



VALIDATION VS ACCREDITATION IN ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION: FROM ADMINISTRATIVE RATIONALITY TO THE INSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION OF DESIGN KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to clarify the distinction between accreditation and validation in the context of architectural education and to demonstrate that these mechanisms rest on different conceptions of quality. The analysis shows that European higher education quality assurance systems—particularly ESG-based accreditation—primarily interpret quality in terms of structural compliance, documented procedures, and measurable learning outcomes. This approach ensures institutional stability and legal legitimacy. However, architectural education is based on a specific form of knowledge. Design knowledge is integrative, context-dependent, and partly implicit, emerging through reflective and iterative processes within studio-based learning environments. These characteristics limit the applicability of purely compliance-based quality frameworks. The paper argues that validation—especially within the UNESCO–UIA framework—represents a different institutional logic. While accreditation focuses on operational conditions, validation addresses pedagogical coherence and professional orientation through peer review processes. As a result, the paper proposes a layered model of quality in architectural education, distinguishing structural, pedagogical, and professional dimensions. Within this framework, accreditation and validation are not alternatives but complementary mechanisms.

Keywords: *administrative rationality; design knowledge; architectural epistemology; studio-based pedagogy; validation; accreditation; quality assurance; peer review; institutional logics; professional legitimacy; architectural education; UNESCO–UIA; ESG.*

1. Introduction: The Transformation of the Concept of Quality

The concept of quality in higher education has undergone a fundamental transformation over the past few decades. The previously implicit understanding of quality, based on professional reputation and academic autonomy, has gradually been replaced by a formalized, documentable, and auditable quality assurance framework. The Bologna Process and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have grad-

ually institutionalized the concept of quality and placed it within a regulated framework. The ESG (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area) framework adopted by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) increasingly defines quality in terms of structural compliance, documented procedures, and alignment with measurable learning outcomes [1].

This is of particular significance in architectural education, as the quality of programme is not limited to structural compliance: a significant por-

tion of design knowledge is implicit, integrative, and reflexive in nature. This raises the question of whether quality interpretation can be confined to purely administrative and compliance-based frameworks.

The transformation of the concept of quality has dual implications for architectural education. On the one hand, accreditation ensures the stability and legitimacy of operations. On the other hand, it emphasises the need for the interpretive framework of quality not to be limited solely to compliance, but also to create opportunities for the institutional representation of the specific nature of design knowledge.

In this context, the study examines the relationship between accreditation and validation and argues that, alongside the current interpretation of quality based on administrative rationality, it is essential to develop normative and professional frameworks that promote the institutional recognition of design knowledge.

2. Administrative Rationality and the Institutional Logic of Accreditation

2.1. The formalization of quality within the ESG framework

The Bologna Process and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have gradually transformed quality into a regulated, documented, and auditable category. The central reference framework for this is the ESG, adopted by the EHEA Ministerial Conferences and regularly reviewed [1].

The ESG has a dual purpose: on the one hand, it ensures that the operations of higher education institutions are transparent, verifiable, and professionally reliable; on the other hand, it promotes the comparability of European higher education systems and the mutual recognition of qualifications. The ESG structures higher education quality assurance around three main areas: first, the institutions' internal quality assurance systems, which include curriculum design and development, the definition of learning outcomes, the collection of student feedback, and the operation of assessment and examination systems; secondly, external quality assessment procedures, including program and institutional accreditation, as well as quality assurance audits; and thirdly, the regulation of the operation of quality assurance and accreditation organizations, which defines the operating principles of these organizations and ensures their independence and credibility.

This structure links quality to formalized procedures, documented data, processes, and auditable procedures. Accordingly, formalization creates a standardized reference framework, strengthens documentability, and makes auditability a central principle, whereby external experts examine whether operations comply with prescribed standards. Quality is thus increasingly linked to explicitly defined, measurable, and auditable learning outcomes.

2.2. The Theoretical Background of Administrative Rationality

This transformation fits into a broader process of rationalization, a classic analysis of which was described by Max Weber as one of the fundamental characteristics of modern organizational operations: activities increasingly take place within regulated, formalized, and verifiable frameworks [2], thus quality becomes not primarily a matter of interpretation but of verification, and therefore an administrative category. This administrative rationality is evident in ESG-based accreditation systems. Administrative rationality is not merely a technical procedure but a specific form of modern institutional operation, the aim of which is to ensure that decisions are based not on personal preferences but on general rules. Higher education quality assurance systems are manifestations of this logic. ESG-based accreditation evaluates according to predefined standards, requires documented learning outcomes, monitors institutional operations through external expert audits, and operates within a cyclical review system.

Weber, however, warned of the limits of rationalization, its "iron cage": formalized rationality tends to reduce goals to means and to prioritize formal compliance over substantive values [2]. In this sense, the formalization of the concept of quality cannot be regarded as a completely value-neutral process. Accreditation interprets quality along structural and procedural categories. These mechanisms are indispensable for ensuring legal legitimacy, institutional credibility, and international compatibility. Systems based on structural compliance and measurable learning outcomes, therefore, tend to reduce quality to indicators and replace complex professional judgment with formal criteria. This becomes particularly problematic where knowledge is implicit, integrative, and context-dependent—such as in architectural design and studio-based pedagogy—since these forms of knowledge are more

difficult to represent within the framework of compliance-based quality assurance.

This study argues that accreditation operates within a framework of rationality where its task is not to provide a comprehensive interpretation of professional knowledge, but solely to ensure the structural conditions for its operation. The issue is not the existence of administrative rationality itself, but its implicit dominance as the sole legitimate interpretation of quality. This realization leads to an examination of how validation represents a different institutional logic: one that emphasizes not compliance, but professional orientation and the articulation of forms of knowledge.

2.3. The Function of Accreditation

Having clarified the theoretical background of administrative rationality, it is worth precisely defining the functional role of accreditation within the higher education system. Accreditation is not merely an evaluation process, but an institutional mechanism whose primary role is to ensure the legal and institutional legitimacy and operational stability of higher education programs. In national quality assurance systems aligned with the ESG, a program can only operate if it meets the specified structural and quality requirements[1]. Accreditation authorizes the launch and maintenance of a program and ensures the official recognition of the degree. Without this function, the operation of the higher education system would become unstable and unpredictable; therefore, accreditation is a fundamental tool for institutional legitimacy.

In this context, the purpose of quality assurance is to ensure that the operations of higher education institutions are transparent and verifiable, and that the qualifications awarded reflect reliable educational quality for students, the labor market, and society. To this end, accreditation employs transparent evaluation procedures, involves external experts, and examines the operation of institutions through a cyclical review system. Within this framework, quality is primarily manifested as audited compliance.

One of the most important tasks of accreditation is to ensure minimum standards. Given the diversity of the higher education system, it is necessary to define basic requirements that guarantee the professional and organizational soundness of programs. Accreditation, therefore, typically examines the coherence of the curriculum, the competencies of faculty, the adequacy of infra-

structure, and the functioning of internal quality assurance.

Accreditation also contributes to the international comparability of qualifications. Within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a unified quality assurance framework facilitates the mutual recognition of qualifications and student mobility, which is particularly important for regulated professions—such as architecture. However, it can be observed that the scope of accreditation is fundamentally limited to structural dimensions: it does not assess the quality of professional thinking or the depth of pedagogical culture but rather examines the conditions of operation. Accreditation, operating within the framework of administrative rationality, is therefore indispensable but offers an incomplete interpretation of quality. This realization leads to the question of what mechanism is capable of expressing and institutionally recognizing the integrative nature of design knowledge—that is, the institution of validation.

3. Design Knowledge as a Distinct Form of Knowledge

3.1. Reflective practice

The interpretation of the quality of architectural education cannot be separated from the question of what form of knowledge it conveys. Design knowledge cannot be reduced to a set of declarative facts, but is a specific mode of cognition in which thinking, action, and decision-making appear in a mutually shaping process. A classic analysis of this phenomenon was provided by Donald A. Schön in his work **The Reflective Practitioner**. Schön criticizes the traditional model of professional practice known as technical rationality [3], according to which the professional applies theoretical knowledge and appropriate methods to predefined problems. Schön, however, points out that in complex professions—including architecture—problems are not predetermined but emerge during the design process. The designer does not merely solve a problem but interprets and reframes it.

The central concept of reflective practice is reflection-in-action [3]: professional decisions arise from the thought process during action. The designer experiments, interprets, provides feedback, and modifies; problems and solutions mutually shape one another. This iterative process is clearly observable in the architectural studio,

where students develop their designs through critiques and reinterpretations.

Schön also points out that a significant portion of professional knowledge is implicit (tacit) knowledge [3, 4]. Designers often make decisions based on experiential patterns and precedents that cannot be fully formalized. In architectural education, therefore, knowledge is not merely the transfer of information, but the development of design thinking and judgment.

It follows that quality is captured not only in the final product but also in the reflective design process. Conformity-based quality assurance can examine structures and procedures, but it struggles to interpret the quality of reflective decision-making. The theory of reflective practice thus points out that design knowledge cannot be fully reduced to formalized structures and compliance criteria.

3.2. Designerly Ways of Knowing

The theory of reflective practice highlights that design goes beyond technical problem-solving; it is therefore an interpretive and iterative thought process. This idea is further explored in Nigel Cross's **Designerly Ways of Knowing**, which interprets design as a distinct mode of knowing [5]. According to Cross, design cannot be classified under either the scientific or humanistic categories of knowing, but rather represents an independent mode of knowing.

According to one of Cross's central theses, design represents a distinct "third" mode of cognition alongside scientific and humanistic cognition, with its own unique logic of thinking and problem-solving. While science seeks to describe and explain the world, design is concerned with creating possible futures. The designer therefore not only analyzes existing conditions but also examines possible future configurations. Design thinking is thus generative and projective.

Cross emphasizes that one of the most important characteristics of design is *problem framing*. The designer does not seek optimal solutions to pre-defined problems, but rather shapes the interpretive framework of the problem themselves. This phenomenon resonates with the theory of reflective practice: during the design process, thinking and action are in constant dialogue. Defining the problem is, in itself, the act of design.

Another defining element of *Designerly Ways of Knowing*—that is, the specific modes of knowing inherent to design—is visual and spatial thinking. Drawings, models, and diagrams are not merely

tools of communication but also media of thought. Through drawings and models, the designer explores alternatives, modifies, and reframes decisions. A significant part of design knowledge is based on the use of precedents and analogies, which serve an inspirational and structuring role.

One of the fundamental characteristics of design is the acceptance of ambiguity. Scientific rationality often seeks to reduce uncertainty, whereas design requires the productive management of uncertainty. A design problem rarely leads to a single objectively optimal solution. This openness also complicates the issue of evaluation. Design quality cannot be reduced to a single indicator or metric. Evaluation always includes an interpretive dimension.

These characteristics indicate that the institutional interpretation of design knowledge goes beyond a narrow focus on the logic of structural conformity.

3.3. Wicked Problems and Complexity

Examining the nature of complex problems is key to understanding the characteristics of design thinking. One of the defining concepts in design theory is "*wicked problems*" (ill-structured problems). Richard Buchanan made this a central element of design discourse in his study *Wicked Problems in Design Thinking*, which builds on Rittel and Webber's analysis of urban planning [6]. *Wicked problems* are fundamentally different from well-structured problems: they are not clearly defined, allow for multiple interpretations, and do not have a single definitive solution.

Architectural design typically deals with such problems. In the case of a building or urban intervention, a complex system of technological, social, aesthetic, and economic considerations emerges. During the design process, defining the problem is itself part of the solution process.

The mutual evolution of the problem and the solution is a fundamental characteristic of design thinking. Throughout the process, the designer redefines the situation, examines various interpretive frameworks, and develops potential solutions based on them. Complexity, therefore, refers not only to the number of factors but also to the openness of the interpretive horizon.

The built environment can be understood as a complex adaptive system in which social, technological, and environmental factors interact dynamically. The effects of a design decision often manifest in the long term and in a non-linear manner. Solutions are therefore not simply

“right” or “wrong,” but more or less adequate within a given context.

It follows that quality in architectural design is a relational category: it depends on the extent to which the design is able to integrate various perspectives and organize them into a coherent system. This dimension is difficult to capture in quality assurance systems based solely on indicators and structural compliance.

3.4. The Studio as an Integrative Knowledge-Building Environment

The distinctive features of design knowledge in architectural education are primarily manifested in the operation of the design studio. In studio-based, design-centered education, students do not merely seek solutions to predefined problems, but interpret and shape complex, multidimensional situations. The design process involves the integration of technological, aesthetic, social, and ethical considerations. In most architecture programs, the studio is a central element of the curriculum. It is based on project-based, long-term, and iterative workflows, accompanied by regular critiques and feedback. Learning thus takes place not in a linear lecture-exam model, but in a cyclical design process.

Integration is a key element of the studio's operation. During the design task, structural, environmental, technological, aesthetic, and social aspects are woven together into a single coherent system. In this sense, quality manifests itself in the depth of integration and the coherence of decisions.

Criticism is an important element of the studio's pedagogy. Students regularly present their work, which is then reflected upon by the instructors and the group. This dialogic process is not merely an evaluation exercise but a knowledge-building mechanism: students learn to articulate their decisions and reflect on their own design processes.

Iterative experimentation—exploring sketches, models, and alternatives—is the practical manifestation of design thinking. The studio also serves as a collaborative learning space where students learn from each other's work, and knowledge takes on a collective dimension.

Accreditation can assess the structural elements of the studio—such as the number of hours, credit value, or the instructor-student ratio—but it can only capture the studio's integrative and reflective pedagogical culture to a limited extent. This distinction highlights that the quality of architectural education extends beyond structural com-

pliance and can thus be understood as integration and reflective competence.

3.5. The design studio as an implicit platform in validation systems

Before proceeding to a detailed comparison of the differences between accreditation and validation, it is necessary to clarify the intermediate level that actually underpins the functioning of these systems: the role of the architectural design studio. In contemporary professional validation frameworks—particularly in the practice of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) [7] – the studio occupies a structurally central yet theoretically under-reflected position. Although professional policy documents and validation criteria do not explicitly name the studio as a knowledge-forming medium, their operation is nonetheless built upon this medium [7].

In the RIBA validation system, as well as in related educational discourse, the emphasis is primarily on learning outcomes, graduates' competencies, and professional aptitude. Among these, adaptability, collaboration, and the ability to handle complex, real-world problems play a prominent role [8]. At the same time, the learning environment in which these competencies are actually developed is not explicitly theorized; it appears implicitly within the structure of studio-based education.

In this sense, the design studio functions as an integrative platform. It unites different areas of knowledge—design thinking, technical and structural knowledge, and the interpretation of environmental and social contexts—within a project-based, iterative learning process. This integrative nature is consistent with theories regarding the specific nature of architectural design knowledge. In particular, the concept of “designerly ways of knowing” [5], and the design process as a reflective practice [3]. The studio is also the venue for performance and assessment. Validation processes rely primarily on outputs such as portfolios, designs, and project work, which are inherently studio-based. In this way, the studio becomes the space where learning outcomes are not only created but also made visible and assessable. Abstract competencies are translated here into concrete architectural proposals. Furthermore, the studio can also be interpreted as a simulated environment for professional practice. Through collaborative work, critical discourse, and engagement with complex design tasks, the studio mirrors the functioning of architectural



Fig. 1. The design studio as an integrative knowledge-generating environment in architectural education Source: author's conceptual framework.

practice in many respects. This is consistent with validation requirements that prioritize professional competence and practical applicability. Despite all this, a significant gap remains. The studio does not explicitly appear as an independent knowledge-forming system. Tacit knowledge [4], reflective practice (2), and the theory of community learning and *communities of practice* [9] are largely absent from the validation discourse. The epistemological nature of the studio thus remains hidden, even though the functioning of validation systems is fundamentally based on it. This points to a fundamental tension. Professional validation frameworks rely on the design studio as the primary medium for the development and assessment of competencies, yet they interpret it primarily as a platform for educational organization and assessment, rather than as a knowledge-generating system. Bridging this gap is crucial for a deeper understanding of the quality of architectural education, as it is not only necessary to examine what is measurable but also how design knowledge itself is generated. Validation systems are based on the design studio in their operation, yet they do not make their knowledge-generating nature explicit.

4. Validation as a Normative and Professional Interpretive Framework

4.1. The UNESCO–UIA Charter

In the previous chapters, we argued that the quality of architectural education is not limited to structural compliance. Given the integrative, reflexive, and complexity-managing nature of design knowledge, the interpretation of quality requires both normative and professional dimensions. In this context, validation can be understood as a peer-review-based, normative-professional framework that interprets the coherence, integration, and professional orientation of architectural education beyond compliance-based criteria. It is at this point that the institution of validation becomes relevant, as it operates according to a different institutional logic than accreditation, which is based on administrative rationality.

One of the defining reference frameworks for international architectural education is the *Charter for Architectural Education* developed by UNESCO–UIA [10]. The Charter is not a legal text nor a collection of accreditation standards; rather, it is a normative document that articulates the fun-

damental principles of architectural education based on global professional consensus.

The UNESCO–UIA Charter articulates the fundamental values and orientation of architectural education. The document is not bound by national legal systems and is not a binding regulation; rather, it is a professional guideline. This fundamentally differs from ESG-based accreditation: while accreditation examines the structural conditions of operation, the Charter articulates the purpose and ethos of architectural education.

The central principle of the Charter is integration. In architectural education, design, technology, theoretical knowledge, and professional responsibility are not separate elements but appear as an interconnected system. The Charter emphasizes the central role of design thinking, the integration of technical and environmental considerations, and the architect's social responsibility in shaping the built environment.

The UNESCO–UIA validation is based on this normative framework. It is not a legal authorization mechanism, but rather a professional evaluation process that assesses the extent to which the training program is coherent, integrated, and professionally oriented. During the professional evaluation and peer review, the process involves not only reviewing documents but also interpreting the educational concept and the program's professional orientation.

Thus, validation not only confirms operational compliance but also serves to institutionally recognize the values of architectural education. While accreditation focuses on compliance with standards, validation examines the extent to which the program aligns with international professional principles of architectural education. The two mechanisms are therefore not alternatives to one another, but rather quality dimensions with distinct functions.

4.2. Peer Review and Professional Horizons

Building on this understanding, the UNESCO–UIA validation process operates through peer review as its primary evaluative mechanism. This is a collegial evaluation mechanism in which active participants in the discipline (practicing architects, architecture educators, and experts with international experience) examine and interpret the program's professional quality. This mechanism fundamentally differs from the logic of an administrative audit: while an audit checks compliance with standards, peer review is based

on a professional assessment of the program as a whole.

During validation, the review examines not only whether formal requirements are met, but also what pedagogical concept organizes the training, how different areas of knowledge are integrated, and how professional responsibility is reflected throughout the curriculum. The evaluation is thus interpretive in nature: it acknowledges that the quality of architectural education cannot be captured solely by measurable indicators.

The professional evaluation also compares the program to the international professional landscape. Validation does not expect a uniform form or style but rather examines whether the program fits coherently into the current professional discourse of the architectural discipline. The evaluation is therefore fundamentally discursive, grounded in professional dialogue: it takes shape through presentations, questions, and critical discussion.

In this sense, validation is not merely a certification process, but rather institutional recognition and professional positioning. While accreditation focuses on meeting minimum standards, validation interprets the program's professional orientation and coherence, thereby making visible both the normative and discursive dimensions of quality.

4.3. Institutional Legitimacy

In the context of validation, the concept of institutional legitimacy is central. It does not merely denote administrative status, but rather the process through which a form of knowledge—in this case, design knowledge—gains a legitimate place within institutional structures and professional discourse. While accreditation ensures the legal and organizational legitimacy of operations, validation contributes to the institutional reinforcement of the professional status of design knowledge.

Due to the specific nature of design knowledge, it can only be captured to a limited extent by compliance-based indicators. If quality is interpreted exclusively within the framework of administrative rationality, there is a risk that the essential dimensions of this form of knowledge will be pushed into the background.

In this sense, the UNESCO–UIA validation can be understood as a mechanism that makes design knowledge visible within an international professional context. The program's pedagogical concept, integration, and professional orientation

become the subject of reflexive interpretation during the validation process, and the training becomes interpretable within the international professional discourse.

Institutional recognition is thus not a static rating, but rather the formation of a professional horizon and positioning. While accreditation ensures the legal legitimacy of operations, validation makes the professional legitimacy of design knowledge visible. The two mechanisms are therefore not alternatives to one another, but represent different qualitative dimensions in the interpretation of architectural education.

This realization forms the central thesis of the study: accreditation and validation operate according to different institutional logics, and the institutional recognition of design knowledge represents a qualitative dimension that becomes interpretable beyond the framework of administrative rationality.

5. European and Central and Eastern European Context

The difference between accreditation and validation is not merely a theoretical issue but can be understood within an institutional and cultural context. The EHEA's quality assurance structures provide a relatively homogeneous framework through the ESG [1], yet the quality culture of individual countries differs significantly for historical and institutional reasons.

With the introduction of ESG in Europe, a multi-level quality assurance system has emerged based on national accreditation agencies, ensuring transnational comparability and mutual recognition. The system also structures the internal quality management of higher education institutions. A distinctive feature of the European model is that it is not fully centralized: the ESG provides common guidelines, but implementation takes place at the national level. Consequently, accreditation exists in every country but operates with varying emphases. In some systems, institutional self-assessment dominates, while in others the role of external audit is stronger.

In the case of architectural education, the European quality assurance system is also linked to the dimension of professional regulation. Architectural licensing is not merely a matter of higher education but also of professional chambers, which is why accreditation is a fundamental prerequisite for professional legitimacy.

Higher education systems in Central and Eastern Europe have historically evolved from strongly state-centered models. The legacy of centralized educational structures remained palpable even after the transition, which is also reflected in the functioning of quality assurance. In this region, accreditation is generally a strictly legally regulated decision-making mechanism falling under central authority, which often serves as the primary source of legitimacy for its operation. Consequently, the concept of quality is often compliance-based: the emphasis is on documentation, formal requirements, and the verification of organizational structures. In Hungary, for example, the national accreditation system aligned with the ESG is operated by the Hungarian Higher Education Accreditation Committee (MAB) [11], which ensures European compatibility and legal stability; however, structural compliance dominates the interpretation of quality.

In this highly regulated environment, UNESCO–UIA validation plays a unique role. Since it is not a legal accreditation mechanism but a normative professional framework, it does not compete with state accreditation; rather, it operates in a different dimension. Validation creates an opportunity for the training program to align not only with national standards but also with international professional discourse. In addition, it strengthens institutional self-reflection, as the integration of pedagogical concepts and training becomes the focus of interpretation. The process also shapes institutional identity, since the training program is not merely presented as a unit of compliance but also positions itself through its own professional profile.

Based on an analysis of the European and Central and Eastern European contexts, quality assurance can be understood as a layered system. The first layer is linked to the logic of administrative rationality, which ensures legal compliance, organizational stability, and standardized structures. The second layer is the professional-normative dimension, which focuses on pedagogical coherence, integration, and professional accountability. These two layers are not mutually exclusive but form complementary dimensions. In Central and Eastern European systems, however, the dominance of the first layer often overshadows the significance of the second. In this context, validation serves as a complementary mechanism that enables institutional recognition and professional articulation of design knowledge alongside accreditation.

6. A Layered Model of Quality

The previous chapters of this study have argued that the quality of architectural education cannot be understood based on a single institutional logic. Accreditation, which is based on administrative rationality, and validation, which represents a normative-professional horizon, fulfills different functions. This difference should be interpreted not as competition but as stratification. In the following, we summarize this insight in the form of a model.

6.1. The Three Layers of Quality

The quality of architectural education can be understood in terms of at least three layers that build upon one another but operate according to different logics.

The first structural-legal layer is linked to the dimension of administrative rationality. This ensures the basic conditions for the operation of higher education institutions: legal compliance, organizational stability, documented procedures, and the fulfillment of minimum standards. The primary institutional tool of this dimension is accreditation. Its function is indispensable, as it guarantees transparency, public trust, and international compatibility. Its scope, however, is fundamentally limited to structural dimensions. The second, pedagogical-integrative layer concerns the program's internal functioning and coher-

ence. Here, quality manifests itself in the operation of design knowledge: in the central role of the studio, in the integration of technological, theoretical, and social dimensions, and in the practice of reflective decision-making and complex problem-solving. The logic of “designerly ways of knowing” and the handling of “wicked problems” become a pedagogical reality in this layer. Quality is thus not merely compliance, but the practice of design thinking.

The third, normative-professional layer represents the program's professional horizon and identity. This includes embeddedness in international professional discourse, professional accountability, and the coherent articulation of the pedagogical concept. In this dimension, design knowledge becomes explicit as a specific form of professional knowledge. The institutional mechanism of this layer is validation, which does not ensure legal legitimacy but rather professional positioning.

6.2. The Relationship Between the Layers

The three layers are not hierarchical; rather, they are complementary.

Without the first layer, the system would become unstable; without the second layer, the pedagogical content of education would become hollow; and without the third layer, design knowledge would remain implicit and difficult to articulate.

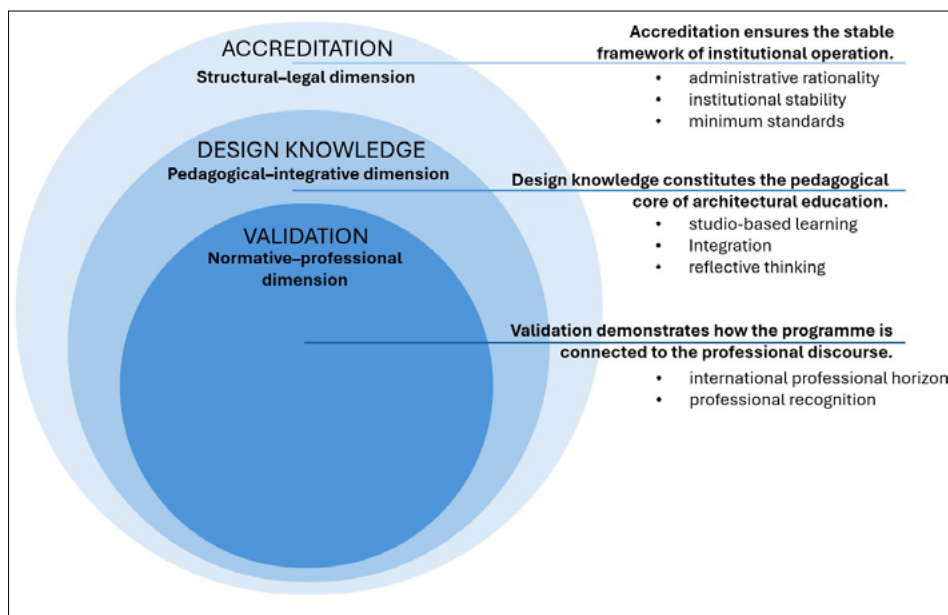


Fig. 2. The layered model of quality in architectural education Source: author's conceptual framework.

If quality is understood solely in its structural dimension, the specific form of knowledge inherent in design is pushed into the background. If, on the other hand, we interpret it solely in pedagogical or normative terms, the framework of institutional stability and accountability is missing. The essence of the layered model is precisely that these dimensions together constitute a comprehensive interpretation of quality in architectural education.

6.3. Administrative Rationality and Design Knowledge

The arc described in the title of this study—from administrative rationality to the institutional recognition of design knowledge—does not imply rejection but rather a complementary relationship.

Administrative rationality ensures stability, standardizes operations, and makes them auditable. Institutional recognition of design knowledge, on the other hand, creates a professional horizon and discourse, and makes the value of design thinking explicit. Together, these two logics enable adequate capture of the various dimensions of the quality of architectural education.

6.4. Implications for Central and Eastern Europe

In Central and Eastern European higher education systems, the culture of quality has traditionally been highly formalized and primarily based on the logic of compliance. In this context, the layered model is particularly significant because it highlights that structural compliance is not synonymous with professional quality.

The model creates an opportunity for institutional self-reflection and legitimately highlights the specific nature of design knowledge. In this sense, validation is not a competitor to accreditation, but rather a complementary mechanism that opens up a broader professional horizon.

6.5. Concluding Remarks

The quality of architectural education can only be properly understood if we also take into account the specific nature of design knowledge. While administrative rationality is necessary, it is not, on its own, a sufficient condition for quality.

According to the proposed model, quality assurance does not operate according to a single logic, but rather as the combined operation of structural, pedagogical, and normative dimensions. Accreditation ensures the conditions for operation, while validation makes design knowledge visible

and articulated. Together, these two mechanisms constitute the full quality horizon of architectural education.

7. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to conceptually clarify the distinction between accreditation and validation in the context of architectural education and to demonstrate that these two mechanisms operate along distinct institutional logics. The analysis highlighted that European higher education quality assurance systems—particularly ESG-based accreditation—interpret quality within the framework of administrative rationality. This approach is based on structural compliance, documentability, and auditability, and plays a fundamental role in ensuring institutional stability and legal legitimacy.

Architectural education, however, is based on a specific form of knowledge. Reflective practice, Designerly Ways of Knowing, and the handling of complex, so-called wicked problems represent dimensions of quality that cannot be reduced to mere compliance indicators. Design knowledge is integrative, context-dependent, and normative, and the studio is not merely a form of education but a space for integrating knowledge formation.

Based on this insight, the study argued that UNESCO–UIA validation, understood as a peer-review-based normative-professional framework, is not an alternative to accreditation but rather a distinct dimension of quality. While accreditation examines the conditions of operation, validation focuses on interpreting pedagogical coherence and professional orientation. The discursive nature of peer review enables the institutional recognition of design knowledge, that is, making it explicit and reflective.

The study, therefore, proposes a layered model of quality that distinguishes three dimensions: the structural–legal, the pedagogical–integrative, and the normative–professional layers. Within this framework, accreditation and validation are not alternatives to one another; rather, they are complementary mechanisms. This approach is particularly relevant in the Central and Eastern European context, where the culture of quality is traditionally highly formalized, and the logic of compliance plays a dominant role.

One of the study's most important findings is that the quality of architectural education cannot be understood without accounting for the specific nature of design knowledge. Administrative ra-

tionality is a necessary but insufficient condition for quality; institutional recognition of design knowledge requires a professional horizon that goes beyond structural compliance.

The study also identifies further research directions. It would be worthwhile to explore in greater detail how validation influences pedagogical practice and institutional self-interpretation, and how the dimensions of design knowledge might be more explicitly reflected in the discourse on quality assurance. Moreover, the issue of institutional recognition of design knowledge may be relevant not only for architectural education but also for other design-based disciplines. This approach extends beyond architectural education and offers a framework for interpretation of other design-based disciplines as well.

In summary, it can be concluded that the difference between accreditation and validation reflects not only procedural distinctions but also differing interpretations of the concept of quality. The normative dimension, which complements administrative rationality, enables the quality of architectural education to be recognized in the European higher education area not merely as compliance but also as a professional and pedagogical value.

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