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Thematic analysis

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"Thematic Analysis" in the context of accreditation

An ESG¹ standard for quality assurance agencies active in higher education

¹ "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)" (Brüssel, Belgien, 2015)

The text is essentially based on the contribution of Dr. Karl Kälble "'Thematic Analysis' in the context of accreditation. An ESG standard for quality assurance agencies operating in higher education" (to be published in 2020).

1. "Thematic Analysis": Towards an ESG standard for quality assurance agencies accrediting in the national and international higher education sector

At European level, the revised version of the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" adopted by the Conference of Ministers of Education in Yerevan (Armenia) on 14-15 May 2015 provides, among other things, binding criteria for the assessment of quality assurance agencies active in higher education and the quality assurance procedures they carry out. This is the only way "to ensure that the agencies in the European Higher Education Area work according to the same principles and that all procedures and methods correspond to the intentions and requirements of their respective contexts", the explanatory statement states (HRK 2015, p. 13). An external review and positive assessment of the agencies against the criteria laid down in the ESG is also a prerequisite for inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). Similarly, full membership of the agencies in the "European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education" (ENQA) requires compliance with the ESG (see HRK 2015, p. 13, footnote).

Part 3 of the ESG defines the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance agencies". Quality assurance agencies carry out the external quality assurance procedures described in Part 2 of the ESG in the higher education sector (HRK 2015, p. 35ff.). One of the "standards" relating to agencies that regularly carry out external (national and international) quality assurance procedures in higher education concerns the preparation and publication of so-called "thematic analyses".

Standard 3.4 "Thematic analyses" reads as follows:

"Agencies regularly publish reports describing and analyzing the general findings they have gained in the course of implementing external quality assurance" (HRK 2015, p. 37).

The "**guideline**" for this standard is defined as follows:

"Through their work, agencies gain knowledge about study programs and universities that is useful beyond the individual procedure and can serve as a basis

for structured analyses of the entire higher education system. These findings can contribute to the reflection and improvement of quality assurance strategies and procedures in the institutional, national and international context. Thorough and careful analyses of these findings highlight developments and trends and draw attention to areas that are characterized by good practice or are characterized by persistent difficulties" (HRK 2015, p. 38).

Until 2015, the version of the ESG that was adopted in May 2005 by the ministers responsible for higher education at the Bologna follow-up conference in Bergen (and, as mentioned, updated in 2015) was valid. until 2015, it formed the reference framework for internal and external quality assurance and for quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area.

A comparison of the ESG from the year 2005 published for the first time with the revised version of the ESG from the year 2015, based on Standard 3.4 "Thematic Analyses" relevant here, shows the changes made in this respect (also relevant for the "AHPGS" and their activities) (cf. EURASHE 2016):

ESG 2005, Standard 2.8 "System-wide analyses": "Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc" (ENQA 2005, S. 22).

Guidelines: "All external quality assurance agencies collect a wealth of information about individual programmes and/or institutions and this provides material for structured analyses across whole higher education systems. Such analyses can provide very useful information about developments, trends, emerging good practice and areas of persistent difficulty or weakness and can become useful tools for policy development and quality enhancement. Agencies should consider including a research and development function within their activities, to help them extract maximum benefit from their work" (ENQA 2005, S. 22).

ESG 2015, Standard 3.4 "Thematic Analysis": "Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities".

Guidelines: "In the course of their work, agencies gain information on programmes and institutions that can be useful beyond the scope of a single process, providing material for structured analyses across the higher education system. These findings can contribute to the reflection on and the improvement

of quality assurance policies and processes in institutional, national and international contexts. A thorough and careful analysis of this information will show developments, trends and areas of good practice or persistent difficulty" (HRK 2015, S. 75).

The European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE 2016) comparatively analyzed and focused on the 2015 ESG changes relevant here as follows: "This standard's name has changed from 'system-wide analysis' to 'thematic analysis' to better cover also agencies not operating in 'a system' or operating in several different systems. The standard has furthermore become more demanding as to the frequency of the analyses, which were formerly expected to take place 'from time to time'. The guidelines now mention that the analyses could be of relevance not only in the national context but also internationally" (EURASHE 2016, S. 18).

With regard to the German accreditation system, it should be critically pointed out in this context that the publication of analyses on findings from the German accreditation system until the "Study Accreditation State Treaty" came into force on 01.01.2018 in this country (despite the meanwhile obsolete ESG requirement of 2005) was primarily a task of the Accreditation Council (which was also partly dependent on findings from the agencies, which generally made these available). Accordingly, the German agencies were not obliged to allocate personnel, financial and time resources to carry out their own thematic analyses (which, in the author's view, should also meet scientific standards) in the national context. It is only in the aforementioned new version of ESG 2015 that the regular preparation and publication of thematic analyses of an agency's findings in relation to study programs and universities by the agencies themselves is made binding. The appropriate resources must now also be made available for this.

The preparation of sophisticated thematic analyses usually requires more or less time-consuming textual analyses, some of them quantitative, but most of all qualitative (see Chapter 2), which have to be carried out by Agency staff in addition to their main work in the Agency. This also requires corresponding scientific and methodological competence on the part of the employees of an agency, which cannot be taken for granted, but can be built up and successively deepened in the course of appropriate further training.

In connection with the required regular publication of "Thematic Analyses", reference is to be made to the more fundamental, scientifically sound analyses from the circle of employees and members of the AHPGS published in recent years, which go beyond the narrower context of accreditation and which are based on current vocational and education policy discourses as well as the literature and studies available on the subject also address developments, changes and problems relevant to accreditation and quality assurance in higher education, some of which are challenging, in relation to subjects and study programs that are part of the agency's core business (see AHPGS homepage: "Thematic Analyses" and "Publications"). Trigger for the relevant publications were not least and without doubt experiences and findings from accreditation procedures of the AHPGS, which suggested or stimulated certain contributions. The fact that the AHPGS also carries out more fundamental analyses was also acknowledged in the expert report of 09.02.2014 of the Accreditation Council on the "Application of the AHPGS of 07.11.2012 for accreditation and for verification of compliance with ESG" in "Recommendation 6": "The experts recommend to expand the welcome publication activities on topics such as academisation in the health care professions" (Accreditation Council 2014, p. 58).

Against the background of this concise starting position, the AHPGS explicitly meets the requirement formulated in the ESG 2015 to prepare and publish initial thematic analyses based strictly on the available data material, using the findings it has gained in evaluation procedures. If necessary, these analyses should also show examples of good practice or identify certain problem constellations and thus challenges for quality assurance (see Chapter 3).

In 2019, the employees of the AHPGS have intensively dealt with questions concerning thematic analysis. What purposes should they serve in the Agency's understanding? On which topics are there findings that go beyond individual procedures and are or could be of interest to which (yet to be defined) target groups (e.g. universities, study programs, reviewers, the agency itself in terms of improving its own procedures)? This topic-centered discourse within the AHPGS is important because thematic analyses according to the ESG guidelines leave open which topics are to be analyzed. Nor does the ESG prescribe to the agencies which methods and approaches from the heterogeneous pool of qualitative social research should be applied to which questions. This means that there is a lack of references to certain scientifically founded (possibly also cross-

disciplinary) methods and procedures that should be used for analysis. Accordingly, it is necessary to clarify what is meant (or could be meant) by thematic analyses, and which qualitative method(s) of implementation is/are suitable for this in the study field of health and social affairs.

2. What are "Thematic Analysis"?

"Thematic analysis" (TA), one of the variants of qualitative content analysis and methods of data evaluation from the methodological arsenal of qualitative social research, which is conceptually particularly at home in the English-speaking world and is particularly common there, is essentially a (low-threshold and practicable) method for identifying, structuring and analyzing patterns in qualitative data, especially in the sense of recording topics (cf. Braun/Clarke 2006). The "thematic analysis", which Braun and Clarke now refer to as "reflexive thematic analysis" in order to distinguish it from other approaches, focuses in particular on cross-case, content-related patterns or topics in existing or to be collected data, which must be found and analyzed in depth by the respective interpreter on the basis of the existing data material. As a rule, only information from the existing data material is coded in the concrete procedure, which answers a specific question or problem posed to the data material (thematic coding).

Basically, there are at least two (but also other) possibilities of category formation: the deductive and the inductive approach. In the deductive approach (top-down), the categories are established and defined before the data material is analyzed. With the inductive approach (bottom-up), the categories are not created before the material is viewed, but are derived directly from the material without reference to previously used theoretical concepts (see Braun/Clarke 2006; Mayring 2010, p. 65).

Within the methodological discourse on "Thematic Analysis" there are different positions on the question of whether it is entitled to the status of an independent method at all. In their fundamental article, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize that "Thematic Analysis" is characterized, among other things, by its flexibility, which is neither fixed on a certain theoretical basic position nor necessarily aims at the formation of a plausible theory verifiable on the basis of the data, and can accordingly be applied in many disciplines. A further advantage is that the method can be used for evaluation independently of a survey

method, even if the data material already exists. Its main aim is a detailed description and condensation of the data. As such, it is an adaptable and useful tool, potentially useful for qualitative analysis of complex and detailed data in all fields. The approach of "Thematic Analysis" described by Braun and Clarke attempts on the one hand not to restrict the freedom and flexibility inherent in the method, but nevertheless wants to clearly delimit it by describing clear decisions on action and implementation steps.

Braun and Clarke (2006) propose the following six steps for the interpretation of existing data material in research practice: 1. familiarizing yourself with your data, 2. generating initial codes, 3. searching for themes, 4. reviewing themes, 5. defining and naming themes, 6. producing the report.

From the author's point of view, the final report/text should generally be structured as follows: Cover page with logo, (abstract and keywords; optional for scientific publications), introduction, methodology, results, discussion (with references to limitations), and conclusion (with or without outlook; if necessary reference to follow-up studies).

3. Aim and purpose of the "thematic analyses" prepared by the AHPGS

The Accreditation Agency in the Field of Health and Social Affairs (AHPGS) is a German accreditation agency whose main task is to carry out assessment procedures for Bachelor's and Master's degree programs at German universities, universities of applied sciences (universities of applied sciences), colleges of education, art and music colleges and at dual universities and "university-equivalent" universities of cooperative education (program accreditation) as well as for internal university control and quality assurance systems (system accreditation). The AHPGS works across university types and subjects with specific competences in the study field of health and social affairs as well as in related fields of study and action (see homepage AHPGS). In addition, the AHPGS also carries out program and "bundle procedures" at foreign universities or in the international university context.

In addition to the continuation of its more fundamental scientific analyses and publications related to the study field of health and social affairs, as recommended in the last report of the Accreditation Council on the application of the AHPGS for accreditation (cf. Accreditation Council 2014, p. 58), which in the

self-image of the AHPGS have always been part of the core business of the agency, the AHPGS will immediately (beginning with the year 2020) regularly prepare and publish thematic analyses, which are based on empirically verifiable findings and/or observations that were gained in the accreditation context. These analyses are also intended to highlight examples of good practice or to identify certain problem constellations and thus challenges for quality assurance. With the preparation and publication of reports relevant from the point of view of the AHPGS, especially for universities, study programs and for (the training of) reviewers as well as for the employees of the AHPGs, related to the study field of health and social affairs, the AHPGS fulfils a requirement of the "European Standards and Guidelines" (ESG) for agencies. With regard to the study field of Health and Social Sciences, which is specific to the accreditation procedures of the AHPGS, thematic analyses also offer the opportunity to obtain information on current developments in this area in the university context and to identify examples of precarious or good practice. In addition, thematic analyses can provide findings relating to the assessment procedures carried out by the AHPGS, which can be used to improve the procedures if necessary.

4. Conceivable "thematic analyses" in the field of activity of the AHPGS

It is necessary for the AHPGS to compile topics for analyses which can be worked on and analyzed in the next few years against the background of a fundamental objective. During a working session, it was discussed and decided to focus the thematic analyses on the subject area "Academicization and Professionalization in Health and Social Affairs".

The following topics, among others, are suitable for an analysis and are concretized if necessary:

- Survey of experts on the basis of a questionnaire to be newly developed (new system)
- Survey of universities on the basis of a questionnaire to be newly developed (new system)
- Recognition of competences acquired outside higher education (target group-specific, e.g. in courses of study in social work or nursing, etc.)

- Experiences with the new Nursing Professions Act with regard to courses of study leading to primary qualifications (in perspective)
- Presentation of the personnel situation in teaching (e.g. in Master's programs for further education)
- Achievement of qualification level 7 in Master programs with heterogeneous admission requirements
- Experience with accreditation in an international context (e.g. using the example of specific countries, requirements, recommendations, etc.)
- Experience with cooperative study programs (e.g. using the example of specific subjects)
- Experience with system accreditation
- Quality assurance of study programs by universities
- Analysis of requirements in study programs (e.g. using the example of specific subjects)
- Dual study programs
- Experience with the new accreditation system

5. Possible places of publication and presentation of "Thematic Analyses

Possible places for publication and presentation of thematic analyses and/or results of such analyses may be

- Homepage of the AHPGS,
- relevant scientific journals and edited volumes, contributions to edited volumes dealing with quality assurance in a national and international context, etc.
- Presentations, lectures, meetings.

6. "Thematic Analysis": Decisions of the AHPGS

The processing of thematic analyses is sustainably secured by the resolution of the managing directors of AHPGS e.V. and AHPGS Akkreditierung gGmbH of 20.03.2019 (confirmed by the executive board of AHPGS e.V. on 21.05.2019 and by the shareholders' meeting on 23.06.2019) and by the resolution of the executive board of AHPGS e.V. and the management of AHPGS Akkreditierung gGmbH on 16.12.2019.

Literature:

(...)