



center of accreditation and quality assurance  
of the swiss universities

## **Quality principles and measures of the OAQ**

**December 2005**



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## 1 Introduction

The OAQ requires a coherent and effective internal quality assurance system to be able to work professionally at a high level. Quality assurance measures are systematically applied and there are feedback mechanisms in place to guarantee quality development. Developing a culture of quality at an institution is the main goal because it is not sufficient to have a quality assurance system alone. More so, all staff members must be motivated to work for quality and have the relevant knowledge. Only in this way can quality assurance measures influence the daily activities at an institution.

This position paper on OAQ quality principles and measures focuses on all the day-to-day activities and is the basis of all work phases. As a learning organisation the OAQ is constantly adapting this document and introducing improvements on the basis of external or internal feedback.

In the first part, the OAQ's understanding of quality is explained and the principles of a well functioning quality assurance system presented. In the principles guiding the individual quality sectors of its work, the OAQ fixes its claim to quality. In the second strategic part of the paper, measures that have been taken to date in implementing its quality policy and those which are planned for the medium term are explained.

## 2 OAQ principles of quality

### 2.1 OAQ understanding of quality

- The OAQ works efficiently and with constantly high standards of quality according to predetermined goals and basic legal stipulations.
- Internal and external evaluations lead to a development of quality in OAQ spheres of operation.
- Quality that is lacking as well as critical aspects of the working process are identified through internal and external feedback, are discussed and development quality measures are taken. The OAQ works systematically to improve and advance its work processes.
- The results of OAQ work are reliable and have earned the OAQ the confidence of external stakeholders.

### 2.2 Principles of OAQ quality assurance

- All work processes and fields of activity are considered.
- There are clearly structured and adequately formulated guidelines for quality assurance.
- Quality assurance is firmly established within management and the corresponding responsibilities are clearly distributed.
- The quality of the working processes is documented and evaluated.
- Internal and external evaluations constantly check to see if the predetermined goals can be achieved or whether adjustments are needed.
- A broad participation of all staff members as well as the active internal communication of the results of internal quality assurance are guaranteed.

## **3 Guiding principles and measures of quality**

### **3.1 Input**

#### **3.1.1 Guiding principles**

- The legal basis of the OAQ is clear. Its core tasks are unmistakably defined by law. Within this framework the OAQ has a wide variety of activities which are undertaken through projects.
- The OAQ works independently of the state and the universities in the planning and implementation of procedures as well as in reaching decisions.
- The OAQ organises and manages itself under the terms of its bylaws and has its own budget. Finances are regulated by law with guaranteed contributions coming from the Confederation and the cantons.
- The OAQ is a small organisation with a competent and highly-qualified staff. It has a broad range of exclusive knowledge. The staff has a high degree of initiative and self-motivation.
- OAQ management has adopted a participative approach which is based on open information and mutual confidence. Conflicts are discussed openly and solutions sought together.
- The office of the OAQ is supported by an international scientific advisory board which is responsible for the scientific quality of OAQ work.
- The OAQ has a “corporate identity” and a modern, user-friendly office infrastructure in keeping with this identity.

#### **3.1.2 Measures**

- The main element of internal quality assurance of the OAQ is the position paper on OAQ quality principles and measures which is integrated into day-to-day work.
- OAQ staff members have clearly defined job descriptions which correspond to the qualification of the individual members and take into consideration their competencies and strengths. In this context the staff act independently.
- Decision-making processes at the OAQ are transparent. The decision-making competencies of the staff are clearly defined.
- Annual evaluation talks enable the director to assess the work of the staff.
- Continuing education is seen as a main quality assurance measure to ensure a competent and motivated staff. The OAQ supports and promotes the professional and personal development of its employees with the aim of expanding available knowledge and abilities and adapting to new requirements.
- Different linguistic and scientific cultures are brought together into a team; teamwork is important.
- There are formal information and communication processes as well as feedback mechanisms within the OAQ (team meetings, meetings with the scientific advisory board) as well as with external partners (web page, news letters, annual report).
- The scientific advisory board comments on strategic issues as well as the individual procedures carried out by the OAQ.
- At team meetings all on-going activities and their results are open to wide-ranging discussions (internal feedback).

### **3.2 Process**

#### **3.2.1 Guiding principles**

- In its activities the OAQ works on the basis of the best international practices and cooperates internationally in the field of quality assurance and accreditation.

- OAQ quality assurance aims to promote the quality of teaching and research at universities.
- The OAQ sees itself as an operative centre of competence for quality matters throughout the university sector. As such it promotes a coherent national quality and education policy.
- The quality assurance undertaken offers a form of consumer protection by providing transparent assessments of the quality of study courses and university performance. They also serve as guidelines for students and the labour market.
- OAQ management style is forward looking, allowing for innovation and ideas from its staff. OAQ management makes a point of motivating its staff.
- The flat structure and the small number of staff permits a flexible organisational structure which can deal quickly with developments and adapt.
- Internal and external communication operates in a friendly, professional, constructive and speedy manner.
- OAQ working culture is characterised by mutual respect and courteous working relations.
- All services and procedures are carried out by a competent and motivated staff which knows its decision-making competencies.

### 3.2.2 Measures

- OAQ processes are clearly based in law. They follow a transparent and stringent procedure which is ensured by accreditation guidelines adopted by the SUK/CUS as well as by an internal quality handbook.
- The quality handbook contains detailed descriptions of all OAQ procedures. The handbook aims for the highest possible standardisation of work to guarantee the same process for each procedure in terms of time and content. The handbook clearly defines the responsibilities of the individual steps in the procedure. A direct link to the electronic handbook template leads to the relevant standard documents in the procedural stages.
- All OAQ procedures are monitored through a database. Information such as the nature, beginning and end of the procedure, expert groups and decisions are stored here. The database is used by OAQ management as a control tool and forms a basis for future strategic decisions.
- In developing quality standards for each new accreditation sector (universities of applied sciences, medicine, psychology, etc.) the OAQ first looks into what is being done on the international level.
- A preliminary check of accreditation requests by private institutions looks at the credibility of an institution to avoid a situation whereby the OAQ undertakes a procedure at an institution which is not yet ready for an accreditation or which is not serious. On the other hand, such a preliminary check can save an institution which is not yet ready for an accreditation a large financial outlay.
- The OAQ procedures are founded on the basis of internationally accepted standards and guidelines (ECA code of good practice, ENQA standards and guidelines, INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice 2005, UNESCO-OECD guidelines on Quality Provisions in Cross-Border Higher Education).

- A well-chosen group of experts increases the quality of a procedure. The OAQ has published selection criteria for external experts which correspond to ECA guidelines. There is intensive contact with other European accreditation agencies which recommend experts. To guarantee the greatest possible independence of the experts, the OAQ invites mainly international experts to take part in its procedures.
- At the beginning of the procedure, the institution or course of study being investigated receives a self-assessment handbook which contains the aims of the self assessment, the process and the tasks required of the institution/course of study. In this manner, the OAQ guarantees that all candidates receive the same information and that the expectations of the accreditation are clear.
- The OAQ has introduced two measures to ensure that the external experts have a coherent level of knowledge: The handbook for the external appraisal describes the procedure for the external experts and familiarises them with the quality standards and the format of the report. An expert briefing on the night before the visit ensures that all participants have the same level of knowledge concerning the institution and procedure. The OAQ plans meetings of the external experts to introduce them to the Swiss accreditation system and to discuss possible problems in the accreditation procedure.
- The OAQ Scientific Advisory Board is also included in quality assurance at the process level. It makes the definitive selection of the expert team and examines and adopts the OAQ's final report on the procedure.
- The OAQ demands high quality standards in cooperation with external partners/staff. The quality is checked by internal feedback mechanisms. At least two staff members examine the material produced by the external partners/staff and/or their activities.

### 3.3 Output

#### 3.3.1 Guidelines

- The annual targets of the OAQ and the associated milestones can be achieved thanks to its high-quality work.
- A main goal of the OAQ is the satisfaction of the partner groups.
- The performance of the OAQ is systematically evaluated.

#### 3.3.2 Measures

- Internal feedback operates through an electronic pin board to which all OAQ staff has access. Personal feedback can be contributed at different points (guidelines, quality standards, handbook, questionnaire, etc.). The results are regularly investigated, discussed in the team and used for the development of the quality of internal and external processes.
- The satisfaction of the external participants with the procedure is systematically investigated; the results are considered and used to develop quality. At the end of every procedure the experts and the institutions/study course receive a questionnaire on their satisfaction with the procedure, its organisation by the OAQ, the composition of the expert team, the instruments, etc. The answers are assessed by the relevant quality group and, after team discussion, the results are applied to the quality development of procedures and instruments.
- The OAQ plans follow-up evaluations which, 1-2 years after the procedure, check to see what has changed after the external visit to the institution. Standardised interviews with different participants are planned.



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- Exchanges of experiences and cooperation with national and international partners contribute to the quality of the work of the OAQ. OAQ instruments are cyclically updated on the basis of international developments.
- The OAQ is regularly evaluated externally. An international group of experts checks whether the OAQ is meeting the terms of the Code of good practice of the ECA as well as those of the European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies of the ENQA.