Responsible Bodies

The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) is responsible for the legal framework conditions in the field of quality assurance at higher education establishments (universities, universities of applied sciences, private universities). The concrete design of quality assurance systems falls within the autonomy of higher education establishments, the quality and suitability of established quality management systems are examined as part of audit procedures. In principle, a distinction is made between external and internal quality assurance.

In March 2012, the system of external quality assurance in the Austrian higher education (HE) sector was fundamentally re-organised. On the basis of the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ Austria) was established. The tasks and responsibilities previously held by the Austrian Quality Assurance Agency (AQA), the Austrian FH Council (FHR) and the Austrian Accreditation Council for Private Universities (ÖAR) were transferred to AQ Austria.

All matters related to quality development and quality assurance at university colleges of teacher education, which were set up in 2007, are within the scope of responsibility of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. To ensure quality- and needs-oriented academic support is provided for the development of teacher training programmes, the Quality assurance council for teacher training (QSR) was set up with the Federal Framework Law concerning the Introduction of a New Teacher Training Scheme.

Approaches and Methods for Quality Assurance

External quality assurance within the Austrian higher education sector is regulated by the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education for universities, universities of applied sciences, degree programmes and private universities. The external quality assurance of these educational institutions shall be ensured by way of:

- certification of quality management systems of educational institutions;
- accreditation of degree programmes;
- accreditation of educational institutions;
- supervision of the accredited educational institutions and accredited degree programmes

The obligation to implement internal QA measures is laid down for

- universities in the Universities Act, for
- universities of applied sciences in the Universities of Applied Sciences Study Act, and for
private universities in the Federal Act on Private Universities [15].

The obligation to implement (both external and internal) quality assurance at university colleges of teacher education [16] is specified in the Federal Act on the Organisation of University Colleges of Teacher Education and their Studies 2005 [17].

AQ Austria [7] is responsible for the entire higher education sector in Austria (with the exception of university colleges of teacher education). In carrying out its responsibilities AQ Austria applies international standards of quality assurance within the Austrian higher education system, especially oriented towards the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

External Quality Assurance

Federal Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education [18]: With the redesign of external quality assurance for the higher education sector in 2012, an important step towards modernisation was made. The government programme for the 24th legislative period foresaw the amalgamation of the hitherto existing agencies in charge of quality assurance in the higher education sector into one cross-sectoral institution in accordance with European standards, as well as the introduction of cross-sectoral legislation for external quality assurance. The Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education essentially provides for the following new elements:

- Cross-sectoral law on external quality assurance; establishment of AQ Austria [7];
- Application of a central framework for quality assurance procedures across sectors (e.g. obligation to publish outcomes of procedures, possibility of certification or accreditation upon fulfilment of requirements, mandatory fee for all procedures, etc.);
- Audit areas for the quality assurance procedures to be outlined by law, details to be defined by the Agency;
- Establishment of quality assurance procedures for the respective higher education sectors (audit or accreditation);
- Establishment by law of a Students’ Ombudsman, i.e. an ombudsman and information and service centre for all students at higher education institutions (integrating the hitherto existing Student Ombudsman Office);
- Legal provisions governing the registration of programmes from foreign providers in Austria.

The Act stipulates that universities must be evaluated through external audits every seven years.

The main tasks of AQ Austria [7] are as follows:

- Developing and carrying out external quality assurance procedures such as audits for higher education institutions and accreditation procedures for higher education institutions and degree programmes, according to national and international standards;
- Continuous supervision of accredited higher education institutions and degree programmes regarding the accreditation requirements;
- Conducting studies and system-wide analyses, performing evaluations, and carrying out projects;
- Providing information and advice in matters related to quality assurance and quality enhancement;
- International cooperation in the area of quality assurance.

The Agency is – among others – a member of ENQA [19], the European Association for Quality
Assurance in Higher Education.

Based on the **Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education** [18] two different types of quality assurance procedures are defined. **Accreditation** is a formal and transparent quality review procedure, based on defined criteria and standards, which leads to state recognition of a higher education institution and/or of study programmes. An **audit** involves reviewing and certifying a higher education institution’s internal quality management system as well as providing support in continued development of that system. The following diagram provides an overview of which types of quality assurance procedure are applied to the different types of higher education institutions.

Fig. 1: External Quality Assurance at Higher Education Institutions according to the **Federal Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education** [18]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sectors</th>
<th>Programme Accreditation</th>
<th>Institutional (Re-)Accreditation</th>
<th>Audit</th>
<th>Report System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Degrees</td>
<td>Courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private universities</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities of applied sciences</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public universities, Danube University Krems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: **AQ Austria (2013): ENQA coordinated external review of AQ Austria. Self-evaluation report.**

Since the new **Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education** [18] came into force, **public universities** [2] must obtain **certification** of their internal quality management system through a quality audit process every seven years. The certification decisions are not linked to any direct legal or financial consequences. The universities may choose whether they wish to be audited by **AQ Austria** [7], an agency listed in the **European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education** [20] (EQAR), or another internationally recognised and independent quality assurance agency. The Act will substantially improve the information available to students and the general public about quality assurance.

**Private universities** [4] have to be accredited institutionally by **AQ Austria** [7] every six years. New degree programmes created in the interim period must also undergo accreditation; however, there is no programme re-accreditation because it is part of the institutional re-accreditation.

To newly established **universities of applied sciences** [16] the same rules are applied as to private universities. But unlike private universities, universities of applied sciences enter the audit system once they have successfully passed institutional re-accreditation. However, the validity of the accreditation status of the institution depends on a positive certification from the audit process.

The **accreditation decision** of the **Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria** [7] is based on an external expert opinion by a group of experts. The decision of the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria requires the approval of **BMWFU** [21] in order to be effective.
Accreditation is granted for a limited period of six years in case of initial accreditation or re-accreditation or for an unlimited period (universities of applied sciences [11] degree programmes [11] that have successfully passed institutional re-accreditation).

Quality assurance council for teacher training

Based on the Federal Framework Law concerning the Introduction of a New Teacher Training Scheme [22], the Quality assurance council for teacher training (QSR) [9] was set up on 3 July 2013. It aims to ensure external quality assurance which provides quality- and needs-oriented academic support for the development of teacher training programmes. Its members are independent in the performance of their functions and not subject to any instructions.

The tasks of the QSR:

1. observation and analysis of the development of teacher training in Austria with consideration of European and international developments, preparation of proposals for its further development,
2. advisory function for federal ministers and higher education establishments in matters related to quality assurance and requirement issues,
3. examination, based on the available offer of study programmes, of the academic and profession-oriented prerequisites for the rendering of services by university colleges of teacher education, if necessary involving an independent higher education quality assurance institution which is internationally recognised for this work (such as the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria, or a quality assurance establishment that is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register),
4. issuing statements as part of the consultation and review process related to the curricula of teacher training programmes regarding the implementation of occupational law-specific requirements (particularly of the competences required for teachers and their qualification profile, consideration of the tasks of school types mentioned in the School Organisation Act [23] and recruitment requirements) for the educational establishment which provides the training, and
5. annual publication of a report on the current status of teacher training in Austria and submission of report to the National Parliamentary Council.

Internal Quality Assurance

All higher education institutions (HEIs) are obliged to establish an internal quality management system for assuring quality in teaching, research and organisation. Based on this, the HEIs choose those approaches and arrangements which best suit their own needs. Continuous internal evaluations, the evaluation of the performance of teaching staff, external evaluations, etc. are common elements of those systems. Generic standards and guidelines for all HEIs are furthermore provided by the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, which are seen as a reference for quality activities in internal and external quality assurance.

Universities

According to the 2002 Universities Act [13], universities shall develop their own quality management systems in order to assure quality and the attainment of their performance objectives. These institutional quality management systems are subject to periodic audits. This is in line with the international trend towards a large degree of autonomy of higher education institutions in questions of quality assurance. External quality assurance for the individual types of higher
education institutions is organised according to the respective sector.

The specific areas which must be evaluated are laid down in the performance agreements (Leistungsvereinbarungen) concluded between the individual universities and the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research [1]. The universities report on their quality assurance measures as part of their annual reporting duty. In addition, the first report of a performance agreement period includes a report on the structure of the quality management system. The first report was published in 2008.

The performance of university staff will be regularly evaluated, at least once every five years. Evaluations will be conducted in accordance with subject-based international evaluation standards. The results of all evaluations will be the basis for decisions of the governing bodies of the universities. External evaluations shall take place at the instigation of the university council or rectorate of the university in question. Students’ evaluation of teaching quality is a relevant factor in connection with performance agreements.

As one example of the implementation of an internal QA system, the University of Vienna [24] can be mentioned. Here the Independent Unit for Quality Assurance (BEfQS) has been set up, which supports the University of Vienna in its commitment to high quality in teaching, studies and research. This contributes to the further development of the university’s quality assurance system and the connected quality criteria, methods and instruments. In addition, data of graduates are recorded in two ways at the University of Vienna:

- **Survey of graduates** immediately after the end of studies: The survey results are evaluated annually and presented to the directors of study programmes and the team of rectors.
- **Analysis of career pathways** by evaluating social security information: Jointly with Uniport (the career service centre of the University of Vienna), BEfQS has commissioned Statistics Austria to evaluate the social security information of graduates based on different criteria (time span until first employment after graduation, number of changes of employers, duration of first employment, average monthly income, the economic categories of companies, labour force participation rate and labour status, monitoring of developments in the following years, etc.).

**Universities of Applied Sciences**

Pursuant to the Universities of Applied Sciences Study Act [14], the providers have to establish a quality management system for the purposes of service and quality assurance. The courses shall be subjected to an evaluation by the students; the results of the evaluation shall be used for quality assurance. The internal quality management system of accredited providers of universities of applied sciences is subject to periodic audits according to the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education [5].

**Private Universities**

According to the Federal Act on Private Universities [25], private universities [4] have to establish a system of quality assurance as a precondition of accreditation. Private universities themselves define the quality management system and choose the methodical instruments for evaluation, taking account of internationally common models. The quality assurance system is one of the assessment areas of the accreditation procedure which is mandatory for all private universities and the study programmes offered by them.

**University Colleges of Teacher Education**

Quality assurance at university colleges of teacher education [16] is specified in the Federal Act
University colleges of teacher education are obliged to set up their own quality management system to assure their quality and performance and to carry out regular internal evaluations. The evaluations focus on the tasks and activities as well as the entire service range of university colleges of teacher education. Where external evaluations are conducted, the university colleges of teacher education concerned as well as their bodies have to make available the data and information required for the evaluations and are obliged to cooperate.