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Towards Institutional Accreditation: The Swiss Experience in external QA

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Abstract

The Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ) was set up in 2001 with the task to ensure and promote the quality of teaching and research at Swiss universities. On behalf of the federal and cantonal authorities and in accordance with best international practices the OAQ carries out various quality assessments with autonomous responsibility for its operations.

The focus of the external quality assurance system in Switzerland is on institutional assessments. Periodic assessments of the internal quality assurance systems of the Swiss universities are mandatory and linked to the financing of the institutions. The OAQ has successfully carried out a first cycle of such audits in 2003-4 and has repeated it in 2007-8 on the basis of new national Directives for internal quality assurance (compatible with the European Standards and Guidelines in that domain). The institutional assessments are supplemented by selective and voluntary programme accreditations. A new Federal law regulating the whole Swiss higher education sector is under discussion and will enter into force in 2012. According to the new law – and based on the positive experience made with the two past audit-cycles, a new institutional accreditation model will be mandatory for all public higher education institutions in Switzerland.

1 Brief description of the OAQ, its main activities and its accountability

The Centre of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ) was set up in 2001 with the mission of ensuring and promoting quality teaching and research at Swiss universities. It is the only national organisation active in this field. Its tasks and responsibilities are defined by law.

Under the terms of the Federal Law on Financial Aid to Universities (UFG), the OAQ, on behalf of the Swiss University Conference (SUC) and for the State Secretariat for Education and Research (SER), carries out various quality assessments (accreditation of institutions and programmes, evaluation procedures, institutional audits) according to international good practices. Since the beginning of 2008 the agency was also recognised by the Federal Department of Economic Affairs as official accreditation agency in the area of the universities of applied sciences, operating of behalf of the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology. For its procedures the OAQ defines the quality standards necessary for the assessments and develops all the instruments such as guidelines and relevant tools.

The OAQ provides services and carries out mandates for federal, cantonal and university partners. Through its activities the OAQ has the following main goals:

- contributing to the Bologna process;
- offering higher consumer protection through transparent assessments of the quality of study courses and university performance;
- seeking international recognition of Swiss accreditation decisions;
- supporting universities in the implementation of an effective internal quality assurance system.

The main stages of accreditation and quality assurance procedures are the self-evaluation by the applying higher education unit and the external assessment including an on-site visit carried out by a panel of independent experts selected by the OAQ. External experts, coming in a large majority from abroad, are selected and appointed by the OAQ according to strict criteria. Independency and absence of conflicts of interest are systematically checked and have to be confirmed in a written contract. The OAQ concludes all procedures with a recommendation regarding the final decision. The competent political authorities then make the formal – legally binding – decision. Decisions can be appealed to an independent arbitration court and after that to the Federal Court.

The OAQ has autonomous responsibility for its operations and the judgements made in its reports cannot be influenced by third parties. For the fulfilment of its tasks the OAQ Secretariat relies on a competent staff (11 collaborators), on a Scientific Advisory Board and on external experts. Over 250 experienced experts covering all fields and disciplines and coming from all over the world cooperate with the OAQ for that purpose. A pool of student

experts was set up in 2007 in cooperation with VSS, the biggest Swiss student union. Students from that pool have been carefully selected and trained to be active participants in quality assurance processes and members of review panels. Trainings take place every year.

According to the law, the OAQ receives its funding from the university cantons (50%) and the Federal Government (50%). Private higher education institutions and other third parties pay for the OAQ services.

The performance of the OAQ is systematically evaluated. So far more than 150 assessments, both at institutional and programme level have been carried out. The evaluations of processes and outcomes show positive results. An external review of the OAQ's activities every five years, foreseen for all ENQA members, is an additional and essential element in support of the accountability of the agency. In 2006 the OAQ successfully passed an international peer review carried out for multiple purposes, among which to check the OAQ fulfilment of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) developed by ENQA and adopted by the Ministerial Conference in Bergen in 2005. As a consequence of that, the OAQ has been chosen by other agencies operating in Europe for the coordination of their own external review, according to strict ENQA Guidelines.

2 The focus on institutional assessments: strengths and weaknesses

The OAQ performs 3 types of quality assessment:

- a) Accreditation procedures at institutional and programme level, both in the public and private domain, carried out on a voluntary basis. National „Guidelines“, revised regularly on the basis of national and international developments, outline the quality standards respectively for institutional and for programme accreditation;
- b) Evaluations: carried out by the OAQ at institutional level, within the recognition procedure of institutions applying for financial support from the Federal Government for the first time (accreditation-like procedure), obligatory if mandated by the State Secretariat for Education and Research;
- c) Institutional Audits: mandatory institutional assessment of the internal quality assurance systems of the public universities of Switzerland mandated by the State Secretariat for Education and Research. Organised and carried out by the OAQ every 4 years to examine if the legal prerequisites of the federal financial support are still fulfilled.

This shows that the focus of the external quality assurance system in Switzerland lies with institutional assessments. Several strengths can be identified in support of an institutional approach to external QA. Primarily, such assessments are respecting and strengthening the autonomy of higher education institutions in so far as the level of interference with own institutional QA practices is reduced to the minimum. Indeed, only the internal QA system, its mechanisms and its efficacy are checked in the frame of an institutional audit, leaving to the institution the freedom to choose any ad hoc internal QA measure and internal evaluations of

sub-units which are fit for purpose. This contributes largely in the establishment of self-going internal processes and mechanisms which end up minimizing the bureaucratic and financial burden when external QA processes are required, thus highly contributing to the development of a quality culture within the institutions. Such approach has proven quality-enhancement oriented and assures sustainability, as an internal QA policy is then incorporated into the institutional strategic plan and strictly linked to the institutional management, foreseeing self-going and well-functioning internal QA mechanisms. Finally, an important strength of this approach is represented by the broad acceptance that it has received by the universities themselves.

A periodic assessment of the internal quality assurance system of the public Swiss universities is a mandatory quality assurance measure and is linked to the financing of the higher education institutions. The OAQ has successfully carried out a first cycle of such audits in 2003-4 and has repeated it in 2007-8 on the basis of binding national Directives, issued in December 2006, which define the standards for internal quality assurance systems (compatible with the European Standards and Guidelines – ESG – developed by ENQA in that domain). The second cycle of institutional audits at Swiss universities examined both the internal quality assurance system at institutional level and the implementation of quality assurance measures by looking at selected and representative study programmes.

That new combination of institutional and programme elements based on a well functioning, dynamic and effective internal quality assurance system has been well conceived bearing in mind that quality is primarily the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves. This system respects the autonomy, identity and integrity of the institution and aims to contribute to both quality improvement and accountability of the institution.

The reason why the OAQ, also inspired by the ESG, insists on the importance of internal quality assurance is reinforced by the fact that robust and reliable internal quality assurance systems allow for lighter external quality assurance measures and a minimisation of the bureaucratic load for both higher education institutions and agencies. Such approach is favoured by all the actors involved in quality assurance in Switzerland, as it shows that internal quality assurance can become a meaningful exercise.

The 7 standards for internal quality assurance outlined in the Swiss Directives from 2006, which represented the sole basis to the second cycle of Q-audits in Switzerland, are the following:

Standard 1. QA-Strategy

The university establishes its quality assurance strategy and communicates it publicly. This strategy includes the guidelines to a quality assurance system whose objective is to ensure and continually improve the quality of university activities, as well to promote the development of a quality culture.

Standard 2. Areas of application

The quality assurance system incorporates the university's key tasks, especially teaching

and research, as well as the interconnected supporting services. It is an integral part of the overall strategy and supports university development.

Standard 3. Processes and responsibilities

The university regulates the quality assurance processes and ensures that its personnel and students are familiar with these processes. The responsibilities for quality and quality assurance are assigned transparently.

Standard 4. Evaluations

The university performs periodic internal evaluations of teaching, study programmes and curricula: procedures to assess student performance, results of teaching, research and services, as well as resources, gender equality and learning infrastructure. An external evaluation is performed whenever necessary.

Standard 5. Human resources development

The university supports and encourages the continuing education and development of its teaching and research staff. This also includes career planning for young academics and the promotion of gender equality.

Standard 6. Application of information (Management Information Systems)

The university management bases its strategic decisions concerning research, study programmes as well as the recruitment and promotion of its teaching staff on relevant and up-to-date quantitative and qualitative information. This information is systematically collected, analyzed and applied in order to continuously improve the quality of university activities.

Standard 7. Communication

A transparent reporting on procedures and results of quality assurance measures guarantees feedback to the involved groups within the university. Periodically, the universities publish objective information on study programmes and conveyed degrees.

An external institutional assessment based on few essential elements such as the 7 standards mentioned above reduces the level of 'interference' of external agencies on the institutions' autonomy and creativity, allowing each institution to organise internally any relevant evaluation needed, fit for purpose, be it at faculty, department or programme level or having for object a research unit. The accountability and sustainability of that system is assured only if institutions are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes and if external assessments are improvement-oriented.

Institutional assessments, and particularly audit-like procedures, result however having a number of weaknesses.

Primarily one limit is constituted by a lack of transparency for the public in so far as good quality of study programmes is concerned. Student or consumer protection for the quality of single programmes or research units is not expressly and directly guaranteed by such external QA assessments, although indirectly it is or should be guaranteed. More precisely, the risk of an existing low-quality study programme, although minimized, is not excluded and

the time needed by the internal institutional QA mechanisms to overcome the problem can change considerably according to the nature of the problem and the size and type of institution.

Furthermore it has to be highlighted that the respect of the autonomy of the institutions shows only one side of the coin. The reverse of the medal might be perceived as greater evaluation activities – and relative costs – on the shoulder of universities, being prejudicial to the solution in which the burden is taken in charge externally, by agencies. Moreover, an institutional approach to quality engenders doubts concerning the applicability in the international recognition of quality and particularly in the mutual recognition of accreditation results, the importance of which was stressed in the Ministerial Communiqué of London 2007.

Finally, in the context of Switzerland a weakness of the system is represented by the fact that the external QA requirements for private institutions are still under-developed. Is the institutional audit model applicable to private institutions as well and would it be sufficient to assure public accountability? The question remains unanswered.

Institutional assessments in Switzerland are supplemented by selective and voluntary programme accreditations, both in the private and public domain. The accreditation framework (quality standards, instruments, procedures) corresponds to international best practices, taking the specificities of the Swiss higher education system into account. The OAQ has made the observation that audited public institutions make often use of this possibility, particularly in the field professional oriented programmes such as of engineering or medicine.

3 A new federal law for higher education in Switzerland

A new Federal law proposal regulating the whole Swiss Higher education sector is under discussion and will enter into force in 2012. The new law foresees that institutional accreditation will be mandatory for all public higher education institutions in Switzerland: universities, federal institutes of technology, universities of applied sciences and universities for teaching training; an independent Accreditation Council of broad composition would be created for these purposes being invested of full decision-making powers.

Such approach won't represent a discontinuity from the current audit practices, as the accreditation model is likely to center around the 7 standards currently used in the institutional audit system. This seems logical as the lesson learned in the two past audit cycles is that this system proved extremely efficient, resulting in visible results such as structural institutional changes, opening internal QA units or networks, developing and implementing QA strategies more and more incorporated into institutional strategic planning, carrying out systematic internally planned evaluation of curricula, programmes, services and research. The decision to move from audit to accreditation methodology is based on the fact that accreditation procedures have been developed in most European countries (and overseas) with a certain convergence of terminology, objectives and methodologies. The results of accreditation procedures are formalized, well understood and therefore easily

acceptable across national borders. That explains to a certain extent the Swiss political views.

In addition to high-quality institutional accreditation procedures, attention will be largely brought to follow-up evaluations seeking at understanding what measures have been taken by the assessed institution in terms of quality development and what have been the effects of the accreditation in the short and medium run. This exercise supports higher education institutions in their continuous quality development and improvement. It also helps the agency and the authorities involved in measuring and improving their impact on the quality assurance system of institutions.

4 International cooperation in a highly dynamic European QA scenario

The international cooperation is particularly relevant for the OAQ's work. Active involvement in all major European and international accreditation and quality assurance networks ensures that the OAQ's work complies with best international practice and can always be brought into line with developments within the European Higher Education Area.

The OAQ is full member of ENQA, as a result of the positive external review to which the OAQ was submitted in 2006, showing that the agency would be ready to get admission to the planned European register for trustworthy agencies operating in Europe. That would further increase the OAQ credibility internationally. It is nowadays evident that the increasing activities in quality assurance (internal and external mechanisms), represent a big risk of 'evaluation fatigue' and a potential waste of money and resources. Accountable institutional accreditation focussing on the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system of higher education institutions, combined with the freedom of institutions to manage their own quality assurance strategies – be it for quality improvement or mainly for marketing reasons – represents a sustainable scenario for an increasingly mobile European Higher Education Area. It is not a coincidence that some countries with long-standing traditions in systematic programme accreditation such as Germany, the Netherlands and Spain have recently introduced institutional assessments as well.

On a European level the OAQ is holding the Presidency of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA). This project group is aiming at mutual recognition of accreditation results and decisions. One of the challenges of the coming years, as a consequence of a shift towards an institutional approach to quality, will be to define what are the core elements of institutional assessments and, based on the outcomes, come up with mutual recognition agreements. That will be possible if a sufficient amount of similarities is found and if mutual trust is built up among the Quality Assurance Agencies.

5 Questions for the discussion following the presentation

- Can institutional accreditation assure good quality of study programmes?
- What is the optimal balance between Q-enhancement and Q-control?
- Reward of basic quality or of excellence?
- Can we have the same rules applying to all types of HEI, including private vs public ones?
- How to handle results of institutional accreditations in mutual recognition agreements?
- How to guarantee coherence between internal and external QA?



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Biographical note of the authors

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