



# Quality assurance system in Austria

## AQ Austria: responsibilities and structure of the agency

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### Quality assurance system in Austria

The Austrian federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research defines *facilitating the higher education institutions to achieve their goals* as the main objective of the quality assurance system in Austria. Since the Bologna Declaration the major focus of external quality assurance in Austria are however *promoting quality development at higher education institutions and making the results of the quality assurance procedures publicly accessible*. Therefore, the quality assurance system ensures transparency and increases trust in the relevance and quality of higher education institutions.

The Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education (HS-QSG) is the legal basis for the external quality assurance of the higher education system in Austria. It establishes a common legal framework for different procedures of external quality assurance at different higher education institutions (HEI): public universities, universities of applied sciences, private universities, private colleges and university colleges of teacher education. According to the HS-QSG, different procedures of external quality assurance apply to different types of HEIs. Regardless of the type of quality assurance procedure, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) provide the international reference framework and are the common reference point for quality assurance for higher education institutions. The HS-QSG distinguishes between two main external quality assurance procedures: accreditation and certification by audit. Accreditation and audits have different objectives and therefore encompass different assessment areas of the higher education institutions.

Accreditation procedures in Austria have an *ex ante* character and are always peer review procedures, as they mainly focus on the question if a higher education institution or its degree programme meet the standards of assessment. Further, the accreditation procedures determine

if the institution or programme can have the right to operate as a higher education institution or offer the proposed higher education degree programme.

There are two forms of accreditation procedures: institutional and programme accreditation procedures, but both of them have their own specifications depending on the type of the higher education institution or the programme they are applied to. Accreditation procedures differ further in the options of the findings by the expert panel and the decision of the Board of AQ Austria. Both, initial institutional and programme accreditation procedures can only end with approval or rejection; there is no option to start under conditions. In case of the renewal of institutional accreditation or amendment of an already existing degree programme, standards can be assessed as: met, partly met with conditions or not met. All positive accreditation procedures require formal recognition of a higher education institution and/or its degree programme by the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research.

The second procedure of the quality assurance system in Austria is audit. Audit is a cyclical peer-review assessment process of the internal quality management system of a higher education institution, mainly focused on quality assurance and quality development of the institution. Audit certifies and confirms the performance of the internal quality management system of a higher education institution. In the Austrian external quality assurance system, audit is mandatory for the public universities and the universities of applied sciences.

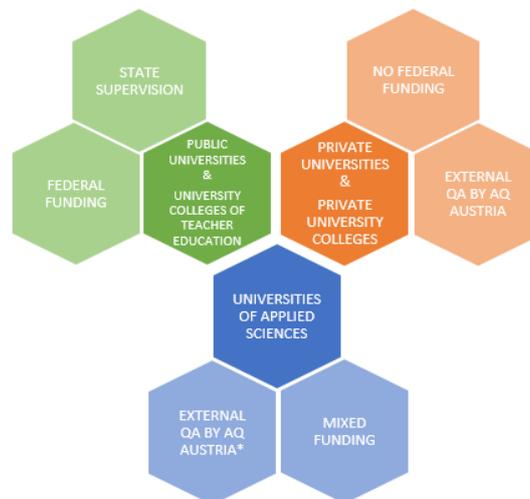


Figure 1: Austrian higher education system sectors and their external quality assurance specifications, Source: own diagram

The higher education system in Austria consists of different types of higher education institutions:

- 22 public universities,
- 16 private universities,
- 21 universities of applied sciences and
- 14 university colleges of teacher education.

The legal basis for the public universities is the Universities Act. Public universities conclude performance agreements with the federal government have annual reporting obligations and shall additionally perform an audit procedure for the certification of their internal quality



management system with an internationally recognised and independent quality assurance agency every seven years.

The legal basis for the private universities and private colleges is the Private Higher Education Institution Act. These institutions require an initial institutional accreditation conducted by AQ Austria, which must be renewed on a regular basis. The degree and certificate programmes – leading to an academic degree – require accreditation by AQ Austria before they may be offered.

The legal basis for the universities of applied sciences is the Universities of Applied Sciences Act. They require a one-time renewal initial institutional accreditation by AQ Austria, after that, they pass on to the audit system with any internationally recognized and independent QA-Agency. Degree programmes and their certain amendments of the universities of applied sciences have to undergo accreditation by AQ Austria.

## AQ Austria: responsibilities and structure of the agency

AQ Austria is a quality assurance agency that is recognized in Austria and internationally and operates in several countries. At the same time, it is the only legally established cross-sector agency for quality assurance and accreditation in Austria.

As an independent body for external quality assurance in the higher education sector, AQ Austria is responsible for conducting accreditation procedures (as a public authority) and audits in Austria. In addition to the national external quality assurance procedures – audits and accreditations, the agency has further responsibilities, such as notification of foreign degree programmes offered in Austria and supervision of accredited higher education institutions and their degree programmes.

According to the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education, AQ Austria is responsible in particular for the following tasks in the area of external quality assurance:

- developing and carrying out external quality assurance procedures, as a minimum, audit and accreditation procedures, according to national and international standards;
- accrediting HEIs and degree programmes;
- continuously supervising accredited HEIs and degree programmes regarding accreditation requirements;
- reporting to the National Council and publishing reports on the outcomes of the quality assurance procedures;
- fulfilling the tasks according to the statutory provisions of the Universities of Applied Sciences Act and the Private Higher Education Institution Act;
- issuing certificates for educational institutions upon an audit;
- conducting studies and system analyses, performing reviews, and carrying out projects;
- providing information and advice in matters related to quality assurance and quality improvement;
- notification of foreign degree programmes;
- international co-operation in the field of quality assurance.

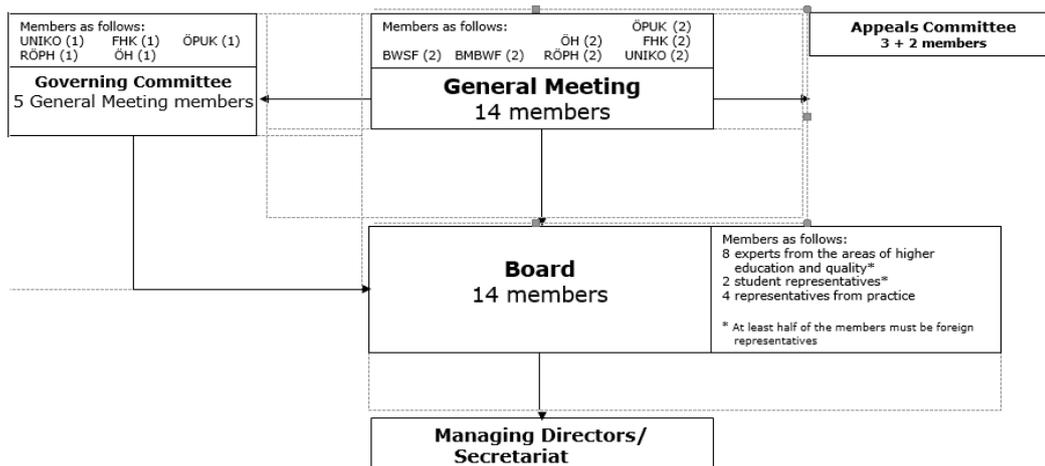
In addition, AQ Austria has a variety of further voluntary quality assurance procedures in its portfolio:

- evaluation of degree programmes (national HEIs)
- evaluations of HEIs as well as university-related research institutions in Austria and abroad
- accreditation of continuing education programmes (national HEIs)
- system accreditation and degree programme accreditation in Germany
- institutional accreditation in Switzerland
- degree programme accreditation in EHEA countries
- audits of the internal quality management systems of HEIs in EHEA countries
- consulting to HEIs and university-related research institutions for issues relating to quality enhancement, quality assurance and quality management

Besides activities directly connected with external quality assurance, AQ Austria also conducts studies and system analyses, performs reviews and carries out projects. The Analyses focus on topics of focus and on cross-sectional issues that concern more than one higher education institution or the entire higher education system. In addition, the agency offers consultancy to HEIs on the preparation of external reviews or for the development of strategies.

The AQ Austria applies the principles and values of public responsibility for quality in higher education, securing academic freedom, autonomy of higher education institutions and scientific integrity to all its activities. The agency is obliged to publish annual reports of activities as well as all decisions of the board of AQ Austria on and central documents (expert review, HEI statement) of the external quality assurance procedures.

The organisation structure of AQ Austria is regulated by the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and it consists of the Board, the General Meeting, the Governing Committee, and the Appeals Committee. The agency bodies are supported by the managing director and the secretariat of the agency. At least 45% of the members of all agency bodies must be women.



BWSF – Advisory Council for Economic and Social affairs (2 members)  
BMBWF – Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (2 members)  
ÖH – Austrian National Union of Students (2 members)  
RÖPH - Rectors' Conference of the Austrian University Colleges of Teacher Education (2 members)

UNIKO – Universities Austria (2 members)  
FHK – Association of Austrian Universities of Applied Sciences (2 members)  
ÖPUK – Austrian Private Universities' Conference (2 members)

Figure 2: Agency bodies and committees, Source: AQ Austria diagram

The main decision-making body of AQ Austria is the board and it consists of 14 members with academic and professional qualifications as well as a from among its members elected President and a Vice-President. AQ Austria Board is guaranteed independence by law (in their performance, members are not bound by any ministerial directives) and it is responsible for designing methodologies, for taking all formal decisions in accreditation and audit procedures, and for executing the supervision of accredited institutions. Furthermore, the Board decides upon the strategy, the annual budget, the annual report and the organisational structure of the secretariat.

The General Meeting is the body assembling and representing the relevant stakeholders of the agency. Duties of the General Meeting are, in particular, the election of the Governing Committee, the nomination and appointment of the Appeals Committee, and the nomination of ten members of the Board. Different from the Board, the members act as representatives of the respective organizations.

The Governing Committee is the strategic advisory body has a strategic-advisory task and it exercises its advisory function through communicating informed views, especially with regard to the methodologies and standards of the agency as well as regarding the annual budget, the annual report, job applications and the rules of operation.

The Appeals Committee is responsible for dealing with appeals and complaints from higher education institutions and consists of two Austrian and two foreign members coming from higher education institutions with expertise in the field of quality assurance and with legal qualifications, as well as, in the case of a conflict of interest, one Austrian and one foreign substitute member. The members are not allowed to belong to any other body of the agency, and they must operate without instruction.

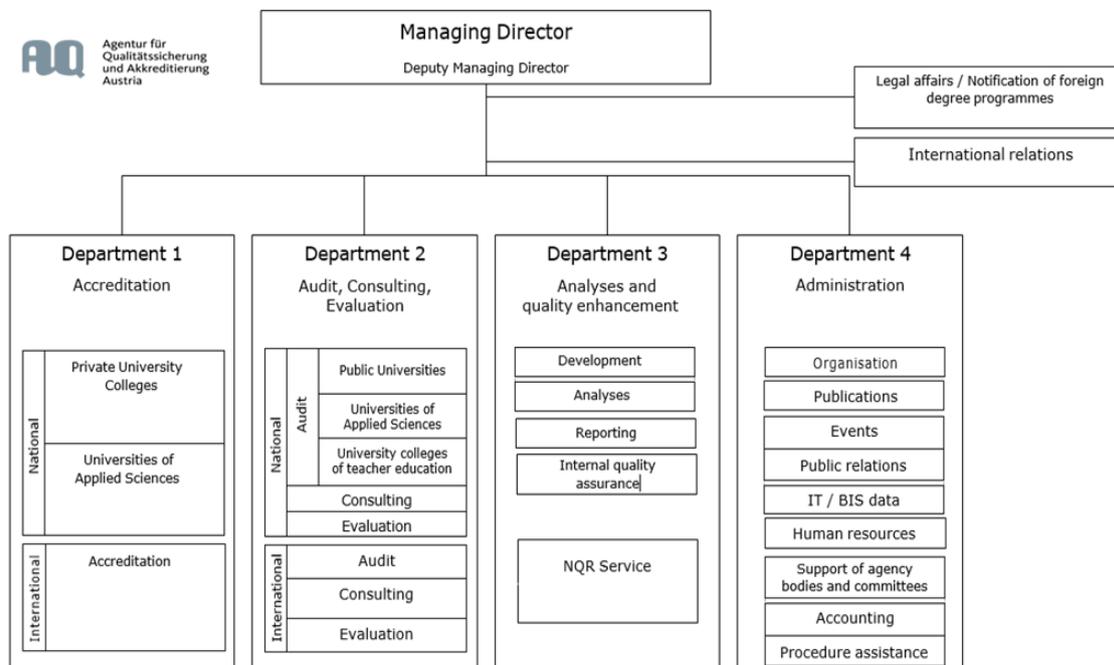


Figure 3: Structure of the secretariat of AQ Austria, Source: AQ Austria diagram



The secretariat of the agency is divided into units: Accreditation; Audit, Consulting and Evaluation; Analyses and quality enhancement; Administration; International relations; Legal affairs and Notification of foreign degree programmes. The secretariat is led by the managing director, who handles the day-to-day operations of the agency.

## Relevant legal Acts

- **Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education** (Hochschul-Qualitätssicherungsgesetz (HS-QSG))  
Online available in German:  
<https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20007384> (as consulted online on 07.05.2021)
- **Universities Act** (German: Universitätsgesetz (UG 2002))  
Online available in German:  
<https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20002128> (as consulted online on 07.05.2021)
- **Private Higher Education Institution Act** (Privathochschulgesetz (PrivHG))  
Online available in German:  
<https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20011248> (as consulted online on 07.05.2021)
- **Universities of Applied Sciences Act** (Fachhochschulgesetz (FGH))  
Online available in German:  
<https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=10009895> (as consulted online on 07.05.2021)