

Assessment Report



International Institutional Reaccreditation of the American University of Science and Technology (AUST), Beirut, Lebanon



Imprint

EVALAG

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I. Introduction

The assessment procedure¹ was carried out with an informed peer review on the basis of a self-evaluation report provided by the University, a two-day online visit² of international experts, an assessment report by the expert team and the accreditation decision taken by EVALAG's Accreditation Commission.

The procedure applies the fitness for purpose approach which assesses to what extent the institution is able to achieve its self-set objectives. The point of reference are EVALAG's criteria for international institutional accreditation that follow the **European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance** in the European Higher Education Area dated 15 May 2015.

These criteria focus first of all on the profile and the strategies of the institution which are in the centre of the procedure. The governance structures which are used to implement strategies, the fields of activities of the institution and cross-cutting issues which influence the implementation, and the success of the institutional strategies are also examined. By assessing compliance with the criteria, EVALAG checks whether the institution has objectives with regard to each criterion, whether it implements activities which serve to reach the defined objectives, and whether it uses mechanisms to assess the results of its activities. Additionally, EVALAG assesses if the institution meets academic standards that are accepted in Europe and internationally.

The following criteria are used: Institutional profile and strategy; Governance; Resources; Teaching and learning; Research; Institution and society; Quality assurance (See Annex 1 for a detailed description of the criteria).

The experts express the extent of compliance regarding the criteria. It refers to the following levels of assessments: passed, passed subject to conditions, suspension of the accreditation procedure or failed. Depending on the degree to which the institution meets the criteria, the institution will be accredited, accredited with conditions or not accredited.

¹ The University was first accredited in 2018 (till September 2024) and is currently undergoing the reaccreditation process.

² Due to the current security situation in Lebanon, the site visit was carried out online (April 04 and April 5, 2024)

II. HEI (profile)

The history of the American University of Science & Technology (AUST) dates back to 1989 when it began operations under the name of American Universal College (AUC).

In August 2000, AUC changed the name to American University College of Science & Technology (AUCST) as per presidential decree #3585/2000. In August 2007, the Presidential decree #677/2007 confirmed the present name of American University of Science & Technology (AUST) with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities associated with a full-fledged University.

The main campus of the University is located in Beirut. Additionally, the University operates two smaller regional centres in Zahlé and Sidon and a new branch (licensed in 2022) in Bhamdoun; Mount Lebanon.

Currently, around 3666³ students are enrolled at AUST across its undergraduate (32) and graduate programmes (16) in four faculties:

- Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS)
- Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE)
- Faculty of Engineering (FOE)
- Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS)

Table 1 shows an overview of AUST in numbers.

American University of Science and Technology (AUST)	
Founding year	1989
Number of students	3666
in Beirut	2494
in Zahlé and Bhamdoun	833
in Sidon	339
Full-time academic staff (2022/2023)	49
Part-time academic staff (2022/2023)	191
Tenured (2022/2023)	43
Administrative and technical staff ⁴	56
Faculties	4
Number of academic departments	24
Number of programmes:	
Undergraduate	32
Graduate	16

³ Total: Male 2078 (56.7%), Female 1588 (43.3%); Beirut: 2494, Zahle: 833, Sidon: 339, Bahmdoun (enrolment is embedded in Zahle)

⁴ The term of administrative staff applies to secretaries, assistants, laboratories and studio managers. These are non-teaching individuals.

Students who graduated in July 2022 (BA/BS)	918
Students who graduated in July 2022 (MA/MBA)	258
Enrolments (Fall 2022-2023)	3666
Students who graduated Fall 2022 (MA/MBA)	184
Budget (revenues) ⁵	7.9 Mio \$
Annual tuition for 30 credit hours (for undergraduate study)	2,165 \$
Percentage of budget for financial aid	18,63% (\$1,399,612)
Percentage of budget for research	5 % (\$ 396,809)

Table 1 – AUST in numbers (Academic year 2022-2023)

AUST follows an American-styled educational philosophy based on an obligatory broad liberal arts curriculum that includes languages, social sciences, humanities and math/natural sciences requirements from all students regardless of academic major. The academic calendar of AUST is based on two semesters per year, each of a 15 week duration. One credit hour is defined as 15 hours of face-to-face interaction between student and teacher. Most courses are organized on a three credit hour basis, meaning that the student and the teacher have met for 45 hours per semester.

Students have to accumulate a minimum of 105 credit hours in order to qualify for a Bachelor degree starting the sophomore class. Students who join AUST as freshmen with a General Secondary Certificate (after successful completion of 13 years of education) may be given up to 30 credit hours of first year courses depending on their performance in the placement exams. The University organizes its classes on the basis of face-to-face teaching, therefore, personal attendance of class sessions is obligatory. Only a few absences per course are allowed. As a private University, AUST does not receive any public funding to support its activities. Thus, the University relies on student fees as its main source of income.

⁵ Note: Since tuition fees are collected partially in USD and partially in LBP at a government imposed rate which is several times inferior to the exchange rate in the market (e.g. 15 000 L.B.P by government against 80 000- 100 000 L.B.P by market). The values are composite results of amounts collected in USD plus amounts collected in LBP at the real market rate.

III. Institutional Assessment

AUST submitted a Self-Evaluation Report on 8 January 2024.

The expert group is comprised of:

Prof. Dr. Marilena Maniaci, University of Cassino and Southern Lazio, Department of Letters and Philosophy, Governing Board Member of the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR)

Prof. Dr. Werner Fritz, Head of Institute "Business Informatics and Data Science", "Business Informatics", Head of Degree Programme "IT Architecture", Head of Degree Programme "Software and Digital Experience Engineering" at the University of Applied Sciences FH Joanneum, Austria

Prof. Dr. Paul Richard Sharp, Professor of Economics at the University of Southern Denmark, Odense University

Ana Gvritishvili, LL.M. PhD student in the Economics programme at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia and Executive Committee member of ESU since 2022.

The online visit took place on 4 April and 5 April 2024.⁶

During the online visit the expert group met with the President of the University, the Vice-President, Provost, Deans, Head of Departments, Teaching Staff, Director and Staff of Center for Learning and Development, Students and Alumni, Academic Support Units, Quality Assurance Department, Members of Advisory Board. AUST also provided a short video (5 minutes) that showed selected facilities of the University.

All experts had declared to be free of any conflict of interest.

The following assessment report is structured along the assessment criteria for institutional accreditation that is carried out by EVALAG (see annex 1). After a short description of the criterion, each chapter starts with a presentation of the current status regarding the criterion which is based on the information in the SER report of the University and the information gathered during the online visit. On this basis, the expert team assesses the criterion. Finally, the experts list the conditions and/or recommendations for further improvement.

⁶ Due to the current security situation in Lebanon, the management has decided to conduct an online visit. The German Foreign Office has advised German nationals to leave the country (25.07.2024).

1. Institutional profile and strategy

Criterion

The institutional profile and strategy define the main activities of a higher education institution and therefore are at the centre of the institutional accreditation procedure. Applying the fitness for purpose approach, the experts mainly check whether an institution has a clearly defined strategy that fits the institutional profile. Furthermore, they check whether the strategies and the profile of the institution comply with internationally accepted standards. The experts also review the processes for the definition of strategies. Furthermore, they analyse whether the strategies are adequate to reach the institutional objectives.

Current Situation

Strategic profile

AUST was established with the goal to provide American-styled education especially to those young men and women in Lebanon who are financially challenged. The basic idea was to make higher education accessible to individuals with limited means, thus providing opportunities for social advancement and progress.

From the onset, AUST decided to distinguish itself by offering majors that the Lebanese and Middle Eastern labour market needs, but no University is offering, e.g. optometry, radiologic sciences, fashion design and forensic science. These majors should provide students with good opportunities in the job market. In its self-report, AUST states that it lately introduced new programmes that flourished and met a high demand in the context of the technological revolution such as Digital Marketing and Cybersecurity.

In May 2022, the Board reviewed the Statement of Mission⁷ of AUST. It aims at a clearer form and incorporates suggestions from stakeholders as well as some recommendations made by the EVALAG team of experts in 2019. The main ideas of the new Statement are the following:

- The American University of Science and Technology (AUST) is a recognized institution of higher learning licensed by the Lebanese Government that is committed to excellence and freedom in teaching and research. AUST reflects the concerns of its founders that affordable American-styled education should be within the reach of all seekers without any form of discrimination or prejudice.
- AUST shall be a student-oriented University that prioritizes learning, critical thinking, applied training and research-based class work. It

⁷ The mission statement is reviewed every four years. AUST points out that academic units draft their own mission statements. Institutional and academic units' strategies are revised annually following standardized processes for any amendments needed and for taking corrective actions in case of deviations.

shall establish wide networks of national and international universities for exchange and joint research projects. Furthermore, networking with potential employers is a priority because they may provide part time and/or full time employment to students. For example, the University recruits employers to serve on the advisory boards of academic majors.

- The University shall offer high quality programmes comparable to those offered in the USA including a liberal arts curriculum that is distinctive of American education.
- AUST shall strive to graduate highly competitive, proficient and motivated communicators, problem solvers, designers and entrepreneurs who enjoy high levels of tolerance for different opinions, who are promoters of human rights and intercultural dialogue and who are well versed in new technologies.
- The University shall require internships in academic majors offered so as to shorten the distance between the classroom and the working place and it shall establish an office to assist students in finding full time and part time jobs while studying.
- AUST shall offer cultural and educational programmes and activities that will support and complement the traditional classroom teaching and learning processes and provide an extended arm to the “society” to share and participate in the wealth of experience that the University can provide.
- AUST shall offer academic programmes needed in the market and not sufficiently offered by other universities.
- The University shall adopt a flexible scheduling system so that working students are enabled to study at AUST.
- AUST shall encourage applied research with effort to find solutions to existing problems.
- The University shall review its Mission Statement every four years (or before in case of need) and it shall consider the inputs of all possible stakeholders (boards, administrators, faculty, staff, students, alumni, employers).⁸

In this context, academic courses that are directed toward good citizenship (e.g. human rights, peace culture and conflict resolution, western civilization) are complemented by lecture series and activities designed to foster understanding among peoples and cultures.

AUST also states that the advances brought about by new technologies can be very helpful to the teaching/learning process and has several programmes

⁸ The last 4 bullets in italics are amendments by the Board in May 2022.

delivered in hybrid forms as well. The establishment of part-time studies was also explicitly included in the updated mission statement.

At least annually, AUST organises public activities (e.g. the Math Olympics organised with the Bulgarian Embassy, and the forensic competition held with a neighbouring school in Beirut) to strengthen the connection between the University and the local community (for example in 2022: 300 high schoolers attended a free course entitled “Robotics and Coding” and 55 students attended a one-week camp entitled “Formula 1”). AUST also addresses this issue with an annual series of lectures and events designed to bring the parents of the future students to within the perimeter of the campus.

Definition process

The University highlights in its SER that it understands strategy as a continuous process that involves evaluation of the past and planning for the future. The mission statement of the institution (see above) is the driving point of the institutional strategy. Academic units draft their own mission statements. Institutional and academic units’ strategies are revised annually following the above process for any amendments needed and for taking corrective actions if needed.

The following steps take place in the strategic planning process:

- In July of each academic year, Department Heads and the Academic Deans conduct a series of meetings to discuss the results obtained from the outcomes of the last academic year.
- A report of findings is submitted to Vice President/Provost by the end of October. The report includes qualitative and quantitative indicators that assess the progress in achieving the goals, objectives and strategic initiatives set for the previous year as outlined in the Summary of the Strategic Plan.⁹
- The President presents the strategic plan to the Board of Trustees for final approval along with the final budget in its July session.
- Once the plan is approved, the Executive Council diffuses the plan to the Faculty Deans and Heads of Departments for implementation.

Based on the evaluation report and the revision of the institutional strategy provided by the Vice president, each Dean/Head of Department, along with his/her team, prepares a SWOT analysis pertaining to his/her Faculty/ Department and prepare a strategic plan that addresses the SWOT analysis in accordance with the University mission for the next strategic plan cycle. The

⁹ <https://api.aust.edu.lb/content/uploads/files/Strategic-Plan.pdf> (accessed 10.06.2024)

results of the SWOT analysis are used to identify goals for organizational development. This takes place in February accompanied by a budget request from the Dean to the Vice President/Provost.¹⁰

Assessment

Strategic profile

The experts are aware of the difficult economic, social and political situation in Lebanon and welcome the revision of the mission statement. According to the experts, AUST's mission is globally clear, practical and attractive. It reflects a deep understanding of the responsibilities of higher education institutions in emerging societies such as Lebanon. The experts appreciate that AUST provides high academic quality study opportunities to students with fewer financial resources, while operating the institution as a private enterprise in a competitive market.

The reviewers also appreciate the mission's multicultural and tolerant approach to education, which reaches out to all factions of Lebanese society. All students interviewed by the experts during the online visit praised AUST for its student-centred approach. AUST's commitment to its students is reflected in the high level of individualized support in social and financial matters, as well as in finding internships and future jobs.

The strong connection to the job market is clearly reflected in several agreements with companies, ranging from internship opportunities for students to joint projects. The fact that almost all enrolled students work alongside their studies is also a unifying element. The University takes into account the special constraints and needs of de facto part-time students. In addition, all staff, students and alumni interviewed by the experts are familiar with the mission and goals of the University, know and accept what is expected of them and how they can contribute.

According to the experts, the strategies at both the University and faculty level seem to be in line with the University's mission. With its focus on academic education primarily for the labour market, AUST's profile is in line with internationally accepted standards for higher education institutions.

Definition process

The experts welcome the fact that the mission statement is reviewed every four years in order to integrate current developments.

They also appreciate that regular processes to reflect and adjust the strategies are already implemented at AUST. These processes appear well thought through but should be supported by the development and monitoring of Key

¹⁰ AUST provides the expert group documents for decision making process (Appendix 41).

Performance Indicators. Strategic planning is a collaborative process that occurs in parallel with budget planning. Input and participation from academic units are considered, but the final decision is made by the Board of Trustees, which is then implemented by the Executive Council.

Adequacy of the strategies

The reviewers found AUST's strategies for achieving its goals to be coherent and appropriate. All activities appear to consider the University's goals and the original intentions of its founders. The University's reputation and the apparent success of many of its alumni attest the appropriateness of the strategies chosen.

Areas for improvement

The experts welcome the University's efforts with regarding strategy development despite the difficult political, social and economic situation in Lebanon. During the interviews, the experts were able to see that faculty research activities are supported at some point. Nevertheless, the experts would like to see more support for faculty in their research activities. The experts recommend funding for all University faculties and their research activities, especially in the field of Art and Science and Health and Science.

Recommendations

R1: Regular monitoring of the fulfilment of strategic goals or priorities should be conducted to ensure sustainable further development. Quantitative and qualitative Key Performance Indicators should be used to support this process, enabling precise comparisons between past and current statuses, helping to identify obstacles, and providing the University with a foundation for reflecting on how to better achieve its goals.

2. Governance

Criterion

The criterion focuses on the internal governance and decision-making processes of the institution. The experts check the clarity and transparency of the organisational provisions and governance structure. They examine whether governance structures are adequate to support the institutional strategies and how decision-making processes are organised. Furthermore, the experts check how stakeholder groups are involved in governance, whether the institution provides relevant information about its activities for the internal and external public and whether academic freedom is assured.

Current Situation

AUST is a no-for-profit institution established by a Lebanese family in 1989. AUST follows a system of governance similar to US universities. Overall, the organizational structure of the University is as follows:

Basic information¹¹ on governance – the constitution of councils, the University mission, University policies – are published on the University website.

University governance and structure, decision making processes

The Board of Trustees, responsible for University development, consists of between 9 and 21 members from outside the University, plus the President (as ex-officio member without voting rights). Each board member is elected for four years and may be re-elected once. The board oversees and implements the basic University policies. Every four years, the board elects the President of the University.

The President is in charge of all aspects of the life of the University and is solely responsible to the Board of Trustees and to the legal authorities in Lebanon. The Board of Trustees elects a President for a five-year term and entrusts him/her with all aspects of the life of the University. The President appoints his/her principal assistants, Vice-Presidents, lawyers and auditors, with the approval of the Board of Trustees.

The vice presidents are responsible to the president. They are responsible for the day-to day business. There are currently 3 vice presidents: Provost (Vice President for Academic Affairs), Vice President for Finance and Administration, and Vice President for academic Research. The Vice Presidents are appointed by the President and approved by the Board.

The Executive Council, consisting of the President (as Chair), the Vice Presidents, and the Provost, is the highest institutional council. It ensures that the overall program of the University is carried out in accordance with established policies, rules and procedures. The Executive Council acts on recommendations from lower councils, academic units, and staff within the general policy framework established for the institution. The Executive Council also acts as an appellate body in cases of conflict, such as faculty disputes, staff disputes, faculty-staff disputes, and student disputes, after the lower councils have exhausted their remedies.

The University Council is composed of the members of the Executive Council, the academic Deans of the faculties, the Dean of Students and Admissions, the Registrar, the Director of IT, and the Director of the Bursar's Office. The AUST documents show that the University council was expanded after the last accreditation to include students, faculty members and administrative staff to participate in its deliberations on matters of direct concern to them.

¹¹ <https://api.aust.edu.lb/content/uploads/files/Constitution-Bylaws.pdf> (accessed on 06.09.2024)

The Administrative Council deals with day-to-day decisions. Members of the Council comprise the Dean of Students and Admissions, the Registrar, the Public Relations Officer, the Quality Assurance Manager, the IT Manager, the Design Office Manager, the Campus Security Chief, the Building and Grounds Manager, the HR Manager and the highest student achiever (by invitation, when issues relating to student welfare are to be discussed).

The Advisory Board includes experts who are chosen to support academic majors ¹²by providing advice, employing graduates and providing opportunities for research by undergraduate students in the senior study projects. Nominations for membership of the Board are also considered from students, alumni, faculty and other potential stakeholders.¹³

According to the self-evaluation report, two key principles are observed:

1. Whenever and wherever various inputs are desired, the faculty councils come into play.
2. There is always a possibility for appeal and the Executive Council is the last appeal stage.

AUST generally follows a participative management policy in which all University groups and stakeholders and their interests are considered, while keeping in mind that the system should remain free of all political interference and meddling.

In the report and during the meetings the phrase “open door policy” was often used meaning a fluid and non-obstructed communication process between students, staff, faculties and administration.

In the academic sector, Deans¹⁴ are appointed by the President after consultation with the Provost and the approval of the Board. Each Dean has the responsibility to oversee the running of the concerned faculty according to

¹² According to the university, majors are specialized fields of study chosen by students, such as International Affairs, Computer Science, Computer Engineering, or Interior Design. A full list of majors and enrollment figures from Fall 2022 is provided in the Self Evaluation Report (pages 60-61). Some majors have Advisory Boards composed of prominent individuals in the field, like CEOs, directors, alumni, and top managers. These boards support the growth of the major by offering assistance, services, internships, and employment opportunities. Currently, majors in Computer Science, Information & Communication Technology, International Affairs, Business, Computer & Communications Engineering, Mechanics Engineering, Design, Clinical Laboratory Sciences, and Forensic Sciences have functional Advisory Boards.

¹³ According to the SAR the role of students in the governance of AUST is believed to be primordial because the Institution is established to serve them. The Board of Trustees has not yet approved the election of student representatives on Boards and Councils. AUST believes that this would result in significant divisions along confessional and party lines. Students' input is sought in academic departments (e.g., new majors, double degree initiatives) where the input of high achievers is considered. In matters pertaining to student life on campus, the formation of clubs and in sports activities, student opinions and participation are highly regarded and considered vital for the success of any event. AUST considers the potential reinstatement of student representation on councils, committees, and boards, contingent on the prevailing political atmosphere in Lebanon.

¹⁴ The appointment of the Academic Dean follows the norms practiced in American Universities. The EVALAG team of experts of 2019 recommended that the Dean be elected by the faculty. AUST opts to remain with the appointment practice as per policy.

the general guidelines set in the Board approved policies. Deans hold meetings with chairs of departments on a regular basis.

The chairs of academic departments are appointed after consultation with the faculty concerned and they are ordinarily rotated.

Alumni are included as members of advisory boards of certain disciplines; the establishment of an alumni association is already planned.

Student participation in decision-making processes takes place informally. Teachers select individual students on an informal basis, since organised political student groups are banned from the campus.

Clarity and transparency and information policy

The website of AUST is the link between the institution and the internal and external public. Announcements on job vacancies, activities, the University calendar, applications, news, registration, and more study-related information are communicated via the website www.aust.edu.lb. AUST also uses social media services to address the public: Facebook (about 29k followers), Instagram (about 13.4k followers) and LinkedIn (about 25k followers).¹⁵

Academic freedom and hiring procedures

Faculty members are formally (under the conditions of the cultural and institutional norms of Lebanon) assured academic freedom in research and in the delivery of their academic subjects, in incorporating changes to the curriculum and in implementing new curricula.¹⁶

Applications of new faculty members can be submitted on public job vacancies or as general applications. In the application process the candidates are interviewed and present themselves to the department. Each application is internally discussed between the academic members and the chair. Typically, three candidates are chosen and recommended to the Dean who reviews the recommendation and submits a prioritized list to the Provost who in turn will negotiate with the candidates in the order of the priority submitted. The President finalizes the deal with her/his approval and a contract is issued.

Faculty and staff members serve on standing councils in which they participate in the governance. These councils are:

- Admissions Council (4 faculty members- one elected from each Faculty- plus one member from the Office of the Dean of Students and Admissions;
- Curriculum Council (4 faculty members plus the Registrar);

¹⁵ March 2015

¹⁶ Students are invited to participate in departmental meetings and on council meetings when there are issues that concern them (e.g. curriculum councils, co-curriculum council).

- Co- Curriculum and Student Life Council (4 faculty members plus Dean of Students and Admissions);
- Financial Aid Council (4 faculty members plus Dean of Students and Admissions, plus a staff member from the Bursar's Office);
- University Research Council (4 faculty members; Associate and full professors)
- Graduate Studies Council (4 faculty members who have graduate program)
- Institutional Review Board (Chaired by the Provost and its faculty members)

AUST points out that each year, the Provost forms a Peer Group Committee (one for each candidate for promotion) to deliberate on the file(s) of the candidate's eligibility for promotion. The Peer Group Committee (PGC) is composed of the faculty members of the rank to which the faculty member is applying for promotion. The PGC is composed of faculty members usually from AUST but, at times, guest faculty members from other universities are asked to join if AUST does not have qualified faculty in the field of the candidate.

Appeals

The right to appeal is formally regulated. Students, staff and faculty members have the right to appeal decisions of individuals and councils all the way to the Executive Council which is the last appeal authority.

Before this, student non-academic issues (e.g. absences, misbehaviour) are normally decided by the office of the Dean of Students and Admissions. Student academic issues are decided in the faculties with the right to appeal to the next higher instance up to the Provost's desk. For conflicts involving staff members, the Human Resources Director will deliberate on a solution to the issue which, if not agreed upon by either party, may be appealed to the Administrative Council.

Conflicts between a faculty member and a staff member are first handled by the chair of the department if the issue is intradepartmental. The Dean of faculty and the Human Resources Director will step in in case one of the parties is not satisfied. Conflicts between faculty members are dealt with by the concerned Deans, followed by the Provost.

In all these cases a final appeal to the Executive Council is possible.

Assessment

During the interviews, the experts were able to see for themselves that the Advisory Board is very committed to the students and the University. The experts also suggest that the governance structures of AUST are clearly structured and documented. The responsibilities and procedures of the main University bodies are described in the constitution and in the bylaws. The

governance procedures appear well thought out and applicable. The relations between academics and the funding body are clear and transparent. At this point, the experts recommend that the decision-making processes for all members of the University be made clearer.

Student participation in governance structures was also discussed. The University argues that the formal exclusion of student representatives is due to the social, cultural, and religious tensions in Lebanon. Including them in the University would reignite the lines of conflict. Rather, the aim is to create a harmonious and open atmosphere for students at the University. This positive campus atmosphere and the open-door policy were also confirmed by students. The experts are able to comprehend the University's explanation of why student representation is not being implemented due to the cultural and social tensions in Lebanon.

The experts consider the University's goal of providing a politically tension-free space for encounters to be reasonable. Nevertheless, they see a need for action with regard to the future integration of students in University committees. On this basis, the experts advocate a written elaboration of what future participation could look like. The experts appreciate the university's intention to integrate students in University committees. Taking into account that this is a longterm issue, the experts decided to stick with the condition.

Furthermore, the experts were convinced that academic peace is institutionalized within the structures of AUST. Overall, from the perspective of the experts, a sustainable organizational development of the University would be the best way to guarantee a vivid and continuous participation of students.

Adequacy

The experts assess the governance structures as adequate for a University of this size. They have seen that the governance is efficient. In case of conflict, appeal mechanisms exist. The majority of University staff seems to be familiar with these. Appeals procedures were applied in the past and have contributed to successful conflict resolution.

Academic freedom

The experts experienced the academic staff as highly committed to AUST. Without any doubts, they are free both in their scientific and their teaching activities. Nevertheless, the reviewers believe that there is room for improvement.

Areas for improvement

Overall, the reviewers particularly commend the high level of commitment from the advisory board. The support from its members enables the University to maintain a broad network of industry partners, which is beneficial for the students. Additionally, discussions highlighted the need for further definition of academic peace and decision-making processes. It would also be useful to further specify the principles of academic peace to strengthen the University structures.

Recommendations and Conditions

R3: The decision-making process should be more formalized and documented. This increases the transparency of the organizational structures for all University members.

R4: With regard to academic freedom, a detailed elaboration should be provided concerning research, teaching, and discourse. This would support the University's third mission and promote a transparent understanding of quality.

C1: The university must introduce representatives of students in its committees on a systematic basis. It must provide evidence for this (for example protocols or similar documents) and provide a short resumé about its experience with this new approach.

3. Resources

Criterion

This criterion focuses on adequate resource endowment and deployment to sustain the core activities. The experts check the existence and sustainability of a professional funding and financial management. They also check whether the qualification and number of the (academic) staff (full-time and part-time) are adequate to support the institutional strategy as well as to ensure the intended learning outcomes. Further, they review staff recruiting and staff development and if the search, hiring and tenure procedures are in line with international academic practices. The resources, facilities and equipment are also part of the criterion. Therefore, the experts examine if the amount and quality of facilities and equipment allow a smooth running of the programme (library, laboratories, teaching rooms, IT equipment).

Current Situation

Financial resources and management

According to the SAR, all of AUST's financial needs are met (100%) by student fees. Funds spent on salaries, research, financial aid etc. come from tuition fees. There is no government subsidy.

AUST has an annual budget that shall guarantee the financial safety, stability and wellbeing of the operation in its various cost centres. The budget is developed from the bottom up thus getting individuals at various levels of the decision-making process involved: In October of each academic year the budget cycle begins. It ends in July of the same academic year, the date at which the Board approves the proposed budget. The procedural steps in the academic sector are described below (non-academic cost centres follow similar pathways).

1. The Vice President for Finance and Administration sends all cost centres copies of the actual approved year budget with space provided for incorporating changes desired for "next year" with a note explaining the margins of change approved by the Board.
2. The academic cost centres submit their internal deliberations to the Dean concerned by end of January. These deliberations will include the needs for the coming year in full time and part time faculty, equipment, facilities, etc. The non-academic cost centers will submit the results of their deliberations directly to the office of the Vice President for Finance and Administration.
3. The Dean will coordinate the requests of the various cost centres under her/his jurisdiction and will send them to the Provost by end of February.
4. The Provost will meet with the Dean in any academic budget defence session and together they will arrive at figures that will be submitted for review to the Vice President for Finance and Administration by end of April.
5. The Vice President for Finance and Administration will hold all University budget defence sessions with each budget centre represented by its ultimate head during May until a final all University budget is agreed upon. This budget will be presented to the Executive Council for discussion and approval by June 15.
6. The President submits the proposed University budget to the Board in its July session for approval.

The Vice President for Finance and Administration is the key person in the budget cycle. The offices directly involved in collecting and dispensing funds according to the approved budget employ nine full timers (with college degrees) who make sure that revenues are collected, and payments are made according to the approved budget. An internal auditor rechecks all income

and expense statements. The University also employs an external auditing firm.

The annual budget guarantees the salaries (including possible increases¹⁷) and plans for growth as requested by the various cost centers and approved by the Board at least a year ahead of implementation.¹⁸

Tuition fees from the students account for practically 100 % of the revenues in the budget. AUST maintained its fees in USD, a stable currency, and aligned with the government's directives regarding the exchange rate. However, it introduced an operational fee to cover the cost of fuel for the power generators that will illuminate classrooms, offices, laboratories, and provide heating and cooling.¹⁹

Human resources and the recruitment process²⁰

Vacancies are advertised on the website and in journals. General applications are also accepted. The University welcomes also inquiries by mail, email, telephone or on walk. According to the self-evaluation report, AUST's policy concerning the pay scale, the teaching loads and the promotion requirements of its faculty members observe other Universities' practices.

The faculty affairs policy²¹ which is approved by the board regulates recruitment, contracts, loads, promotion, leaves, outside teaching, etc.

Regardless of the type of contract envisaged, each academic applicant must appear in front of a faculty panel for a presentation of 30-45 minutes.

AUST offers three types of faculty contracts:

- Full-time faculty contracts are for a period of twelve months and provide remuneration for that duration. Faculty members are entitled to promotions in line with the provisions of the faculty affairs policy, and they benefit from life insurance, which provides a specified lump

¹⁷ Raises in faculty and staff salaries usually come because of an evaluation process.

¹⁸ According to the SAR long range planning and even one year planning suffered severe blows beginning with the effects of Covid-19 and the worsening financial climate that resulted in almost total inability to plan for tomorrow. The Lebanese Pound and its effects on the salaries of faculty: A hypothetical case of a faculty member who was paid 4,500,000 LBP that equaled 3000\$ in 2017 and the resultant equivalent of \$45 in April 2023.

¹⁹ According to the SAR this was necessary given the lack of electrical power from the government at the time because of the explosion catastrophe in Beirut 2020.

²⁰ As of 2019, top PhD graduates seeking University positions rarely apply to universities in Lebanon. This is because they could not locate lucrative offers outside. With the financial collapse, recruiting qualified faculty members to accommodate growth or to fill in the positions depleted by exodus of some faculty members to greener pastures has become increasingly difficult. The profile of applicants for vacant positions has become different than the years prior to 2019. Today, universities cannot offer the same salaries and benefits as before. Applicants who previously inquired about research facilities and research support now inquire about a daily transportation allowance and attempt to justify a reduced number of days on campus (3 or maximum instead of 5). With the rapidly rising costs of fuel and the declining value of the Lebanese pound, being a professor has become a less lucrative alternative for supporting a family.

²¹ <https://api.aust.edu.lb/content/uploads/files/Faculty-Affairs.pdf> (accessed 10/06/2024)

sum payment in place of indemnity. Faculty members in this category work full time. Contracts are for a one or for a three-year duration.

- Full load contracts where faculty members have a teaching load of 12 credit hours for two semesters. Staff in this category are required to be present for their office hours and they may teach outside AUST. Faculty members in this category may teach outside AUST but will have to schedule one office hour for each course they teach. They do not have council duties. Should a full load faculty member apply for a full-time contract, the period during which he/she was in the full load category will count for promotion purposes.
- Part time hourly contracts where faculty members are contracted to teach a certain number of hours, and they are paid the agreed upon hourly rate based on their academic degrees and experience. The part timer is required to devote one hour per week as “office hour” for every 3 credit hours course taught.

According to the SAR, full time contract faculty members are entitled to medical insurance and to sabbaticals which they may apply for after 6 years of full time service. Before being hired, all applicants for faculty positions will have to give a seminar in their field of expertise to the faculty members in the same Faculty they are applying to. At the end of the presentation an evaluation report is drafted to assist the Dean.

Overview of 2022-2023 staff

2022/2023	Total	Full time academic staff	% Female	% International	% Tenured	Part time academic staff	
Total	240	49	52 %	6 %	18 %	191	
With Master degree	111	28	61 %	1 %	17 %	83	
With PhD degree	73	12	40 %	4 %	22 %	61	
By Academic Unit:							
Business and Economics	54	12	43%	4%	11%	42	

Arts and Sciences	121	25	56%	10%	15%	79	
Health Sciences	50	8	68%	2%	22%	42	
Engineering	15	4	0%	0%	55%	11	

Academic and administrative staff of AUST²²

Staff quality assurance and evaluation

Faculty members may enrol or audit any University course for free. Staff members are encouraged to enrol for higher degrees and the fees will be shouldered by the University if the higher degree is in the line with the employee's activities. Occasionally, AUST holds special development courses and workshops for its staff and workers (e.g. English language courses for drivers, parking attendants, cafeteria staff and security personnel, etc.).

Faculty and staff salaries are reviewed each year. Normally, a certain pay rise due to inflation is given to all, There are also pay rises in case of important accomplishments/excellent job performance.

According to the SAR, the involvement of faculty in the governance of the Institution is guaranteed through their participation in council meetings, departmental meetings and faculty meetings. The promotion of a faculty member is based on the evaluation of teaching effectiveness, research productivity and record of service. The University provides all requirements that a faculty member needs to be judged worthy of promotion such as access to unlimited internet, email, library facilities, seed money for research, computers, laboratory equipment, required software, travel to conferences and payment for publishing research output in refereed journals. Faculty members are consulted when a new Chair or a new Dean is appointed.

Facilities

The American University of Science & Technology operates on three campuses: the main campus is located in Beirut (land space: 10,000 square metres; building space: 12,245 square metres). Zahlé campus consists of 8,000 square metres of land space and 6,000 square metres of building space. Sidon campus consists of 7,245 square metres of land space and 3,725 square

²² The recruitment and hiring of faculty members are described in the Faculty Affairs Policy.

metres of building space. The property and buildings of the campuses are owned by AUST.

Several laboratories²³ are available for teaching, learning and research. The Faculty of Engineering maintains 12 laboratory facilities distributed over more than 1,000 square metres:

- Quantitative Medical Physiology Laboratory (QMPL)
- Biomedical Instrumentation & Controls Laboratory (BICL)
- Biomechanics/Biomaterials & Human Performance Laboratory (BBHPL)
- Communication Systems Laboratory (COMSYSLAB)
- Control and Industrial Automation Laboratory (CIAL)
- Digital and Microprocessors Laboratory (DML)
- Circuits Analysis and Electronics Laboratory (CAEL)
- LabVIEW Facility (LabVIEW)
- Senior Capstone Project Laboratory (SCPL)
- Engineering Workshop
- Computing Facilities and Computer Networks/Hardware Laboratories
- Innovation Centre

The Faculty of Health Sciences houses the following ten laboratory facilities distributed over more than 2,000 square metres:

- Applied Toxicology Laboratory (ATL)
- Biology Laboratory (BL)
- Biotechnology Research Laboratories (BRL)
- Chemistry and Pharmaceuticals Laboratory (CPL)
- Computer Laboratories (CL)
- Medical Physiology Laboratory (MPL)
- Molecular Biology Laboratory (MBL)
- Molecular Genetics Laboratory (MGL)
- Optics and Optometry Laboratory (OOL)
- Phlebotomy Laboratory (PL)

The laboratory for genetically modified organisms is recognized as the reference GMO laboratory for Lebanon and the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region.

The Department of Arts and Design runs a ceramics and printmaking studio, a drawing, painting and sculpture studio, a fashion design lab, a carpentry workshop, and a computer design lab.

The Department of Communication Arts maintains a TV studio fully equipped with professional digital video cameras as well as a state-of-art radio studio. In the editing suite, there are about 15 editing stations where students are able to digitize and edit their work.

²³ According to AUST the laboratories are GLP and ISO certified.

Additionally, an “Innovation Centre” for AUST students and alumni who want to start tech companies is available, equipped with Apple desktops, tablets, and mobile devices.

Besides, AUST’s offers modern computing and computer networks/hardware laboratories with Macintosh, Windows, Linux, Android, iOS, and Windows Mobile based equipment. Each laboratory capacity ranges from 20 to 46 workstations, and locations are distributed throughout the campus. Most of these labs are open daily, from early morning until late at night.

These lab facilities provide an extensive high-tech suite and a secure work environment for faculty, staff, and students. Instructors can request to have some software/hardware installed in the labs for course use and can reserve instructional labs for teaching. The instructional labs provide faculty with fully configured computer facilities to deliver an advanced, hands-on learning environment for students.

The whole campus is equipped with a high-speed wireless Internet connection that can be used by all University members. All classrooms are also equipped with LCD projectors along with a PC and internet connection.

The recent conclusion of an agreement with Blackboard Inc. will offer the use of the learning environment Moodle for the whole University in the very near future.

Library

AUST students and staff have access to EBSCO online which offers access to a wide range of electronic library services. Furthermore, AUST library has concluded an agreement with a library of the leading older University in Lebanon (American University of Beirut and the library of the Lebanese University)

Assessment

Altogether, the expert panel thinks that AUST provides sufficient and modern resources to sustain its operation at the desired quality level. With regard to the library's equipment (journals, books etc.), the experts suggest on the basis of the student interviews that the FAS department should be better equipped.

In the talks with AUST, the processes for personnel selection, recruiting and onboarding were also discussed. The experts recommend establishing standardized processes for the entire University, as each faculty currently has its own regulations. According to the experts, this would also improve transparency in recruitment.

In terms of academic staffing, the ratio of part-time to full-time employees was also discussed. While experts identified potential for growth in this area,

they are aware of the political and economic crisis in Lebanon. Particularly, academic staff is lacking, and recruitment is difficult due to hyperinflation.

The experts also welcome the establishment of the Quality Management Department.²⁴ In order to be able to implement all tasks, the University management should provide the department with more staff.

Financial resources

In the experts' view the financial management is professional; the process of preparing the yearly budget is clear and executed with the collaboration of the faculties. The University relies for its funding almost exclusively on its tuitions. The experts were able to see for themselves that AUST helps students to pay their tuitions. The Center for Learning and Development organizes job offers during and after their studies to provide students with financial security.

The expert group appreciates AUST's general policy to keep the tuition fees on a reasonable level and to spend a significant amount on student financial aid. The experts had the impression that by and large this system works, and students do not have to stop or interrupt their studies out of funding reasons. The experts also commend the University's efforts to collaborate with companies to ensure sustainable resource management.

Altogether, the experts consider the deployment of resources to fit in with the mission of a student-centred institution.

Staff

The experts agree that the staff of the University seems appropriate to provide high quality education to its students, even under the impression that the ratio of full-time teachers to half-time teachers is too low. Nevertheless, the experts did not get the impression of any negative effects on both the quality and the range of studies by this imbalance. Despite the staff shortages, the University has also included current topics in its teaching (e.g. AI, Robotics). The experts were impressed by the dynamic and motivated staff members, both academic (full time and part time) and administrative, which are a big asset of AUST.

However, in the experts' view AUST lacks a structured approach to hiring, recruiting and onboarding processes. Furthermore, it would be prudent to enhance the capabilities of QM in order to reinforce the quality management segment.

²⁴ Further details on the equipment of the QM department can be found in chapter 3 "Quality Assurance."

The reported search and tenure procedures of the University seem to fulfil by and large academic standards and ensure the selection of academics based on an academic decision.

International mobility exists on certain individual levels, mostly for short periods, e.g. participation of conferences, workshops etc. The experts estimate the existing contacts and partnerships with universities abroad as a good starting point.

Facilities

By and large, the facilities of the University are appropriate for sustaining the teaching and research activities of the University.

AUST has several modern laboratories on Beirut campus. The experts were able to view the modern equipment via the video provided by AUST. The technical equipment should allow a high quality of teaching and seems also appropriate to carry out applied research projects, even on a very high standard.

Due to the effects of Covid, the University has set up a new infrastructure for hybrid teaching, which is expressly welcomed by the experts.

Outside class hours, students are allowed to use any lecture room, even computer rooms available.

The existing library is very small and provides only a limited range of scientific literature especially in the field of Art and Health science. The experts welcome that AUST has come to an extensive agreement with ESCBO which should guarantee online access to scientific sources both to students and staff at least in an adequate amount – as long as AUST provides practical support through qualified personnel how to work with digital libraries, e.g. how to find relevant sources and how to deal with them (proof of validity, references, quotation rules, plagiarism, etc.).

The IT infrastructure of the University is up to date and equipped with modern and functional software. Different stakeholders confirmed this observation during the online visit. The experts appreciate that through the recent agreement with Blackboard Inc. a virtual learning environment can be provided University wide.

Areas of improvement

To enhance organizational efficiency and ensure fairness, it is essential to formalize the hiring processes at a University-wide-level. Additionally, achieving a more balanced ratio of part-time to full-time staff would be beneficial. The experts strongly recommend increasing the number of staff in the QM department to optimize the governance structures. These steps will significantly contribute to the sustainable development of the University.

Recommendations

R5: To enhance organizational efficiency and ensure fairness, it is essential to formalize the hiring processes on a general University level.

R6: It would be beneficial to achieve a more balanced ratio of part-time to full-time staff.

R7: The number of staff in the QM department should be increased to optimize the governance structures.

4. Teaching and Learning

Criterion

Teaching and learning are one of the main missions of higher education institutions. In the accreditation procedure the experts check whether the study programmes comply with the institutional strategy and national regulations. They also review the academic standards of the study programmes and how research and teaching are linked. The experts review whether there are student centred teaching and learning processes and whether the diversity of students and their needs are taken into account. Moreover, they assess how the assessment of intended learning outcomes is organised and how the student life cycle is organised.

Current Situation

Academic standards of the study programmes

The learning teaching process at AUST is guided by a concept conceived and implemented by faculty members and referred to as the 4Cs (Communication, Computer, Content, Critical Thinking).

Students admitted to AUST must have passed successfully the General Secondary Education Examinations (Baccalaureate II). This is a requirement originating from Lebanese law: higher education institutions can only admit candidates on the basis of official exams (or equivalent). The Lebanese law requires that universities operating on the American-styled system award BA/BS degrees after the completion of a minimum of 120 credit hours. AUST has opted to award its Bachelor degrees after the completion of 135 credit hours or 105 credit hours starting the sophomore class. The extra 15 credit hours are used to provide students with additional material that could not be adequately fitted in the 120 credit hours.

All new students must pass the International Computer Driving License Test (ICDL).

Faculty members in academic departments have the responsibility to constantly update and improve their curricula. The process of improvement considers inputs from various stakeholders. To align the academic pro-grams

with the latest advances and changes, faculty members may resort to curricular changes. Such changes must come as results of deliberations within the academic department and must receive the approval of the Dean of the faculty and the Provost. These changes should take into consideration the input of stakeholders especially the advisory board, where it exists, and the alumni input.

The academic year consists of a fall semester and a spring semester, each of 15 weeks. A full time student's normal load is five courses per semester (15 credit hours). Some students may petition to enrol in six or seven courses (maximum 21 credit hours per semester) if they are graduating in that particular semester or if they have a Grade Point Average (GPA) superior to 3.00/4.00.

At the undergraduate level, students need to get C grades (2.00/4.00) in all courses in the major field of specialization and to attain a minimum cumulative Grade Point Average of 2.00/4.00 in order to graduate.

In 2015, AUST implemented a new schedule for all class sessions with a duration of 75 minutes twice a week instead of 50 minutes sessions three times a week. Since then, Fridays are reserved for administrative meetings, faculty meetings, departmental meetings, and extra teaching hours for students who need assistance. Furthermore, students can use design studios, computer centers, engineering workshops, DNA and toxicology laboratories for research purposes. The University is convinced that the adjustments have generated positive effects, e.g. on the research culture and the support of working students.

There are new requirements for higher education institutions (285/2014) in Lebanon. Universities have to seek accreditation from recognized and respected international bodies as to the quality of management system and the quality of their study programmes which are not offered in Lebanon. Therefore, the University has recently asked international agencies to carry out a program assessment for the following study programmes:

- Computer & Communications Engineering programme from the Accreditation Board of Engineering & Technology (ABET)
- Business programmes from the International Accreditation Council for Business Education (IACBE)
- The Computer Science programme is also accredited by ABET

In addition to programme accreditation AUST has ISO 17025 accreditation as well as the European GLP (Good Laboratory Practice) certification for its Toxicology Laboratory.

Student centred study

All study programmes should meet the general demand of student-centred teaching and learning by interactive class sessions as far as possible. The emphasis is on learning and teaching. According to the SER it is inappropriate for faculty members to assume a preaching role in which students are expected to listen and believe. They are to be leaders of discussions and, hence, engage the students in a process of deductive learning whenever possible. Faculty members are encouraged to engage students in case studies, and this is to be reflected in their exams.

The number of students in a class varies from 16 to 45 depending on the nature of the course being taught. The final evaluation of students is a total of grades received in quizzes, exams, papers, projects, attendance, participation and the final exam. The latter accounts for a maximum of 40% of the final grade.

AUST has recently begun to add online-teaching elements to conventional on-campus teaching, thus, to address the increasing demands by working students for blended learning offers. In 2021-22 and 2022-23 there was a rush of Iraqi graduate students to AUST. Close to 600 students registered in the MBA program and in the MS program in Engineering and Health Sciences.

Assessments of intended learning outcomes

The syllabus of each course offered specifies what is required from the student in the course and how the student will be evaluated. In most courses, there is the requirement for at least three exams and a final work/test (aside from papers, projects and short quizzes). The final grade attributed to a student in a course is the total of her/his performance in exams or homework and her/his performance during class sessions.

The University has a focus on applied sciences. Therefore, each study programme requires an internship so that the students get in touch with real work conditions.

In accordance with the SER, comments are also requested from the Boards of Advisors in the disciplines of Computer Science and Engineering. The input of the Board of Advisors typically relates to the implementation of academic changes designed to ensure that graduates are up to date with the requirements of the job market. The Board of Advisors convenes at least once per year to provide guidance designed to enhance the program and ensure its alignment with current industry standards. Additionally, the University solicits advice from alumni.

Furthermore, the focus on applied sciences is visible because the University requires capstone projects. The senior project course is designed to assess the student's ability to synthesize knowledge obtained from various courses. The student is required to publicly explain and defend the project.

For some faculties, AUST requires Exit exams. They are supposed to measure the learning outcomes of every student. Graduating students from the Faculty of Business and Economics, the Faculty of Engineering and the Computer Science major have to pass these exit exams. Further-more, in order to assess the employer's satisfaction with the graduates of AUST, the Human Resource Department reaches out to institutions that employ AUST graduates and asks them to fill questionnaires that reflect their opinions about the quality of graduates' work.

Practice oriented study

Disciplines such as engineering, computer science and business have Boards of Advisors, made up of leaders in the field who are at the same time potential employers of the graduates. These advisors may influence the academic faculty on the latest needs of the market and on curriculum changes needed to meet these needs. The Board meets at least one time a year and its membership usually include a graduate of AUST.

Each year the Human Resource Directors in institutions that employ AUST graduates are asked to fill in questionnaires designed to reflect the employer's satisfaction with the graduates of AUST. These comments are taken seriously and implemented wherever possible.

Diversity

According to the University's mission, students, faculty and staff come from all religions and from all socio-economic strata. Special attention is paid to the individual needs of all students, especially those who prove to be academically in need of help. Weak students may benefit from extra sessions for free (especially problem-solving sessions). Students in a difficult financial situation are given work contracts in units of the University. Payment for these hours is taken into account when billing their fees.

For students who are slow learners, AUST has established the Learning Enhancement and Assistance Program (LEAP) which is unique of its kind in Lebanon. LEAP enrolls 20 to 30 students per year.

Student Life Cycle

The life cycle of the student at AUST begins with the application form - applications for admission are accepted by mail, online, and in person. Applicants for undergraduate admission are required to take placement tests in English and mathematics. The Admissions Committee reviews applications and makes decisions based on the student's performance in the last two years of high school and the passing of the National General Secondary Exams. The Admissions Council decides on the admission of all new students.

Once admitted, the student is required to attend an orientation session to familiarize him/her with the academic rules and procedures and University life. The student is then assigned an academic advisor and receives a Student Program Contract sheet, which outlines the required courses for the relevant study programme. According to AUST, it is ordinarily possible for the contract sheet of every student in each major to leave some room for individual choices. These are labelled as "Technical Electives" and "Free Electives". All new students are required to attend sessions on the use of Blackboard before attending classes and to complete the New Student Satisfaction Form. The results of which are used to improve performance in the following semester. The first two days of class are usually devoted to an introduction to the course and for socializing.

The Dean of Students and Admissions who is a member of the University Council deals with students' direct concerns, worries and views of students. The Dean's office assists students who have absence issues, academic issues, adjustment issues with the move from high school to University, and behavioural issues. The office drafts a profile sheet for every student that summarizes the student's academic and her/his conduct (behaviour). There are follow-up sessions offered to students with a weak academic performance. Furthermore, the University offers its students access to medical services including a clinical psychologist. All students are obliged to enrol in a medical insurance during the registration week for a nominal group fee.

The Center for Learning and Development collects data on available jobs for students outside the University and refers students who are seeking jobs to these companies (students with financial assistance from AUST work on Campus). The centre also offers instruction sessions on how to prepare for a job interview and on writing CVs and letters to employers. A majority of students enrolled at AUST are – in general – financially needy and they cannot depend on their parents to pay or help in the tuition costs.

Each year, a job fair is organized for companies to introduce themselves especially to graduating students who are seeking jobs. A considerable amount of recruitment takes place during the job fair day. There is a recent decision that in the future, the job fair will be split into different days according to job types.

The Sports and Activities Office is responsible for coordinating the non-academic life of students on campus with several clubs and sports offers. The Sports and Activities Office also oversees the involvement of students in volunteer work and in work that forges the identity of students with social, cultural and national issues such as activities for the elderly and for orphans, marathons, greening of Lebanon, etc.

Students have an academic advisor who accompanies them throughout their student life. These faculty advisors also act as guides and mentors. There are regular meetings between the student and her/his advisor to talk about the

student's workload and the choices regarding courses. Graduates can join the Alumni Association.

AUST has also signed cooperation and exchange agreements with over 60 international universities. These agreements provide students with opportunities to study for a semester or a year in a different atmosphere and in a different culture. Lately, AUST signed agreements with 9 universities in Iraq.

Assessment

Teaching and learning with a view to the University strategy

AUST was established to make high education accessible to individuals with limited financial means. Teaching and learning are considered the central activity of the University. AUST strives to adjust its study programmes to the needs of the Lebanese labour market, thus competing with other private universities.

The expert team views positively a consistent implementation of the University strategy in the field of teaching and learning. They appreciate how AUST has established contact to key stakeholders on the labour market to monitor developments and needs that could lead to new study programmes.

In the view of the experts, the study portfolio of AUST is innovative with unique offers in the region. The expert group supports the general education concept of the University with the obligatory broad liberal arts curriculum that includes languages, social sciences, humanities and math/natural sciences requirements from all students regardless of academic major.

Furthermore, the experts appreciate the University's flexible approach to the needs of the students. For example, many classes are offered twice a day since most of the students are working.

In the view of the experts the University allocates appropriate resources to teaching and learning. The staff met during the site visit was dynamic and motivated and expressed a high commitment to AUST. In general, the experts deem the student-staff ratio to be appropriate.

Student centred study system

In the view of the experts AUST shows a high interest in the students' success. The students' learning process is continuously observed, and problems and difficulties are dealt with in close consultation between students, student services and academics. Experts appreciate that the University makes special efforts to have a diverse student body and supports students in a difficult financial or social situation. The experts see these services and the concern for the student body as a great asset of AUST.

Asked for a short characterization in one word for AUST during the interview sessions, “supportive” and “understanding” were the most frequently mentioned adjectives. The students explicitly appreciate the services offered by the University and report a well organised study process.

Academic standards and curriculum development

The expert group assesses the academic standards of the study programmes as being met. In the eyes of the experts the strict obligatory attendance policy has a positive impact on the study success. Nevertheless, in cases of hardship the University tries to comply with students’ double burden of study and work, and a great deal of flexibility is shown.

The University has appropriate procedures for the development of study programmes. Academics are responsible for the programme content; compliance with University and national regulations and an appropriate study organisation are ensured. The experts have noticed that AUST is keen to involve enterprises into the development of their study programmes. For the experts, this is an excellent way to ensure the best preparation for the professional market without questioning the academic basis of the programmes.

AUST also seems to assure an appropriate workload of its study programmes. Research methodology, internships or capstone projects are obligatory, and the experts appreciate how the University acts to support students in finding places for internship, partner enterprises for the projects, and later on jobs. Given the present economic crisis in Lebanon in particular, the experts would like to mention graduates’ excellent starting conditions.

Overall assessment

The online visit confirmed that teaching and learning of high quality is well practiced at AUST. The University devotes energy and resources to providing innovative study programmes at high academic quality. Robust links between the study programmes and the labour market exist. Teaching is carried out by dynamic, motivated and supportive lecturers. The University offers professional student support services and takes special account on working students. Financial and social support for students in need is obviously a high priority of AUST.

Areas of improvement

Research could be broader implemented in teaching. This happens already in the Faculty of engineering via student projects (e.g. robotics) but it could be extended to all fields of study such as Arts and Health Sciences. Staff’s opportunities to perform own research could also be strengthened, for

example by visiting international conferences. In addition, it would be desirable for the University to develop a general strategy for working students in order to provide them with even more targeted support. Furthermore, the experts welcome the expansion of program accreditation to all degree programmes, as this will enable the establishment of the same quality standards.

Recommendations

R8: Accreditations should be extended to all departments and programmes – especially in the fields of art and health.

R9: Formalized criteria for monitoring and updating the programmes should be established.

R10: Due to the special situation of working students, a general strategy should be developed to fulfil the student-centred approach for these needs as well.

R11: Formalized criteria for monitoring and updating the programmes should be established.

5. Research

Criterion

The criterion focuses on the research profile and academic goals of the HEI and whether the profile fits the institutional strategy. Moreover, the experts check whether the academic standards are fulfilled, how the research process is organised and supported by the institution and how research is evaluated within the institution. They also check how the training of young researchers is organised, how the institution assures the academic standards of the training of young researchers and their rights.

Current Situation

Research and institutional strategies

In the self-evaluation report, AUST describes itself as a comprehensive institution that combines teaching and research while the preponderant factor is teaching. Research takes a distant second position to teaching but is seen as an important factor at least for the identity of the University. AUST's website has a special section entitled "Research and Publications" that reflects the work of AUST's faculty members and their research interests.

The University has a policy of not using tuition fees for research projects. According to the SAR, AUST currently graduate students in the health sciences conducting "wet" research are allocated \$10,000 each. Faculty members receive seed money through the Research Council and the Executive Council. Additionally, trips that include presenting papers at conferences and

publishing results in specialized journals are funded by the general research budget. According to the directives of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), this budget must be at least 5% of the total University budget.

Since 2003, AUST has a Vice-President for Academic Affairs who started office with the aim of integrating more research activities into each Faculty. From the very beginning, research is seen as the strict domain of faculty members. The topic and methodology are decided upon and executed by the individual faculty member(s) concerned.

The University provides seed money for research and the allocation of seed money is deliberated upon by the Research Council composed of faculty members. In addition, AUST has an Institutional Review Board made up of faculty members and administrators whose task is to review research projects with an ethical angle especially when humans and/or animals are subjects in the experiments.

AUST especially encourages applied research that should be of use to the country whereas theoretical research is given less support. For example, the University encouraged research on the issue of young Lebanese entrepreneurs coping with a changed economic situation due to the war in Lebanon in 2006. The SER also mentions research that was conducted in economics about successful franchising ventures by young Lebanese entrepreneurs or in health sciences about the effects of consanguinity on the physical health of children.²⁵

Faculty members are encouraged to work in research groups together so that people with a lower research profile will profit from colleagues with stronger research backgrounds. AUST is paying the publication fees that some journals impose. In case of research projects with a particular long duration, the Research Council may grant the faculty member a decrease of one course per semester to accomplish the research task.

Research and promotions

Prior to 2003, all full time PhD holders were assigned to the rank of assistant professors. Now, the Faculty Affairs Policy regulates the procedure of duly promotions to the rank of associate professor after evaluation by a Peer Group Promotion Committee based on three criteria: teaching effectiveness²⁶, research output (speaking at international conferences and publications), and services (community and profession). The Faculty Affairs Policy also specifies the publication and conference requirements needed for pro-

²⁵ The university has provided the experts with a list of publications.

²⁶ The impact of student evaluation is considered.

motion in rank. Faculty members promoted to the rank of Associate Professors become on Limited Tenure and they are offered 3-year contracts renewable every year.

According to the policy, the University supports researchers with the necessary tools: Internet, library facilities/ connectivity, seed money for research, payment for publishing, payment for travel to conferences and released time for research. According to AUST, the funding comes from collected money from application fees, entrance exams and cafeteria income.

More substantial expenditures for research may be received from the National Council for Scientific Research (CNRS) which has recently started assisting research in social sciences, business, and human sciences. CNRS has recently widened its funding to include research in Social Sciences, Business and Human Sciences.

The allocation of University funds for research is overseen by the University Research Council, comprised entirely of faculty members and the Executive Council. This structure ensures that faculty colleagues play a significant role in deciding how research funds are distributed. Faculty members are granted complete autonomy in selecting the focus and methodology of their research projects. While the University encourages research with practical applications that benefit the community, it does not impose any form of coercion. The research projects involving senior students focus on applied research.

Agreements with international universities, with which AUST has signed MoUs include a provision for research collaboration. Collaborative research has been conducted between AUST faculty and faculty from the University of Compostela in Spain, the University of California at Berkeley and San Francisco, the Université de Lille, the Lebanese University, and others. AUST also encourages its faculty to lecture with cooperating universities. For this purpose, several of AUST faculty members took advantage of the Erasmus+ offers to lecture in European universities. Furthermore, between 2021 and 2023, AUST hosted a special program involving Iraqi universities, which saw the visit of four University presidents and approximately 500 graduate students in Business, Engineering, and Health Sciences.

AUST assists faculty members who do not have PhDs in securing PhD acceptance and provides modest support in helping the faculty member complete the desired doctorate degree. This support may be in considering travel days for research consultations with advisors as “non-absent” days and even assigning substitute faculty members to cover up these absences.

Training of young researchers

There are no PhD programmes at AUST. According to AUST, while teaching takes precedence over research at the undergraduate level, research becomes increasingly significant and prominent at the graduate level. Typically,

students across various fields are introduced to research as part of their coursework, involving literature searches for term papers and familiarization with the scientific method for projects. Advanced study courses require the development of fresh ideas and the integration of diverse fields into cohesive research projects. By the time of graduation, graduate students receive sufficient training to conduct research independently. Students pursuing MA/MS/MBA degrees at AUST enjoy privileges similar to faculty researchers, including access to resources and financial support for research expenses.

Conversely, graduate students²⁷ are expected to push the boundaries of knowledge in their fields through research. A list of AUST alumni who pursued Ph.D. degrees after completing their BS and/or MS at AUST is provided, showcasing their diverse research interests and affiliations with renowned universities.

According to the SER, in the summers of 2022 and 2023 AUST ran summer camps on Robotics, Arduino, coding and gaming for high school students designed to introduce them to scientific research. More than 200 students registered in each summer camp.

Thesis, research results and final projects (in short, all items that have some research factor) need to be defended in open sessions. At least one member of the examining committee must be from outside AUST.²⁸ An exemplary event demonstrating this commitment is the Annual Engineering and Computer Science Expo, where senior students present and defend their research projects to a jury predominantly composed of external members.

This is the case for students from Engineering and Computer Science. They present their research results and products during the Annual Engineering and Computer Science Expo (once a year). All the University community in Lebanon and industry stakeholders are invited to the Expo. The Jury members who judge the products for quality, originality and standards are in their overwhelming majority from outside AUST – faculty members from other universities, leaders in the industries, potential buyers of good ideas.

Assessment

The experts identified a need for monitoring research and research output at the University by implementing KPIs. This is likely aligned with the mission of a teaching University. It also reflects the Lebanese tradition, which may value education more than research. The experts welcome the increase of budget allocation from 2% to 5% since the last accreditation.

²⁷ AUST assists faculty and students in the travel costs incurred when they are presenting their findings (delivering papers) at conferences inside and outside Lebanon.

²⁸ In its SER, AUST points out that external examiners are used for the open defenses to ensure compliance with the criteria for fairness and objectivity.

Research is primarily applied research, addressing the needs of Lebanese society, particularly in the context of the current crisis in Lebanon. According to experts, the results are commendable. However, there is a need for greater coordination of research activities and more effective communication of institutional research priorities. The experts acknowledge the engagement of the staff in applied research activities and its integration in the curricula through projects and during internships. Nevertheless, the experts still see considerable potential for improvement regarding systematic (interdisciplinary and internationally) networking of researchers, formalized policy for research and the implementation of KPIs for research output.

In the eyes of the experts, there is positive development since the last Accreditation because AUST is more involved in research projects in cooperation with companies, institutions and administrations in all faculties.

The experts noted that research activities of academic staff are encouraged, but only to a limited extent. They appreciate that AUST has started to think about incentives for researchers, but a comprehensive and central research strategy seems to be missing. In the eyes of the experts, the monitoring of research activities and publications by the departments is a good step in this direction.

According to the expert group, research at AUST meets international academic standards. The University gives its researchers the freedom to pursue their projects, supports them within the budget to carry out individual applied research, and encourages its students to participate in research projects.

As the experts learned from interviews with Department Heads and staff, the importance of the research profile of applicants in hiring is growing.

Areas for improvement

Overall, the experts see the University's orientation as a teaching University and understand the reason for this. Nevertheless, the experts believe it would be useful to support the research activities of the teaching staff even more strongly through formalized processes (e.g. national/international teaching staff exchange). Teaching and students could also benefit from this.

Recommendations

R12: If AUST wishes to strengthen its applied research activities, it should establish a formalized framework.

R13: Systematic networking of researchers (also international networking) should be established. The university should consider expanding strategic partnerships/contracts with foreign universities to offer more postgraduate/doctoral positions for young scientists.

R14: At the department level, systematic measures should be taken to identify specific areas for research activities. The implementation of KPIs for research output should be considered.

6. Institution and Society

Criterion

The experts check whether the strategy of the institution takes the needs of the society into account. They also examine how the HEI interacts and connects with society via different forms of cooperation, internationalisation, entrepreneurship, diversity. In addition, the experts review whether the activities fit the strategy.

Current Situation

The mission statement of AUST reflects its objective of the development of society and in particular the development of the student seen as a central figure in society. In its self-perception as a centre of learning, research and activities with physical facilities, sophisticated equipment, and highly educated, well trained and smart individuals, the University claims a potential to raise the various standards associated with education of the youth of the community and to provide training programmes in the continuing education department for society at large.

The University executives see their institution in a dynamic and organic relationship with society and state whilst keeping the independence of the University. AUST's activities for groups other than registered students may be classified as activities that extend a hand to government agencies, schools, armed and security services, and society at large.

The SER provides the following examples of external activities:

1. Government agencies:

- Helping policy makers in the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Economy and Trade, Ministry of Justice develop proper regulations regarding GMOs and pesticides.
- Training staff at the Ministry of Labor on IT issues with Huawei
- Assisting the Ministry of Defense in preparing advertising posters
- Specialty Diploma Program for judges in the Ministry of Justice in strategic management

2. Schools

- Donating and equipping computer centers for 3 schools each with twenty-five computers and offering free training for a month in each of the 3 centers
- Free training sessions in Arduino to several schools

- Free Robotics, Arduino, Coding and Python summer camps for 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th grade schoolers
- Free summer sessions in Math, Computer Science and English for college bound high school graduates (even if the student does not intend to join AUST)
- On a monthly basis, visits of the optometry mobile clinic to schools for free vision screening for students over 11 years old
- Health awareness sessions to several schools
- Free training sessions on Microscopy and DNA extraction to 3 schools
- Organizing the annual Science and Math Olympiad for highschoolers
- Training sessions on entrepreneurship for highschoolers
- Special facilities (very reduced costs- almost free) for high school teachers to study and receive teaching diploma

3. Armed and Security Forces

- Free courses in analysis of gun residue, toxicology and DNA testing to members of the Lebanese Armed Forces, the Internal Security Forces and the General Security Officers.
- Free one year program in Strategic and Security Analysis for officers of the Lebanese Army
- Free advice and collaboration with the Army's Directorate of Engineering

4. The general Public

- An open admission conference on "The impact of Digital Transformation" on Business Schools in Lebanon
- An open admission conference on "Unlocking the Power of AI in Education"
- Training programmes and workshops for schoolteachers, coordinators, department heads and school directors on a variety of topics: counseling, brain based learning, leadership skills, activity theory, time management and enhancing problem solving skills
- Monthly lecture series on topics of general concern: earthquakes, climate changes, Lebanese literary giants

In conclusion, AUST is committed to maintaining close ties with its local community and broader society. It fulfils its mission to be a positive educational influence in its environment. AUST is committed to assisting groups in need without regard to their religious, gender, or social status.

Assessment

The experts highly appreciate the strong and active affection of AUST to the local neighbourhood as well as to Lebanese society needs. The University's Third Mission confirms both commitment and responsibility for the society.

In the view of the experts, it can be seen as an asset of AUST to offer higher education even for societal groups that otherwise could not afford a study.

The self-evaluation report and the interviews during the online visit gave proof that University executives, staff and students give high attention to the needs of society.

Without any doubt, academic training is closely connected to the job market. Several research activities with local industries bring scientific results into the heart of society and open new cooperation and partnerships with enterprises or may lead to joint projects with industries.

The experts appreciate that AUST is also institutionally connected to the economy and community through the various departments (CDL) and the Advisory Board. This network creates partnerships, and the needs of society can be directly integrated into the study programmes.

Areas for improvement

The experts see potential in further internationalization efforts and recommend intensifying these initiatives. This includes strategic partnerships with foreign universities for student and faculty exchanges, study abroad programmes with targeted scholarships, integrating global perspectives into the curriculum, and promoting international research collaborations.

Recommendation

R15: Internationalization efforts should be intensified, for example: Strategic partnerships with universities abroad for student and faculty exchanges; study abroad programmes with targeted scholarships; integrating global perspectives into the curriculum and promoting international research collaborations.

7. Quality Assurance

Criterion

The criterion focuses on the internal and external mechanisms used by the institution to monitor and improve its quality. The experts check the existing quality assurance concept of the institution, which indicators are used for monitoring the achievement of objectives and how the institution and the people responsible for the programme systematically collect, analyse and use relevant information about their activities. Moreover, the experts exam-

ine whether quality assurance is used regularly, systematically and effectively for quality enhancement, if quality feedback loops are closed and how the institution fosters the development of a quality culture in general.

Current Situation

The quality assurance concept

According to the self-evaluation report, AUST fosters the quality culture through the participative system that is adopted by the AUST management as a whole. All chairpersons, Deans, and heads of administrative departments are involved in updating the process and procedures manual on a yearly basis. This shall enable everyone in the institution to recognize the relevance of the quality processes and actively participate in its development and enhancement.

AUST adopts a quality management system that mainly focuses on the effectiveness of teaching and student learning. The evaluation of the validity of the programme is each faculty's responsibility. The academic Departments regularly evaluate the programmes and report their outcomes to the Executive Council through the faculty Dean. This is done through evaluating student learning outcomes from each course and from the whole programme through a variety of instruments such as course projects, senior projects, capstone projects, exit exams, students' performance in exchange programmes and graduate studies

Similarly, the Research Council evaluates the research programmes and reports it to the Executive Council, too.

An internal quality assurance system of AUST developed quality assurance processes. Furthermore, it improves the communication between all participants within the University. For this purpose, the Quality Assurance Department documents processes and procedures with the concerned departments. It monitors the adherence to quality standards (for example: need of students, course materials, process of hiring new faculty members, evaluation of programmes, learning outcomes, research outcomes, International student and faculty exchanges), and proper implementation of processes at all levels of the University as set by the concerned departments and approved by the Executive Council. It receives feedback on the quality of education from various stakeholders. It reports any quality non-compliances to the Executive Council for review and corrective action.²⁹

The scope of work of the Quality Assurance Department covers the following functional areas:

- Monitoring the execution of academic processes pertaining to the academic rules, regulations, and procedures, such as: presenting the

²⁹ The university notes that a programme may be closed if there is a low enrollment over an extended period.

course offering on set deadline, courses offered match the needs of students, courses' capacities are met, books are available for students on the set deadline, process of approving courses syllabi, course materials and syllabi are posted on line on the set deadline, process of hiring new faculty members, process of evaluating faculty members, process of submitting final examinations, proctoring of exams, process of posting of final grades, process of changing a grade, change major process, advising of students during advising periods, process of evaluating senior projects, process of execution of events, clearances for graduation process, process of make-up exams, branch visitations.

- Monitoring the execution of administrative activities pertaining to administrative rules, regulations, and procedures, such as: students' admission process, hiring of staff process, staff evaluation process, staff development process, students' registration process, students' financial aid process, collection of tuition fees process, schools orientations process, students' requests (absence, withdrawal, certificates, transcripts, counselling, make-up exams) processes, graduation process, purchasing process, buildings and grounds maintenance.
- Monitoring the execution of services by staff and workers not directly concerned with the academic process (directly or indirectly) such as the functions of food services, parking, on campus security and safety.

Indicators and collection of information

The Quality Assurance Department monitors a list of "Planned Semester Activities" pertaining to the processes and procedures that need to be conducted by each academic and administrative department. The activities are distributed among the semester to include the registration week(s) prior to the start of the semester, the 15 weeks of instruction, the final examination period, and the posting of grades period. A process manual was developed with concerned departments as well in order to map the proper implementation of these activities.

The Departments' chairpersons/Directors report the execution of these processes on a weekly basis (on Friday afternoon of each week) and submit the report to the Quality Assurance Department. The QAD checks if the tasks listed for the specific week were performed and whether the performed tasks meet the standard according to the indicators.³⁰ The indicators could be

³⁰ AUST has created a task list for the Departmental Assistant, Chairperson, and Dean that defines the tasks to be performed at the beginning of the semester (e.g., ordering supplies) to ensure that academic activities run efficiently.

quantitative or qualitative. Examples of quantitative indicators pertaining to academic activities are:

- the percentage of instructors who attended the faculty meetings;
- the percentage of new students who attended the department's general orientation;
- the percentage of senior students who received advising in order to graduate on time;
- the number of contacts with the industry to ensure training and job placement to students and graduates.³¹

Examples of qualitative indicators are:

- the preparation of the preliminary course offering for the next semester;
- the revision of syllabi.
- engagement for AUST (Reviewing books and ordering new ones, Assisting in student recruitment efforts by involvement in orientation sessions, visiting schools, review of laboratory equipment etc.)

Administrative departments as well report quantitative indicators such as the percentage of target schools visited by the admission's office for orientation, number of students issued acceptance letter by the Registrar, percentage of due tuition fees collected by the Bursar's office, and qualitative information such as whether the Registrar's office sent the course offering on-time to the IT department to be posted online or whether the Bursar's office reminded concerned students of their tuition fees instalment due dates.

Some tasks and processes that are listed in the "Planned Semester Activities" are interlinked between academic and administrative Departments. For example, the Registrar's office sends the list of senior/graduating students to the academic departments in order for the latter to provide students with proper advising and graduation clearances, the IT department issues username and password for each instructor and the academic Department ensures that the instructors post the course material and syllabi online.

Quality complaints from any of the University's stakeholders pertaining to non-adherence to set processes and procedures are reported to the Quality Assurance Department for corrective action with the concerned department. The Executive Council approves the corrective action. Furthermore, the Quality Assurance Department collects feedback from other stakeholders:

³¹ According to AUST, 877 companies post their vacancies, and recruitment needs on the Simplicity software, while AUST simultaneously posts the CVs of its students seeking positions. Of these 877 companies, 178 had vacancies available for AUST students to apply for.

- The students who evaluate each course. Students' evaluation³² of their courses are conducted through a questionnaire that is posted to them on their online system.
- The graduates who provide information on their employment status and success in the job market. The information is collected through an online questionnaire that is sent to the graduates via their personal emails. The results of the questionnaire are reported to the academic Departments to monitor the employment status of the graduates as an indicator for the validity of their programmes.
- The job market who provides information on the performance of students and graduates whom they hired: Companies that operate in Lebanon may approach the Job Placement Office at AUST to hire students and/or graduates for available job vacancies. The Job Placement Office works on filling these vacancies through matching the job description and required qualifications and skills with AUST students and graduates, and regularly follows up with the companies to get feedback on whether the students were employed. Any quality related issues are reported to the Quality Assurance Department.

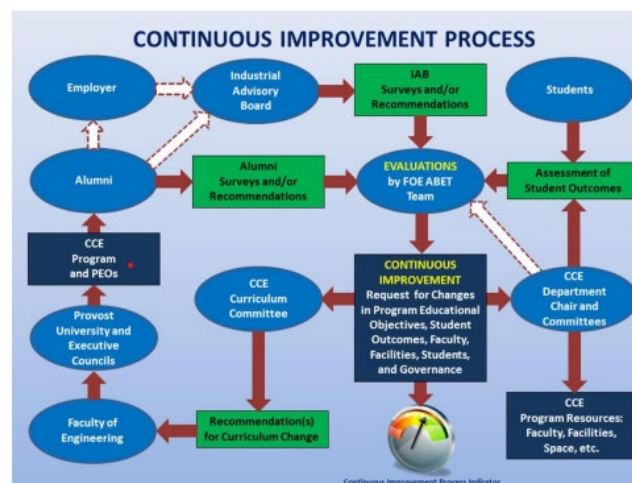
Using information for the governance of the institution

The various quality assurance instruments that are detailed above are regularly and systematically used for quality assurance purposes. These instruments are used on a weekly, monthly, semester, and/or yearly basis depending on the instrument. The "Planned Semester Activities" are used on a weekly basis, students' evaluation is conducted at the end of each semester, data on graduates employment status is updated yearly, and feedback on students and graduates performance in the workplace is received regularly by the Job Placement Office as part of its daily task. The Quality Assurance Department reports the outcome of the various instruments to the concerned academic and administrative department and the Executive Council to close the feedback loop.

According to the SER, Students' feedback is incorporated as well in the decision-making process. Students' evaluation of courses is considered to be an essential criterion in the evaluation of faculty members' teaching effectiveness. The Chairperson of each academic department conducts an evaluation of the faculty members in the department on a yearly basis. The evaluation is based on several criteria that include the faculty members' performance in academic and administrative duties. The students' evaluation holds 52% weight of the total score of the faculty member evaluation. A faculty member who receives a weighted score less than 3.0/4.0 will have to discuss the rea-

³² The University has submitted aggregated results of the student survey and a questionnaire for the student evaluation (Appendix 32). These are available to the evaluators.

sons behind this “low score” with the Chair and the Dean and a plan for improvement will be drafted and monitored by the chair. If the score of less than 3.0/4.0 persists in a subsequent semester the contract of the faculty member is not renewed. AUST has started to incorporate students’ feedback in the evaluation of its Programmes’ Educational Objectives (PEOs)³³. In both the Faculty of Engineering and the Department of Computer Science, MS/Alumni representatives attend the yearly meeting along with the Industry Advisory Board members for evaluating the PEOs. The student representatives participate in the evaluation and approve the meeting minutes and the desired changes. AUST will start gradually adopting students’ feedback in the evaluation of its programmes’ objectives in the rest of the academic Departments. Students who petition the Dean of Students and Admissions or the concerned Chairperson/Dean on any issue pertaining to academic or administrative matters receive a copy of their petition indicating the decision regarding the petition and the actions to be taken if applicable. The following overview shows the continuous improvement process:



³³ According to AUST the mission statements of the four faculties and their respective departments (available on the AUST website) define the educational objectives, which are student-centered (focusing on future learners). Additionally, the curricula of the individual courses include learning objectives and outcomes. The main PEOs are: 1. Career success: positions, roles, contributions of AUST graduates in their respective jobs; 2. Professional and ethical responsibility; 3. Research collaboration and research output; 4. Continuous improvement of academic programmes.

Assessment

The experts observe a well-developed quality assurance system based on formal processes. The main focus is on the effectiveness of teaching and student learning, and the validity of the offered programmes.

AUST was one of the first universities in Lebanon to implement a quality management (QM) system. The experts appreciate the instalment of the Quality Assurance Department to monitor and assess the adherence to quality standards and for documentation and report of processes and procedures. At the ministerial level, standards were adopted from international agencies, as there are no QA agencies in Lebanon. The experts commend AUST for its progress in automating processes, such as student registration, which is now online. There is also a high level of acceptance and awareness of the topic of QM thanks to the program accreditations. The experts were convinced that continuous improvements in the University's structures are an important goal. Furthermore, they were impressed by the commitment of the staff.

In the experts' view, responsibilities of teachers, Department, Faculty and above are clear, and the quality assurance instruments, which are currently in place, seem to be broadly accepted and implemented.

Assessment criteria and indicators are defined, published and – according to the interviews during the online visit – University wide accepted. In the eyes of the experts, data are collected and analysed systematically. Against this background, the experts expect the QM handbook to be extended to all processes at the University. These include governance, teaching and learning and research. This will enable standardized processes that are transparent for all members of the University. According to AUST, the relevant documents are currently being processed. The experts explicitly welcome the revision of the process manual and the creation of a QM manual, and they encourage the university to continue this process of organizational development.

By and large, this system appears to be adequate and functioning well since both students and staff the experts talked with during the online visit confirmed their satisfaction with all processes they deal with.

The experts appreciate that the University tries to close the feedback loops and students in most cases students receive feedback on their evaluation surveys.

Recommendations and Conditions

(see R5): The number of staff in the QM department should be increased to optimize the governance structures.

C2: The Quality Assurance Manual must be extended to encompass all aspects of institutional life, including governance, teaching and learning, research, defining quality procedures and quality loops.

IV. Assessment

Overall assessment

During the online visit the expert group experienced a University community mentally open, full of spirit and eager to improve. They would like to thank the organisers of the online visit schedule for all the opportunities for additional questions and an open discussion.

AUST appears as a dynamic University with a clear and attractive profile. The experts noted a good sense of responsibility for society, and they appreciate that AUST opens study possibilities of high academic quality even to students with lesser financial means. The University takes into account the special limitations and needs of working students. The experts also emphasize the University's third mission, which is committed to social and cultural life in Lebanon in a variety of ways.

In its focus on academic training primarily for the labour market, AUST's profile complies with internationally accepted standards for higher education institutions.

The governance structures of AUST are clearly structured and documented. The responsibilities and procedures of the main University bodies are described in the constitution and in the bylaws, governance procedures appear well thought out and applicable. The relations between academics and the funding body are clear and transparent. While this is a promising start, the experts advise implementing KPIs to ensure the outcome is sustainable.

Furthermore, the expert panel is convinced that the support of the Advisory Board is very helpful, especially with regard to a well-developed network with companies. This gives graduates good job opportunities on the labour market.

The financial management of the University appears to be professional. The expert group appreciates AUST's general policy to keep the tuition fees on a reasonable level and to spend a significant amount on student financial aid.

According to the expert group, the deployment of resources is consistent with a student-centred institution, but the budget spent directly for research appears as far too low. Research activities should be further developed in all faculties, especially in the field of Arts and Health Sciences.

The University's staff is well-qualified to provide high-quality education to its students. The experts were impressed by the dynamic and motivated staff members, both academic (full-time and part-time) and administrative, which are a significant asset of AUST. However, in the experts' view, it is recommended that AUST develops a long-term strategy to improve the ratio of full-time to part-time employees.

The facilities of the University are appropriate for sustaining the teaching and research activities of the University. Laboratories and technical equipment should allow a high quality of teaching and seem also appropriate to carry out applied research projects, even on a very high standard. The IT infrastructure of the University is up to date and equipped with modern and functional software. In terms of library facilities, AUST should expand its holdings to include more literature, particularly in the fields of art and health science.

Teaching and learning of high quality are well practiced at AUST. The University devotes energy and resources to providing innovative study programmes at high academic quality, with a special account on working students. Robust links between the study programmes and the labour market exist. The students' learning process is continuously observed, and problems and difficulties are dealt with in close consultation between students, student services and academics.

Research at AUST offers itself primarily as applied research, related to the needs of Lebanese society. The results are commendable. However, there appears to be a need for greater coordination of research activities and more effective communication for institutional research priorities.

The experts acknowledge the engagement of the staff in applied research activities and their integration in the curricula through projects and during internships. Nevertheless, the experts still see considerable potential for improvement regarding applied research. More applied research projects could be implemented that address problems such as pollution, environmental protection and employability. In this context, the University should make direct use of the Advisory Board to identify fields for research more structurally.

The experts highly appreciate the strong and active affection of AUST to the local neighbourhood as well as to Lebanese society needs. It can be seen as an asset of AUST to offer higher education even for societal groups that otherwise could not afford a study.

The experts observe a well-developed quality assurance system based on formal processes. The focus is on the effectiveness of teaching and student learning, and the validity of the offered programmes. Responsibilities of teachers, department, faculty and above are clear, and the quality assurance instruments which are currently in place seem to be broadly implemented and accepted. The reviewers welcome the implementation of the QM structures but expect the QM handbook to cover all areas of the University. It is also recommended that the number of employees be increased to support the QM department with all its tasks in order to further optimize University processes.

Altogether, against the backdrop of hyperinflation and the difficult living conditions in Lebanon, AUST has made progress since the last institutional accreditation in 2019.

Assessment levels

Level	Assessment	Description
A	Passed.	The institution fulfils or exceeds all criteria. All activities are in line with the profile and objectives of the institution and provided at a high academic level.
B	Passed subject to conditions	The institution does not fulfil some relevant criteria. However, the institution should be able to remedy the shortcomings within nine months after the assessment.
C	Suspension of the accreditation procedure	The institution does not fulfil relevant criteria, but it is likely that it will be able to remedy the shortcomings within 18 months after the assessment. The HEI may apply for a resumption of the accreditation procedure.
D	Failed	The institution does not fulfil relevant criteria and is not expected to be able to meet all assessment criteria within 18 months' time.

Assessment grades

No	Assessment criteria	Assessment
1	Institutional profile and strategy	A
2	Governance Condition: The university should introduce representatives of students in its committees on a systematic basis. It should provide evidence for this (for example protocols or similar documents) and provide a short resumé about its experience with this new approach.	B
3	Resources	A
4	Teaching and Learning	A
5	Research	A
6	Institution and Society	A
7	Quality assurance Condition	B

	<p>The Quality Assurance Manuel must be extended to encompass all aspects of institutional life, including governance, teaching and learning, research, defining quality procedures and quality loops.</p>
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V. Statement of the University

The university submitted a statement as well as additional documents on 31 July 2024. The following documents were submitted:

- Minutes (Meeting University Council, Executive Council)
- QM Manual
- KPIs (Faculty of Business)
- List of scientific publications
- Contract sheets

The following recommendations and conditions were addressed by AUST:

Institutional Process and Strategy

Regarding R1:

The University welcomes the recommendations and recognizes that formalizing the process and defining qualitative and quantitative KPIs will allow for a structured comparison of past and present. This will be implemented in the fall of 2024.

Regarding R2:

AUST considers the recommendation to be goal-oriented. The university has adjusted its mission statement accordingly.

Governance

Regarding R3:

In the opinion of AUST the decision making process and the reporting ladder are clear. If the experts and/or Evalag has some improvement tips, we would be happy (and grateful) to evaluate and consider them. It must, also, be borne in mind that transparency is one vital component in the practice of governance at AUST.

Regarding R4:

The university points out that the Board's Policy on Academic Freedom is a key principle, ensuring that faculty members can pursue research and academic work with complete freedom. The only requirement is that when discussing non-university matters publicly, they should clarify that their views are personal and not representative of the university. For instance, faculty members expressing opinions on the war in Gaza must indicate that they are not speaking for the university. Classrooms are spaces for diverse opinions and constructive dialogue, not for indoctrination. Free discourse to explore ideas re-mains a cornerstone of education. Regarding research, faculty members have full freedom in choosing topics and methodologies, provided they comply with the law.

Regarding C1:

AUST outlined in its statement that it plans to involve students beginning in the fall of 2024. To facilitate this, AUST has established criteria: students with a GPA of 3.0 or higher (out of 4.0) will be included in academic departmental meetings (24 departments) and on four faculty councils (Admissions, Curriculum, Co-Curriculum, Institutional Review Board).

Resources

Regarding R5:

According to AUST different selection and recruitment processes apply to faculty, non-teaching staff, and workers due to the distinct nature of their roles. By governmental law, faculty members are subject to the Law of Contracts and Obligations, whereas non-teaching staff and workers are subject to the Labor Law. Faculty members follow a multi-step process involving interviews and recommendations by department heads, deans, and the Provost. Non-teaching staff are selected through interviews with department directors, the HR director, and the VP for administration. Workers, such as doormen and security agents, are primarily recruited by the HR director and relevant offices. Furthermore, the university points out that the updated Quality Manual will present these procedures, highlighting the uniform process for each group. Despite the differences in hiring processes, AUST aims to formalize and standardize these procedures across all categories at the university level, with the HR department leading this effort.

Regarding R6:

According to the university: Due to the challenging political situation and economic collapse, finding suitable staff has been a significant challenge. Furthermore, in the fields of Engineering, Computer Science, Business, Communication, and Design, 17 new full-time staff members have been successfully hired over the past two months. AUST resumes that these new recruits, who

come from diverse professional backgrounds and bring specialized expertise, are expected to make valuable contributions to strengthening their respective departments.

Regarding R7:

According to AUST the university council has approved two new positions for the QM department.

Teaching and Learning

Regarding R8:

AUST is planning the concrete implementation of program accreditation in the areas of Health and Art. This was planned before the pandemic in 2019. An offer from EVALAG exists since this year.

Regarding R9

The university welcomes the recommendations and plans to formalize a unified procedure. Consequently, the University Council, based on the Provost's recommendation, will hold annual meetings in early summer to update all curricula that require revision. This change will be implemented starting in Fall 2024.

Regarding R10

According to the statement AUST has already established support measures tailored to the individual needs of students with part-time jobs. Those who work in shops, department stores, supermarkets, offices, design studios, etc., during the day can schedule classes from the afternoon to the evening (until 21:00). Conversely, students who work late in bars, discos, nightclubs, restaurants, and similar venues are offered course times that best fit their schedules, with some consideration given to closed sections to accommodate them. AUST has already established support measures tailored to the individual needs of students with part-time jobs. Those who work in shops, department stores, supermarkets, offices, design studios etc. during the day can schedule classes from the afternoon to the evening (until 21:00). Conversely, students who work late in bars, discos, nightclubs, restaurants, and similar venues are offered course times that best fit their schedules, with some consideration given to closed sections to accommodate them.

Regarding R11

AUST points out that starting from the second year, all courses require research papers, culminating in the mandatory Senior Study course in the final year. This course is preceded by a research proposal that must be approved by a professor. The SER section on training young researchers highlights the

progression from research term papers to senior projects, a requirement across all fields. In Fall 2023, a staff member was assigned to review Senior Study Projects to identify those with financial potential and publication possibilities, with the aim of obtaining interesting results. The recommendation to encourage faculty and student engagement in further research will be thoroughly discussed and implemented starting Fall 2024. According to AUST students conduct research under a professor's guidance, and most publications bearing AUST's name are authored by graduate (MA/MS/MBA) students.

Research

Regarding R12-R14

AUST welcomes the recommendations and recognizes the necessity of implementing them, with the goal set for 2024. According to the statement, AUST also recognizes that over the past 4-5 years, it lost some of its most prolific researchers due to the devaluation of the Lebanese Pound. Starting in Fall 2023, salaries were adjusted to become competitive again, with the aim of attracting professors who can make a significant impact in research areas. Although there is existing research cooperation between AUST faculty and colleagues from Lebanese and international universities, there is certainly room for improvement.

Institution and Society

Regarding R15

According to the statement, AUST points out that over the last four years, efforts to internationalize have remained strong. Contracts with Iraqi universities were signed in 2022, 2023, and 2024. In 2023, the agreement with Université Catholique de Lille was expanded to offer double degrees, with students already enrolled. Agreements with Université de Toulouse and Université de Nantes are set to be signed in Fall 2024, with one AUST professor already completing his Ph.D. at Nantes. Additionally, AUST signed a Cooperation and Exchange agreement with Abu Dhabi University (ADU) in 2024. Five AUST students will participate in a multidisciplinary course at ADU in December 2024.

Quality Assurance

Regarding C2

According to the statement, AUST acknowledges that the quality manual should encompass all aspects of institutional life. Efforts to develop this manual have already started, as the current version only includes processes and procedures. This will be a top priority, particularly with the Executive Council's approval to hire additional staff for the Quality Assurance Department.

VI. Accreditation Recommendation of the Expert Group to the Accreditation Commission

According to the expert team, the American University of Science and Technology (AUST) meets EVALAG's criteria for institutional accreditation. Therefore, the team recommends AUST for accreditation and recommends awarding the EVALAG label for institutional accreditation.

The team recommends AUST to consider and implement the following conditions (C) and recommendations (R) to further improve the University:

Institutional profile and strategy

R1: Regular monitoring of the fulfilment of strategic goals or priorities should be conducted to ensure sustainable further development. Quantitative and qualitative Key Performance Indicators should be used to support this process, enabling precise comparisons between past and current statuses, helping to identify obstacles, and providing the University with a foundation for reflecting on how to better achieve its goals.

R2: The experts recognize that the University focuses on teaching and applied sciences to meet the needs of the labour market in Lebanon. However, it would also make sense to emphasize research activities more strongly in the mission statement.

Governance

R3: The decision-making process should be more formalized and documented. This increases the transparency of the organizational structures for all University members.

R4: With regard to academic freedom, a detailed elaboration should be provided concerning research, teaching, and discourse. This would support the University's third mission and promote a transparent understanding of quality.

C1: The university must introduce representatives of students in its committees on a systematic basis. It should provide evidence for this (for example protocols or similar documents) and provide a short resumé about its experience with this new approach.

Resources

R5: To enhance organizational efficiency and ensure fairness, it is essential to formalize the hiring processes on a general University level.

R6: It would be beneficial to achieve a more balanced ratio of part-time to full-time staff.

R7: The number of staff in the QM department should be increased to optimize the governance structures.

Teaching and Learning

R8: Accreditations should be extended to all departments and programmes – especially in the fields of art and health.

R9: Formalized criteria for monitoring and updating the programmes should be established.

R10: Due to the special situation of working students, a general strategy should be developed to fulfil the student-centred approach for these needs as well.

R11: All Departments should integrate research activities – especially in the fields of art and health.

Research

R12: If AUST wishes to strengthen its applied research activities, it should establish a formalized framework.

R13: Systematic networking of researchers (also international networking) should be established. The university should consider expanding strategic partnerships/contracts with foreign universities to offer more postgraduate/doctoral positions for young scientists.

R14: At the department level, systematic measures should be taken to identify specific areas for research activities. The implementation of KPIs for research output should be considered.

Institution and society

R15: Internationalization efforts should be intensified, for example: Strategic partnerships with universities abroad for student and faculty exchanges; study abroad programmes with targeted scholarships; integrating global perspectives into the curriculum and promoting international research collaborations.

Quality assurance

C2: The Quality Assurance Manual must be extended to encompass all aspects of institutional life, including governance, teaching and learning, research, defining quality procedures and quality loops.

VII. Accreditation decision of the EVALAG Accreditation Commission

In its meeting on 23 September 2024, the EVALAG Accreditation Commission unanimously decides to re-accredit the American University of Science and Technology (AUST) institutionally with the condition (C) and recommendations (R) mentioned in chapter VI.

In December 2025, the American University of Science and Technology submitted a detailed report on the fulfilment of the condition. It provided the following documents:

- Quality Manual – Governance and Quality Management Manual (April 2025)
- Meeting Minutes Faculty (February, April, May, September 2025)
- Meeting Minutes Semester Start October 2025
- Participation of Students

The EVALAG Accreditation Commission considers all requirements fulfilled (December 2025).

Annexes

1: Online visit schedule (04-04-2024 and 05-04-2024)

Zoom Meeting

Thursday, 04-04-2024,		
European time (Beirut +1 hour)		
9:15 am – 9:30	Technical check	Experts & EVALAG
9:30 am – 10:30 am	Meeting with President and Executive Council and members of the Board of Trustees (optional)	President Provost Vice President experts & EVALAG
<i>Break of 15 minutes</i>		
10:45 am – 11:30 pm	Meeting with the Deans	Arts & Sciences Business & Economics Engineering & Computer Science Health Sciences experts & EVALAG
<i>Break of 15 minutes</i>		
11:45 pm – 12:30 pm	Meeting with Heads of Departments	Members of the following Faculties: Faculty of Arts & Sciences Faculty of Business & Economics Faculty of Engineering & Computer Science Faculty of Health Sciences experts & EVALAG
12:30 pm – 1:00 pm	Internal meeting of expert panel	experts & EVALAG
<i>Break of 1 hour</i>		
2:00 pm – 3:00 pm	Meeting with Teaching Staff	full time and part time teaching Staff experts & EVALAG
<i>Break of 30 minutes</i>		

3:30 pm – 4:30 pm	Meeting with Director and staff of Center for Learning and Development	Dean of Students & Admissions CLD Director Career Center Supervisor experts & EVALAG
4:30 pm – 5:30 pm	Internal meeting of expert panel: review of the first day	experts & EVALAG
Friday, 05-04-24 European time (Beirut +1 hour)		
08:45 am – 9:00am	Technical check	experts & EVALAG
9:00 am – 10:00 am	Meeting with Students and Alumni	Students & Alumnae Students Activities Office (SAO)
10:00 am – 10:45 am	Meeting with stakeholders	Members of Board of Trusty experts & EVALAG
11:00 pm – 12:00 pm	Meeting with Academic Support Units	Dean of Students and Admissions Associate Dean for Admissions Registrar Director of Information Technology Director of the Bursar's Office Librarian experts & EVALAG
<i>Break of 15 minutes</i>		
12:15 pm – 1:15 pm	Meeting with Quality Assurance Department	Staff QM experts & EVALAG
1:15 pm – 2:15 pm	<i>Break of 1 hour</i>	
2:15 pm – 4:00 pm	Internal meeting of expert panel	experts & EVALAG

4:00 pm – 4:15 pm	Closing meeting with the President and the Provost	experts & EVALAG
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2: Assessment criteria³⁴

The accreditation criteria used by the EVALAG institutional accreditation have been put into effect by the EVALAG Foundation Board. They refer to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and include an analysis of Part 1 of the ESG.

1. Institutional profile and strategy

The expert team checks

- 1.1. whether the strategies fit the profile of the institution (fitness for purpose)
- 1.2. whether the strategies and profile of the institution comply with internationally accepted standards (fitness of purpose)
- 1.3. the processes for the definition of strategies
- 1.4. whether strategies are adequate to reach the institutional objectives.

2. Governance

The expert team checks

- 2.1. the clarity and transparency of the organisational provisions and governance structure
- 2.2. whether governance structures are adequate to support the institutional strategies
- 2.3. how decision making processes are organised
- 2.4. how stakeholder groups are involved in governance
- 2.5. whether the institution provides relevant information about its activities for the internal and external public
- 2.6. whether academic freedom is assured. This includes:
 - 2.6.1. Adequate participation of academics in academic decisions of the institution
 - 2.6.2. The main responsibility for research and teaching lies with academics

³⁴ Decision of the Foundation Board, February 18th 2016, updated December 1st 2017.

2.6.3. Adequate relations between academics and the funding body of the institution

2.6.4. Transparent and science-based search, hiring and tenure procedures for academics which are documented in statutes.

3. Resources

The expert team checks

- 3.1. the existence of a professional funding and financial management
- 3.2. whether the staff is adequate in qualification and number to support the institutional strategy
- 3.3. whether the search, hiring and tenure procedure are in line with international academic practices
- 3.4. whether resources, facilities and equipment are in accordance with the institutional strategy.

4. Teaching and learning

The expert team checks

- 4.1. whether the study programmes comply with the institutional strategy and national regulations
- 4.2. the academic standards of the study programmes
- 4.3. how research and teaching are linked
- 4.4. whether the institution employs student centred teaching and learning processes which pay respect to the diversity of students and their needs
- 4.5. how the assessment of intended learning outcomes is organised
- 4.6. how the student life cycle is organised.

5. Research

The expert team checks

- 5.1. the research profile and academic goals of the institution
- 5.2. whether the research profile fits the institutional strategy
- 5.3. whether the academic standards are fulfilled
- 5.4. how the research process is organised and supported by the institution
- 5.5. how research is evaluated within the institution.
- 5.6. how the training of young researchers is organised

5.7. how the institution assures the academic standards of the training of young researchers

5.8. how the institution assures the rights of young researchers.

6. Institution and society

The expert team checks

6.1. whether the strategy of the institution takes the needs of society into account

6.2. the activities with which the institution connects to society (e.g., co-operations, internationalisation, entrepreneurship, diversity)

6.3. whether the activities fit the strategy.

7. Quality Assurance

The expert team checks

7.1. the quality assurance concept of the institution

7.2. the indicators for monitoring the achievement of objectives

7.3. how the institution systematically collects, analyses and uses relevant information about its activities

7.4. whether quality assurance is used regularly and systematically for quality enhancement

7.5. whether quality feedback loops are closed

7.6. how the institution fosters the development of a quality culture.