

II.2 Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (AQ Austria)

Dietlinde Kastelliz

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1 Terminology, purpose and aim

Austria has three different types of higher education sectors under the auspices of the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy: public universities, private universities and universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen), which are covered by three separate laws.

With regard to external quality assurance, these three sectors are within the scope of a single law, the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education (hereinafter: HS-QSG), but with some differences in procedures for the different sectors. The law also defines the working areas of the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (AQ Austria):

- institutional accreditation and accreditation of degree programmes at universities of applied sciences
- audit at public universities and at universities of applied sciences
- institutional accreditation and accreditation of degree programmes at private universities
- evaluation of degree programmes and institutional evaluation at all types of higher education institution (e.g. public universities, universities of applied sciences, private universities and university colleges of teacher education), including outside Austria
- studies and system analyses and projects
- consulting in matters related to quality assurance and quality enhancement.

AQ Austria distinguishes auditing from other types of external quality assurance procedure. An audit is understood to be a cyclical peer review, the aim of which is the *assessment of the organisation and the effectiveness/performance of an institution's quality management system*. At the same time, an audit is a supportive measure for the enhancement of quality management in all areas of a higher education institution. AQ Austria believes it is an institution's own responsibility to assure its quality, and that it has the capability to do so. Furthermore, AQ Austria regards its procedures as supplementary to higher education institutions' internal quality assurance.

Both institutional and programme accreditation at universities of applied sciences and at private universities have licensing powers, and are therefore official procedures. Although they are also conducted through peer reviews, their aims are different from an audit as they lead to the public recognition of the institution or study programme. In addition to the aim of the procedure, further differences between audit and accreditation naturally arise from the assessment areas that have to be reviewed.

The official definition of an audit's function is established in HS-QSG §22 (1): 'The certification of the quality management system of an educational institution shall be based on an audit of the assessment areas'. These assessment areas are mentioned in section 3 of this report.

An audit in Austria is understood to be a non-authority, external quality assurance procedure for higher education institutions. This is certainly true for public universities, although a negative outcome in an audit can ultimately have severe consequences for universities of applied sciences – they may lose their 'licence' and thus have to apply again for initial institutional accreditation.

2 National legislation

Public universities are set up by law, and are not required to undergo a 'licensing' procedure in the form of external accreditation for public recognition when introducing a new study programme. In this case, the universities' statutes constitute the regulations for an internal procedure, which includes several steps leading to the approval of a new study offer for degree education.

The most recent completely new public university to be established in Austria dates back to 1994, when Danube University Krems (which is solely a university for continuing education) was founded with the passing of a federal law. In 2004, three public medical universities (in Vienna, Graz and Innsbruck), which had previously been faculties of public universities, were set up as independent institutions based on the University Act 2002.

Newly-established universities of applied sciences undergo initial institutional accreditation and switch to an audit of their internal quality management system after 12 years.

The aforementioned HS-QSG applies to public universities, universities of applied sciences and private universities. University colleges of teacher education are governed by another authority (the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture) and are thus neither under the supervision of AQ Austria nor AQ Austria’s responsibility. Nevertheless, they too can make use of the agency’s services, for example external evaluation or consulting.

Although one of the aims of the HS-QSG was to bring about the convergence of the higher education sectors in Austria, it has become clear that higher education institutions are not treated equally by the HS-QSG:

Type of institution	Degree programme accreditation	Institutional (re) accreditation	Audit	Reporting to AQ Austria
Public universities			×	
Universities of applied sciences	×	×	×	×
Private universities	×	×		×

However, the sectors share common aspects as well. All types of higher education institution covered by AQ Austria are obliged to implement internal

quality assurance mechanisms. It is the responsibility of the individual institution's management to decide how to do this and what the internal quality assurance system should look like. AQ Austria believes that each institution has to choose and set up a system which best fits its profile and its needs. There is no 'one size fits all' approach, as the diversity and autonomy of institutions need to be taken into consideration. It is assumed that a higher education institution will set up a system which covers not only single performance areas but the organisation as a whole, and includes its core tasks (teaching, learning and research) as well as its other responsibilities (administration, societal impact, etc.).

Until the launch of the HS-QSG in March 2012, audits in Austria were conducted on a voluntary basis for public universities only. They were introduced by the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA) in 2007, and from the very beginning were designed as a means of enhancing an institution's quality, not as a monitoring tool.

In 2012, an interim audit model, and in July 2013 a refined audit model for public universities and universities of applied sciences was presented by the newly-established AQ Austria, meeting the requirements set in the HS-QSG. It was derived from the former model, and still placed the emphasis on enhancement, though with an additional formative aspect. The audit is now mandatory not only for public universities, but also for universities of applied sciences. Private universities are not subject to audits, but have to undergo periodic institutional evaluation by AQ Austria. In accordance with the law, however, audits of the required assessment areas (see section 3 – Scope) may be performed either by AQ Austria, or by a quality assurance agency registered by EQAR or "another internationally recognised and independent quality assurance agency". The responsibility for this definition lies with the Austrian Ministry of Science, Research and Economy. In any case, the stipulated assessment areas have to be observed, whereas procedural questions (e.g. the number of site visits, the size of the panel, etc.) follow the individual models of the respective foreign agency.

The audit is related to other external quality assurance procedures conducted by AQ Austria in the sense that the validity of the accreditation status of a university of applied sciences depends on a positive certification from the audit process. A university of applied sciences may lose its licence and would have to re-do its institutional accreditation in the event of a negative outcome from the audit, following a period of two years after the original decision to

remedy the shortcomings. Otherwise, AQ Austria considers an audit to be completely different from an accreditation and does not encourage the two procedures to be linked closely.

The certification decision in an audit procedure can be either negative, or positive, or subject to conditions. An outcome 'subject to conditions' requires the institution to prove that it has removed its deficiencies within two years.

In the event of a positive decision, the institution is trusted to look after its own quality, and according to the HS-QSG its next audit will be due seven years later. For universities of applied sciences, new degree programmes must still be externally accredited by AQ Austria. Public universities do not face any obligatory external quality assurance procedures other than the audit every seven years. The only exception from this is the Danube University Krems (a public university for continuing education) with the legal obligation to externally accredit its doctoral programmes.

One of the reasons for the implementation of the new law (HS-QSG) and the corresponding introduction of a mandatory audit for public universities and universities of applied sciences is the effort in Austrian higher education policy to narrow the gap between these two higher education sectors. Universities of applied sciences were introduced to Austrian higher education in 1994 and have often been regarded as the 'younger brothers' of public universities due to their stronger focus on teaching and learning and their predominantly applied research, as well as to the organisation of the study programmes, which is much more regulated than in public universities. Furthermore, universities of applied sciences have an explicit aim to provide applied academic education and to ensure students' employability. Universities of applied sciences do not enjoy the same organisational autonomy as public universities: as already mentioned, universities of applied sciences are subject to a 'licensing' procedure involving institutional accreditation and programme accreditation for each new degree programme, whereas public universities are set up by law and introduce new degree programmes autonomously with an internal process and final recognition by the university's own senate.

Incidentally, AQ Austria itself is by law required to undergo external evaluation in accordance with international standards on a regular basis.

3 Scope

The scope of the AQ Austria audit model covers certain assessment areas, with more detail provided in the standards.

The assessment areas follow the requirements of § 22 (2) of the HS-QSG:

1. Quality strategy and its integration into the management tools of the higher education institution;
2. Quality assurance structures and procedures in the areas of degree programmes and teaching, research or advancement and appreciation of the arts or applied research and development, organisation and administration and staff;
3. Integration of internationalisation and societal objectives into the quality management system;
4. Information systems and involvement of stakeholder groups;
5. Quality assurance structures and procedures for certificate programmes for further education offered by provider of university of applied sciences degree programmes.

A close analysis of these assessment areas shows that on the one hand they involve different dimensions, and on the other hand include very dissimilar aspects. In addition, the 'core tasks' of higher education institutions like teaching and research are regarded on the same level as more technical issues like information systems and administration.

Within its audit, AQ Austria does not check the compliance of individual degree programmes with the Bologna principles regarding learning outcomes, ECTS, recognition, etc. When assessing these areas, the institution has to prove that its internal quality management system is capable of guaranteeing that the institution meets the official requirements for the delivery of degree programmes. Also, if an institution wishes to deal with one of these topics in more detail it can be included in the audit, as the developmental character of the procedure allows this.

Four standards which specify the aforementioned assessment areas are also used to assess the organisation and effectiveness/performance of an institution's quality management system. They have a holistic perspective, based on the quality cycle 'plan-do-check-act':

Standard 1: The higher education institution has defined objectives and pursues a strategy which is systematically supported by management tools.

The higher education institution shall specify strategies and define objectives as prerequisites to establish and implement an internal quality management system. Measures shall be derived from these strategies, and responsibilities at all levels of the higher education institution shall be defined. The higher education institution is autonomous in designing its internal quality management processes.

Standard 2: The quality management system supports the higher education institution in achieving its objectives.

The quality management system shall comprise measures of internal quality assurance, which support the higher education institution in achieving its objectives, fulfilling its tasks and advancing its internal organisational and controlling processes. The core responsibilities of a higher education institution shall be studying and teaching including further training, research or development and appreciation of the arts as well as cross-cutting tasks in the fields of organisation, administration and support, human resources, resource management, and internationalisation.

Standard 3: The quality management system uses evaluation procedures, monitoring and information systems as integral components.

Strategies, organisation and services of the higher education institution shall be subject to systematic monitoring. The higher education institution shall rely on the results and findings of internal monitoring, of its information and reporting systems and of quality assurance measures when it comes to developing and/or advancing objectives and strategies and making controlling decisions. Furthermore, the results of internal and external evaluation measures shall be integrated into the advancement and/or adaptation of the quality management system.

Standard 4: The quality management system is based on the quality approach of the higher education institution and provides for the systematic involvement of various interest groups.

The higher education institution's quality approach shall be sustained by its members and fostered by an active communication strategy. The composition of the interest groups shall be determined by the profile and objectives

of the higher education institution and shall reflect its societal responsibility. AQ Austria also sees these standards as a reflection of the standards in Part I of the ESG, but does not explicitly refer to them.

The crucial point in an audit (as in any external quality assurance procedure) is the proof of the effectiveness of the institution's quality management system or procedures. It is not sufficient to have a quality handbook or a well-designed process framework without putting them into practice. AQ Austria asks the institution for evidence of how its internal quality management system contributes to the achievement of its aims (this implies, of course, that the institution has set aims). This evidence can be provided through documents, but can also be provided orally during the peer review. Representatives of the higher education institution must prove where and how the quality management system supports the daily routine of the institution, how it contributes to solving specific problems, and how every staff member at the institution contributes to active quality management in his or her respective area of responsibility.

4 Audit procedure

AQ Austria performs its audit following the typical stages of a peer review, starting with the hugely important preparation phase. Here, AQ Austria establishes the aims and expectations of the institution for the audit, so as to support institution-wide awareness of the process. To avoid conflicts of interest, AQ Austria does not assist institutions in drafting their own documentation, but is available for questions throughout the process concerning the assessment standards and the methodology behind the procedure.

The selection and preparation of the panel is a crucial element for the success of an audit. The organisation of an audit as a peer review means that panel members must be familiar with the field, must come from comparable contexts to the institution and must be qualified to complete the task set. To acquaint them with the specific nature of an audit and the individual profile of the audited higher education institution, AQ Austria allows for the careful preparation of panel members for each procedure separately.

AQ Austria regards it as fundamentally important for the profile of the review team to invite people with experience in managing higher education institutions: quality culture needs to be implemented from the top down, and the management has to prove its commitment to taking responsibility for its institution's quality. As the audit does not assess individual degree programmes, discipline-specific knowledge is not a priority requirement for peers, especially since institutions with a varied profile could not be covered that way. However, the specific profile of an institution, its size and context etc. is taken into account in the composition of the review team, to guarantee an equal perspective. For an audit at a specialised institution, for example an arts university, AQ Austria employs panel members who are experienced in the respective field. A typical panel has five members. AQ Austria mostly works with peers from outside Austria and prepares them for the specifics of the Austrian higher education system. This is due to the small size of the country and therefore the potential for peers to be biased. If a higher education institution wishes to include Austrian peers in the panel, the agency will select appropriate experts.

AQ Austria conducts two site visits with the panel at the institution. During the first visit the focus is on the organisation of the overall quality management system in the context of the aims and strategies of the higher education institution. The actual implementation of the quality management is the subject of the second site visit.

The panel prepares a report where peers make statements about the institution's internal quality management system and assess it according to the four standards mentioned in the previous section. The higher education institution has the opportunity to comment on the report and deliver a statement. Both the panel report and the institution's statement are taken into consideration by the board of AQ Austria when it decides on the certification of the institution's internal quality management system. Once the certification decision has been made, the certification result, the panel report and the institution's statement are published on the agency's website.

During the audit the panel members get a picture of the institution's internal quality assurance and assess the system as 'met', 'partly met' or 'not met' with the specific requirements of each standard. It is considered 'met' if no deficiencies are detected. 'Partly met' means that quality management basically exists, but there are shortcomings in its implementation. If, however, a major area of the institution (for example research) is not at all covered by the

quality management system, the standards are regarded to be 'not met' and the quality management system consequently may not be certified.

With regard to follow-up procedures, the agency offers optional workshops for the institution a couple of months after the certification decision had been made. In this workshop, members of the institution discuss critical issues and recommendations from the panel report with one panel member, usually the head of the panel. The institution presents the measures it intends to implement in response to the critical issues, and receives immediate feedback.

As an internal follow-up and as part of its internal quality assurance, the agency reflects on the methodology and organisation of the procedure and notes any requirements and ideas for improvement as well as successful aspects. Furthermore, AQ Austria asks the audited institution as well as the peers to give feedback via a feedback form. These are continually fed into the development of the audit and external quality assurance procedures offered by AQ Austria.

5 External assessment / effects and impact

AQ Austria follows a dual approach in its audit of higher education institutions. On the one hand there is the assessment aspect, which has a formal character; on the other hand there is the issue of enhancement, which aims to support the institution in its development. This approach leads to high expectations regarding the audit's impact on the management of the higher education institution, on the higher education institution's internal processes, on the development and delivery of degree programmes, and so on. One reliable way to evaluate and assess the impact of the audit and to find out whether it had any impact is certainly a re-audit, when a comparison of the development of the quality management system can be made. Seven years elapse between an audit and a re-audit, which is longer than most students stay at the institution. This cries out for other ways of analysing the impact of the procedure.

At the moment, AQ Austria uses questionnaires as an immediate means of obtaining feedback from the institution and panel members, both on procedural issues and on the expected effects the audit will have on the institution. A new system of collecting feedback is currently being developed.

It will include differentiated issues for individual respondent groups at the institution at specific times, for example immediately after the finalisation of the audit procedure, one year later, etc. The agency thus intends to find out the real consequences of the audit in the individual assessment areas. Furthermore, as part of the agency's responsibility for system-wide analyses, AQ Austria is setting up a project to conduct analysis at higher education institutions which have undergone an audit in accordance with the HS-QSG.

6 Current and future challenges and developments

Since the law on quality assurance in higher education came into effect in Austria in March 2012, the organisation of an audit every seven years has become mandatory for public universities and universities of applied sciences. Although the character of the procedures and the assessment areas differed from the current audits, universities of applied sciences are familiar with external quality assurance procedures, as evaluations were regularly conducted before.

For public universities, however, the concept of compulsory external quality assurance is new. One of AQ Austria's guiding principles is respect for the autonomy and individuality of higher education institutions. Nevertheless, the feeling of autonomy is a delicate topic for public universities. The University Act 2002 (UG 2002) granted autonomy to public universities, which is shown in their degree of self-governance (before then, they were under the official authority of the Ministry of Science and Research). Responsibility for quality also lies with the institution itself. One of the requirements of the UG 2002 for public universities is the establishment of an internal quality management system in accordance with the institution's needs. It is this system that is now subject to assessment through the audit.

The structure of AQ Austria is closely related to this issue. The agency unites three former Austrian institutions for quality assurance: Fachhochschulrat (the Council for Universities of Applied Sciences, founded in 1994), Akkreditierungsrat (the Council for Private Universities, established in 2000) and the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (founded in 2004). Each of these institutions had certain fields of responsibility and roles, which were merged in 2012 as a result of the HS-QSG to become the new organisation AQ Austria. The two councils were state bodies and had powers over the

institutions in their respective sectors. AQ Austria is now a mixed organisation that partly has the function of a public authority, regarding universities of applied sciences and private universities, but not public universities. Nevertheless, this has proven to be an obstacle for the agency, as the public mainly consider it a public authority. Public universities are suspicious of this aspect as they consider it a threat to their autonomy. One of the agency's challenges is therefore to restore trust, especially from public universities.

Audits following the assessment areas mentioned in chapter 3 of this text may be performed by AQ Austria, by a quality assurance agency registered with EQAR, or by another internationally-recognised and independent quality assurance agency. This leads to significant competition for AQ Austria. If a higher education institution decides to conduct its audit with an agency that is not AQ Austria, the Austrian agency is not involved in the procedure at any stage.

In addition, another challenge of the audit is its status: a negative outcome of an audit, especially following a negative re-audit, will lead to different consequences for public universities and for universities of applied sciences. Whereas a university of applied sciences loses its 'licence' and consequently has to undergo the initial institutional accreditation again, the effect on a public university might be a loss of reputation and probably more pressure on budget negotiations with the Ministry, but not closure. It is debatable which consequence is worse for the individual institutions, but the unequal treatment of the two sectors concerning consequences again raises the questions of authority and of the significance for the institution.

From national experience and from the political commitment expressed in the Bologna Follow-up Group at the Bucharest Ministerial Conference, AQ Austria expects further 'internationalisation' of the audit. This will presumably not be connected with the content of the audit, but rather with opening the 'market' to foreign quality assurance agencies. No doubt this will lead to a better understanding of national higher education systems in the EHEA and hopefully also to institutions having a more appreciative approach. In the long run, this should have a positive impact on students and their mobility during their education, as well as on the recognition of their degrees when they are looking for employment.