

**Report of the panel of the ENQA coordinated
review of the Austrian Agency for Quality
Assurance**

against the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the
European Higher Education Area

November 2007

1 Executive summary

This report analyses the compliance of the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA) with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

AQA approached ENQA to request that ENQA organise a review of the agency for that purpose. ENQA appointed a panel of international experts to carry out the external review of AQA. The site visit took place in Vienna on 11 and 12 October 2007.

AQA was formally established in 2003 and has been developing its work with higher education institutions in Austria over the last four years. The agency is recognised by the Austrian state authorities as a national agency with responsibility for supporting and certifying higher education institutions' quality management processes. AQA works alongside a number of national accreditation agencies for different parts of the sector. A major part of its work to date has been concerned with carrying out programme evaluations in the Austrian *Fachhochschulen*, producing reports for the attention of the *Fachhochschule* Council. AQA has also carried out evaluations in universities and has organised thematic benchmarking projects. More recently AQA has developed and commenced the implementation of a comprehensive programme of institutional audit with public universities. As with AQA's other work, this methodology includes major elements of support and development for institutions. The introduction of this procedure, which is closely linked with the wider regulatory arrangements in Austrian higher education, marks a significant change in AQA's role, status, and recognition.

AQA has a clear commitment to the ESG, and is developing criteria based on those guidelines for all of its work. It operates in a flexible and collaborative manner with institutions, so that more detailed criteria can be agreed for particular institutional review purposes.

AQA is an independent organisation, with stakeholder representatives on its governing Board. It has an organisational decision-making structure which clearly separates broader policy matters from academic judgements on institutions. These are made by a Steering Group with a majority of international members external to the Austrian system, providing for a high level of objective decision-making and safeguarding the autonomous responsibility of the agency.

The services provided by AQA and the quality of the work of staff are generally well regarded by the institutions with which the agency has worked. AQA staff support the appointment, briefing and reporting of peer review panels and also provide constructive feedback opportunities to institutions. AQA is allocated appropriate financial and material resources to effectively fulfil its objectives.

The review panel identified, alongside many positive features, a number of areas where AQA's work will benefit from review and development. Some of the weaknesses are attributable to the historical situation of the

agency, which is now changing. The main areas for attention concern published criteria, publication of reports, and internal quality assurance systems for the agency.

In the light of the documentation and oral evidence, and taking careful account of AQA's current situation in the national context, the review panel concluded that AQA is in substantial compliance with the ENQA Membership Regulations and the ESG. The panel consequently recommends to the Board of ENQA that AQA should be admitted to Full membership for a period of five years.

2 Introduction

This is the report of the review of the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA, the agency) undertaken in October 2007 for the purpose of determining whether the agency meets the criteria for Full membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The criteria are listed in Annex 1 to the report.

2.1 Background and outline of the review process

ENQA's regulations require all Full member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they fulfil the membership criteria. AQA currently has observer membership status with ENQA. The purpose of the review was to consider the application and submission by AQA for Full membership status. In addition, the review considered the ways in which AQA had addressed the recommendations of the ENQA Board following its earlier application for full membership, made in 2005.

In November 2004, the General Assembly of ENQA agreed that the third part of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) should be incorporated into the membership provisions of its regulations. Substantial compliance with the ESG thus became the principal criterion for Full membership of ENQA. The ESG were subsequently adopted at the Bergen ministerial meeting of the Bologna Process in 2005.

The third part of the ESG covers the cyclical external review of quality assurance and accreditation agencies. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, external cyclical reviews for ENQA membership purposes are normally conducted on a national level and initiated by national authorities in a EHEA State, but carried out independently from them. However, external reviews can also be coordinated by ENQA if they cannot be nationally organised. This may be the case, for instance, when no suitable or willing national body can be found to coordinate the review. In that event, ENQA plays an active role in the organisation of the review, being directly involved as coordinator, whereas, in the case of national reviews, it is only kept informed of progress throughout the whole process.

2.1.1 The review process

The ENQA-coordinated review of AQA was conducted in line with the process described in *Guidelines for national reviews of ENQA member agencies* and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The review panel for the external review of AQA was composed of the following members:

Professor Jürgen Kohler, (Chairman). Former Rektor, Greifswald University and former Chair, German Accreditation Council)

Dr Peter Findlay, (Secretary). Assistant Director, Reviews Group, QAA (Quality Assurance Agency), United Kingdom

Ms Vanja Ivosevic (panel member). Former President, ESIB, Croatia

Professor Henrik Toft Jensen (panel member). Former Rektor, University of Roskilde, Denmark

Professor Dezsö Sima, Former Vice-President, Hungarian Accreditation Committee Hungary

These experts were nominated and appointed by ENQA and accepted by AQA.

AQA produced a self-evaluation report which provided a substantial portion of the evidence that the panel used to form its conclusions. The report outlined in detail the work of AQA, giving helpful SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of each of its procedures and of its general current position. Based on its reading of the self-evaluation and the extensive accompanying documentation, the review panel then established a number of lines of enquiry for the review. The panel agreed with AQA a programme for the site visit, with a series of meetings with key partners and stakeholder representatives. These included representatives of universities and Fachhochschulen, of the Austrian Students' Union, of the relevant state ministry, and with members of the AQA Board, Steering Group and AQA staff. During the site visit, held on 11-12 October 2007, the review panel was able to seek additional clarification and evidence-based verification of the statements contained in the self-evaluation. Following the visit, AQA offered further documentation addressing specific ESG guidelines which had been the focus of discussion in the visit. Finally, the review panel produced the present final report on the basis of the information provided in the self-evaluation report, the panel's consideration of all of the documentation provided before, during and subsequent to the site visit, together with the evidence derived from the meetings which took place during the visit. In doing so the panel provided an opportunity for AQA to comment on the factual accuracy of the draft report. The review panel confirms that throughout the review it was given access to all documents and people that it wished to consult.

2.1.2 *Timeline of the review*

Before the site visit

Action	Time
Terms of reference, protocol and preliminary timetable for the review are agreed between the ENQA Secretariat and the Agency.	February 2007
The Review panel is appointed in accordance with ENQA policy.	February 2007
Review secretary agrees the site visit schedule with Review Chair and Agency.	June 2007
The Agency produces its self-evaluation document and submits this along with any other documentation of relevance to the ENQA Secretariat – then passed to the Review secretary, along with the Briefing pack, for distribution to the other panel members.	SED Received August 31
Review Chair makes an initial identification of lines of inquiry with reference to the Terms of reference of the review and the information received from the Agency. These are developed further in consultation with the rest of the review panel	September 2007
The Review secretary produces a briefing paper – outlining the background, schedule and draft lines of inquiry for the review and circulates this to the Review panel.	28 September 2007

The site visit

Action	Time
A briefing meeting takes place on the evening before the site visit. The Chair and panel members will discuss the schedule of the visit and agree how the lines of inquiry will be dealt with.	10 October
The site visit takes place (see section 6).	11-12 October
A panel meeting takes place as the penultimate session of the site visit. At this meeting the team will review the evidence presented, and draw preliminary findings, and if possible put these into the 'skeleton' report.	12 October
The panel will then have a final meeting with the representatives of the Agency in which the main findings of the review are communicated	12 October (also team meeting in evening)

After the site visit

Action	Time
The Review secretary will produce the initial draft report and circulate it to the Chair and panel members (see section 7 for drafting and structure guidance)	31 October
The Panel members will review the draft and suggest any comments, amendments, or additions and provide these to the Review secretary.	9 November
The Review secretary will produce a revised draft which, after agreement from the Chair, is submitted to the Agency for comment on its factual accuracy.	14 November
The Agency will submit any amendments to the report relating to factual accuracy to the Review secretary for consideration.	30 November
The Review secretary will produce a final version of the report and submit to ENQA.	3 December
ENQA receives report, latest deadline	5 December
ENQA Board considers report	20 December

Report structure

The first section part of this report is the executive summary.

This second section provides, firstly, an account of the review process and, secondly, an overview of the quality assurance arrangements in the Austrian higher education system, and AQA's role and activities within that system.

The third section presents the detailed findings of the review panel regarding AQA's level of compliance with the ESG for external quality assurance.

The fourth section considers progress regarding ENQA previous recommendations to AQA

The fifth section gives the panel's conclusion.

The report includes three annexes:

ANNEX 1: ESG (part 2 and part 3);

ANNEX 2: Terms of reference for the external review of AQA;

ANNEX 3: Glossary of acronyms.

(These annexes to be added in final report)

2.2 Background to the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA)

2.2.1 The Austrian higher education sector – a brief overview

Over the last twenty years Austrian higher education has seen a process of gradual integration, together with a growing level of institutional autonomy in the university sector. The most significant point in these developments was the 2002 Universities Act, which became fully effective in 2004. This marked a major thrust towards the creation of a single university sector, creating a common legal basis for the universities of the sciences and the arts, and setting up newly founded medical universities based on the major medical faculties in the larger university institutions. The Act gave the 22 public universities in Austria complete autonomy, making these institutions legal entities under public law and independent from the federal Austrian administrative system. Universities are now accountable to the state through negotiated "Leistungsvereinbarungen", i.e. performance agreements (as discussed below).

In addition to the public universities, higher education is provided by the *Fachhochschulen* (translated as universities of applied sciences, offering technical and vocational higher education provision), the *Pädagogische Hochschulen* (Teacher Educational Colleges) and by private university institutions. There are separate legal regulations for each of these HE sectors (*Universitätsgesetz 2002, Fachhochschul-Studiengesetz 1993, Hochschulgesetz 2005, Universitäts-Akkreditierungsgesetz 1999*). The *Fachhochschulrat* (Fachhochschule Council, FH Council) oversees the standards and quality of degree programmes and acts as the authority for the evaluation and the accreditation of these programmes. There are seven accredited private universities. These are recognised under the University Accreditation Act of 1999, which established the required recognition procedures. The *Akkreditierungsrat* (Austrian Accreditation Council) is the body responsible for approval and re-accreditation of the private universities. Finally, the higher education sector includes post-secondary colleges for teacher training.

2.2.2 Evaluation and Quality Assurance

The 2002 Universities Act requires universities to develop a quality management system in order to assure quality and performance. The full range of activities in a university is subject to evaluation. Specified broad areas to be evaluated over a period of time are determined through a performance agreement between institutions and the relevant Ministry. The performance of staff must be evaluated at intervals no longer than five years. In accordance with the Act these evaluations must be conducted on the basis of specific international standards and in line with the statutes and aims of the university.

2.2.3 The role of AQA in external quality assurance

AQA was founded at the end of 2003 as a private independent Association

under the Austrian Associations Act. Its work addresses quality assurance across the whole of the tertiary education sector in Austria, the public universities, the *Fachhochschulen*, the *Pädagogische Hochschulen* (Teacher Education Colleges) and the private universities. The founding members of AQA are the Austrian Rectors' Conference (ÖRK), the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (FHK), the Austrian National Union of Students (ÖH), the Austrian Union of Private Universities and the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture (now: Federal Ministry for Science and Research). The agency has been operating since Spring 2004. Currently AQA employs a total of seven members of staff.

The Austrian system is now characterised by a high level of institutional autonomy with regard to quality assurance. While the legal regulations of all HEI sectors in Austria place an obligation on higher education institutions to introduce and develop internal quality assurance systems, there are no specifications with regard to the design and operation of such systems. Similarly, there is no standard national procedure for the formal approval of internal quality assurance. AQA is not assigned an exclusive national role through the legislation, and Austrian public universities remain free to choose the agency which supports them in their quality assurance work, and in its recognition or certification. For these and other reasons, the precise role and position of AQA within the Austrian higher education system is not yet conclusively defined, and it is one which the agency has had to work to develop gradually over the last three years. As indicated above, the most significant development with regard to the public universities in Austria has been the introduction of performance agreements (*Leistungsvereinbarungen*) which regulate the funding and accountability between institutions and the state. The performance agreements entered into by public universities and the relevant ministry, the first cycle of which is from 2006-2009, now explicitly include expectations that quality assurance will be introduced in key performance areas. The agreements run for three years, broadly define quality targets and include reference to a university's plans for introducing targets in one or more defined performance areas (teaching, research, personnel management, internationalisation and mobility). The performance agreements therefore open the way for a strengthened role for AQA in advising and supporting universities in developing their quality assurance arrangements, and in providing an institutional audit method which offers a formal recognition that those arrangements are operating effectively.

In the self-evaluation report, AQA stated that this legal obligation for the development of quality management systems, the accompanying need for systematic external quality assurance, and the expectation of alignment with the criteria embodied in the ESG provided together the basis and starting point for its work in supporting institutions with the development of their systems, and eventually in providing formal certification for those systems. The review panel were able to confirm this analysis, and found that substantial advances had been made over the last year in clarifying and strengthening the position of the agency.

2.2.4 *AQA – organisational and management structures*

The management structure of AQA is designed to create a clear separation of powers between corporate governance and academic quality assurance. The founding member stakeholders are represented in a General Meeting, from which is drawn the AQA Board, which has responsibility for overseeing the general management of the agency and for supporting the position of AQA within Austrian higher education. Members of the Board have only an advisory role with regard to methods, standards and policy. Decision making relating to academic policy and quality assurance judgements is the responsibility of a separate Scientific Steering Group. Steering Group members are senior and expert representatives who work in the field of academic quality assurance. A majority of members bring an international perspective from outside Austria, and these members are currently drawn from universities and quality assurance agencies in Germany, Belgium, Norway and Switzerland. Thus, through the constitution of the Steering Group the experience of a number of existing ENQA agency members is channelled into the work of AQA. Operational management of the agency is focused in the role of the Managing Director, who leads the team of staff.

2.3 Main areas of activity

Since its establishment, there have been five main areas of work in which AQA has been responsible for external quality assurance activities.

2.3.1 *AQA Quality Audit*

Since 2005, AQA has developed and has begun the introduction of a framework to support institutions in establishing and developing their internal quality management systems. Initially implemented for the public universities, this framework can also be adapted and offered to other sectors, which have indeed asked AQA to support them in this area. The procedures relate strongly to the requirements of the performance agreements which were entered into by universities in 2006, and which include the expectation that substantial progress will be made with quality assurance systems by 2009. AQA has designed a process which caters for the need of each individual university to address the particular performance agreement under which it is operating. It takes into account the fact that quality systems are in many areas at an early stage of development. The AQA process is divided into three phases. The first phase is one focused on support for developing quality assurance in an area defined by the university, with accompanying workshops on broader quality management issues; the second phase provides for an external assessment of a specific area (for instance teaching quality) together with a view of broader institutional quality assurance and quality management strategies; the third phase covers the entire quality assurance system of the institution in all expected areas of operation, consider strategic targets and the fulfilment of quality management standards. The second and third phases are to be assessed through an institutional audit methodology. The phasing is intended to be flexible, so that any university can apply to take part in any phase when it feels that it has sufficiently

developed its systems. AQA will award formal certification which recognises institutional achievement in Phase 2 (i.e. establishment of a quality management system for a specific area of study, and also for the successful completion of Phase 3 (the establishment of an overall quality management system for all areas of an institution. In the longer term, AQA looks towards providing assurance towards an international certificate which aligns with common standards shared with other international agencies, based upon the European Standards and Guidelines.

The review panel noted that, while this new methodology was central to AQA's future operation, it was at the time of the review still at an early stage of implementation. Work commenced on Phase 1 in January 2007 with five selected universities. A number of support and development workshops involving these universities have been completed during the year. One university has identified a development focus for Phase 2. Documents provided to the panel during the visit indicated that AQA was still in the process of agreeing the final details of the process for its planned later phases, including the detailed criteria for judgements.

2.3.2 *The evaluation of study programmes in Fachhochschulen*

The FH Council is responsible for the approval, by a formal accreditation process, of all individual study programmes offered at *Fachhochschulen*. The FH Council periodically identifies an number of institutions and requires them to undergo programme-related or institutional evaluation with a view to re-accreditation. The *Fachhochschule* institutions are then free to select a quality assurance agency to co-ordinate the evaluative review. Under these requirements, AQA has been responsible for managing the evaluation of individual study programmes, thus providing institutions with the information which can form a basis for the re-accreditation decision. AQA arranges and supports a peer review evaluation exercise for each programme, including the preparation of the report by the peer review panel. The FH Council broadly defines the procedures, including those relating to panel membership and report publication. It lays down the evaluation criteria, receives the evaluation report, and makes the accreditation decision based on the evaluation. To date AQA has had responsibility for arranging 21 such evaluations of study programmes in *Fachhochschulen*. AQA recognises that this activity, which thus far has formed the major part of its work, is in the nature of a service delivery relationship. Notwithstanding this, the responsibility for maintaining the standards of the external quality assurance process, which contains all the usual aspects of such an external review, clearly lie with AQA as the operating agency, and the reviews that have been completed have clearly strengthened its range of experience. In addition to this programme-level work, AQA has led one institutional evaluation of a *Fachhochschule*, again providing a report for decision by the FH Council.

2.3.3 *Evaluation of study programmes in public universities*

AQA has developed procedures for the evaluation of programmes or disciplinary areas in public universities. The detailed aims of the process

and the procedures may be individually negotiated and tailored to meet the needs of the university concerned. The procedures include a self-evaluation, a visit by a peer review panel, and a formal report to the institution. A major purpose of the evaluation is to inform strategic decision-making at institutional level. The evaluation process uses the ESG as one of its reference points. In the future, AQA is intending to offer certification of study programmes through such evaluations. Thus far, two such programme evaluations in public universities have been completed.

2.3.4 *Thematic research projects*

AQA has conducted a major comparative evaluation on a cross-sectoral basis. This focused on equal opportunities and gender-related employment issues in higher education, the promotion of women and gender mainstreaming. The research procedures were developed with external international expertise, involved an expert team and institutional stock-taking and self-evaluation. The resultant reporting included confidential reports to individual institutions, and a general overview report containing recommendations for appropriate quality assurance measures relevant to all universities. AQA sees potential for the transfer of this procedure to other broad policy areas, with a view to supporting internal quality assurance management and as a contribution to benchmarking.

2.3.5 *Benchmarking*

From 2004 to 2007 AQA conducted subject related comparisons at Austrian Universities and *Fachhochschulen* in cooperation with CHE (German Centre for the Development of Higher Education). On the basis of its experience with this work, AQA has developed a benchmarking procedure aimed primarily at quality enhancement by performance comparisons on selected areas of interest. In collaboration with higher education institutions and invited experts, a procedure and a set of indicators is developed and selected topics or subject areas in higher education institutions are compared. The results of the benchmarking work are made available to the participating higher education institutions for their internal quality management. The publication of results is a secondary goal. The benchmarking work is therefore intended to support and complement AQA's activities supporting quality management. The agency is currently piloting this approach to benchmarking in one subject area, in collaboration with one Austrian university and four further European universities.

2.4 The current national context for AQA's work

In the discussions which took place as a part of the review visit, the panel were able to gain a number of important insights into the history of AQA's work and its current position within the Austrian higher education system, more specifically in the quality assurance policies and practices emerging in the Austrian system at the present time. The following points are particularly significant:

Because of the pattern of historical change and the interests of different sectors, Austrian higher education currently has three agencies addressing various forms of external quality assurance and accreditation (as described above). Different institutions in the higher education sector have different quality assurance requirements under law. AQA is the only agency that has authority for external quality assurance across the different institutions in the sector, and it is currently working with both universities and *Fachhochschulen*. In a number of discussions during the site visit, it was recognised that the system might well benefit from some level of rationalisation with regard to external quality assurance. AQA is currently developing proposals along these lines.

Some of the work that AQA had completed between 2004 and 2007 had been in the nature of quality enhancement projects, focusing on specific aspects of university performance, and involving comparison both nationally and internationally. The character of some of these was potentially controversial and the delivery of the projects took place very early in the agency's life. From the discussions that it held, it appeared to the review panel that these were commissioned projects that were not necessarily always fully owned or accepted by institutions. This may have created some problems with regard to the agency's initial acceptance, and the establishment of a constructive and regular relationship between the agency and institutions.

Representatives from the public universities repeatedly made clear to the review panel that AQA's role and contribution had only now, in 2007, come into prominence for them. This was because university senior management had, since the Universities Act, been heavily occupied with driving through a raft of major reforms relating to internal organisational structure, staffing and restructuring curricula according to the Bologna process. The recently agreed performance agreements had now given a new emphasis to the introduction of systematic internal quality assurance and, ultimately, to its certification as a priority for universities, and universities were now able to give this expectation the full attention that it required. Institutions were expecting AQA to play a supporting role in this process, and to provide the framework for evidence-based certification of internal quality assurance procedures. In that respect, both the representative of the ministry and representatives of the public universities emphasized the significant role which AQA should and can have in the process of certifying that the quality targets outlined in the performance agreements between the State and the universities have actually been fulfilled. The panel formed the view that one consequence of this situation was that for the early years of its short history, AQA was in the position of waiting for the readiness of the largest group of its main 'customers' to seek its services.

That time has now arrived and AQA has therefore now reached an important watershed in its work. The history of programme evaluations carried out in the *Fachhochschulen* and universities has provided the agency with valuable experience, but the national and political context points clearly towards the development of institution-level quality

assurance as the guiding policy for its future activities. The introduction of an institutional audit methodology has therefore been the focus of the most recent work in developing the agency's policy and procedures, and of its development workshops with universities. It was made clear to the review panel that the flexible, supportive, and developmental character of that methodology was strongly welcomed by the representatives of the universities, who now fully supported AQA's work and relied on its collaboration for the introduction of their own internal quality assurance systems.

In both documentation and discussions, staff members of AQA and other participants in the site visit emphasised strongly the importance of AQA's role in the current national context of Austrian higher education. The agency's vision for the future includes the following key aims:

- - to develop greater co-ordination between the different procedures currently in place
- that accreditation decisions might in future be made by relevant accreditation committees located under the umbrella of single national institution for external quality assurance
- to achieve a higher status for the agency
- to achieve full recognition by the public universities

3 Findings

3.1 ESG 3.1 (and section 2)/ENQA criterion 1: Use of external QA procedures

The review panel's findings with regard to AQA's adoption of external quality assurance procedures as recommended in the ESG section 2 were as follows.

3.1.1 (ESG 2.4) Processes fit for purpose

In its self-evaluation report, AQA described its processes in detail. It also specifically addressed the recommendation of the ESG section 2 guidelines in the documentation submitted after the visit. During its visit, the panel were able to discuss the fitness for purpose of the agency's procedures and also to see examples of AQA reports, including those on programme evaluation in *Fachhochschulen* and universities. The panel discussed the processes used by AQA in meetings with representatives of *Fachhochschulen* and universities, and with the staff of AQA with experience of its procedures.

With regard to general fitness for purpose, the panel noted that until recently the procedures governing AQA's main activities were defined by third parties (FH Council), to which AQA had successfully delivered reports according to the specified requirements of the accrediting authority. Considering the more recent developments, the panel examined in detail the procedures, designed independently by AQA over the last year, for the support and certification of institutional quality management. It considered that the flexible and gradualist character of these procedures aligned very well with the needs of institutions and with the current

national context for AQA's work.

With reference to ESG 2.2 (pre-defined criteria and processes available to those concerned), the panel saw evidence that these procedures had been designed and developed through a process of consultation involving key stakeholders, including higher education institutions. The procedures contain explicit statements of the aims and objectives of the processes as well as a description of the procedures to be used.

The panel found that the approach of AQA to external quality assurance activities followed broadly the model of review recommended in the guidelines: the various activities included a self-evaluation and submission of evidence, the work of an expert panel, and a formal report with follow-up activity.

The examination of reports showed that outcomes of the assurance processes are evidence based. An enhancement dimension is frequently included in the follow-up processes, which are mainly supportive and developmental in character. Institutional process development and enhancement is a significant feature of the AQA Quality Audit approach.

AQA has drawn students into its work on a number of levels. The Austrian Union of Students is represented in AQA's committee structure, and by invitation a representative has observer status on the Scientific Steering Group. Representatives of student bodies have also been involved in consultations as a part of the initial design of AQA projects and processes. Thus student representatives have participated in the workshops for the AQA Audit Phase 1, and in some cases are members of the steering groups for the individual university projects in this phase. The representative of the Union of Students with whom the review panel met strongly welcomed this inclusion of the student voice in the strategic management of the agency, but also commented that there had been some AQA events for which student representatives had apparently not received an invitation.

The panel found that in the various aspects of AQA's quality assurance work, students are generally involved as a relevant source of feedback on the educational experience, both through questionnaires and through meetings with student groups and representatives. The panel did not find evidence that students are currently involved in review processes as members of review teams. The panel heard that AQA plans to involve students more directly in review teams in the later phases of its Quality Management initiative with universities, and some pilot projects are underway (see also section 3.7.2 below). However, there is currently no procedure for direct student involvement in reviews that has been developed or negotiated with the relevant national student body. Overall, the panel considered that AQA has taken a constructive and positive approach to involving students in its work; greater progress has been hindered by contextual factors not necessarily under the control of the agency. The panel would encourage AQA to strengthen further this aspect of its work.

3.1.2 (ESG 2.5) *Reporting and publication*

The panel were able to see copies of completed reports on evaluations of *Fachhochschule* and university programmes, together with project and benchmarking reports. The panel reviewed AQA publications and its website for evidence of publication of reports. There was no formal policy relating to the publication of reports by the agency.

AQA stated that its position was to publish reports on institutions, wherever this has been possible with the agreement of the institution or the commissioning body.

For the evaluation of study programmes in *Fachhochschulen*, the panel found that outcome summaries of the reports are accessible on the AQA website, through a link to the website of the FH Council, the owner of the reports. The full reports are not publicly available, as far as the panel could ascertain.

The reports on the evaluations of study programmes in public universities were not published by AQA, since the agreement of the institutions was not given.

The final overview report of the project comparing equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming is available on the AQA website.

The panel noted that in the agreed procedures for AQA audit, the agency is clearly committed to the publication of reports, however no reports have yet been completed.

The panel judged that the reports prepared by AQA were appropriately structured, with clear conclusions and recommendations. With regard to accessibility and publication of reports, the panel found that for the majority of its past reports AQA had been bound by the formal requirements of the FH Council, as the accrediting body and the owner of the reports; the Council made summaries of reports, including key recommendations, available to the public. With regard to processes owned and fully managed by AQA, the evidence seen was varied and not conclusive. It was explained that while AQA wished to ensure the publication of all its reports, there was not currently a clear legal basis in place for requiring this; hence publication practice has so far depended on the consent of the institutions concerned. As for AQA's own institutional position on publication policy, the panel read and heard clear statements of commitment to the publication of the reports that would result from the future activities of the agency.

3.1.3 (ESG 2.6) *Follow-up procedures*

The panel reviewed reports and other documentation for evidence of follow-up. Follow-up procedures were discussed with AQA staff and representatives of institutions during the site visit.

The evidence available suggested that follow-up visits by AQA to institutions mainly took the form of an advisory explanation of the points covered in reports, and support for action-planning where appropriate. The opportunity was very limited for AQA to demonstrate arrangements

for more formal follow-up in the sense of action plans produced by institutions and monitored by the agency. For the *Fachhochschulen*, such follow-up would be the responsibility of the FH Council, while for the evaluation of study programmes in universities, it would be the responsibility of the institution to manage the follow-up process. For these reasons, AQA does not have a formal policy for follow-up to reviews in the sense of the ESG standard.

The evaluation project on equal opportunities produced recommendations which were to be incorporated into the performance agreements of universities. The outcomes of the project were presented and debated at a conference organised by AQA in January 2007. Further follow-up may be initiated by the ministerial committee which commissioned the project, and AQA may then be involved.

The panel found that AQA offered institutions feedback, development and support following its evaluation and review work. However, formal follow-up requirements which met the expectations of the ESG standard were not generally in place for AQA's current activities. This was because in most instances AQA was not the full owner of the processes and did not have the authority to request or monitor information on action planning which would demonstrate effective follow-up. The panel understood that this would change in future, with the implementation of AQA certification of institutional quality management, when there would be recommendations and conditions which would involve more systematic follow-up procedures. These remain to be defined.

3.1.4 (ESG 2.7) *Periodic Reviews*

In the documentation provided, AQA pointed out that for the *Fachhochschulen*, a requirement for periodic review is laid down in law. It is therefore likely that AQA will be commissioned by the FH Council to carry out programme reviews on a regular cyclical basis. The responsibility for defining and publishing the arrangements for cyclical reviews lies with the FH Council.

For the audit and certification of quality management systems in universities, the time-limited period of certification will require periodic renewal and therefore a cyclical review pattern of six years.

3.1.5 ESG 2.8 *System-wide analyses*

AQA's mission, and its work to date, both clearly include activities which are broadly supportive of quality assurance development and the exchange of experience and good practice between institutions and these can provide the basis for analysis. The two major projects on benchmarking and equal opportunities provide examples of system-wide analysis, with a provision of information to institutions about their performance in selected areas of current interest within the context of the national higher education environment in Austria, and internationally. It is envisaged that this research and development function for the agency will continue.

AQA has not thus far published summary reports deriving from its evaluation and review activities. At this stage in its history it is unlikely that there is a sufficient volume of information directly owned by the agency to provide the necessary resource for such analysis.

A strong feature of AQA's work has been its commitment to international networks, its use of international expert experience, and its readiness to draw on international quality assurance research and advice. In this sense it has used system-wide information from across Europe to inform its own work.

3.2 ESG 3.2/ENQA criterion 2: Official status

In its exploration of matters relevant to this criterion, the review panel considered statements in AQA's self-evaluation, documentation from the legal framework relating to institutions, letters and other documents from the Austrian Ministry for Science and Research (Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung = BMWF).

The panel noted that the relevant legislation for institutions, most importantly the Austrian University Law of 2002, place requirements on institutions to introduce quality assurance arrangements; this law also provides for the establishment of a supporting agency. The status of AQA as a quality assurance agency for the whole of Austrian higher education is affirmed by the fact that its founding stakeholders included all representative bodies of that sector. The major stakeholders are represented on the AQA Board.

The documentation provided to the review panel by AQA included a formal statement from BMWF, dated July 2007, which had a significant bearing on the question of official status. This statement confirmed: that the Ministry recognised AQA as a quality assurance agency for all sectors of Austrian higher education; that AQA's decisions were made on an independent basis; that these decisions and recommendations fulfilled the legal requirements for external quality assurance; that for the public universities, AQA's processes and their outcomes would serve to provide appropriate evidence that the elements of performance agreements relating to quality assurance were being met; and that for the Fachhochschulen and private universities, AQA's processes and their outcomes would be a basis for decisions by the respective accrediting agencies. Finally the ministerial statement recognised the three-phase process for the development and certification of quality management as a supportive framework for the establishment of internal quality assurance arrangements in Austrian higher education institutions.

The review panel were able to meet with the Director General for Higher Education from the BMWF, who confirmed the details of the above statement, and explained the important role of AQA in the broader framework for the regulation and funding of public universities, which centred upon the performance agreements. In the meeting, it was emphasised that the Ministry intends to accept AQA's judgements and

recommendations as evidence that the conditions of performance agreements have been satisfied.

On the basis of the evidence presented to it, the panel were therefore able to confirm that AQA has been established as operating within a clearly defined legal framework regarding institutional responsibilities, and that AQA is fully recognised by the state as an independent agency with authority to carry out quality assurance across the Austrian higher education sector.

3.3 ESG 3.3/ENQA criterion 1: Activities

The review panel took an overview of the extensive documentation, provided with the self-evaluation and during the visit, which described AQA's range of activities. These have been summarised at sections 2.3 and 3.1.1 of this report, above. The panel were able to discuss the implementation and operation of the various methods and procedures during the visit.

On the basis of the evidence presented, the panel was able to confirm that AQA carried out a range of activities and supporting functions which clearly demonstrated that quality assurance is its core work. Its principal current and proposed activities covered programme evaluation, institutional audit, benchmarking and project work, together with a substantial amount of development and support work in collaboration with institutions, carried out through workshops, conferences and consultancy activity. It is also clear from AQA's documentation that the ESG guidelines are recognised and incorporated in its procedures, and furthermore that the guidelines provide the basis for the agency's criteria for evaluating quality assurance in institutions.

3.4 ESG 3.4/ENQA criterion 3: Resources

The panel examined statements of accounts of the Agency for the last two years. These indicated that the agency was sufficiently well resourced to cover its existing activities. The majority of funding comes from the state government. In discussion with the representative of the Ministry, the intention to provide continuing financial support for the agency was confirmed. The panel judged that AQA has the necessary funding basis to carry out its work effectively.

The self-evaluation gave details of the current staff establishment of AQA. The panel judged that AQA has sufficient staff resources for its current range of work, but that it may need to extend its range of staff resources as it maintains current delivery and extends its activities to more universities.

AQA has accommodation conveniently located in the university district of Vienna; it is well appointed, spacious, includes well equipped individual offices and meeting rooms. The administration and information systems appeared to be efficient. The panel therefore considered that the material resources are currently fit for purpose.

3.5 ESG 3.5/ENQA Criterion 4: Mission statement

AQA's mission statement is based on articles 2 and 3 of its statute of association (*Vereinsstatuten* according to the Austrian law on *Vereine*). The mission statement was first developed in 2004 and was amended by the Scientific Steering Group at the General Meeting in June 2007 due to the further development of the agency. The mission statement is published on the AQA website.

AQA's mission statement is based on the aims and areas of function outlined in the agency's statutes. These outline a range of functions in external evaluation/certification as well as the information dissemination and the provision of expertise. The main reference and aim of the activities of the AQA is to develop and strengthen internal quality assurance in the higher education institutions of Austria. This is realised through development work, through acting as the agency for external quality assurance, and through providing an information resource on international developments in the field.

The AQA mission statement concludes with a vision of the future (in 2010) which sees AQA's work then providing a form of certification for university quality systems which is nationally and internationally recognised. The vision sees AQA as being an integral part of the national quality culture, and having an exemplary status in the international context.

The panel were therefore able to confirm that AQA's mission statement has been formally agreed, and is published. It clearly identifies quality assurance as the focal point of the agency's work and includes a broad indication of the key aims and objectives of its activities.

With regard to other expectations of the ESG guideline on this criterion, the review panel considered that the inclusion in the mission statement of a clearer indication of the historical and cultural context of the agency and its work with institutions would be desirable. Following discussions with the panel during the site visit, AQA provided additional documentation to the panel which showed that in its past planning processes and in its current operational planning, the aims laid down in the mission statement were implicit in the detailed targets and activities included in its planning statements. The panel concluded that AQA was consistently addressing the aims of the mission statement in its organisational planning. In terms of the precise expectations of the guideline, it would be desirable to see more explicit and systematic linkage between the statement and the management plans, however the panel were satisfied that the spirit of the guideline was demonstrably inherent in the management planning of the agency.

3.6 ESG 3.6/ENQA Criterion 5/ Independence

AQA provided copies of its statutes of association, and an account of its committee structures and their working. The review panel were able to discuss the question of independence with a range of stakeholders including representatives of the Ministry, of the universities and the

Fachhochschulen. The panel focused particularly on independence of judgement with regard to quality assurance decisions and recommendations.

AQA is formally established as an independent Association (*Verein*), separate from both the state authorities and the higher education institutions. Its legal and political independence, as well as its recognition as an independent body, was confirmed through the BMWF statement (see 3.2 above) and in the discussion with the Ministry representative. As indicated above, AQA has created a clear separation of powers in its committees as between governance functions (by the Board) and academic decision-making (by the Scientific Steering Group). With regard to quality assurance criteria, processes, and judgements, the final decision rests with the Scientific Steering Group, with its majority of external international expert members. The final outcomes of quality assurance processes can therefore clearly be seen to be the responsibility of the agency, and within the agency, of a body which is separate from higher education stakeholders or government representatives. The clearly separated functions of the two main AQA committees were confirmed in discussions with the review panel, where members of the AQA Board confirmed that they had never been involved in the consideration of evaluation reports. Similarly, the Ministry was clear that academic decisions lay entirely with the Scientific Steering Group.

The panel did, however, hear the view expressed by institutional representatives that in its earlier work the agency had been substantially concerned with projects, proposed by the Ministry and agreed with the Rector's Conference, which had not been entirely straightforward in their implications for the agency's relationship with institutions. This may have created some difficulties for AQA with regard to establishing mutual trust and the credibility of its independent role.

A further aspect considered by the panel was the close relationship between AQA's work in supporting institutions in developing quality assurance systems on the one hand, and its evaluation and future certification of those systems. AQA believed that sufficient independence of judgement in this area was ensured by the use in its reviews of peer expert panels external to both AQA and institutions. The recommendations of the expert panel would then be considered and confirmed by the Steering Group, which itself included a strong external element.

Taking all these factors into account, the review panel formed the view that, with regard to its formal legal position, the AQA statutes, and the establishment of the Scientific Steering Group together provide a clear confirmation of the independent status of the agency. The panel considered the establishment, and the strengthening of the Steering Group, which was distinctive in its inclusion of a strong international membership, to be a particularly commendable feature of the internal structure of the agency, and one which supported the independent basis for judgements. The panel considered that these provisions were effective in safeguarding the independence of AQA's work in developing and

approving its procedures, in appointing expert panels, and making decisions on institutional quality assurance. The review panel noted, however, that the AQA statutes did not explicitly identify the decision-making authority of the Steering Group, and the panel would therefore advise that this authority be formally enshrined.

The panel also believed that it will be helpful to all parties in establishing organisational independence and mutual trust if significant communications between the Ministry, the institutions and AQA are formal, transparent, and recorded. The panel would endorse the view expressed by the Ministry representative that in the future it may be appropriate to consider an even stronger separation within AQA between the support and development work and certification decisions. In order to ensure this, AQA may also want to consider how to define more precisely a 'cut-off point' for the provision by the agency of advisory services to higher education institutions seeking quality certification from the agency. However, the panel did not identify any evidence of existing weakness on this count, as the necessary circumstances for any such clash of interest have not yet arisen.

3.7 ESG 3.7/ENQA Criterion 6 & 8: External quality assurance criteria and processes

The panel were able to verify the character of the processes and methodologies followed by AQA, through examining documents which provided detailed process specifications, through reading quality assurance reports on programmes and on institutions, and by discussions with representatives of institutions and with the management and staff of AQA. The two main aspects of this criterion are now areas are now discussed separately in more detail.

3.7.1 Criteria

The review panel found that, because of the variety of processes and stakeholders with which the agency worked, the issue of clearly defined quality assurance criteria for external quality assurance was a complex one.

For its work with institutions seeking to meet the accreditation requirements of the FH Council, AQA has carried out programme evaluations in institutions, using criteria laid down by the FH Council. The review panel found standards and criteria to be clear, detailed and specific, and cover many aspects of quality in programme delivery. The review panel considered that these criteria met the expectations of the ENQA guideline; however these are not AQA's own criteria, but predefined criteria which it follows in its work with *Fachhochschulen*. Similarly, in a bid for the evaluation of a programme in a private university, AQA proposed to adopt the relevant criteria of the Accreditation Council for private universities, rather than being in a position to frame its own criteria.

For its evaluation of programmes in public universities, AQA's guidelines cover the process and procedures and include a list of matters for inclusion in self-evaluation documents, but these represent focal points for the procedure rather than well defined criteria. The main responsibility for establishing standards and criteria for these university programme evaluations (of which two have thus far been completed) lies with a Steering Group which is established by the university and supported by AQA officers. The task of this group may be influenced and shaped by the performance agreements agreed between ministry and the university concerned. Thus AQA has the role, in this context, of supporting internal university bodies in defining the focus of the evaluation and developing a 'catalogue of criteria' for reviews of programmes which will frame the appropriate questions and lines of enquiry for the expert panel to follow during the review procedures. The review panel appreciated that this flexible approach clearly respects the autonomy and individual interests of each university, but nevertheless it begs questions concerning the establishment of agreed criteria for programme evaluation which are valid both *per se*, e.g. *vis-à-vis* generally accepted quality criteria, and across the university sector as a whole.

The main area of activity in which AQA will, in future, need to refer to commonly established and recognised quality assurance criteria is in the quality management project and the associated AQA Audit of institutions. This was therefore the main subject of the review panel's enquiry, both in consideration of documentation and in discussions during the site visit. The panel understood from both of these sources that the main reference point that has been adopted for general criteria is the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). The ESG will thus provide an overarching common set of standards and guidelines which would apply to all universities and form the basis for the development of quality assurance systems and for their external assurance. Within that common framework, AQA intends to work with each individual institution to develop more detailed criteria which are relevant to its particular situation and profile, and which meet the agreed expectations of the performance agreement between the Ministry and the university. During the site visit discussions, the review panel heard many references to the ESG as the key reference point for quality assurance criteria.

Alongside this general approach to the definition of criteria, AQA is currently developing more detailed procedural specifications for its quality audits. In documentation which was presented to the panel during the visit, and which at that time still remained to be finally approved by its Scientific Steering Group, AQA had drafted definitions of the standards for the institutional quality management system, together with criteria for judging levels of institutional maturity in relation to those standards. The documents also identified a range of 'key processes' which would be subject to audit in each of the main quality dimensions for institutional management. In this documentation the review panel saw clear evidence of a deepening approach to the definition of standard criteria, but it noted that this work was very recent, and still remained to be agreed with participating institutions. The panel understood that in the current stage of the implementation of internal quality management systems at public

universities, this ongoing work had been the subject of consultation and discussion among the stakeholders, and this was confirmed by the evidence provided by recent AQA workshops. The view of the AQA senior management was that a common set of standards and criteria would be agreed with universities, but this agreement would be based on an active consultation and development phase, so that institutions could contribute to the development and have ownership of commonly agreed criteria.

The review panel recognised that the documentation presented to it during the visit showed evidence of positive steps towards the definition of standards and criteria which will be used in a new process that is still in development. The panel concluded that it is too early for it to be able to confirm that AQA has established quality assurance criteria for its future work which are 'pre-defined and publicly available', as expected by the relevant ESG guideline, and on which judgements can be soundly and consistently based. Nevertheless, on the basis of the evidence presented to it, the review panel was of the view that AQA is making rapid progress towards a position where it will in future be able to publish such criteria.

3.7.2 *Processes*

As indicated above (section 3.1.1 of this report), the processes adopted by AQA follow closely the international model recommended by the ENQA guidelines. Thus, AQA's main external quality processes include a self-assessment by the institution, an external assessment by an expert panel of peer reviewers, a site visit, and a report with recommendations.

AQA has made appropriate use of expert panel members, has addressed the systematic briefing and support of panels, and has used international experts for several of its processes, drawing upon other German-speaking countries for its peer review processes.

The involvement of students in AQA's broad range of activity has been discussed above (section 3.1.1). As noted there, the agency has not thus far been able to involve students as members of its review panels in a systematic manner. This is in part because such participation was not provided for in the specifications of the commissioning bodies, notably of the FH Council. AQA is supporting a strengthening of the student role in a current project, carrying out two pilot reviews with students as full members of the panel for *Fachhochschule* programme evaluation. In its description of the processes for auditing institutional quality management in Phases 2 and 3 of the AQA Audit methodology, the agency has clearly stated that students will be involved as members of the peer review panels. It can therefore be concluded that this aspect is likely to be further developed in the future work of the agency.

With regard to follow-up procedures, this aspect has also been discussed in some detail above at section 3.1.3. It will be seen there that, held against the ESG guidelines, this is a weaker aspect of the AQA's current work, and that the reasons for this lie in the current level of authority of the agency. It is envisaged that this will change in the future.

No evidence was presented to the panel that a formal procedure was yet in place, through which institutions could appeal against judgements and recommendations made by AQA (i.e. through the decisions of the Scientific Steering Group). The agency's procedures for programme evaluation include paragraphs headed 'System of Appeal', but these outline the opportunity for comment on the report, rather than a formal appeal procedure, perhaps involving a non-involved party as adjudicator. The panel observed that there were only a very small number of independent final decisions made by AQA to date (as opposed to recommendations to other accrediting bodies (such as the FH Council, which bears the final external responsibility and is therefore required to make provisions for an appeal system). Therefore, the lack of a developed formal appeal procedure is neither surprising nor damaging at this point in time. AQA will no doubt wish to introduce such a formal appeals procedure well before the second and third phases of the AQA audit method is reached, when certification decisions will be made on its own authority, which could be subject to appeal.

In summary, the review panel would have difficulty in confirming a full level of compliance with this part of the ESG. However, it found that there was substantial compliance with regard to the general character and aims of AQA's procedures and processes, and detailed compliance in a number of the expected areas; many of the areas of relative weakness in compliance are explained by contextual factors, or are attributable to the fact that AQA's work is at an early stage.

3.8 ESG 3.8/ENQA Criterion 7: Accountability procedures

The review panel was provided with relevant documentation, particularly relating to the evaluation of AQA's work with *Fachhochschulen*. Accountability was also discussed in some detail with the AQA senior management group, and with stakeholder representatives from the universities and *Fachhochschulen*.

As already discussed in this report, a major part of AQA's work up to the present time has been focused on conducting programme evaluations in *Fachhochschulen*. The panel noted that the Council had, in accordance with its Evaluation Regulations and as a part of the contract with AQA, included the expectation that there would be thorough feedback and review procedures to ensure that the evaluations carried out by AQA were robust and fit for purpose. The feedback mechanisms, which were developed managed by the AQA staff responsible for the area of work, included detailed comments on all aspects of the process by the members of the expert panels, together with comments from course leaders of the evaluated programmes. Additionally, and again in accordance with the Council's expectations, AQA has commissioned reports on the procedures by external observers from other national agencies. The panel were able to see one report by an NVAO observer in 2006 which was comprehensive in scope, was informed by the ECA standards, and provided AQA with evaluative commentary on its the effectiveness of the procedures. AQA has developed its evaluation services on the basis of feedback received

from teams and institutions, making adjustments to the process to include greater support in the self-evaluation, a longer site visit, and developmental follow-up workshops.

The review panel discussed other aspects of internal assurance and accountability with the AQA senior management group. The group pointed to a variety of evaluative activities which produced feedback information. These included: workshops with institutions to discuss the audit processes that were currently being introduced; the role of AQA staff in supporting the programme evaluation panels and reviewing the effectiveness of the process in an ongoing way; internal review discussions with these staff, held on an annual basis; the reflections and policy development discussions which took place in the Scientific Steering Group; and a systematic review of AQA's work carried out every two years with the key stakeholders. The review panel acknowledged that these different activities provided a sound basis for reflection on and evaluation of AQA's activities. However the panel also heard from some institutional representatives that there was a view that AQA did not have systematic arrangements in place for feedback from institutions, and that the agency might be considered in some areas of its work to be insufficiently open to constructive critical feedback. The panel did not see evidence of any established policy for AQA's own internal quality assurance with regard to its overall effectiveness as an organisation, or clear evidence that feedback from the different methods was assembled and considered in a holistic and systematic manner. The panel therefore concluded that, while there were existing strengths to build on, in particular the evaluation of its work with *Fachhochschulen*, the agency is only at the early stage of defining a systematic approach to informing and reviewing the quality of its service. The review panel were therefore not able to see a clearly defined published policy relating to the external review of the AQA's work, and this remains to be developed.

The review panel also examined the other aspects mentioned in the ESG guideline relating to this standard. The panel were of the view that the agency's processes and outcomes reflected the aims of its mission statement. The panel confirmed that AQA has in place 'no conflict of interest' commitments as a part of its recruitment contract for members of review teams; it would strengthen this practice further if the agency could establish a formal policy statement governing this aspect of its work. The panel noted that AQA makes very little use of sub-contracted work, but that one collaboration with another agency on the benchmarking project had been appropriately monitored and assured. Finally, it was not clear to the panel that AQA had in place a clearly stated policy for a regular cyclical external review; however, a number of discussants, including the Ministry, considered that the current ENQA review fulfilled that expectation and could serve to do so in the future.

4 Additional Terms of Reference of the review

The review panel gave particular attention to the five points identified in the recommendations of the ENQA Board when it considered an earlier application by AQA for full membership, in June 2005. Below we give the

ENQA Board comment, together with a brief summary of the findings of the review panel on these points:

- *Activities*
ENQA: *Evaluations should be finalised. Your application and provided documentation suggest that some evaluations are in progress but there are currently no finished ones*
AQA has now completed a total of 23 evaluations of programmes of study, two in universities and 21 in *Fachhochschulen*. In addition, AQA has carried out a cross-sector thematic evaluation of equal opportunities policy and practice in public universities. Full reports on these evaluations were available as part of the evidence considered (see sections 3.1.1, 3.1.2 and 3.7.2 above)
- *Mission statement*
ENQA: *The Board was unable to identify a policy and management plan that would fulfil the requirements of paragraph 4.10*
A mission statement is in place and published on the AQA website. The panel considered that there was a sufficiently well-developed linkage between the aims of the mission statement and the agency's strategic and operational plans to satisfy the relevant criterion (see section 3.5 above)
- *Independence*
ENQA: *Additional clarifications are needed in order to clarify your operational independence ...including the composition of your Board and Scientific Council*
The panel received authoritative and sufficient statements regarding independence of operation, the composition of the AQA Board and Scientific Council, and the appropriate separation of powers of these committees (see section 3.6 above)
- *External quality assurance processes*
ENQA: *The Board was unable to locate the final evaluation reports of AQA so further information about the publication of your final reports are needed over the next two years*
See section 3.1.1 above and other sections of this report with regard to the general fitness for purpose of the AQA processes, on which the panel are able to report positively. Concerning publication, some of the final evaluation reports of AQA remain unpublished, mainly due to reasons beyond the Agency's control. There are in fact currently very few reports to which this expectation might legitimately apply (see section 3.1.2 above) ; the AQA website provides links to the summary section of reports on *Fachhochschule* programme evaluation, as published by the FH Council. There is a stated intention on AQA's side to publish reports on institutional audit and certification, in the future.
- *Accountability procedures*
ENQA: *The Board needs additional information on the quality policy of AQA, further description of the actual internal and external feedback mechanisms and evidence that the processes and goals of*

your accountability procedures reflect the mission and goals of quality assurance

AQA was not able to provide the review panel with evidence of a fully developed internal quality policy; however the panel's attention was drawn to a number of relevant processes which provide information that is used by AQA in self-evaluation and to support accountability (see section 3.8 above).

5 Conclusion

In reaching its judgement the review panel took into consideration a number of important strengths in AQA's work which were identified in the course of the review, together with the particular arguments arising from the past and current context of the agency.

Significant positive features identified by the panel during the review include:

- AQA's explicit recognition of the ESG as the basis for defining quality assurance criteria and for its work with institutions, together with the fact that while the panel found that the agency does not yet fully meet all parts of the ESG, it does not offend against the ESG standards in any major area
- The strong support for AQA's work from all of its stakeholders and partners, in particular on the side of the public universities
- The timeliness and fitness for purpose of the AQA audit model, which is well aligned with the current needs of universities, and includes valuable development and support features. The emphasis within this model on support, development and quality enhancement features is in line with wider international trends.
- The generally high level of satisfaction with the work of AQA over the last three years with regard to completed programme evaluations
- The constitution and independent decision-making of the Scientific Steering Group, with its strong international expert membership
- The strong commitment to an international perspective and cross-European collaboration in AQA's work

With regard to the broad national context of AQA's work, the following points were taken into consideration by the review panel:

- Since commencing its activities in 2004, AQA has been working to establish itself in a period of rapid change in its sector, and in competition with other agencies. The panel found some evidence that the early years of the agency's work had presented some difficulties and in many ways had constituted a learning period for all concerned. The public universities were heavily involved in addressing internal reforms over this period. It is

only now that AQA is in a position extensively to substantiate its work with universities, since the performance agreements between the Ministry and the universities are now in place. It was clear to the panel that it was only recently that both the Ministry and universities had fully embraced a decisive role for AQA in certifying the fulfilment of quality-related stipulations in these performance-related contracts.

- Because of this delay in assuming a more central role, the nature of AQA's work in the national context over the last three years has meant that a fully independent decision-making and judgemental authority was not normally central to its work; the agency has worked with institutions mainly with a view to meeting the requirements of other authorities. This has meant that it has not been possible for AQA to fulfil all aspects of the ESG guidelines, simply because of operational contextual constraints (see section 2.3.2 above). Nevertheless, AQA has gathered valuable and lasting experience through this work with regard to the effective and efficient management of external quality assurance, which it has used in the design of its own new methodology, based on institutional audit of quality management. AQA has been engaged in this programme of activity, which constitutes the most significant part of its current work, for less than one year. The process has the explicit support of the Ministry and the universities, is now being implemented with the public universities, and will be fully owned and managed by AQA. The evidence seen by the panel clearly showed that in this process within which it has independent authority, AQA is committed to meeting those parts of the ESG which remain to be fully addressed.

- Potentially, AQA has a central role to play as the only national quality assurance agency in Austria which is recognised by the state as having the authority to evaluate and certificate across the whole of the higher education sector. With the strengthened position which would result from international recognition, AQA will be well placed to contribute to the further development of the national accreditation systems in Austria

- The review panel made particular note of the fact that many of the interviewees during the site visit, including the representatives of the ministry, and of both the university and *Fachhochschule* representative bodies, expressed the view that that ENQA's decision on full membership of AQA at this stage is regarded as highly significant, since it will influence the current planning for Austrian higher education. These statements provided a further strong and explicit commitment of support to AQA's future role.

In the light of these considerations, taking into account the context of its work and the many positive features identified in the course of the review, the review panel judged that AQA is now at a point in its development where it is able to introduce an external quality assurance methodology which is based upon, and comprehensively aligned with, the ESG. In its work up to this time, AQA has wherever possible achieved, in the view of the panel, a sufficient level of compliance with the most important standards and criteria of the ESG. The members of the panel were

therefore in unanimous agreement that they support AQA's application for Full membership of ENQA.

Judgement (as agreed by the panel)

In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the Review Panel is of the opinion that, in the performance of its functions, the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance is not yet fully compliant with the *ENQA Membership Regulations* and the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The agency is, nonetheless, in the opinion of the Review Panel, sufficiently compliant to justify full membership of ENQA

The criteria where full compliance has not been achieved are:

ESG 3.1 in conjunction with ESG 2.5

- AQA has not yet been able to make all full reports publicly available as a part of its own processes
Comment of the panel: it should be noted that evaluations carried out by AQA in the context of *Fachhochschulrat* accreditation proceedings are subject to publication practices of the *Fachhochschulrat*. AQA's own reports on gender equality and the benchmarking project findings were made public. Furthermore, the publication of a report is a binding condition for the external assessment within the proposed AQA audit procedure
- AQA has not yet been able to involve students directly as members of review panels; however, the involvement of students on panels is a binding condition of the proposed AQA audit procedure

ESG 3.7 AQA has not yet been able to publish criteria for external quality assurance which are pre-defined and publicly available; the panel saw evidence that such criteria were currently being developed for the new process

ESG 3.7 AQA does not yet have a formal and published System of Appeal against quality assurance judgements (but see below)

ESG 3.8 AQA has not yet established a systematic approach to its own internal quality assurance

The panel recommends that AQA takes appropriate action, so far as it is empowered to do so, to achieve full compliance with these standards at the earliest opportunity.

With respect to actions addressing these compliance-related points, the panel would draw the attention of the ENQA Board to information included in AQA's response to the consultation draft of the current report. There it was reported that a General Meeting of the AQA Board held on 26 November 2007 had immediately approved amendments to the AQA Articles of Association, so as to include therein provisions to establish a formal System of Appeal, and also to establish formally the decision-making powers of the Scientific Steering Group. In addition, AQA stated that the Board and the Scientific Steering Group had agreed on a management plan for 2008, and that activities will focus on strengthening

and developing further AQA's internal quality management, in particular with a view towards integrating the comments made in the draft of this report. While the panel sees no reason to question these statements, it should be noted that these statements could not be subject to further scrutiny by the panel since they relate to new developments after the site visit.

Recommendations

As a result of its review of AQA, the ENQA panel would advise that the agency also give particular attention to the following points:

- Ensure that all significant communications between the ministry, the institutions and AQA are transparent, formal and recorded
- Develop a more explicit and systematic management plan related to the AQA mission statement
- Include provision in its procedures for the audit and certification of institutions' quality management for monitoring and follow-up to reports to be received from institutions and reviewed by AQA
- Continue its work to involve students directly in panels
- Clearly communicate the intended arrangements for a periodic review cycle

Annex 1: European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the Higher Education Area

Part 2

2.1 Use of internal quality assurance procedures. External quality assurance procedures should take in account the effectiveness of the internal assurance processes described in part 1 of the ESG.

2.2 Development of external quality assurance procedures. The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

2.3 Criteria for decisions. Any formal decisions made as a result of external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit criteria that are applied consistently.

2.4 Processes fit for purpose. All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

2.5 Reporting. Reports should be published and should be written in a style, which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

2.6 Follow-up procedures. Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

2.7 Periodic reviews. External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

2.8 System-wide analyses. Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their review, evaluations, assessments, etc.

Part 3

3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education. The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

3.2 Official status. Agencies should be formally recognised by competent authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an

established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

3.3 Activities. Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

3.4 Resources. Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.

3.5 Mission statement. Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

3.6 Independence. Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by agencies. The processes, criteria and procedures used by the Agency should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include :a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process; an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, a student member(s) and site visits as decided by the agency; publication of a report including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes; a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.

3.8 Accountability procedures. Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

ANNEX 2 Terms of Reference

1. Background and Context

The Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA) was founded at the beginning of 2004 as a non-profit association by the Austrian Rectors' Conference (ÖRK), the Fachhochschule Conference (FHK), the Private Universities, the Student Union (ÖH) and the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (BMBWK). ÖRK, FHK, ÖH and BMBWK are currently ordinary members of AQA.

AQA, whose head office is in Vienna, is an independent agency for evaluation and quality assurance in higher education. It provides its quality assurance procedures to all types of higher education in Austria (public and private universities, Fachhochschulen) and may also become active in other countries.

AQA's tasks in the field of quality assurance and evaluation cover the following areas:

- Evaluation of study programmes (curricula) and institutions;
- Development of QA standards, methods and procedures;
- Certification of institutional quality assurance processes;
- Benchmarking and comparisons of subject fields and higher education institutions;
- Information on quality assurance practice in Austria and other countries;
- Observation and exchange of experience on quality assurance practices;
- International cooperation on quality assurance issues.

The standards and procedures implemented by AQA are decided, co-ordinated and monitored by a Scientific Steering Group, consisting of international experts in the field of quality assurance.

AQA works in cooperation with quality assurance agencies and networks all over Europe. AQA is a full member of INQAAHE and CEEN, and a candidate member of ENQA since 2005.

2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

The review will evaluate the way in which and to what extent AQA fulfils the criteria for the ENQA membership and thus the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Consequently, the review will also provide information to the ENQA Board to aid its consideration of whether AQA should be granted Full Membership of ENQA.

The ENQA Board decided on 10 June 2005 to grant AQA Candidate Membership of ENQA. On that occasion the Board recommended that, in order to fulfil the criteria for Full Membership, AQA should:

- have performed some significant evaluation activities (in 2005 some evaluations were in progress but none of them had been yet brought to an end);
- develop a policy and management plan that would fulfil the requirements of a publicly available Mission Statement;
- provide more detailed information on its operational independence, especially as regards the composition of the Board and Scientific Council;
- provide information on the publication of evaluation reports;
- put in place a quality policy, including internal and external feedback mechanisms as well as accountability procedures of the agency, reflecting its mission and goals.

In the course of the review, the team members will therefore pay special attention to investigating whether these recommendations have been implemented.

In addition to the European context, the review aims at providing feedback on AQA's role and tasks in the context of the Austrian Higher Education system. This feedback should contribute to the further development of AQA and should be based on the following national requirements / features:

The Austrian Higher Education system consists of Public Universities, Fachhochschulen, Private Universities and Teacher Training Universities.

Public Universities make up for around 83% of students, Fachhochschulen for about 10%, Private Universities for about 2% and Teacher Training Universities for about 5% of the students involved in Higher Education.

The provisions for external quality assurance differ between the sectors:

Public Universities are obliged to develop institutional quality management systems and undergo evaluations which are in line with international standards. Performance agreements between each university and the Federal Republic specify the targets and measures as well as the quality management and evaluation ambitions of each university for a period of three years.

Universities of Applied Sciences and Private Universities have been created in the mid and late 1990ies. The accreditation of programmes and institutions by the two relevant accreditation councils (Fachhochschulrat and Akkreditierungsrat für Privatuniversitäten) is a mandatory requirement. Universities of Applied Sciences and Private Universities are also required to develop institutional quality assurance systems.

AQA provides higher education institutions with quality assurance procedures that shall

- support their quality and organisational development
- give proof on the basis of formally defined quality standards.

These procedures currently include:

- external support and assessment of institutional quality management processes for Public Universities
- external programme and institutional evaluations for Fachhochschulen (as a basis for accreditation decisions and for internal quality enhancement processes)
- external programme and subject area evaluations, thematic evaluations and process evaluations for Public Universities (as a basis for external reporting, resource decisions and enhancement processes)

The evaluation shall

- include an appraisal of the role and competences of AQA as a quality assurance agency for all higher education in Austria,
- contribute to the future development of the agencies' competences.

The results and recommendations of the review shall be addressed to the agency.

3. The Review Process

The process will be designed in the light of the ENQA policy on "ENQA-organised external reviews of member agencies".

The evaluation procedure will consist of the following steps:

- Nomination and appointment of the review team members;
- Self-evaluation by AQA including the preparation of a self-evaluation report;
- A site visit by the panel of reviewers to AQA;
- Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report.

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel will consist of five members: four external reviewers (two quality assurance experts, representative of higher education institutions and student member) and a review secretary. Two of the reviewers will be nominated by the ENQA Board on the basis of proposals submitted to ENQA by the national agencies, and will normally be drawn from senior serving members of staff of ENQA member agencies. The review secretary will be nominated by the ENQA Board. The fourth and possibly the fifth external reviewer will be drawn from nominations provided by the European University Association. The nomination of the student member will be asked of the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB). Current members of the ENQA Board will not be eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide to AQA the list of suggested experts with their respective curricula vitae. The experts will have to sign a non-conflict of interest statement as regards the AQA review.

3.2 Self-evaluation by AQA, including the preparation of a self-evaluation report

AQA is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-evaluation process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-evaluation is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-evaluation report is broken down by the topics of the evaluation: background description of the current situation of the Agency; analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a summary of perceived strengths and weaknesses;
- The report is also well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which AQA fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the criteria for the ENQA membership and thus the European Standards and Guidelines. The report will be submitted to the review panel a minimum of four weeks prior to the site visit.

3.3 A Site Visit by the Review Panel

The review panel will draw up and publish a schedule of the site visit. The schedule will include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review team during the site visit, the duration of which will be 2 days.

The site visit will close with an oral presentation and discussion of the main findings of the evaluation between the review panel and AQA.

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the expert panel. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under article 2. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings. A draft will be submitted for comment to AQA within four weeks of the site visit for comment on factual accuracy. If AQA chooses to provide a statement in reference to the draft report, it will be submitted to the chairperson of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report. Thereafter the expert panel will take into account the statement by AQA, finalise the document and submit it to AQA and ENQA.

The final report is to be finalised within two months of the site visit and will not exceed 40 pages in length.

4. Follow-up Process and Publication of the Report

AQA will consider the expert panel's report and inform ENQA of its plans to implement any recommendations contained in the report. Subsequent to the discussion of the evaluation results and any planned implementation measures with ENQA, the review report and the follow-up plans agreed upon will be published on AQA's website.

5. Budget

AQA shall pay the following review related fees:

- Chair 5.000 EUR
- Review secretary 5.000 EUR
- Other panel members 3.000 EUR
- Administrative overhead for ENQA Secretariat 5.000 EUR
- Travel and subsistence expenses (approximate) 6.000 EUR

This gives a total indicative cost of 30.000 EUR for the review. In the case that the allowance for travel and subsistence expenses is exceeded, AQA will cover any additional costs after the completion of the review. However, the ENQA Secretariat will endeavour to keep the travel and subsistence expenses in the limits of the planned budget.

6. Indicative Schedule of the Review

The duration of the evaluation is scheduled to take about 9 months, from January 2007 to September 2007:

Agreement on terms of reference and protocol for review	End Jan 2007
Appointment of review team members by ENQA	Early Feb 2007
AQA starts self-evaluation	Early Feb 2007
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	Mid-Mar 2007
AQA self-evaluation completed	End July 2007
Briefing of review team members	August 2007
Expert panel site visit	September 2007
Draft of evaluation report to AQA	October 2007
Statement of AQA to review team if necessary	Beginning of Nov. 2007
Submission of final report to AQA and ENQA	November 2007
Consideration of report by AQA	November 2007
Consideration of the report and response by ENQA	December 2007
Publication of report and implementation plan	December 2007

ANNEX 3 Glossary

AQA: Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance

BMWF: Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung; the Austrian Ministry for Science and Research

EHEA: European Higher Education Area.

ENQA: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

ESG: European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

Fachhochschule: university level institutions of applied sciences, offering technical and vocational higher education provision in Austria

Fachhochschulrat: Fachhochschule Council – the regulatory and accrediting body of the Fachhochschulen

Vereinsstatuten: Articles of Association