



organ für akkreditierung und qualitätssicherung
der schweizerischen hochschulen

Accreditation process

OAQ final report

International institute of management in telecommunications (iimt)

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1 Introduction

1.1 Object of the accreditation procedure

The direction of the International institute of management in telecommunications (iimt) communicated its interest in becoming accredited by the Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Swiss Universities (OAQ) as soon as the description of the process was published. The rector of the University of Fribourg, Professor Urs Altermatt, sent an application for an accreditation procedure for the iimt on the 27th of November 2003. The process itself began in January 2004 with the first preparatory visit, which gathered the director and vice-director of iimt and the director of OAQ, among other persons. It was then decided to have the accreditation process performed at both levels, for the institution and for its executive graduate programmes.

1.2 Context of the procedure

"iimt is an institute within the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) and has an ongoing commitment to promoting teaching (Bachelor and Master programmes), research, continuing professional training and postgraduate education (Executive programmes) in the field of management in information and communications technology (ICT)."¹

According to the self-evaluation document, the basic mandate of iimt is to expand its position as a leading centre of excellence in these fields, on national and international levels, in an interdisciplinary university environment. The first students graduated from the EMBA programme (the Executive Master of Business Administration in Management in Telecommunications) in 2000. The total number of alumni as of 2004 is 123.

The accreditation procedure started on January 27th 2004 and was conducted by the OAQ in accordance with all the methods and rules prescribed in the "Guidelines for academic accreditation in Switzerland"². A time-schedule was set up, in which the on-site visit would take place in June and the final OAQ report be sent to the CUS (Swiss University Conference) for discussion during the last session of 2004. iimt and OAQ together chose to hold the whole process in English. For practical reasons the iimt provided its self-evaluation report in German, and the OAQ had it translated into English. The on-site visit and the following steps of the process were held in English.

The iimt has done everything in order to let this process run with the best collaborative spirit, and the OAQ thanks the institution for having consistently given all the information needed, and for participating constructively in the assessment procedure.

According to article 21 of the "Guidelines"², this final report is meant to present a synthesis based on the Self-evaluation report of the institution¹, the expert report written by the peer-leader after the on-site visit³, and the statement of the applicant about the expert report. The OAQ expresses its own conclusions based on all the information gathered during the process.

1.3 Expert team

The following persons were part of the expert team:

- Deputy director Dorte Kristoffersen (peer leader), the Danish Evaluation Institute
- Professor Philippe Albert, CERAM Sophia-Antipolis, France
- Professor Mariki Eloff, School of Computing, University of South Africa, Pretoria
- Professor Helmut Schauer, Educational Engineering Lab., University of Zürich
- Professor Rias J. van Wyk, Technoscan Centre, Edina, MN, USA

The representative of OAQ accompanying the group of experts was Dr Isabelle Dustin.

2 Self-evaluation report

The self-evaluation report was submitted to OAQ on May 5th 2004 and consists in two parts, the first one referring to the institution and the second to its executives programmes. It is documented by comprehensive and well-organized annexes, which the experts found very useful. It was prepared by a steering committee comprising representatives of the faculty of Economic and Social Sciences of the University of Fribourg, the management of iimt, academic staff and students. It had not been subject to discussion with many stakeholders of the institution before submission to the OAQ, but the persons met during the sessions had received a copy of it and were well aware of the reasons for seeking accreditation.

The experts mentioned that the report could have been of better use to the institution itself, had it been more analytical and self-reflective rather than merely descriptive. "The expert group learned at the site visit that the self-evaluation process had been a learning process for the institute and the group responsible for preparing the document had identified several areas of improvement and development. The quality of the document would have been improved considerably by making this clear to the reader, and it would also have helped iimt to use it as a tool for further development and could have served as inspiration for the expert group."³

3 On site visit of the institution

The on-site visit took place on the 16 and 17th June 2004. The experts met for a briefing session on the previous evening, during which impressions about the self-evaluation documents could be shared and points to address during the visit could be prepared. An introduction to the Swiss higher education system and the Swiss accreditation system was provided by the OAQ.

The programme of the visit, prepared by iimt and OAQ, included discussions with various groups (administrative staff, research staff, accreditation steering group, lecturers, students and alumni, Institute Council). A visit of the premises was included. Some time between sessions was devoted to a first analysis of the observations. The visit ended with a

debriefing session during which the experts gave the steering committee their first impressions in the form of a brief “strengths and weaknesses” analysis.

Here are quotations from the expert final report about the visit: "First of all the expert group would like to express its sincere thanks to iimt for an extremely well organised site visit. (...) All groups were very welcoming and engaged themselves openly in the discussions with the expert group. (...) A large amount of additional information had been made available to the experts in the meeting room and in addition to this the administrative staff readily provided us with all other types of information we found necessary. (...) The site visit added decisive and invaluable information to the accreditation. The meetings during the site visit added the analytical dimension to the accreditation process."³

4 Accreditation of iimt as an institution

Assessment of iimt by OAQ institutional standards

4.1 Strategy, organization and quality management of the institution

The iimt mission statement is publicly available and focuses on the general profile of the institute and its programmes, rather than on specific educational and research objectives. These are found in the strategic plan and the programme descriptions. It was revised after iimt had been in operation for two years, introducing a stronger focus on ICT than on telecommunications. More detailed statements on the various aspects of the mission were given by different groups during the visit. These interpretations provided the expert panel with a better understanding and knowledge of iimt and what it is trying to achieve. The experts felt the mission statement could be brought in better accordance with the views expressed during the visit. The strategic plan is a very brief presentation of the programme and research objectives of iimt.

The decision-making processes, competencies and responsibilities have been considered by the experts as well described and transparent for those involved. This information can be found in the iimt "Organisational handbook". Staff and students confirmed during the visit having ways to influence the decision-making processes in their relevant fields.

"Iimt has the necessary permanent staff in the form of a management group, administrative staff, marketing staff, research assistants and course assistants. The teaching is taken care of by subject coordinators who are permanent staff at the University of Fribourg, lecturers and guest lecturers."³ The experts consider the resources sufficient to fulfil the goals of the institute for the time being. But they also noted that, due to the small size of the research team, continuity of the group may become a problem if the turnover of the research assistants is not carefully planned.

Student applications to the executive programmes have been decreasing, especially during the last year. This trend does not appear in the self-evaluation report, having been compensated by an increase of specialised and customised company courses, which bring in other students. The experts found the iimt management well aware of the seriousness of the situation and giving it considerable attention.

Concerning external financial contributions, the experts mentioned: "It is crucial that the institute is capable of maintaining at least the same amount of external contributions from partners and sponsors in the future."³

The basic funding of the institute consists of contributions from the University of Fribourg. The institute derives supplemental income from services, i.e. the customised teaching (developed as part of a conscious strategy from the institute to secure sufficient funds), and funding from industry and from public major research funds. The experts wrote the following, concerning the autonomy of decision of the institution with regards to financial sources: "It is not an unusual situation for executive programmes to be supported by private companies and from contributions outside the institution. The partners are also some of the main providers of students to the executive programmes and courses. (...) Being dependent on external funds and customers can also include a risk of having to adapt to the wishes of those providing the external funds. Iimt seems to be aware of the inherent risks and has organised itself with an Institute Council where the main stakeholders are part of the general decision-making processes, and they are thus part of the ownership."³

The experts noted there was a high degree of awareness of quality assurance at iimt. The self-evaluation report and the visit proved that systematic student evaluations are carried out, and that well functioning procedures providing a follow-up to the evaluations exist as well.

The questions related to gender equity are dealt with in part 5.5: Students.

4.2 Range of programs

The executive programmes offered by the institute lead to professional degrees with stated goals and objectives. But the iimt also contributes to the University of Fribourg's academic bachelor- and master programmes. The experts made it clear in a separated paragraph, "Methodological reflections", that the team "has chosen to assess iimt as a unit offering executive programmes, as this is the main responsibility of iimt. If iimt's involvement in the teaching activities of the faculty should have been included in the accreditation of iimt as an institution, it would have necessitated an evaluation of large parts of the faculty as well. This has not been possible within the remit of the accreditation process."³

The mobility of students on a Bachelor or Master cursus is assured by the University of Fribourg and could not be assessed by the expert team. The executive programmes offered by iimt attract students both from Switzerland and abroad, thus providing some cultural blending, but there is no exchange of students during the enrolment in the programs. The same remark applies to teaching and scientific staff, 40% of the lecturers having an industrial background and 20% of them coming from abroad.

Regarding the conditions for attaining records of achievement and academic degrees, please refer to 5.3: Curriculum and teaching methods.

In addition to the contact with former students centrally organized by the University of Fribourg, an alumni association has been set up for the former students of the executive programmes. This alumni association has established good relations with iimt, but there is no evidence of the iimt formally collecting data from its alumni for strategic purposes.

4.3 Research

"(...) It is the view of the expert group that iimt has made the right decisions so far in terms of research priorities. (...) It is an asset of the iimt to offer teaching which is based on relevant research."³ Examples of how the scientific findings are used in the teaching are given in the self-evaluation report, although no "mechanism" assuring this on a systematic basis is provided. The research activities, in line with the objectives of the programmes, are closely linked to the research of the director of iimt, and to a large extent personally driven by her. Due to the small size and the young age of the institution, it is necessary to keep a focus on the development of the relevant research areas, as well as to plan for making these activities less dependent on few individuals.

4.4 Academic staff

The permanent academic staff is employed by the University of Fribourg, which has large implications on the contracts and the fulfilment of most of the standards in this area, for example about the policy for continuing education, access to advice on career development, etc. The experts found no link between the assessment of teachers and their development opportunities. The procedures for selecting, nominating and promoting academic staff related to iimt programmes are dealt with under 5.4: Teaching staff.

The director of iimt acts as a mentor for the research assistants. She has regular meetings with them to define objectives for their development and to monitor their progress in achieving them. The research assistants all expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their roles and opportunities within iimt. The atmosphere at iimt is characterised by the fact that there is an open door policy, which means that it is possible for both academic and administrative staff to seek advice from the director not only on career development issues, but on a broad range of issues.

At the time of the visit, all three research assistants were expected to be finishing their thesis within a few months, which may induce a difficult transition period. The institute management is well aware of this point and working on finding solutions. Nevertheless, the expert group is of the opinion that it would be beneficial to the iimt as well as to its assistants, if the iimt would build a strategy for recruitment, development and promotion.

4.5 Administrative and technical staff

The procedures applied by iimt for selecting and promoting administrative and technical staff are part of the centralised university procedures, and they are in compliance with the standards. The administrative staff expressed its satisfaction with the opportunities for continuing education and personal development.

"The open door policy allows for an easy communication at the administrative level. It should be added, however, that this way of functioning is dependent on the size of the institute and is often also person-driven. It is important to pay attention to these two aspects, should the conditions change."³

4.6 Students

The matriculation of students at the University of Fribourg is governed by the Regulation of 27th November 2000, whereas the specific conditions for admission to the executive programmes are dealt with under part 5.5 Students.

The gender issue is treated in part 5.5 Students.

"Iimt keeps a record of the student statistics for the executive students. It is the expert group's impression that there is an awareness of the trends in the development of study achievement and duration of study, but it has found no documentation for procedures for the monitoring and use of these statistics. The staff-student ratio seems to be satisfactory to fulfil the objectives of the programmes." ³

According to the self-evaluation report, student counselling at the iimt exists in the form of regular, intensive and direct contact with the students, as well as an open-door policy. The students, who attend courses in modules every few weeks, confirmed being very satisfied with the contact with the academic and administrative staff, as well as with the management.

4.7 Infrastructure

The teaching of the executive programmes takes place at the School of Engineering and Architecture in Fribourg. These premises have been visited briefly by the expert team, who found them adequate to fulfil the objectives of iimt. Although different stakeholders also shared this view, other mentioned that students in executive programmes and fee-paying activities often have higher expectations than other students, especially with regard to the infrastructure.

4.8 Cooperation

The self-evaluation report mentions that University of Fribourg has cooperation agreements with a number of universities which iimt can also draw on. Iimt itself has entered an cooperation agreement with HEC at the University of Lausanne, concerning the teaching staff. The experts feel that the relationships with other universities, nationally and internationally, are not given high priority. Nevertheless, iimt can be said to promote cooperation continuously with the working environment and the relevant stakeholders, through partnerships and sponsor agreements.

5 Accreditation of the executive programmes offered by iimt

Assessment of the executive programmes by OAQ programme standards

5.1 Implementation and teaching objectives

The executive programmes have been offered on a regular basis since 1997 and their objectives are in overall accordance with the mission statement of iimt. The latest findings in the field of management theory are combined with practical knowledge from the ICT sector.

5.2 Internal organisation and quality assurance mechanisms

This issue was covered under part 4.1 above.

5.3 Curriculum and teaching methods

The expert group felt that the standard concerning the curriculum being structured following the coordinated implementation of the Bologna Declaration should not apply for the executive programmes, this Declaration having no direct influence on continuing education.

The executive programmes do cover the major aspects of the field in question and allow the student to acquire scientific working methods. The standard on conditions for acquiring certificates and academic degrees is fulfilled as well.

As far as teaching and evaluation methods are concerned, "Both the self evaluation document and the discussions during the site visit lacked to provide detailed evidence as to why the teaching and evaluation methods have been chosen and why they are the most appropriate in terms of fulfilling the teaching objectives."³

5.4 Teaching staff

The two paragraphs below are quoted from the expert report:

"The teaching staff at iimt consists of subject heads who are responsible for coordinating the teaching in a specific field, lecturers and visiting lecturers. The self-evaluation document as well as the site visit offered evidence that the teaching staff at iimt is competent and academically qualified. The student evaluations also help as an efficient means to ensure that the teaching staff lives up to the standards.

Job descriptions apply to all iimt staff. Even though most of the lecturers and subject area coordinators have permanent relations with iimt, only a small amount of their teaching is delivered at iimt. Therefore it is important that they receive the necessary information to give high quality teaching. In that connection it is positive to observe that at the site visit the subject coordinators expressed the view that the briefing of lecturers, e.g. on how to treat the students, on contracts and responsibilities, has been improved."³

Concerning the mobility of the teaching staff, the experts mention that the self evaluation document offers no evidence that mobility of teaching staff is facilitated neither internationally nor nationally. One should add that, as stated under 4.2, some intercultural exchange is provided by the fact that the teaching staff is in part coming from abroad and/or with an industrial background.

5.5 Students

The standard concerning the admission criteria is fulfilled.

There is a considerable gender imbalance in the student population. The management is well aware of this and would like to welcome more women to the executive programmes (95% of the students over the last five years were men). " At the site visit, management and

staff offered a number of explanations to the problem, e.g that technology and ICT are not interesting for women and that pro rata less women hold a management position to fulfil the terms of admission to the executive programmes. There is no evidence, however, that iimt has taken focussed long-term action to alleviate the situation and thus assure a better balance between male and female students."³

There is no exchange of students during the enrolment in the programmes, but the expert group is of the view that this standard is not fully applicable to executive programmes, as it is seldom possible or relevant for employed students to spend time abroad.

Concerning the support and counselling to students, please refer to part 4.6 above.

5.6 Facilities and premises

Please refer to parts 4.1 and 4.7 above.

6 Profile of strengths and weaknesses from the experts' point of view

The expert report contains a rather comprehensive list of strengths and weaknesses, as perceived during the accreditation process. This part, although of considerable value for the iimt, is merely summarized below.

Strengths

- Motivated and hard-working staff, and positive study environment
- Positive use of its small size by running an open-door policy, inducing fast response to problems as they arise
- Quality culture: evaluations, students' spokesperson and guidelines for follow-ups. The group commends iimt for this systematic effort, but suggests the procedures to be revised every 3 to 5 years and, considering the open-door policy and the small size of the institution, a shift of focus from student evaluations to other stakeholders' evaluations (lecturers, other labour market representatives).
- Principle of research-based teaching, i.e. that the teaching is coordinated by subject coordinators who are permanent staff. "(...) inherent risk, however, that it becomes too person-dependent. The expert group would like to commend iimt for the research effort, however, and emphasise that it is crucial to maintain the high priority on research."³
- Modular structure, enabling the institute to make the programmes flexible, and adapt them easily to market trends in general.

Issues to be monitored

- Need for continuous development of structure as well as of course content. The expert group recommends an external evaluation (...) as part of the continuous quality assurance procedure, possibly every 5 to 7 years.
- ICT is an area in continuous development. A yearly discussion of the most important developments and their possible impact on the executive programmes is recommended to become part of the strategic process at iimt.

- The decline in the number of students is a serious challenge and puts iimt under financial pressure, the break-even point in terms of students being 12 per year. The experts commend iimt for having compensated this trend by other activities and express the view that some of the actions listed below may help alleviate the problem.

Weaknesses and suggestions

- A revision of the mission statement and the strategic plan is suggested, in order to define the mission of the institute in more precise and up-dated terms, but also to make clear which professional profiles the iimt offers through its executive programmes.
- It is not clear what exactly international means in the acronym "iimt". This should be clarified, in order to have the right impact on the future orientation of the programmes.
- The expert group encourages iimt to formulate a strategy to ensure the recruitment, the development of a professional profile and the replacement of research assistants.
- The teaching and evaluation methods could be aligned closer to the objectives of the programmes and to the experiences and future tasks of the students. Mature and experienced students may enrich the teaching with their inputs.
- The gender issue needs attention and should be given a priority in the future.

7 Experts' conclusions and recommendations

The expert conclusions are entirely quoted below:

"It is the overall conclusion of the expert group that the iimt is of sound quality as an organisational unit and in terms of its executive programmes, and that it fulfils the standards. iimt has successfully managed to define a number of programmes for which there has been a demand in the market and has started building up a solid research programme to support the teaching activities. In other words it is the expert group's view that iimt both as an institute and as a provider of education has a solid foundation to build on, also in the form of human resources and administrative set-up.

As the technology market is in continuous development, so is the demand from the market in terms of continued education – a need that the executive programmes fulfil. iimt has this year been touched by a marked decline in student applications. This could be due to changing needs in the market. It is therefore important that iimt monitors the needs of the market – i.e. companies and potential students – and revise the programmes and their professional profile to the major trends. This is also necessary to ensure a sufficient financial basis for iimt. This is probably the biggest challenge that iimt is faced with in the short term."³

The expert group recommends unconditional accreditation of iimt as an academic institution, observing, however, the methodological reflections put forward in the report (See in part 4.2: *the team "has chosen to assess iimt as a unit offering executive programmes, as this is the main responsibility of iimt. If iimt's involvement in the teaching activities of the faculty should have been included in the accreditation of iimt as an institution, it would have necessitated an evaluation of large parts of the faculty as well."*³

The expert group recommends unconditional accreditation for the executive programmes offered by iimt.

8 limit statement about the experts' report

Upon receipt of the expert report, the iimt representative transmitted a few minor modifications to the peer-leader. The report in its final version was sent to OAQ and to iimt shortly after. In a letter dated 22nd September 2004, Professor Stephanie Teufel, Director of the iimt, officially agreed on the content of this report, thus completing the second step of the process: expert visit and report.

9 OAQ conclusions and recommendations

The OAQ fully supports the decisions and recommendations of the expert team. Therefore, it recommends:

- Unconditional institutional accreditation to iimt,
- Unconditional accreditation to the following programmes: iimt Executive Diploma and iimt Executive MBA.

Sharing the views expressed by the experts in terms of possible quality enhancement, the OAQ advises the iimt to revise its strategic plan, develop a long-term research staff policy and consider adapting its quality assurance mechanisms on a regular basis, especially taking into account the size of the institution.

¹ Self-evaluation report, iimt, May 2004

² Guidelines for academic accreditation in Switzerland, CUS-SUK, October 2003

³ Institutional and programme accreditation of iimt, Expert group report, August 2004