

## Report

### Support for an Alternative Procedure: Site Visit at Furtwangen University

*Grid Version 02 – December 23, 2022*

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University	Furtwangen University (HFU)
Other universities participating in the alternative procedure	Stuttgart University of Media (HdM) Nürtingen-Geislingen University of Applied Sciences (HfWU)
Additional information, if applicable	Support in the course of accreditation based on trust pursuant to Section 6(4) VoAAv; cooperative procedure

Program-based procedure	<input type="checkbox"/>
System-based procedure	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Initial accreditation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Reaccreditation No. (Number)	
Approval pursuant to § 3 VoAAv dated	September 29, 2020
Trust accreditation on	March 31, 2023
Report No.	1
Report dated	February 8, 2024

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## 1 Implementation of the Alternative Procedure at HFU<sup>1</sup>

### *The first meetings of the Quality Advisory Board*

Following an extended planning phase, the alternative procedure was implemented at the university in 2022. The Quality Advisory Board established for the procedure was formed during a two-part online meeting held on March 25, 2022, and on April 29, 2022. During this meeting, it was already proposed to break away from the originally planned annual schedule and hold two meetings per year, one in person and one online.

The first regular meeting took place in person on July 4, 2022. During this meeting, the HFU was presented to the Quality Advisory Board members through data and facts, insights into strategy and portfolio development, site visits, and a presentation of the newly established Center for Teaching and Learning. Furthermore, the committee reflected on the fundamental aspects of the Quality Advisory Board's work, agreed upon the overarching project plan scheduled for the duration of the alternative procedure (as a "guideline" for the QAB's work), and designated the HFU's internal accreditation procedure as the main subject of review for the second meeting.

This second meeting took place on November 7, 2022. During the meeting, the Quality Advisory Board reviewed the HFU's "Highlight Report" (accreditation status of degree programs) and the FINDO (Furtwanger Information and Documentation Software) and FINQUAS (Furtwanger Quality Assurance System) platforms. In addition, as is customary for every meeting, there was an opportunity for discussion with selected representatives from various degree programs at the university. The main agenda item focused on the HFU's system for the internal accreditation of degree programs and thus pertains in particular to Section 17(2), Sentence 2, and Section 18(1), Sentence 1, of the StAkkVO. As a result, the Quality Advisory Board identified two issues for which it considered the criteria of the StAkkVO not to have been met. This led to binding work assignments (requirements) that the university was to address following the meetings:

- Pursuant to §17(2) sentence 2 StAkkVO, the independence of the quality assessment must be ensured. To demonstrably meet this criterion, it is necessary for the members of the peer groups to sign a written declaration of impartiality. This declaration could, for example, be included in the participation agreement.

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<sup>1</sup> This accompanying report supplements the expert opinion on the alternative procedure dated November 25, 2022.

- Pursuant to §18(1) StAkkVO, the regular evaluation of degree programs must be conducted, among other things, by external students. Students from other faculties (but within the HFU) are generally not permitted for this purpose. Only after repeated (documented) unsuccessful efforts by the university is it permissible to also draw upon students from other faculties. However, the standard practice must be to fill the peer groups with external students.

Beyond these binding mandates, the Quality Advisory Board formulated seven recommendations for the further development of the HFU's quality management system:

- The Quality Advisory Board recommends creating a matrix for the peer groups that specifies which sections of the StAkkVO can (usually) be reviewed and evaluated using which documents.
- The Quality Advisory Board recommends revising the FINQUAS IT system (e.g., process end if there are no conditions; functions of peer group members; escalation levels in the event of impending deadline delays; etc.).
- The Quality Advisory Board recommends enabling peer groups to hold discussions with various stakeholders. The current practice of informing peer groups exclusively through the dean of studies could, for example, be supplemented by discussions with students and graduates.
- The Quality Advisory Board recommends making the results of the regular program committees for each degree program available to the peer groups.
- The Quality Advisory Board recommends systematically uploading the materials additionally sent by the Dean of Studies to the peer group to FINQUAS.
- The Quality Advisory Board recommends clarifying or supplementing the complaint management processes. For example, it could be helpful to implement documentation regarding the occurrence of complaints, their processing (in terms of content and timing), and the feedback provided to the complainant. In addition, the peer groups should be shown how the complaint management system works in advance so that they can also use the system if necessary.
- The Quality Advisory Board recommends that graduates be surveyed on a regular basis (e.g., via a standardized questionnaire) so that the evaluations of these stakeholders can also be incorporated into the peer groups' assessment of the degree programs. The results of the alumni surveys should be made available to the peer groups along with the other initial documents at the kick-off meeting

. Since the HFU regularly participates in the HAW's graduate surveys, these results should also be made available to the peer groups.

In February 2023, the HFU submitted a written response to the requirements and recommendations of the Quality Advisory Board. The Quality Advisory Board addressed this response at its subsequent third meeting, which was preceded by a preparatory meeting in March 2023.

*Third meeting of the Quality Advisory Board, site visit by the review panel*

The next regular meeting of the Quality Advisory Board, initially scheduled for July 4, 2023, had to be postponed due to the illness of one or more key participants. The subsequent alternate date of October 4, 2023, could not be held either, due to a cyberattack on the university. Ultimately, this third meeting of the Quality Advisory Board took place on January 15, 2024, in person at the HFU's Schwenningen campus; it was attended by the evaluators from the Accreditation Council for the Alternative Procedure, who participated in the meeting in an observational capacity but also had the opportunity for explicit discussion with representatives of the university and the members of the Quality Advisory Board.

In advance, all documents for the Quality Advisory Board meeting were made available to the members of the review panel. These included the HFU's response to the requirements and recommendations previously issued by the Quality Advisory Board, information on the structure, organization, and academic institutions of the HFU, descriptions of the processes for program development at the HFU, the HFU's teaching mission statement, and detailed information on two degree programs (the master's program "Innovation Engineering," and the bachelor's program "Applied Business Law").

In addition to formalities, this meeting of the Quality Advisory Board included the following key agenda items: Explanation and discussion of the HFU's response to the Quality Advisory Board's requirements and recommendations (from its meeting on November 7, 2022); discussion of the processes and guidelines for implementing the HFU's teaching mission statement; Discussions with program directors, faculty members, students, and other responsible parties regarding the implementation of the mission statements; internal consultation; closing discussion. Integrated into this process were additional discussions that enabled the evaluators from the Accreditation Council to engage in dialogue with both the members of the Quality Advisory Board and the representatives of the university.

### *Impressions of the review panel*

Both the planning and the conduct of this third meeting of the Quality Advisory Board were overshadowed by the cyberattack on the university, which occurred in 2023 and caused exceptionally severe disruptions to all aspects of the university's daily operations. As a result of this cyberattack, nearly all of the university's operational data was lost, and the corresponding electronic management and support systems, including FINQUAS and FINDO, were no longer available. For example, there were no longer any digital exam records for students, and electronic course registration could not be carried out. This situation put the entire university into crisis mode for a very long period, and all processes had to be managed on an emergency basis using data that had to be recreated or restored from non-electronic sources (entered in Word or Excel). Only through the far-above-average dedication of the university's staff and daily crisis meetings was it possible to ensure minimal operations. Despite these massive disruptions, the university was able to signal to the members of the Quality Advisory Board and the Evaluation Committee a return to routine procedures, thereby presenting an overall more impressive picture of its ability to act in crisis situations.

Even from the minutes of the first two meetings of the Quality Advisory Board, which took place in the course of 2022, it was clear to the evaluators that the Quality Advisory Board is well aware of its role as an advisory and oversight body and fulfills this role with great commitment. This impression was further reinforced during participation in the meeting in January 2024. The committee interacted with the university representatives as equals, identified and elaborated on areas for improvement, and jointly developed appropriate solutions and measures. The review panel rates both the preparation and the conduct of the meeting as very good and considers them highly conducive to the objectives of the alternative accreditation process.

The following section will examine in greater detail how the Quality Advisory Board operated during its third meeting, focusing on key agenda items, particularly with regard to the Quality Advisory Board's role in the alternative procedure.

The first major agenda item consisted of the presentation and discussion of the HFU's response to the requirements and recommendations made by the Quality Advisory Board during the meeting on November 7, 2022. The first requirement addressed the necessary declarations of impartiality by the peer group members. The responsible vice president presented the university's implementation activities and measures, which essentially involved

adjusting and supplementing the relevant processes. The Quality Advisory Board critically discussed these measures and identified a need for readjustment regarding the university's proposed declaration of impartiality. In this regard, it proposed that peer group members could confirm their impartiality themselves by signature. The possibility of electronic confirmation was also discussed. The university already committed to making the necessary revisions during the meeting, so compliance with this requirement will again be the subject of discussion at the next meeting of the Quality Advisory Board.

The measures proposed by the university to implement the second requirement (appointing external students to the peer groups) are deemed appropriate by the members of the Quality Advisory Board.

The measures already implemented or planned to carry out the seven recommendations issued by the Quality Advisory Board were also explained by the responsible vice president and subsequently discussed and evaluated by the members of the Quality Advisory Board. From the evaluators' perspective, this further confirms the impression that both the HFU's QM staff and the Quality Advisory Board are proceeding in accordance with the overarching alternative procedure and implementing it effectively.

The discussions between the Quality Advisory Board and university representatives were characterized overall by a culture of partnership and constructive dialogue: The Quality Advisory Board sees itself as a *"critical friend"* that engages in a critical yet constructive, criteria-based evaluation of the HFU's quality management system, but also views itself as a sparring partner for the university and does not shy away from approaching discussed topics and raised questions in a solution-oriented manner. The fact that the university and the Quality Advisory Board meet on equal footing and network beyond the advisory board meetings (through a planned report format by the chair of the Quality Advisory Board at an upcoming meeting of the HFU Senate) is perceived by the members of the review panel as a very meaningful and appreciative collaboration. This results in a shared commitment to continuously further developing the HFU's quality management system.

However, the evaluators question the extent to which it is possible to provide members of both the peer groups in internal accreditation procedures and the Quality Advisory Board with sufficiently deep insights into everyday university life that are not overly influenced by the filter of the university's quality management system. At this point, Recommendation 3 is highlighted as an example, which is intended to facilitate a stronger and more detailed exchange between the peer groups and the university's stakeholders. This

recommendation is described by the university as “under review,” and the associated description of measures remains unclear, at least in part:

“The Vice President for Academic Affairs and the HFU’s Quality Management department support this recommendation. Discussions regarding its implementation will be held with program directors who have experience with internal accreditation processes, as well as with the Quality Management Board. In addition, the university intends to conduct pilot projects to implement such procedures on a trial basis in order to gain empirical insights into the matter. Consequently, a statement will be prepared for the quality report on this matter.”

Here, the evaluators would have liked to see a clearer commitment from the HFU to establish such discussion forums. This also applies to the level of exchange between the Quality Advisory Board and the members or member groups of the university. For example, even during the later agenda item

“Discussions with program directors, faculty, students, and other responsible parties regarding the implementation of the mission statements,” despite the consistently constructive discussions, one could gain the impression that representatives from the individual member and status groups who were more familiar with QM were involved or sent. In particular, it was noted that, with the exception of one master’s student who already intends to pursue a doctorate, no other bachelor’s or master’s students were present. However, the evaluators consider it important, in the interest of the effectiveness of the alternative procedure, that the Quality Advisory Board be given sufficient opportunities for exchange with representatives of all member groups of the university, particularly students at all stages of their studies. In this context, reference should also be made to the subsequently submitted statement from the HFU Student Council, which commends the fact that contact persons are always available to students when needed, but also contains statements such as the following:

“Another problem is the relatively arbitrary selection of students in some StuKos [Author’s note: Study Commissions].”

“Unfortunately, at the HFU there are no student representatives on the ZPA [Author’s note: Central Examination Board] or on the FPAs [Author’s note: Faculty Examination Boards]. Furthermore, as a student (including as a representative on the FAR [Author’s note: Faculty Council]), one generally gets little to nothing out of the work in the committees.”

“One problem is that the student member of the appointment committee is selected arbitrarily from among all students in a faculty and, as a result, does not have particularly strong ties to the faculty.”

The evaluators classify the aforementioned statements as follows: In their view, this does not constitute a specific, current problem requiring special measures. Overall, the evaluators have the impression that the alternative procedure—due to its distinctive feature of continuous support for the university by the Quality Advisory Board in the area of quality management—has functioned very well in its implementation to date and is having a positive impact on the university. However, to further ensure this positive impact, the evaluators consider it essential that members of the Quality Advisory Board be given the opportunity to gain deep insight into the university's day-to-day operations and, as needed or upon request, to engage in dialogue with all members—and in particular with representative members of all member and status groups—in order to form their own judgment. Otherwise, there is a real risk that the insights granted to the Quality Advisory Board will be overly filtered through the perspective of the QM staff, potentially preventing the identification of areas for improvement.

In this context, the evaluators would also like to emphasize once again the importance of engaging with students (and student groups), which the university should actively promote on an ongoing basis: Students play a crucial role in the quality assurance of academic programs at universities, as they are directly affected by the quality of instruction, available resources, and the organization of their studies. Their involvement ensures that feedback and suggestions from the learners' perspective are incorporated into the evaluation and further development of degree programs. This not only leads to higher student satisfaction but also to a practical and future-oriented design of course content. Through their daily experience in the academic environment, students can provide valuable insights into which areas are functioning well and where there is room for improvement. Their active participation also fosters a sense of shared responsibility and community within the university, which has a positive impact on the learning environment as a whole. Ultimately, integrating the student perspective into quality assurance ensures that degree programs not only meet academic standards but also address the needs and expectations of students.

Overall, from the evaluators' perspective, the continuous quality management being pursued represents a kind of cultural shift that must reach all members of the university. It was evident from various statements by the Vice Rector and the QM staff that this is not yet the case for all members of the university (including individual Senate members).

In the reviewers' view, this cannot yet be expected at present; however, in the further course of the alternative procedure, care should be taken to work more rigorously toward this goal and to make it clear that quality management is a matter for all members of the university and must not be regarded solely as the task of specific officials or the QM Board established for this purpose. This should be enshrined as a specific requirement or function in the partially revised composition of the QM Board.

In the opinion of the evaluators, this also applies to all other agenda items and related discussions—in particular the discussion of the mission statement and the conclusions drawn from it by the Quality Advisory Board—namely that the Quality Advisory Board fulfills the role assigned to it in the alternative procedure as a “constantly available *critical* friend” with great dedication and a strong sense of responsibility. Thus, the implementation of the teaching mission statement was discussed in the context of the redesign of one degree program and the further development of another. In doing so, the Quality Advisory Board provided valuable input on the further development of the mission statement. It expressed the view that distinctive features such as bilingual degree programs and the research master's degree represent unique selling points for the university that should be given greater consideration, and it suggested a process for the continuous shaping, refinement, and concretization of the mission statement. Furthermore, it must be ensured that the mission statement is actually put into practice.

#### *Findings Already Derivable from the Implementation of the Alternative Procedure*

According to the assessment of the expert panel, the Alternative Procedure at Furtwangen University has demonstrated that this “alternative approach,” alongside established forms of program and system accreditation, is well-suited to providing new impetus for the accreditation system.

The positive aspects evident from the implementation of the system at HFU are outlined below on two levels. Similar observations were made in the accompanying procedures at the Stuttgart Media University (HdM) and the Nürtingen-Geislingen University of Applied Sciences (HfWU), so the following remarks are based on the findings from these procedures.

First, the concrete, collaborative approach adopted by the participating universities is both innovative and practical. A quality management system has been successfully implemented that systematically integrates teaching quality management with the universities' operational processes. Through the continuous review of the established quality criteria in line with the universities' requirements and the appropriate selection of topics—including the

option to “resubmit” individual topics or criteria at the regular meetings of the quality advisory boards within the accreditation cycle, a clear shift is emerging toward a “tailored” understanding of QM that moves beyond the rough eight-year cycles and approaches a Total Quality Management approach familiar from industry—at least in the area of teaching. It is positive that this promotes the further development of a “quality culture” at the universities.

Likewise, the on-site visit to the HFU in Schwenningen demonstrated that the intended dual function—on the one hand, the review of criteria, and on the other, the HFU Quality Advisory Board’s self-image as an advisory body—works in practice.

The networking of the quality advisory boards with one another, as envisaged in the further course of the alternative procedure, could in the future lead to an overarching process of regular reflection on *best practices*. This is already being supported at the coordination level by the QM departments of the Operative, which meet for regular exchanges. The experts consider the cross-university coordination office, which rotates among the universities, to be a beneficial element for this networking process. This establishes a building block for securing the new approach. The new QM approach is, consequently, designed to ensure a high degree of continuity—one of its most important aspects. An example of this is the effort to create the opportunity to scrutinize developments in a timely manner through the continuous support of the Quality Advisory Board. Equally convincing is the assessment that accreditation-related peaks in workload can be mitigated compared to the efforts required for system accreditation—and this applies to all parties involved in the QM process. However, it should be noted that this continuity also leads to a greater number of participants overall and thus to higher costs.

Particular attention must be paid to the measures necessary to ensure “continuity,” since the Alternative Procedure is not only characterized by the core element of continuous support from the Quality Advisory Boards, but conversely, the success of this continuous support is a prerequisite for fulfilling the objectives of the entire Alternative Procedure—both in terms of its impact on the participating universities and the synergies to be achieved across institutions. One can only speak of the “further development and sustainable implementation of a culture of quality” if the Quality Advisory Board, on the one hand, functions as a body and (!), furthermore, is given the opportunity to gain deep insight into the day-to-day operations of the institution, so that it can not only respond to improvement potential explicitly brought to its attention, but also identify such potential itself and establish the relevant connections. The Quality Advisory Board must therefore

achieve a certain degree of independence. This should be supported and reflected upon in the ongoing monitoring of the Alternative Procedure.

Secondly, and to a certain extent at the meta-level of accreditation, it is evident that it makes sense to provide universities with the legal framework for developing their own, new QM approaches. This grants the diverse university landscape a scope for action that goes beyond a rigid adherence to the State Treaty on Study Program Accreditation and the Model Statutory Ordinance in their respective state versions. The experts welcome the flexibility created by this. Even with this first Alternative Procedure at the system level, a convincing alternative has emerged.

## **2 Proposals for the design of further monitoring by the Accreditation Council**

The review panel recommends that the Accreditation Council initially continue to monitor the alternative procedure at HFU based on documentation.

Like the other two universities participating in the alternative procedure, the HFU plans to conduct its own mid-term evaluation for the fourth year of the alternative procedure's implementation. The inter-university coordination office will be involved in the preparation of the mid-term evaluation. It would be desirable for the Accreditation Council to observe the mid-term evaluation at the HFU, if necessary with the participation of representatives from the expert panel.

The experts recommend holding a joint event following the mid-term evaluations at the respective universities to conduct a comprehensive and specific analysis of the results. The Accreditation Council should participate in this event.

## **3 Recommendations of the Reviewers**

The Quality Advisory Board should hold regular independent discussions during its meetings with representatives of all university member groups, particularly representatives of students from all degree programs and academic stages. The discussion partners or representatives of the member groups should be appointed by the respective groups and not selected by the university administration.

## **4 Guidance**

### **4.1 General Notes**

The on-site visit took place on January 15, 2024, in person at Furtwangen University in Schwenningen. It included observing the third meeting of the Quality Advisory Board, as well as two discussion sessions with representatives of the Quality Advisory Board and members of the internal steering group, as well as with representatives of the Senate and the University Council.

### **4.2 Legal Basis *State Accreditation Treaty Model***

*Statutory Regulation / State Statutory Regulation*

*European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)*

*Rules of Procedure for Alternative Accreditation Procedures (VoAAv)*

*Agreement on the Implementation of an Alternative Accreditation Procedure dated September 21, 2021*

### **4.3 Expert Panel Support**

#### a) University Professor

- Prof. Dr.-Ing. Norbert Ritter, Dean of the Faculty of Mathematics, Computer Science, and Natural Sciences, University of Hamburg (Spokesperson for the Panel of Reviewers)

#### b) Representative from the professional field

- Dr. Kira Stein, EOQ Quality Systems Manager

#### c) Student Representative

- Christopher Bohlens, Leuphana University of Lüneburg: Management and Business Development (M.Sc.); FernUniversität Hagen: Law (LL.B.) (participation based on written records)

### **4.4 Supervision by the Accreditation Council (Section 34(5), Sentence 2 MRVO)**

- Prof. Dr. Christine Bescherer, Ludwigsburg University of Education
- Prof. Dr. Holger Burckhart, University of Siegen (participation based on written materials)

#### 4.5 Support provided by the Accreditation Council's Secretariat

- Ulf Schöne
- Dominic Kissel

### 5 Fact Sheet

#### Support Information

Date of the on-site visit:	January 15, 2024
Accreditation granted on:	March 31, 2023
Groups of people with whom interviews were conducted:	Quality Advisory Board Internal Coordination Group Representatives of the University Council and Senate Representatives of the Agency (evalag)
Documents submitted for review:	Consultation documents for the preparation of the Quality Advisory Board meeting: Minutes, strategic documents (mission statement for teaching, structural and development plan), process descriptions for the development and enhancement of degree programs, degree program documents