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Taking stock and looking forward

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Short bio:

Thomas Bach is an experienced student representative in the HEA QA field from Germany. He is engaged in QA tasks since 2009, this includes activities at his local University of Applied Science Kaiserslautern / Zweibrücken and at the national level. He has participated as a peer in several programme and system-accreditations, (institutional) evaluations and audits inside and outside Europe (with a focus on Germany) and contributed to meetings and developments in HEA QA.

Furthermore, he is a member of the QA pools from Germany, Switzerland and Austria and former ESU QA pool member. This ongoing participation lead to memberships of several accreditation committees and QA bodies in accreditation agencies and universities, four years involvement in the executive committee for the German QA pool, and instructor and contributor for several trainings.

His main study field is computer science.

Proposal

Title: 15 Years Student Accreditation Pool in Germany: Achievements, Failures and Future Challenges

Abstract:

Student participation on equal terms as partners in higher education assurance was a novel concept in the year 2000. Since its founding in 2000-08-12, the German Student Accreditation Pool (GSAP, [9]) has been established as a central body for student participation in QA. The GSAP trained over 1200 students, participated in over 4000 program accreditations, 30 accreditation bodies, handles frequent discussion and interview requests. Representing over 2 million students with different expectations about quality assurance, a substantial lack of funding and the natural fact of limited time and experience of students in managing complex structures raised more than once questions about the future existence of the GSAP. New and ongoing challenges include the decentralization of accreditation in Germany, cross border activities of accreditation agencies, ensuring the



participation of students with diverse backgrounds, QA for the GSAP itself and sustainability in processes and funding of the GSAP.

Text of paper:

1. Introduction

The title of the 10th European Quality Assurance Forum is *Taking stock and looking forward*. We take the opportunity to provide a review on the development and organization of student participation in quality assurance (QA) in the higher education area (HEA) in Germany. We will provide details on the topics given in the abstract and try to explain the circumstances as best as possible for students with a limited time of direct participation in the complete period over 15 years. Due to the given constraints, we cannot explain details about the (rather complex) structure of higher education in Germany or the (similarly complex, see [5]) accreditation structure in Germany. And even if we would be very happy to talk about it, there is not enough room to emphasise the advantages of student participation, it is not our main focus in this paper. For further details, see [7] and [8].

2. History

Program accreditation based on European declarations and goals started in Germany in 1998. In the year 2000, the German Accreditation Council (GAC, [3]) adopted a resolution to include student participation. As a reaction, the German Student Accreditation Pool (GSAP) was founded in 2000. Until then, there had not been a specific structure dealing with this topic. This correlates with one main problem with student representation in Germany. Although there is the national student union fzs, it is only a voluntary union representing about 50% of the 2.7 million students in Germany within its members ([2], [4]). There is no nationwide student union by law like e.g. in Austria. Therefore the GSAP is based on the common interests of a wide coalition of different parties (political parties (campus / youth organizations), fzs, unions of the general students committee for each of the 16 states (Landes-Studierenden-Vertretungen), several subject-related student bodies (Bundesfachschaffentagungen)). There is no common understanding within the involved parties about the Bologna process or accreditation in general. Some of these parties even refuse one or both. The lowest common denominator is the demand of student representation and participation. This resulted in the main goal of the GSAP: *The GSAP and the signing parties promote the participation of students in accreditation and evaluation*. Political statements about the Bologna process itself are the responsibilities of the signing parties, not the GSAP. This agreement was a significant key factor in the success for the GSAP. While some student bodies changed their opinion about the Bologna process and accreditation regularly during the last 15 years, the goal of the GSAP was constant and supported by possibly all involved parties.

2.1 Standards for Student Participation

Based on the main goal, the GSAP developed some standards for his work. Only the member parties can nominate students as members for the pool. This ensures that students have at least some broader perspective, experience and understanding of different views. Each student member must take part in a 3-days seminar organized from the GSAP about

the Bologna and accreditation basics to be qualified. These standards ensure that student members are able to contribute on a high quality level.

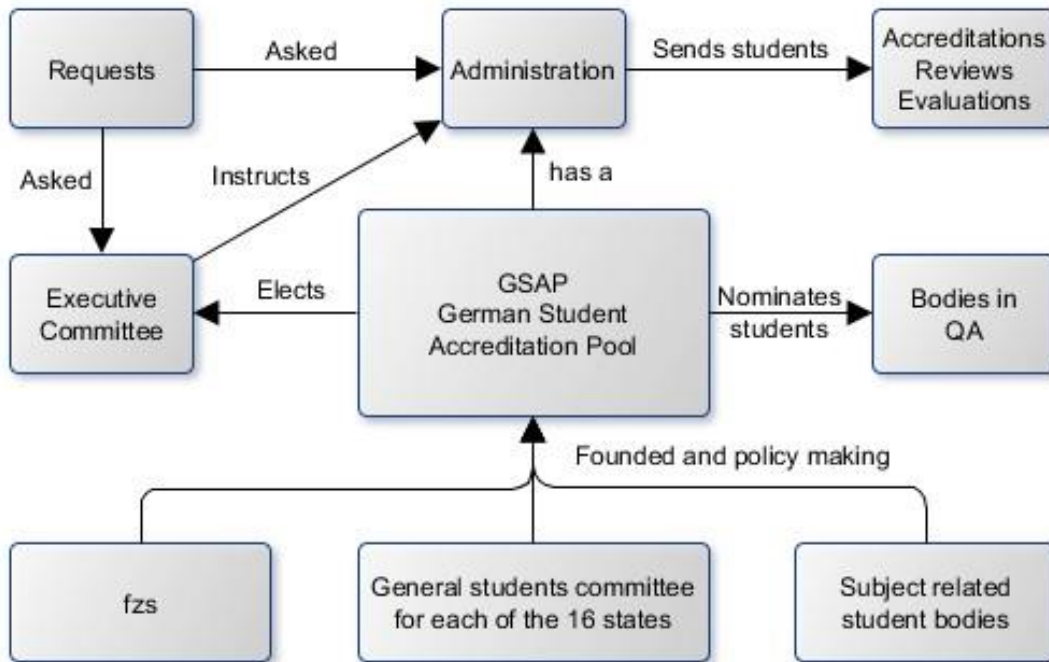


Figure 1: Organisational structure of the GSAP.

2.2 Organisational Structure

Figure 1 shows an outline of the organisational structure. The assembly of the member parties, meeting two to four times a year, adopts strategic and important decisions. They enforce and change directives for the executive committee (EC) and the student members of the GSAP. The EC consists of up to five persons elected for one year. A part time position supports the EC with administration tasks. The organisational structure integrates all stakeholders and adapts successfully to the complex structure in Germany.



2.3 Funding

Funding is a pivotal point for the successful work of the GSAP. Keeping it short: Without funding, the administration cannot be paid and it would be impossible to handle the constant amount of work from external requests. From 2000 until 2006, the fzs financed the GSAP. Due to limited financial resources of the fzs the budget for the GSAP had to be cut in 2006. In 2007, the GSAP together with the GAC and the accreditation agencies in Germany created a financing model that each agency gives a yearly basic amount and/or provides the funding for one seminar. Different student committees from multiple universities provide the second half of the necessary budget. In total, the GSAP has a budget of about 50,000 Euro (see section 3.4 for yearly numbers):

- 15,000 Euro for the position in administration with 15 hours per week
- Around 20,000 Euro for six to ten seminars per year
- Around 5,000 Euro for regular meetings
- Organisational costs (e.g. rent, office) and reserves

A small amount of compensation for the members of the executive committee is planned, but this failed so far.

2.4 Internal Quality Assurance

As a stakeholder in the QA field, the GSAP applies QA processes to itself. The GSAP has its own understanding of quality. It defines the expectations for good work:

- A specific body for complaints handles all complaints from student members or accreditation agencies and can enforce measures.
- Each seminar is evaluated to a predefined set of criteria (e.g. location, learning outcomes). The executive committee applies measures based on the results.
- Each new instructor candidate must participate under supervision before he can join the pool of instructors.
- The seminar informs the new student members about the current quality processes.
- On a regularly basis, all pool members are informed about quality policies and measures.

These tools helped the GSAP to improve and strengthen the adequacy of processes, even if they lead to intensive discussions.

2.5 Internal Process for Requests

A side effect of the massive scale of requests in contrast to the funding is the streamlining of the internal processes to create the best value with the limited resources of the administration. Each request is forwarded to an internal mailing list. Each student member can apply to each request until a deadline. Each application will be processed by the administration, filtered by some pre-defined criteria and otherwise be selected by random (with some respect to gender distribution) and forwarded. This guarantees at least an equal workload for all applications. Each member must provide a justification why she is suitable for this specific request. If this process fails, the complaint body can apply reasonable measures for the future. The vast majority of requests can be served successfully with this approach, see section 3.2.

2.6 Daily Business

On top of the daily business, pool members create handouts and recommendations, handle questions, interviews and discussions and most importantly, they participate in accreditations and evaluations. The GSAP has established itself as the main institution for all questions about QA in HEA involving students. The administration and EC answer about 50 to 100 external requests per month.

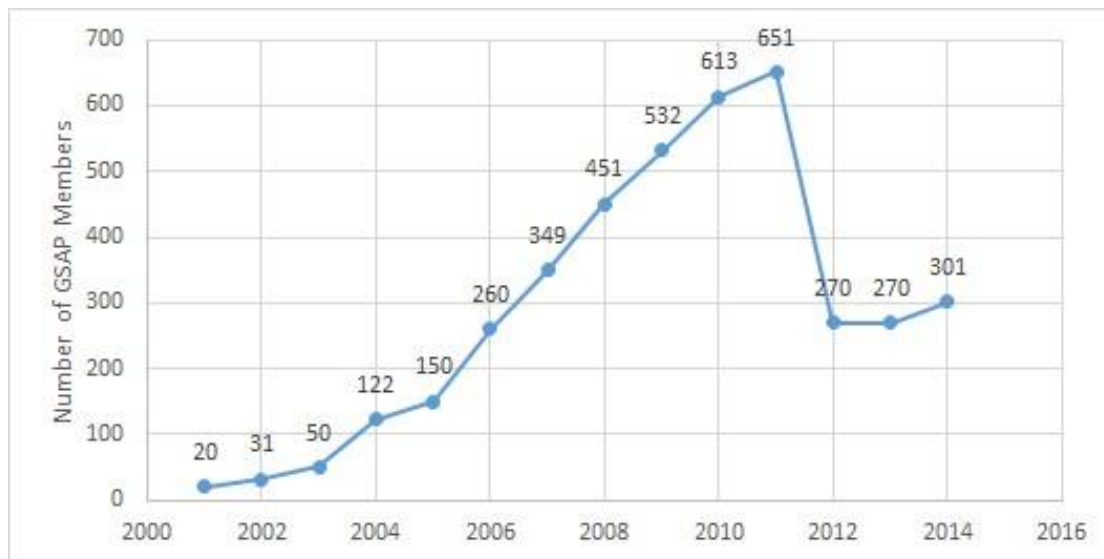


Figure 2: Member statistics. 2003 and 2011 guessed on mail records. Section 3.1 explains the drop in 2013

3. Facts, Numbers and Figures

3.1 Members

There was no electronic database before 2004, all memberships were administrated by paper and hand, partly in excel. Figure 2 shows the known numbers. Numbers before 2005 are guessed by mails. The massive drop to 1/3 in 2013 is reasoned by a clean-up of the internal database. Memberships of all student members were cancelled if they wished so or did not responded to a call.

3.2 Served Accreditations and Evaluations

The amount of accreditations and evaluations increased or stayed high continuously, fig. 3 shows the details. It is expected to decrease in the next years, because the relevant part of the 17,000 study programs in Germany have done their accreditation ([1]) and the re-accreditation cycle starts, which is seven instead of five years. In Addition, the system-accreditation lowers the number of program-accreditations significantly. It is unclear if this decrease in general will be compensated by the increase in international accreditations carried out by the accreditation agencies in Germany. The low numbers of vacant nominations can be explained in both ways. The reason it is not zero is due to the funding. It is impossible for the GSAP administration to invest more than 30 minutes in each request.

Therefore, it is impossible to try to call all members or even all students in the related field in Germany. The reason it is that low could be that some student members apply to a very wide range of request, sometimes not really suitable.

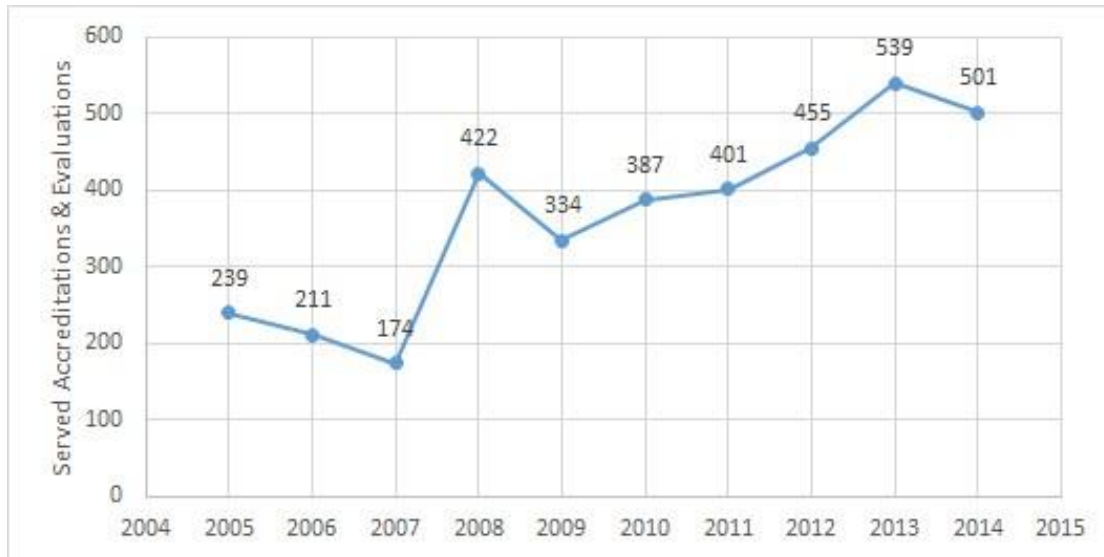


Figure 3: Number of served accreditations and evaluations. No data available before 2005.

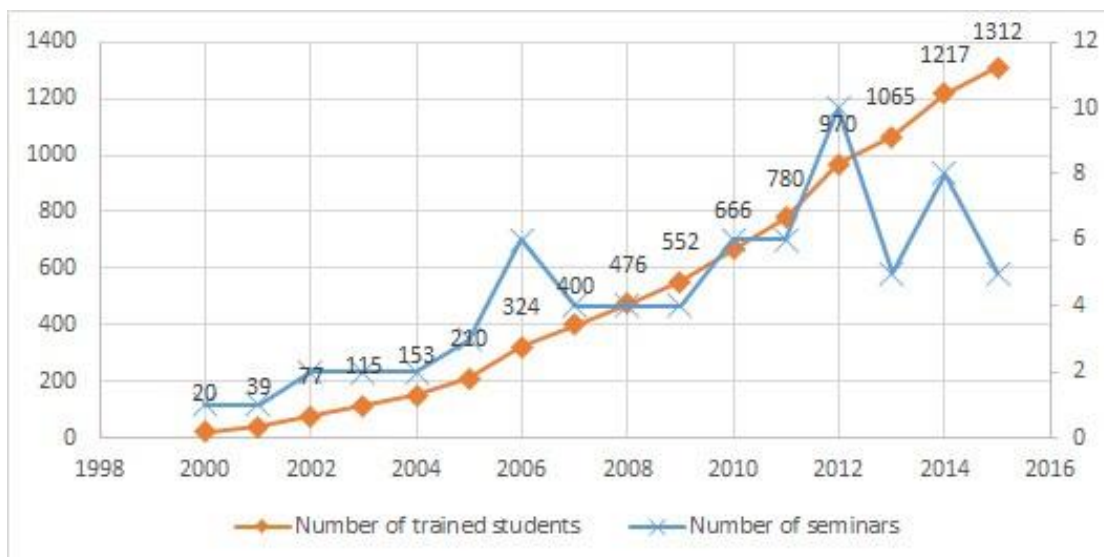


Figure 4: Number of seminars per year and number of total trained students.

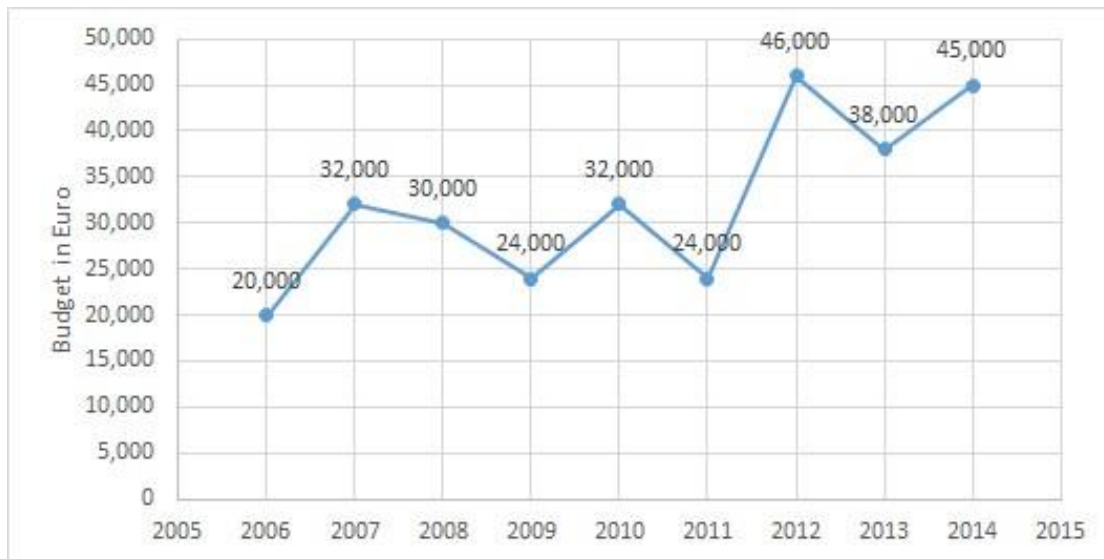


Figure 5: Budget numbers for the different years. Numbers rounded. There is no data available for before 2007, because it was integrated in fzs budget.

3.3 Seminars

Each year had at least one seminar for program accreditation and QA in general during all the 15 years, fig. 4 shows the details. Since 2006, at least one Seminar in each quarter was organised by the GSAP. Beginning with 2013, at least one seminar for system accreditation was organised each year. Seminars about advanced topics in QA were organised on demand, approximately one each 18 month. Typical costs for a seminar are 2500 Euro with 18 participants and 2+1 (one candidate) instructors. There are no fees for the participants to reduce the obstacles for participation. Bed and food is covered. Not all participants join the GSAP, some students just want to increase their knowledge for their work at the local student union at their university or for personal purpose.

3.4 Budget

Since 2007, half of the budget is given by different student unions and the other half by the accreditation agencies in Germany. Before 2007, the fzs undertook the full financing. This shift in budgeting allowed for more seminars per year, which was the main increase in the total budget. Figure 5 shows the details.

3.5 Student Representatives in Accreditation and Evaluation Bodies.

There are about 54 positions for students in bodies from accreditation agencies and GAC in Germany. The GSAP tries to nominate for each position a qualified student. This results in typically 5 - 15 nominations per year. Each student commits to an additional workload of regular meetings (up to 4 per year, up to 2 days each) and tries to give regularly brief reports about his work. Due to the increasing system-accreditations in Germany, the number of accreditation and evaluation bodies is increasing.



4. Problems and Failures

The GSAP is not only a success story. There is a wide field of learning experiences, unrealised hopes and failed claims. Which is probably not surprising for a student led organisation, but still valuable to learn from.

4.1 Positioning

A reasonable goal from the founding era was to establish a single organisation to represent the interest of students in Germany in the accreditation field. Although the GSAP is the only organisation for this field in Germany, not all accreditation agencies work fully together with the GSAP. Some request up to 100% of their student experts, some nearly 0%. This is based on multiple reasons. First, there is no standard that defines the interaction with the GSAP as a MUST. Even the ESG allow taking some student from the first term, who works for her professor, to participate as a student expert in some accreditations. This was always a major discussion point to favour student-centred participation on qualification, expertise and legitimization, and not the free sampling of one person in an agency. This critic is also named in the Bologna implementation 2012 - 2015 report from the Federal Government of Germany [1], p.40. Second, due to the financing, the GSAP is unable to serve 100% of the request. At least, if the requirement that every student must be related to the subject field holds. There are always discussions in student unions that this approach for free choice is an incentive to favour non-critical students, because the agencies are in competition to provide the best experience for the university.

4.2 Funding

Which leads to the funding itself. Handling several hundreds of request and members per year with an administration with only 15 hours per week is indeed a quite impressive result. But it needs many compromises, which are partly described in previous sections. Most of the work by the pool members is done on a voluntary base, without any financial compensation. The current dependency of the accreditation agencies for funding is an ongoing discussion point. Threats to reduce or stop the funding can be used and were used to reach certain unwanted agreements. While this is a typical task between financiers and beneficiaries, it could be asked if the motivations for agencies in a competition driven environment correlates really with the goals and expectations from the student role in accreditation. These funding problems are also named in the Bologna implementation 2012 - 2015 report from the Federal Government of Germany [1], p. 40.

4.3 Time Budget of Students and Consistency

The voluntary work by the student members is simultaneously a drawback in consistency. The majority of pool member can participate for 1 - 3 years until their studentship ends because of limited first and second cycle times. It happens rarely that a student representative in a body can serve for multiple periods. Therefore, the knowledge documentation and transportation is a challenge often not solved. If current members discuss with old members before 10 years, there is often a set of solved problems reappearing or solutions were lost. The accreditation agencies have some major advantages in discussions about e.g. funding because they can freely refer to events in the past.

5. Future Challenges

Some of the current problems will continue to exist in the future. Questions about the organisational structure and the main problems with the funding will be permanent discussion and acting points.

5.1 Decreasing Time and Motivation for Students

Some circumstances will be tighten in the future. The free time for students to participate in volunteer organisations is ever decreasing according to studies in Germany ([10]). This results in less pool members. This will have the largest impact on small fields. It is expected that the success rate for requests in small fields will continue to drop. Without any compensation, it is not clear how to stop this trend.

Some universities start to recognize social competences as part of the study programs, in other countries the accreditation agencies increase the compensation for student experts. There is no clear best practice how to counteract in this case.

5.2 Decentralization

The number of universities with system-accreditation is increasing in Germany [1]. This shifts the QA activities from 10 accreditation agencies in Germany to > 50 universities ([1]). The GSAP is currently unable to contact and negotiate with them all for the conditions of student participation in internal QA tasks. Around 20 universities already started to request student experts from the GSAP. It is unclear how this decentralisation could be solved with the limited personal time and funding.

It would be necessary to define a common enforced standard for financing.

5.3 Cross-Border Activities

The last two Bologna ministerial conferences put a focus on enabling cross-border activities for accreditation agencies. There are currently no best practices for student participation in these activities. One could argue that if an agency selects all other peers from their home country, students should be from there too. On the other hand, students from the target country have probably a better understanding of the local culture. The GSAP stays within its main goals: students should be qualified and legitimised. This often results in the refusal of local students because they do not have any knowledge or training in QA. Even more, one could question the standing of the foreign student in the peer group if all other peers are (e.g.) German experts, even from a neutrality point of view. As an example, the IEP program from EUA avoids students from the same country for these reasons. In the end, there is no body to complaint if students feel that the student peer is not qualified, as there are no standards other than a student must take part in the revisited ESG. It could happen that „the role of the students is formal presence with no real influence over decisions” ([6], p. 45). A common standard for student participation would help in this case. It could help to document the student participation process to detect bad influence.

5.4 Internal QA

One last future challenge is the creation and adoption of good QA practices for the GSAP itself. There is no other student accreditation pool in Europe in this size and history to learn from. Standard approaches from institutions does rarely apply, because a student led organisation is hardly to comply with typical business definitions.



6. Conclusion

This paper showed that student participation in QA is quite a challenging task with a wide field of problems. We presented several concepts to overcome these challenges, but also identified unresolved areas. We looked forward and proposed some key topics for further discussions that will arise with the current motions in HEA QA. We hope that we have provided information to learn from and hopefully some good and interesting practices.

We students have asked for participation and we are pleased to have the opportunity to participate. Sometimes, we are not so happy about the work behind this, but we have some idealism, which helps on the way. The last 15 years showed that a constant and productive collaboration is possible and we hope to foster and strengthen the past experiences. For the future, we hope to solve some of our challenges together. Last but not least, we are ever very thankful if there is some understanding of the special situation for students and some support, even if not everything works flawlessly.

We would like to thank all members of the GSAP for their continuing voluntary work and all attendants of the last assembly for their input and critical review of this paper.

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