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**Quality Assurance at Universities in  
Kazakhstan and the Impact of  
ACQUIN's External Peer Reviews**

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Your intention. Our focus.



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## **Quality Assurance at Universities in Kazakhstan and the Impact of ACQUIN's External Peer Reviews**

### **1. What is ACQUIN doing in KAZ?**

The Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute ACQUIN was founded on January 26, 2001 and accredited by the German Accreditation Council (GAC) on March 22, 2001 for the first time. ACQUIN operates as a non-profit organisation which is financed through membership fees as well as through Higher Education Institutions for accreditation services provided. Currently more than 150 higher education institutions from Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein, Bulgaria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Mongolia are members of ACQUIN.

In line with the idea of the Bologna Process, ACQUIN contributes to the implementation of quality assurance measures in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and other regions of the world. The Agency also carried out and completed a number of evaluation procedures on a national and international level. One focus is the external quality assurance for study programmes and universities in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, North Africa, and the Arab world, most notably in Lithuania, Russia, and Kazakhstan.

Since 2012, ACQUIN has been under the Register of recognized accreditation bodies (Registry 1) of the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK). Within its framework, the Agency carries out accreditation of Bachelor, Master and Ph.D. programmes of all disciplines in national, state, and private universities. The implementation of quality assurance processes abroad is guided by the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" (ESG).

Institutional accreditation is a part of the agenda of the German accreditation agency. The focus of this procedure is to evaluate the organisation and functioning of an entire higher education

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institution, as well as the areas of teaching and learning, research, and internal self-government. A successful procedure for institutional accreditation took place in 2016 in Karaganda.

In addition to conducting its own accreditation procedures in Kazakhstan, ACQUIN cooperates with the National Agency IQAA (Independent Kazakh Agency for Quality Assurance in Education) and IAAR (Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating). Within the framework of cooperation and preparation of accreditation procedures, ACQUIN Agency also provides qualified support and consultations on preparation for the assessment with the participation of highly qualified experts and taking into consideration the specific features of study program/individual university.

## **2. What is ACQUIN's idea of quality in higher education?**

"Quality" is a widely used word in HEIs, accreditation agencies, international quality networks and the political arena, quality is still an intangible concept with very different meanings for actors and institutions. The concept of quality emphasizes functional aspects, which cannot be measured or compared without understanding the aim of quality for individual study programme or institute.

The core tasks of ACQUIN are to promote the teaching quality of higher education programmes and to support the establishment of a culture of quality development at higher education institutions. Its idea of quality interprets in relation to the extent to which a study programme is suitable for an institution's objectives in given socio-economic and legislative settings of a region. Hence, the aim of the Agency's external peer reviews is to assess whether defined objectives and goals are comprehensible and reasonable in order to promote sustainable development of a study programme and institute.

## **3. For what reason did ACQUIN run an impact assessment study in KAZ? What kind of survey was conducted?**

According to the ACQUIN slogan "*Your intention. Our focus.*", the agency continuously assesses own procedures to improve services and activities in the system of higher education. While ACQUIN in Germany participates in national projects such as the publicly funded research project "Quality assurance of studying and teaching via processes of accreditation and evaluation" run by the International Centre for Higher Education Research (INCHER) Kassel, own projects are organised abroad. Each of these analyses focuses on the impact of external peer reviews at HEIs

and raises the question, whether and how established assessment procedures help to improve the overall quality at HEIs and in specific study programmes in particular.

The impact assessment study 2017 was conducted in Kazakhstan, since ACQUIN has a more than five years' experience in the country. A significant number of 207 study programmes at 20 higher education institutions has been visited and the first universities conduct their re-accreditation procedures. Therefore, the developments and changes during the past years are analysed and it is scrutinized whether some of them can be traced back to external accreditations.

With the help of a questionnaire with 16 questions representatives of departments for quality assurance of 17 Kazakhstani HEIs were asked for their opinion on several issues connected with quality assurance and accreditation. The survey was conducted partly as a paper and pencil version during an *ACQUIN Forum* in Almaty, partly as an online survey. The response rate of 59 % was satisfying and therefore the findings of the survey are a helpful feedback for ACQUIN.

#### **4. What are the main findings of the study?**

The questionnaire is divided into three sections that address the notion of quality of culture (quality as fitness for/of purpose), educational programmes and institutional aspects.

##### *Quality of culture (quality as fitness for/of purpose)*

According to the answers of reviewers, external accreditation agencies support Kazakhstani universities in developing transparency and initiating improvements in the quality of learning and teaching.

##### *Education programmes*

Most reviewers agreed that results of the external programme accreditation helped to improve the quality of educational programmes in terms of the objectives; individual specialities meet closer international standards. To a lesser extent, the results influenced curriculum improvement.

##### *Institutional aspects*

The answers of reviewers give indication that external visits of accreditation agency initiate cooperation between faculties. However, some of the reviewers refer to certain restrictions caused by (local) institutional settings within a university.

In general, the answers and comments of reviewers are very positive in relation to the accreditation procedures and external quality assurance agency. HEIs staff members are very satisfied with expertise of the programme managers of the German agency ACQUIN and recommend expanding their activities to the level of the Ministry of Education of RK. On the other hand, the reviewers recommend external quality assurance agencies to instruct national experts that are included in the international expert group on European standards and procedures for the accreditation of educational programmes.

It should also be noted that the survey was conducted anonymously to obtain the most truthful and profound information about the activities of accreditation agencies in Kazakhstan. The assessment was not easy to carry out because the survey was conducted in written form and some answers to the questions were contradictory. This might relate to different understanding or interpretation of certain notions that requires further investigation and clarification.

#### **5. Which lessons are learnt: implications for ACQUIN's work abroad / in KAZ?**

Higher education institutions in the Republic of Kazakhstan face similar problems in regard to external programme accreditation and the implementation of Bologna standards like universities in other member states of the European Higher Education Area. From the perspective of the year 2017 it is the reassuring message that Kazakhstani HEIs are on a very good way to comply with essential standards stated in the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). Therefore, it would be misleading to enumerate problems of accreditation, since this notion is already too hard. However, there are still challenges and impediments for the external accreditation of study programmes. Worth to mention are three aspects, namely the implementation of a credit system, the integration of general disciplines in study programmes, and a lack of experience with international external accreditation among HEI staff members.

##### *Credit technology*

In many respects study programmes of HEIs in Kazakhstan have already a very good level and also provisions of the Bologna Process such as a modular system of the curriculum are in place. Regarding the establishment of a credit point system, standards in Kazakhstan are still aligned with the US credit system, which regularly causes confusions in accreditation procedures. The existing system makes it difficult to evaluate study programmes on the basis of the ESG and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Especially the assessment of workloads suffers from the recalculation of Kazakhstani credits into ECTS credits. With the aim to improve the comparability

of study programmes and to facilitate students' mobility, Kazakhstan should seek to implement the ECTS completely.

### *General disciplines*

The international mobility of students and the recognition of degrees should be also taken into account with regard to the mandatory structure of study programmes. Every study programme at universities in Kazakhstan contains some general disciplines, which are important for the general education of young people. Nevertheless, these disciplines occupy a significant share of the entire programme at the expense of specific parts of a subject. In comparison with graduates of universities abroad, Kazakhstani students receive less subject related studies and their degrees and overall competences are not fully comparable. The government of the Republic of Kazakhstan is therefore encouraged to push forward the plan to extend the years of school education and to move the general disciplines from universities to school. Thus, study programmes can focus in a better way on academic and scientific education.

### *HEIs staff members*

The focus on academic education and the implementation of high-quality teaching depends on active professors and lecturers at universities. Accreditation procedures in Kazakhstan always show major commitment of staff members at HEIs, who are motivated to support students and to teach according to high standards. In this aspect, universities' staff members in Kazakhstan can serve as a benchmark for lecturers abroad. However, some potential for improvement can be seen about the way of presentation of their ideas and concepts of study programmes in interviews during on-site visits. Staff members are not used to discuss structure and content of their programmes in an open discussion between peers. Sometimes questions of reviewers are responded with the mere reference to external provisions, although there might be some leeway for academic creativity. To make staff members of Kazakhstani universities more familiar with the way of discussion about study programmes as it is common practice in other states of the EHEA, especially professors should participate in accreditation procedures abroad. The German agency ACQUIN has already started to involve professors from Kazakhstani universities as international reviewers in procedures at European universities. On the one hand, this will open a window of opportunity for mutual learning within the expert groups. On the other hand, Kazakhstani experts can share their impressions with colleagues at their home universities and have therefore a function as multipliers.

### *Conclusion*

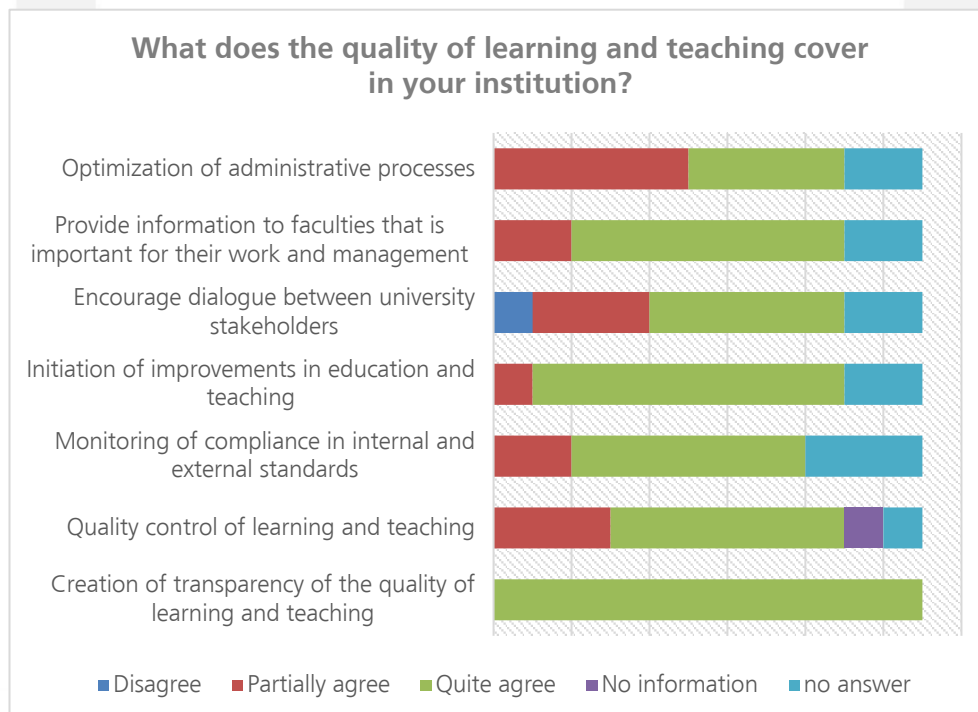
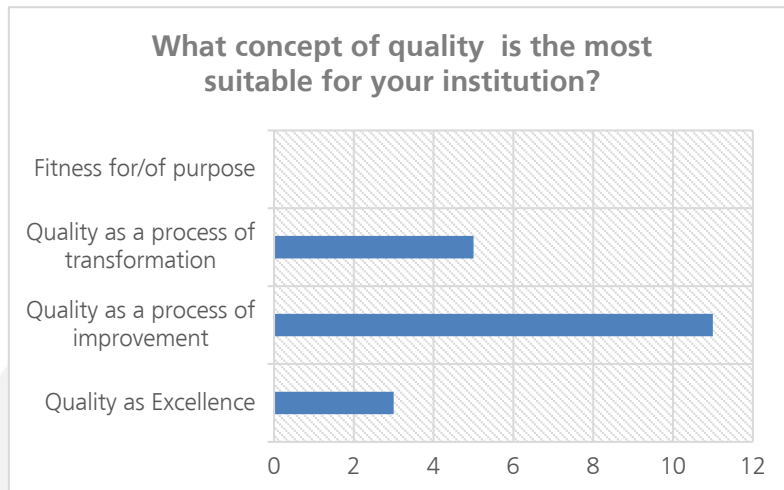
In general, accreditation procedures in Kazakhstan are run on a high level, which is in the line with European standards. This is also true for the quality of many of the provided study programmes at universities in the country. Nevertheless, the mentioned three aspects could be on the agenda of Kazakh higher education policy for the next few years. Especially with some further development in regard to credit system and general disciplines the harmonisation within the EHEA can be enhanced.

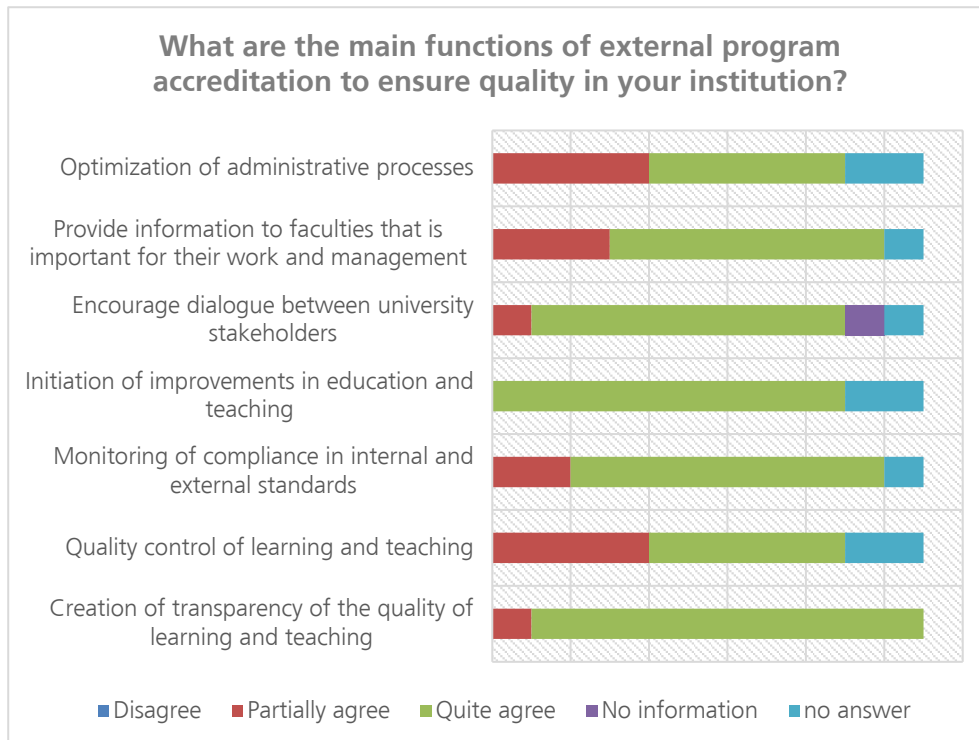
*This insightful study will be resumed once a set of additional and meaningful data will be available. Presumably in a several year period sufficient information will have been collected so that the study can be continued. Furthermore, it is intended to carry on with scrutinizing the impacts of ACQUIN's activities in other countries or regions in the same way whenever an appropriate number of accreditation procedures has been conducted.*



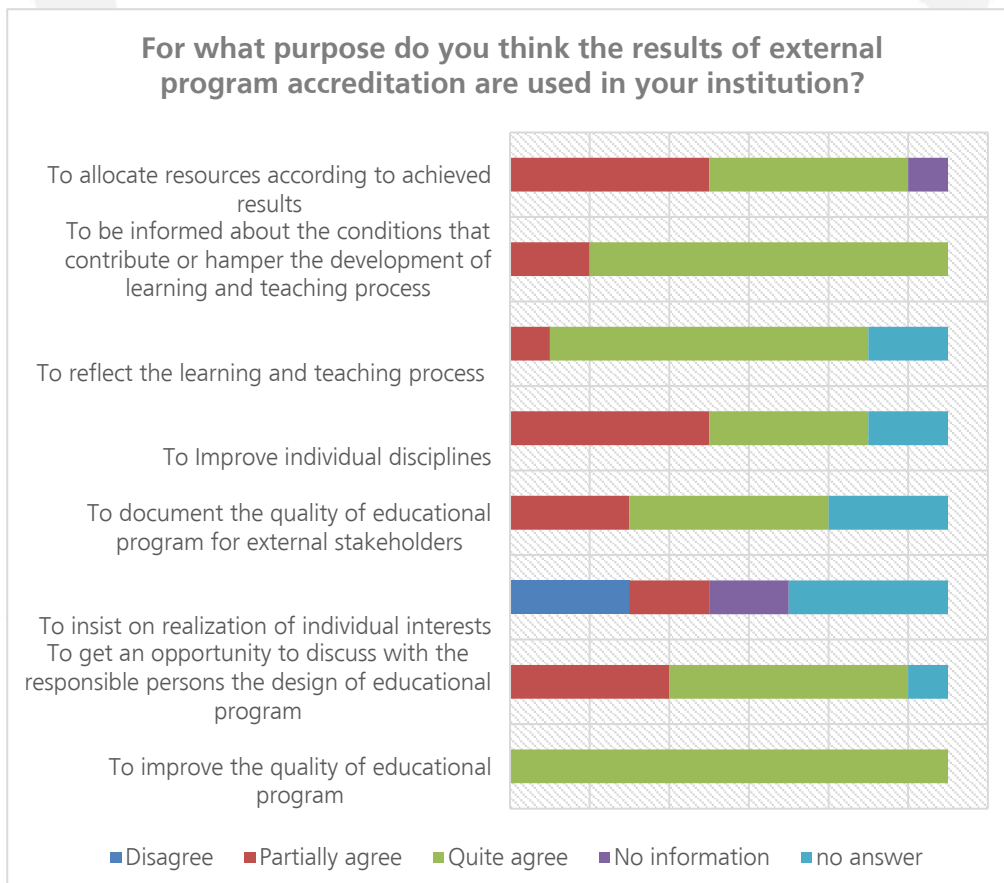
**Appendix**

**Quality of culture or quality as fitness for / of purpose**

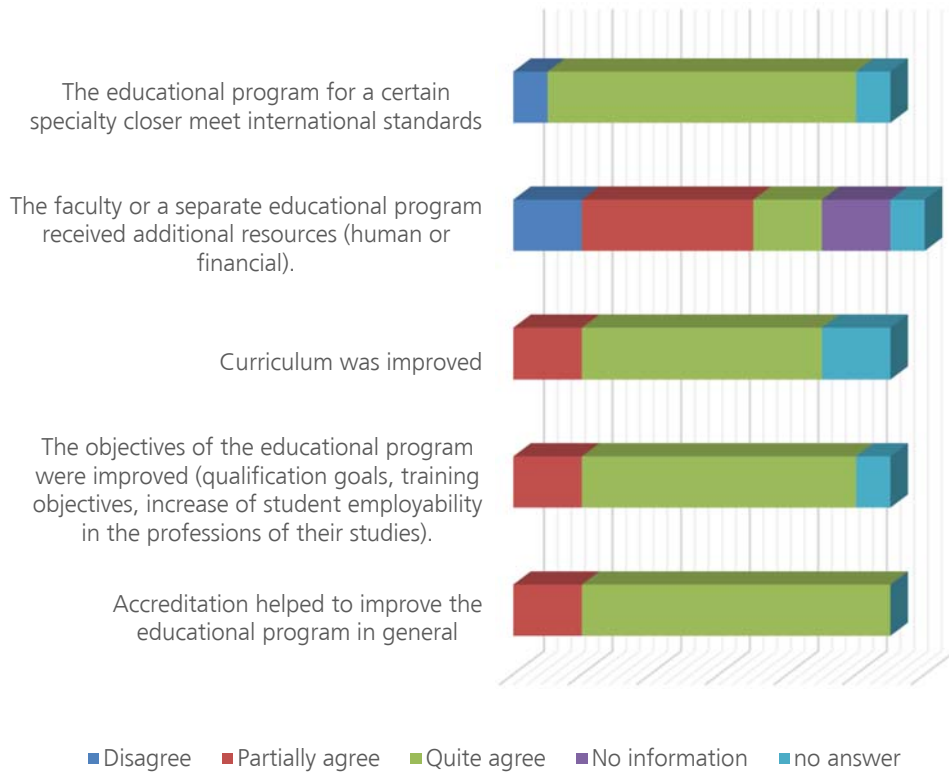




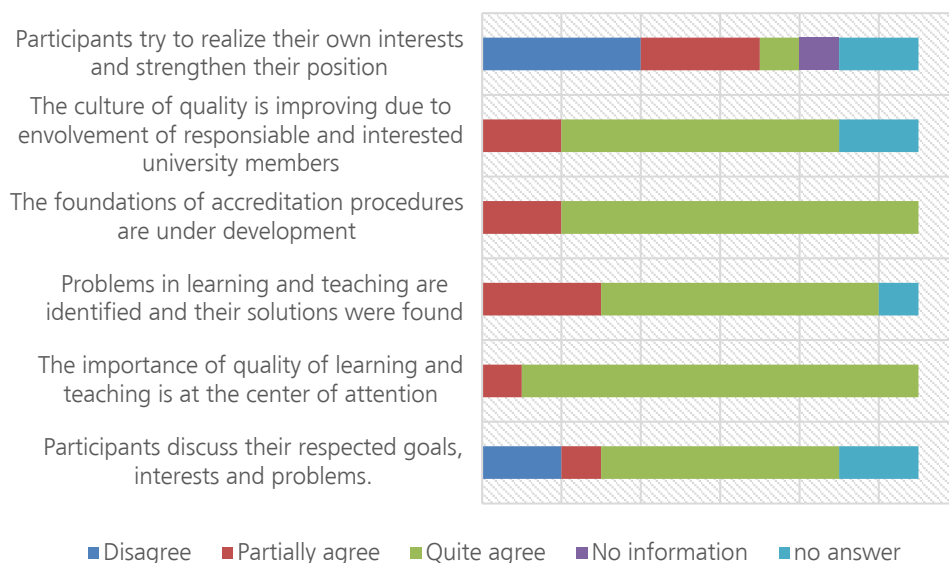
## Educational Program



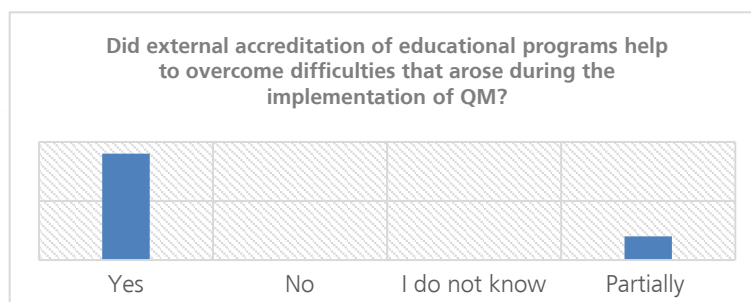
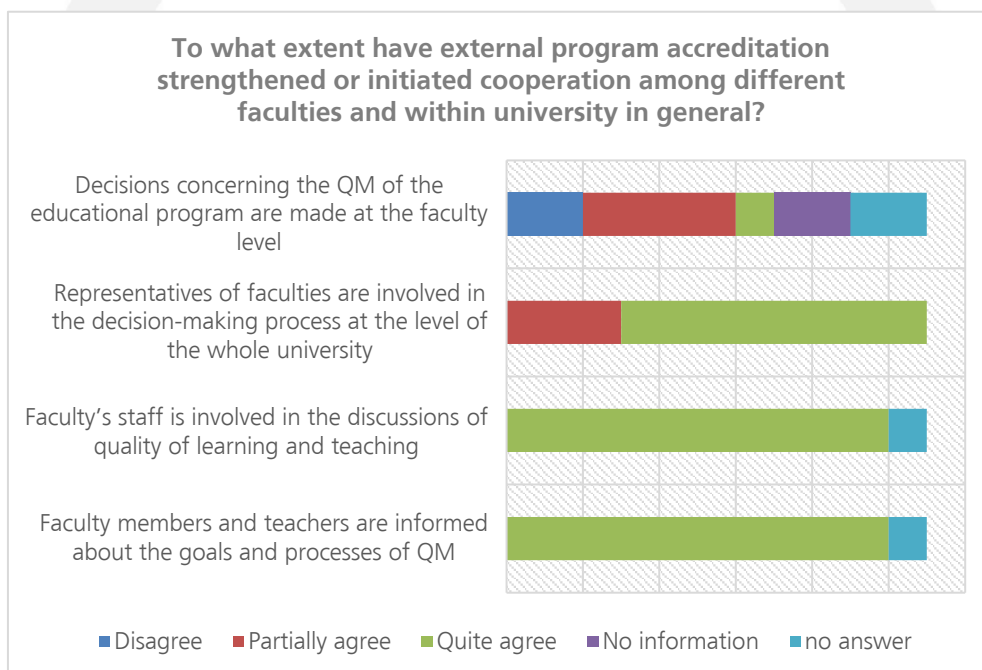
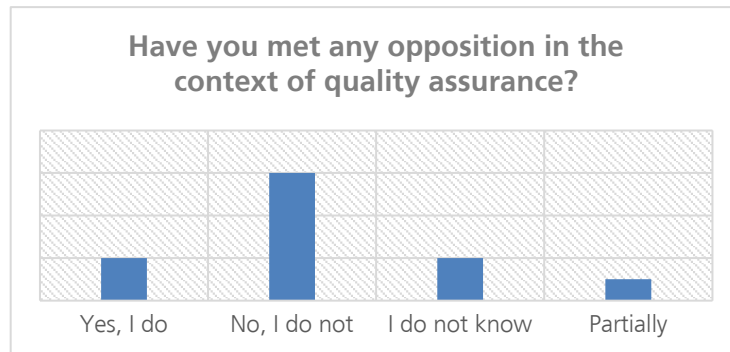
**How did ACQUIN's external program accreditation effect the development of your educational programs?**



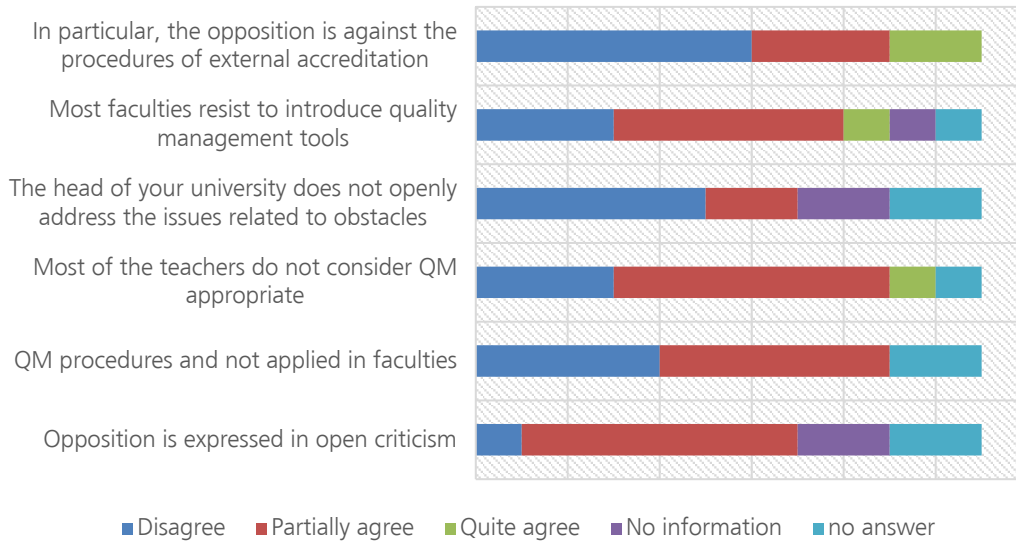
**When you think about external accreditation of educational programs, how do you assess the benefits of process of accreditation?**



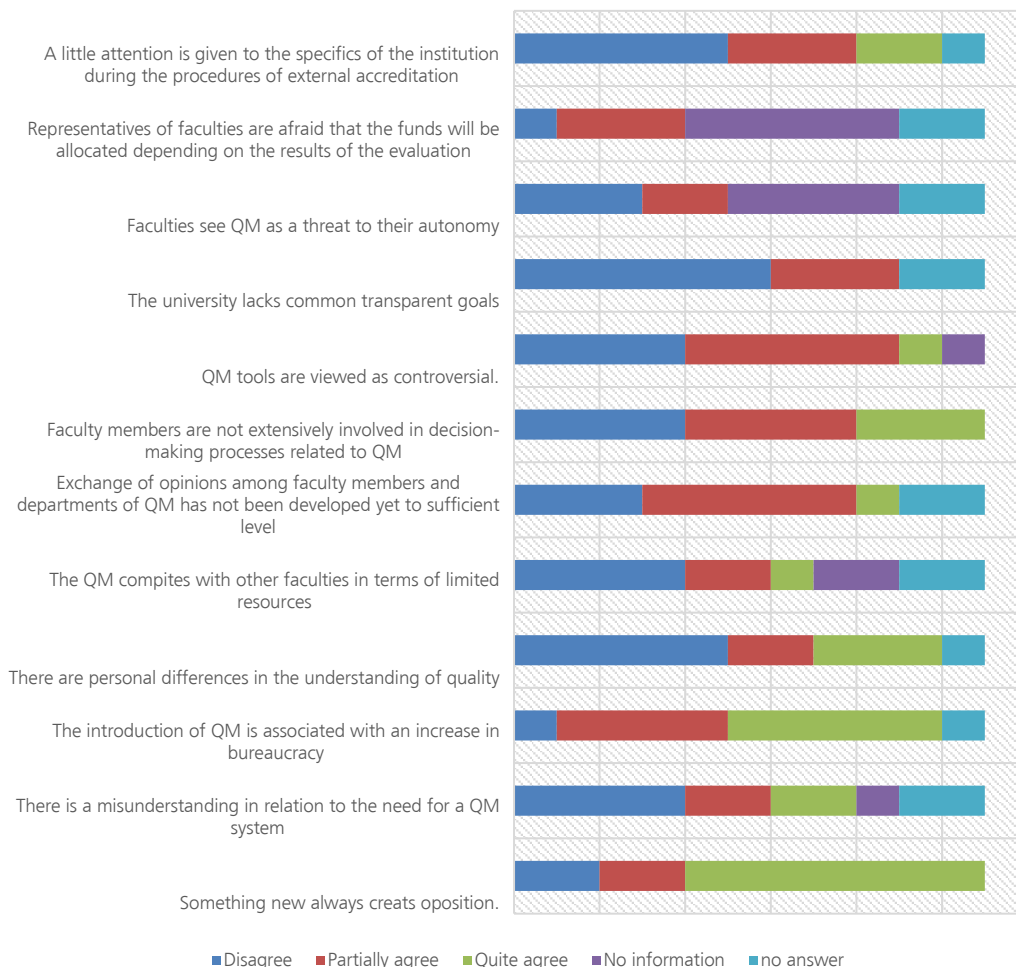
**Institutional Aspects**



**Typically changes in QM are associated with some difficulties and opposition in a university. To what extent do the following general statements apply to your institution?**



**Why do you think there is opposition and difficulties to adopt the tools of QM in your institution? Opposition arises because of..**



**Conclusion**

