

## Concept for the 2024 Quality Dialogue on the topic “Accessibility, Dropout Rates, Academic Success”

### Introduction

The report by the Chair of the German Science Council on current trends in the higher education system, dated January 16, 2024, has made it clear that, as a consequence of demographic change, the issues of feasibility of study, dropout rates, and academic success are gaining in importance.<sup>1</sup> The criterion of “accessibility” in all its dimensions is a decisive factor for successful study, which is why it also represents a central aspect of quality assurance and further development of degree programs and thus of accreditation procedures.

At first glance, these may appear to be “purely formal” aspects, such as standard duration of study, the absence of overlapping courses, workload, as well as the frequency and organization of exams, module structure, and monitoring measures; in reality, however, the question of study feasibility resonates throughout the consideration of nearly all other criteria relevant to accreditation procedures.

In this year’s Quality Dialogue, therefore, the feasibility of study, dropout rates, and academic success are examined as multifactorial constructs. In addition to the feasibility of on-campus degree programs within the standard period of study, the focus is therefore also on the diverse realities faced by students. For instance, students are increasingly pursuing gainful employment alongside their studies, which is reflected in various forms of study (part-time, part-time while working, dual, distance learning) and thus entails diverse demands on the feasibility of study. Digital transformation also opens up new opportunities to increase the feasibility of study—but brings with it equal challenges. What impact do these developments—to name just two—have on academic success? Another key focus is the question of transitions between the different phases of study: How can degree programs be designed so that potential breaking points within the student life cycle become smoother transitions? And last but not least, there is the question of the importance of monitoring “academic success” and deriving measures—not only regarding the handling of the collected data, but also regarding student-centered alternatives to “traditional” or standardized evaluation formats.

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<sup>1</sup> German Science Council (2024): What Comes After Growth? Demographic Change Reaches the Higher Education System. (<https://doi.org/10.57674/30g4-6q75>)

With this year's Quality Dialogue, the Accreditation Council invites participants to focus on these interrelated aspects and to examine them from various perspectives together with students, university administrators, faculty, quality management staff, and agencies, as well as employer representatives and university researchers, in order to shed light on the diverse implications of academic feasibility, dropout rates, and academic success.

### **1. Academic feasibility in times of social change**

This panel focuses on the challenges of designing academic programs for increasingly diverse and heterogeneous target groups. Universities now offer a wide range of academic programs tailored to different target groups: While students who pursue a full-time degree immediately after completing high school still make up the majority<sup>2</sup>, they are by no means the only group. In addition, there are part-time students and working students who are at a later stage in life, as well as students who have gained university admission after completing vocational training without a high school diploma. In addition, an increasing number of students are opting for dual study programs and are thus simultaneously integrated into corporate contexts. This is complemented by students with a foreign educational background or those who, in international degree programs, complete only part of their studies in Germany. Furthermore, many students juggle a wide variety of family responsibilities alongside their studies—particularly *care work*—and students with personal challenges that make studying difficult, such as chronic illness, are also finding their way to higher education. This raises the question of how universities and faculty address the specific needs of each target group—how obstacles can be identified and removed.

### **2. Accessibility in Times of Technological Change**

At the same time, the digitalization push driven by the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the increased development and implementation of digital study programs, expanding the existing range of study formats. This raises the question of how “accessibility” can be organized when in-person programs are supplemented by digital formats or fully transitioned to virtual spaces

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<sup>2</sup> See BMBF: The Student Survey in Germany: 22nd Social Survey. The Economic and Social Situation of Students in Germany 2021, pp. 55–61 ([https://www.bmbf.de/SharedDocs/Publikationen/de/bmbf/4/31790\\_22\\_Sozialerhebung\\_2021.pdf?blob=publicationFile&v=12](https://www.bmbf.de/SharedDocs/Publikationen/de/bmbf/4/31790_22_Sozialerhebung_2021.pdf?blob=publicationFile&v=12) [April 11, 2024]).

be relocated. How do students and instructors experience in-person formats that are implemented in hybrid or even fully virtual spaces? What significance do asynchronous teaching and learning offerings hold, which—in theory—enable even greater flexibility in terms of time and location? Are the digital campus, AI-generated professors, avatars, and bots in teaching and learning environments merely futuristic “gadgets” and technical gimmicks—or, given the irreversibility of an increasingly digitized world and the already widespread applications of AI, are they forward-looking, and thus the next logical step in terms of the relevance of degree programs and quality development?

### **3. *Challenges in Transitions of the Student Life Cycle***

It is not uncommon for the transitions between the phases of the student life cycle to present challenges for both students and universities. For example, how do students experience the transition from high school to college, from a bachelor’s to a master’s degree, and finally from graduation to entering the workforce? What potential problems arise for students and faculty when transitions between academic studies and professional life are not linear but occur in parallel—such as in part-time, distance learning, work-study, or dual degree programs? And how can these transitions—in collaboration with all stakeholders—be structured in such a way that they are successfully navigated?

### **4. *Competency development and expectation management in all phases of study***

In addition to the design of transition points, which primarily takes place at the administrative level, a multitude of other factors play a decisive role in ensuring a successful academic career at all stages—including the transition phases. In this context, socio-psychological aspects are just as important as academic content. How can universities—for example, in STEM fields, but also in other disciplines with specific requirements—appropriately address students’ limited or varying skills and prior knowledge before they begin their studies, without limiting themselves to merely meeting societal demands, but rather remaining committed to the internal logic of academic inquiry?<sup>3</sup> What might successful “expectation management” look like? How can competencies be promoted in a targeted and student-centered manner—what role do, for example,

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<sup>3</sup> See Science Council (2010): Recommendations on the Differentiation of Higher Education Institutions (Drs. 10387-19), p. 17; Lübeck. (<https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/10387-10.html>)

preparatory courses or orientation events, but also individual information and support services? What solutions exist to ensure that student groups with diverse backgrounds can also successfully complete their studies? And how can one constructively deal with (perhaps only *perceived*) “failure”? Might a change of direction be a viable option?

### **5. “Academic Success”: The Importance of Collecting Metrics and Handling Data**

In order to draw quantitatively evidence-based conclusions about the feasibility of a program, a wide range of metrics is generated through evaluations at various levels. In accreditation processes, these metrics are particularly evident in data sheets for degree programs. Courses and modules are evaluated by students, workload is assessed, the framework conditions of teaching are evaluated, cohort trajectories are examined—and the subsequent career paths of graduates are also monitored. But how do universities handle all this data and student feedback? What role do these results play in further developing degree programs and thus, among other things, ensuring their feasibility—or, in the event of problems, addressing them? Are there potentially “blind spots”? And do the figures truly reflect the reality of students’ lives? This panel focuses on the handling of data and the derivation of measures.

### **6. Different Forms of Evaluation for Specific Programs and Subjects**

Specific subjects and study formats not only have their own unique characteristics in terms of organizational structure and content—they also require corresponding specific forms of evaluation. How, when, and in what form is feedback collected? How is feedback from students and alumni incorporated into the further development of degree programs? How can evaluations be designed to be student-centered, participatory, and tailored to needs and requirements? When, for example, are face-to-face interviews appropriate, and when do digital—and possibly standardized—evaluations make sense? But how can the “special challenges” in degree programs with

How should “special program features”—such as “dual,” “international,” “part-time,” or “online”—be taken into account? What obstacles might universities face in conducting evaluations and constructively incorporating the resulting data into quality improvement

? This panel will address specific challenges—and potential solutions.