceptance speech, the redefinition of development studies entails overcoming the hegemonic discourse of developmentalism, a self-critical engagement with power issues and transformation of social reproduction towards justice and equality. This includes a search for new ideas through conversations in different languages based on listening, (com)passion and empathy. This means that the IAC's composition should mirror the diverse constituencies that nowadays practise and shape development studies. While the later ambition is challenging and demanding, IAC has set up a roadmap to address some of the issues identified in the external evaluation and to determine pathways for further engagement and the inclusion of constituencies in the Global South.