



organ für akkreditierung und qualitätssicherung
der schweizerischen hochschulen

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To the kind attention of the Review Panel

Comments regarding the draft report of the external review of OAQ

Dear Review Panel Members,

OAQ appreciates and gladly takes the opportunity to comment on the draft of the report of its external review. Please find our general remarks as well as some factual corrections below.

First of all, on behalf of the OAQ team, I wish to thank the panel for the interest shown at all times in gaining an understanding of the various activities of OAQ and how they are conducted. We were impressed by the professionalism and ethical approach with which the panel conducted its evaluation.

Overall we find that the draft report reflects the current situation of OAQ very closely and that the considerations and recommendations made by the panel will prove extremely helpful for the further development of our agency. Consequently, we agree with the recommendations put forward and have already started to implement them aiming at full compliance with all ESG standards.

In our perception, one of the most salient conclusions made in the review report refers to the governance system that – although in conformity with the law – foresees neither a mechanism for the review of the effectiveness of the Scientific Advisory Board nor the performance of the Director of OAQ. In addition to that, the current system emphasises activities and processes instead of purposes and impact (ESG 3.5 / ENQA criterion 4 and ESG 3.8 / ENQA criterion 7 and overall conclusion). Another key conclusion of the report – again in our perception – concerns the publication of reports, i.e. the non-publication of reports in some areas of activities and the non-publication of negative decisions in some other areas.

While these issues will definitely be resolved once the new law regarding higher education comes into force, OAQ gives the implementation of the recommendations relating to these two issues top priority in order to make the best of the transitional time towards a new QA system in Switzerland. The following measures are designed to this effect and will be put forward immediately:

a. Mission statement, Strategic goals

OAQ takes the analysis regarding ESG 3.5 very seriously and gives the rewriting of its mission statement as well as the development of a strategic position an absolute priority. OAQ believes that the timing to do so is very propitious as both chambers of Parliament have accepted the new law on Higher Education (HFKG/LAHE) and it is now clear that it will be in force by mid 2014. OAQ will widen its mission statement to include explicit goals particularly with regard to the way OAQ will interact with its stakeholders. Furthermore, the renewal of the Scientific Board (see point b) offers an opportunity to strengthen the strategic governance of OAQ. The outcomes of the strategic workshop of autumn 2010 represent a starting point for a conscious definition of the agency's strategic plan, clearly linked to its mission statement.

OAQ will actively participate in the working groups of the federal government, which will prepare the implementation of the new law, thus contributing to an adequate governance structure answering to the national and international challenges.

b. Role and composition of the Scientific Advisory Boards

The term of office of the current Scientific Advisory Board ends on 31st December 2011. OAQ has brought the analysis and the conclusion of the review panel to the attention of the Secretariat General of the SUC as the governing body of OAQ; the final report will be brought to the attention of the SUC members as the body appointing the Scientific Advisory Board. While the respective bylaw specifies the number and the composition of members of the Board, OAQ feels it is possible to enlarge the Board and thus strengthen its diversity by including the professional world as well as the students. In addition, it is possible to develop its function so as to give the Scientific Advisory Board a role in the formulation of strategies and in the evolution of the agency.

Also, the OAQ Boards put this issue on the agenda of the next meeting in order to contribute to the redefinition of their roles.

Under the new law the responsibility for strategic leadership of Swiss QA in general and the OAQ as national agency in particular will lay with the independent Accreditation Council.

c. The implementation of the HFKG/LAHE / publication of decisions

The implementation of the HFKG/LAHE includes two main challenges: a governance structure and a coherent model of institutional accreditation – both responding to national and international requirements in external QA. OAQ will bring the experience gained in a decade of regulated external QA activities in Switzerland into this work and thus offer to play a key role as an expert for QA by participating in the relevant working groups installed by the federal government.

The implementation of the HFKG/LAHE, i.e. the drafting of the respective bylaws, offers an opportunity to discuss with the relevant stakeholders the need to publish reports as well as all decisions (positive or negative) and to establish a legal basis for this central principle of external QA.

d. Communication

In parallel to the improvements in its mission statement and strategic goals, OAQ works on a Communication Concept defining the ways OAQ interacts with its stakeholders nationally and internationally. One of the projects that have already started is the (re-)launch of a biannual newsletter aiming at disseminating good practices as well as the results of the findings of OAQ in its procedures and system-wide analysis of the processes.

As far as the draft review report is concerned, in order to ease its understanding by those who are not particularly familiar with the OAQ, one point needs to be clarified and a small number of factual inaccuracies would need to be rectified.

Clarification:

Page 25/26 – The Review Panel noted “what it considered to be an undue reliance placed on student panel members in terms of the expectation placed on them to develop a Panel’s understanding of the (complex) Swiss HE system”. This consideration is probably at the origin of the Recommendation made to the OAQ in page 26 of the report, according to which the briefing of experts should include a ‘clear and transparent’ explanation of the complexity and historical context of the Swiss HE system.

A clarification is necessary. Well before the systematic introduction of student panel members the OAQ briefing of experts has included a clear and transparent explanation of the Swiss HE system, which it still does, with accurate adaptations according to the context in question (mainly university, UAS, medicine). The OAQ scientific collaborators are responsible for the understanding of the Swiss HE system by the international experts from the beginning of a procedure until the end. This responsibility does not lie within the Swiss student representative. That being said, the training of students willing to be accepted in the ‘accreditation pool’ does focus on this aspect as well, stressing on the implication of representing the Swiss system in an international panel of experts. Students are well prepared for this task and their feed-back has been insofar highly positive, as this insight-knowledge helps them find an authoritative role in the team, easing their full integration.

Factual inaccuracies:

1. Page 6 – The SUC is mentioned as Swiss Universities Conference instead of Swiss University Conference.
2. Page 9 – The pool of trained student reviewers has not been formally ‘accredited’.
3. Page 13 – With reference to the future legal framework scheduled to come into force in 2013 it is stated that institutional accreditation will be mandatory for all institutions of higher education. That will be the case only for public institutions (and for private ones, if they describe themselves as universities or university institutions).
4. Page 14 – In relation to the OAQ accreditation activities in the UAS sector, there is a concluding sentence stating that the OAQ assumes complete responsibility for all steps of this activity and “final decisions are taken by OAQ’s accreditation commission”. In the field of UAS final accreditation decisions are taken by the FDEA. For the voluntary evaluation procedures of UAS postgraduate continuing education the decision-making body is indeed internal to the agency. However, that body is the

Scientific Advisory Board for UAS and not the Accreditation Commission. The latter takes decisions with regards to OAQ's activities in Germany.

5. Page 17 – The Swiss Q-Network and the CUS (French abbreviation of the Conférence universitaire suisse, otherwise known in the report as SUC: Swiss University Conference) are clearly two distinct bodies as the Swiss Q-Network is a group of the Conference of the Rectors of the Swiss Universities. The sentence “For example, the draft Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Swiss Universities were formally adopted by the CUS in December 2006”, is in the given context misleading. The CUS/SUC had indeed adopted the said Guidelines in December 2006. However, here it is wrongly referred to the CUS as the abbreviation of the Swiss Q-Network, engendering big confusion. Your sentence could be rephrased as such: “For example, the draft Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Swiss Universities were deeply discussed within the Q-Network before they were formally adopted by the SUC in December 2006”.
6. Page 22 – Members of evaluation teams are selected according to criteria which include expertise and experience in higher education. However, this is only one criterion. The Review Panel seems to suggest in its summary of findings that assessment panels are composed exclusively by academics. Competencies in teaching, research and didactics are complemented by expertise in quality assurance, the professional field in question and by student representatives.
7. Page 42 – Referring to the activities subcontracted to third parties the Review Panel mentions ‘external communications’. Although recognising that this is drawn from the OAQ self-evaluation report (page 29), we must admit that it would be more appropriate to say that web-design & production is subcontracted externally, as our external communication is obviously conceived internally.

In view of the above mentioned, we wish to thank once again the Review Panel for its work and would like to stress our agreement with the content of the report and the suggestions put forward for improving the running of our agency. In agreement with the State Secretariat for Education and Research (SER) the OAQ intends to use the results of this review as a basis for the application for inclusion in the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAR).

Sincerely,



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Cc: - Dr. Martina Weiss, SUC Secretary General
- Members of the Scientific Advisory Boards