

External Review of the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA) by  
The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

## **Annex 1: TERMS OF REFERENCE**

8 March 2007

### **1. Background and Context**

The Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA) was founded at the beginning of 2004 as a non-profit<sup>1</sup> association by the Austrian Rectors' Conference (ÖRK), the Fachhochschule Conference (FHK), the Private Universities, the Student Union (ÖH) and the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (BMBWK). ÖRK, FHK, ÖH and BMBWK are currently ordinary members of AQA.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> Pursuant to the Austrian Associations Act (Vereinsgesetz), 2002



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

## 2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

The provisions for external quality assurance differ between the sectors:

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

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

AQA provides higher education institutions with quality assurance procedures that shall

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

These procedures currently include:

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

The evaluation shall

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



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

### **3. The Review Process**

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

The evaluation procedure will consist of the following steps:

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

#### **3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members**

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

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

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

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

- Self-evaluation is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;



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

### 3.3 A Site Visit by the Review Panel

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

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

### 3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report

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

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

## 4. Follow-up Process and Publication of the Report

AQA will consider the expert panel's report and inform ENQA of its plans to implement any recommendations contained in the report. Subsequent to the discussion of the evaluation results and any planned implementation measures



with ENQA, the review report and the follow-up plans agreed upon will be published on AQA's website.

## 5. Budget

AQA shall pay the following review related fees:

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

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

## 6. Indicative Schedule of the Review

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

Agreement on terms of reference and protocol for review	End Jan 2007
Appointment of review team members by ENQA	Early Feb 2007
AQA starts self-evaluation	Early Feb 2007
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	Mid-Mar 2007
AQA self-evaluation completed	End July 2007
Briefing of review team members	August 2007
Expert panel site visit	September 2007
Draft of evaluation report to AQA	October 2007



Statement of AQA to review team if necessary	Beginning of Nov. 2007
Submission of final report to AQA and ENQA	November 2007
Consideration of report by AQA	November 2007
Consideration of the report and response by ENQA	December 2007
Publication of report and implementation plan	December 2007

