

# AQA's policy of internal quality management

## Mission and objectives

AQA's mission is laid down in the agency's statutes (Article 2). It includes the development and co-ordination of external quality assurance procedures, certification and accreditation, studies and information.

The agency's mission is translated into objectives and activities for a multiannual period, which are published on the agency's website. The current cycle will end in 2010. After assessment it will be redefined for a new period.

The planning of activities is done in combination with the annual budgets, within the meetings of the Board, the General Assembly and the Scientific Steering Group. Decisions on standards, review experts and the award of certification or accreditation are exclusively assigned to the Scientific Steering Group and the Certification and Accreditation Commission.

## Aims

AQA's internal quality management aims at

- checking the legitimacy of activities and procedures
- assuring the consistency of decisions
- monitoring the achievement of objectives
- verifying the competence and independence of its decision bodies, of experts and reviewers
- supporting permanent improvement of performance

## Internal feedback and mechanisms of reflection

The collection of feedback helps to take conclusions on the legitimacy of activities and for the further development of AQA's methodologies.

Regular meetings of staff and committees are a main source of information and mutual feedback. They lead to conclusions for the ongoing work of AQA as well as to strategy development.

Comprehensive assessments of the agency's strategic objectives, activities and their effects are done before the end of each term of AQA's Scientific Steering Group and the Certification and Accreditation Committee. These internal assessments help to define strategies for the new period of appointment and lead to possible adaptation of internal procedures.

Internal feedback and reflection mechanisms are supported by information and feedback from external sources. These sources include reviewers, experts, higher education institutions and other stakeholders in higher education.

## External feedback mechanisms

AQA actively seeks the dialogue with external stakeholders and clients. Higher education institutions and contracting authorities are invited to give written and/or oral feedback. Feedback mechanisms are part of all project periods, including the co-ordination of projects and their results. They help to check the compliance of results with the pre-defined aims of projects and procedures.

Feedback from experts and reviewers is relevant for the assessment of the methodology and the management of projects.

AQA's organisational structure permits the involvement of the most relevant stakeholders in higher education (rectors' conferences, student unions, public authorities).

Co-operation in international networks (e.g. ENQA, INQAAHE, CEEN, Quality Audit Network) supports a systematic exchange between agencies. AQA also looks for bilateral exchange with agencies, whose staff members act as observers in AQA co-ordinated reviews.

For the development of standards, procedures and guidelines AQA couples its internal know-how with external expertise. The Scientific Steering Group and alternating experts support the work.

## No-conflict-of-interest mechanisms

The independence of experts and reviewers is an absolute requirement for quality assurance agencies. AQA has defined criteria for conflicts of interests and systematically verifies them when selecting and contracting experts. These include items such as the involvement in university bodies, teaching or research co-operation or any appointment procedures. Before engaging experts AQA asks institutions to indicate any conflicts of interests. All experts are nominated by the Scientific Steering Group.

The composition of expert groups follows rules that are specified for the different types of procedures (e.g. expertise in the organisation and the management of higher education institutions and programmes, experts of relevant professional areas). AQA systematically includes student representatives who are nominated by the European Students Union (ESU). The involvement of a majority of experts from outside Austria strengthens the international dimension of reviews. AQA aims for a gender balance in its expert teams.

AQA avoids conflicts of interest of its committee members when it comes to awarding decisions.

As a fixed standard, advising experts cannot act as assessors in certification or accreditation projects.



## Documentation and reporting

The implementation of projects and procedures follows rules and guidelines that are set in advance and duly documented. This includes guidelines for project co-ordination, the preparation of reviewers, site visits as well as standards for decision processes (e.g. for the awarding of an accreditation). Guidelines are expected to guarantee consistency of decisions.

Key operating processes of the agency are constantly standardised and documented.

AQA regularly publishes reports and articles in different journals on its own activities or on quality assurance in Austrian higher education. There is an annual publication of articles that are presented at AQA conferences.

## Cyclical external review

As a member of ENQA the agency is required to undergo regular external reviews. Official recognition in other countries can be linked to further assessments. These reviews are essential for both the development of the agency and the national framework of quality assurance in higher education.

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Approved by AQA's Scientific Steering Group