



organ für akkreditierung und qualitätssicherung
der schweizerischen hochschulen

Summary quality assurance audits according to the UFG

OAQ Synthesis Report

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1 Introduction

The declaration by European education ministers in Berlin on 19 September 2003 says: "The quality of higher education has proven to be pivotal in creating a European Higher Education Area." The ministers stress that, consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the main responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution and that on this basis the universities are obligated to account to the state and society. From this it can be concluded that universities should have effective quality-assurance systems which guarantee excellence in research and teaching.

In Switzerland at the beginning of 2003, the Confederation mandated the Centre of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities, or OAQ, to assess the internal quality-assurance measures of Swiss universities as part of its quality-evaluation activities. Under the terms of the Federal Law on Financial Aid to Universities (UFG) quality evaluations are obligatory for all cantonal universities and a requirement for financial support of these institutions from the Confederation.

Up until that time, Switzerland lacked an independent audit and assessment of quality-assurance measures by Swiss tertiary education institutions. The OAQ quality audit began 1 July 2003 and ended 31 May 2004. The following chapters will briefly outline the procedure and give the most important results.

2 Audit of quality assurance at Swiss universities

2.1 Procedure and requirements of a quality-assurance system

The quality evaluation follows an audit procedure which includes a self-assessment by the university using OAQ guidelines as well as an external appraisal through on-site visits by an international and independent team of experts. The institutions must be able to show that they have taken efficient and effective measures to ensure the quality of teaching and research and that the results of these measures have contributed to an improvement in the quality of the institution. In making their evaluation, the experts use as a kind of benchmark the following list of internationally accepted requirements for a good quality-assurance system at tertiary education institutions:

- The quality-assurance system at a university or university institution should aim both for quality control and for quality development.
- Quality assurance must be an integral part of the overall strategy of the university or university institution, cover all sub-units of the institution and be applied systematically.
- The results of internal and external evaluations as well as other quality-assurance measures must be used continuously with the aim of improving quality of instruction and research.
- The effectiveness of quality-assurance measures must be checked periodically by external experts.

2.2 Expert teams

The OAQ audit teams of independent, international experts consisted of 23 people with experience in quality assurance and management experience.¹ The universities had the right to make substantiated objections about individual members of the groups. In putting the groups together the OAQ took into account balance in language and origin. Interviews in French-speaking Switzerland took place in French and those in German- and Italian-speaking Switzerland mostly in English.

The team leader was a person chosen for his or her profound experience in the sphere of accreditation or evaluation of quality-assurance systems. To guarantee a certain consistency and comparability in the various procedures, the experts worked at times in several consecutive procedures.

The on-site visits in January and February 2004 took place in a relaxed and constructive atmosphere. The groups of people being interviewed consisted of representatives from various levels and interest groups: university administration, students, non-professional staff, professors/lecturers, quality controllers, curriculum managers, etc. The expert reports drawn up after the on-site visits and the position of the institutions on these reports were the basis for the final OAQ reports sent to federal authorities.

The present synthesis report describes the current state of university quality assurance in Switzerland, sums up the main strengths and weakness and recommends improvements in university quality assurance.

3 Strengths of university quality assurance – quality assurance measures at Swiss universities

In the 1990s, Swiss universities began systematically introducing quality-assurance measures for teaching and research. This work today has advanced at variable rates of progress and is based on the regional and university-specific particularities and needs. Individual faculties can show examples of “best practice” in the field of quality assurance and practically all universities have structural mechanisms for quality assurance in place (legal/regulatory basis for quality assurance, a quality-assurance office to coordinate measures). During their interviews, the experts also noticed the commitment to quality assurance in tertiary education at all university levels and among all university staff.

From the documents given to the OAQ by the universities and from the details in the experts reports it emerges that the following important quality-assurance measures have been implemented by the majority of the universities investigated:

- regular evaluations of teaching institutes (lectures, courses, seminars, etc.)
- quality-assurance measures for research (research data bases, research commissions, in part, research evaluations)
- regulation of the appointment procedure (selection to new professorships, re-selection of professors, trial lectures for evaluation purposes, etc.)

¹ Cf. appendix 1

- student support measures (counselling offices, mentoring systems, measures to integrate freshmen, career coaching (situation analysis), “godmother/godfather systems”, etc.)
- courses in didactics for the teaching staff (positions in university didactics, counselling for lecturers, e-learning support, etc.)
- measures to promote new young talents (doctoral institutes, exchange programmes with other research institutes, contacts with the labour market, etc.)
- gender-equality measures (mentoring programmes, measures to promote proportion of women professors, etc.)
- data base systems for student statistics (size of student body, number of students completing studies, supervisory relationships, etc.)

Further quality-assurance measures such as the evaluation of university sub-units are being carried out only partly today, but are planned at most universities.

4 Weaknesses of university quality assurance

The international quality experts pointed out big differences in quality assurance at Swiss universities. The following weaknesses were determined at more than half the universities investigated:

- An explicitly formulated strategy for university-level quality assurance is still lacking at most institutions; existing strategies are still insufficiently in place in overall university-level strategies.
- Most universities have a mixture of different, good quality-assurance measures, but these are not linked to a coherent quality-assurance system.
- Quality assurance is still not formalized enough. It lacks a systematic operation and is insufficiently integrated into the everyday activities of university-level teaching and research.
- The responsibilities for quality assurance at various university levels are still insufficiently defined.
- The results of quality-assurance measures are still insufficiently used to improve quality and for the strategic administration of universities. At the moment, the results focus more on the recognition of problems.
- A systematic evaluation of studies programmes and curricula is lacking.
- The labour market and the graduate body are not integrated enough into quality assurance and development
- Communication about the results of internal evaluations and other quality-assurance measures is still unsatisfactory (for example systematic feedback to students about assessments of lectures; feedback of quality assurance results to management.)

Over and above that, the experts observed that although most universities had extensive data base systems with information about the student body, these were being used too little as management information systems. Besides the usual student statistics they should also contain detailed information about study processes (success rates, dropout rates, reasons for dropping out, development after graduation, etc.) as well as details on the quality of the university product in teaching and research. Such information systems are required not only for the early recognition of problems but can also be used by management specifically for

the strategic administration of teaching and research activities and for the improvement of quality.

5 Comparison with requirements of university quality assurance systems

5.1 Quality control and quality development

At most universities what is lacking is systematic quality control which draws in all university-level units and which leads to quality development. While all universities have initiated control mechanisms such as teacher evaluations, lecturer evaluations, evaluations of individual institutes and so on, the administrations still use the results far too rarely for quality development.

5.2 Placing quality assurance in the overall strategy of the university

At most Swiss universities quality assurance still does not have a place, or insufficiently so, in the overall strategy of the university. However quality assurance does play a major role at the individual university level and here it can be seen how, to a certain extent, it has been used admirably for strategic applications, particularly in the area of teacher evaluations. But universities are taking seriously the call for a strategic application of quality-assurance measures, for example the newly-created quality assurance positions which are attached to each individual rectorate.

5.3 Assessment and application of results of quality-assurance measures

The targeted assessment of the results of quality-assurance measures is still insufficient. At most universities what are also lacking are the relevant overall university strategies. The results of internal and external evaluations are used as effective instruments in problem recognition, but still not enough for continuous improvements in the quality of instruction and research or for management tasks.

5.4 External evaluation of quality-assurance measures

This requirement was met by all Swiss universities with the quality audit carried out according to the UFG and presented here in summary form. A detailed audit of the quality of individual courses of study or of organizational sub-units was dispensed with at this first audit cycle.

6 Recommendations for the improvement of university quality assurance

In their evaluations, the experts made the following recommendations for the further development of university quality assurance in Switzerland:²

- systematic evaluations of study programmes and curricula
- set up Management Information Systems
- interfaculty exchange of good practices
- placement of quality assurance in the overall strategy of the university
- systematization of research evaluation
- define responsibilities for quality assurance
- use results of evaluations and other measures for quality improvements
- formalization of quality assurance

² Presented here are recommendations applying to more than half of the universities audited. The listing is based on the frequency point was mentioned.

- integration of quality assurance into the day-to-day running of the university
- include quality assurance in the implementation of the Bologna reform process
- analysis of existing quality-assurance measures
- improved feedback of evaluation results to the student body/teaching staff
- improved involvement of graduates and of the labour market in quality assurance

It is expected that the universities will have implemented to the best of their abilities the individual recommendations of the experts by the next audit 2007-2008.

7 Assessment of summary quality audits³

7.1 Assessment by the audit teams

The experts said that on the whole they were extremely satisfied with the quality-audit procedure. But they pointed out that communication between the experts and interview partners and the instruments provided by the OAQ could be improved.

7.2 Assessment by the universities

There were differences between French- and German-speaking Switzerland in the evaluation and rating of the quality-audit procedure by the universities being audited. But the overall process in the French-speaking part was better accepted than in German-speaking Switzerland. The areas concerning information about the structure and content of the self-evaluation report, as well as the methods and goals of the quality audits received mixed ratings.

The universities were unanimous in their positive reaction to the fact that the self-evaluation process and the on-site visits contributed to an improvement in internal quality assurance.

8 Overall judgement by the OAQ and outlook

In 2004, the quality-assurance systems in place at public universities in Switzerland received their first critical audit by an independent body. The results of the audit showed each university where improvements could be made. Such quality audits increase the self responsibility of the universities in this sphere, but it also ensures the legally stipulated supervisory role of the state in the matter of quality assurance. Although the quality audit focuses simply on the quality assurance systems set up by the universities, it involves a highly efficient process which determines the level of quality of the overall performance of the university.

Efficient and effective quality-assurance systems at universities are essential in providing high-quality instruction and research. For one thing, it permits the identification of problems in instruction and research and for another, it provides the basis for the continuing development of universities in terms of strategy, content and quality. Today quality assurance at universities is considered a paramount process which in the sense of a culture of quality should be integrated into day-to-day academic life and work both towards quality control as well as quality improvement. Quality assurance refers not only to the evaluation of instruction but also should contain a series of structural, process-oriented and outcome-related aspects of a university. Where evaluations are made, there are important procedural

³ The OAQ has the detailed analyses of the evaluations.

steps to follow (establishment of measurable targets, transparent feedback to the participants, application of the results in quality improvements, etc.). Optimal quality-assurance systems involve all stakeholders in a university, clearly establish responsibilities and are backed up by a well-functioning management information system. In this way it is possible to make the necessary strategic decisions at all levels of the university and to ensure the quality of instruction and research.

Measured against this ideal picture, there is room for improvement at most Swiss universities. But on the basis of the achievements to date, the OAQ is convinced that the universities can full comply with these requirements by 2007-2008. A large number of important elements are already generally in place for an optimal quality assurance system. What is encouraging is not only the widespread and noticeable commitment to quality assurance and development but also the satisfaction expressed by the student body in many places about the quality of instruction. Based on the results of the quality audits, it can be assumed that all Swiss universities provide high quality instruction and research under UFG, Art. 11, para. 3. In the view of the OAQ, the quality-related prerequisites for financial assistance are clearly met.

The OAQ will support the universities in their efforts to remedy the weaknesses in the quality assurance system outlined by the experts in their reports and adheres fully to the recommendations suggested in chapter 4. The OAQ invites the universities to implement these recommendations and thus make the necessary progress by the next quality audit. Moreover consideration is to be given to the specific situation of individual universities.

On the basis of the results of the quality audits presented here and of the latest international experiences, the universities, their committees and the Swiss University Conference are to cooperate closely this year in drawing up quality-assurance guidelines for university-level educational institutions in Switzerland. They can be considered as benchmarks for the coming audit cycle.

Appendix 1: List of experts taking part in the audit procedures

Prof. Jacques Bury, Directeur Agence pour le Développement et l'Evaluation de Politiques de Santé (ADSAN), [Director, Agency for Health Policy Development and Evaluation] Carouge, Switzerland

Prof. Karl Einhäupl, Neurology Clinic, Humboldt-University Berlin/Charité, Chairman, German Science Council, Berlin, Germany

Prof. Lluís Ferrer i Caubet, Rector, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

Prof. Luc François, Director Department of Educational Affairs, University of Ghent, Belgium

Prof. Jon Haakstad, Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), Oslo, Norway

Prof. Kauko Hämäläinen, Department of Education University of Helsinki, Finland

Prof. Nick Harris, Vice Director Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), Gloucester, England

Prof. Jean-Loup Jolivet, Président Comité national d'évaluation (CNE) [President, National Evaluation Committee], Paris, France

Prof. Jürgen Kohler, Rechts- und Staatswissenschaftliche Fakultät Universität [Faculty of Law and Political Science] Greifswald, Germany

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Dorte Kristoffersen, Director of development, Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA), Copenhagen, Denmark

Prof. Rainer Künzel, Präsident Universität Osnabrück [President, University of Osnabrück], Germany

Prof. Jacques L'Ecuyer, Directeur Commission d'évaluation de l'enseignement collegial [Director, Collegiate Teacher Evaluation Commission], Quebec, Canada

Prof. em. Evelies Mayer, Institut für Soziologie der Technischen Universität Darmstadt [Sociology Institute of Darmstadt Technical University], Germany

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Prof. Massimo Tronci, Vicepresidente Dipartimento di Meccanica e Aeronautica e
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