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Internal higher education evaluation for the awarding of quality labels

Guide to accompaniment by AAQ | March 2022 (Status as of 26.08.2022)





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Accompaniment by AAQ – Recognition of internal evaluation procedures

In Switzerland, higher education institutions have institutional accreditation and are thus qualified to evaluate study programmes, research facilities, etc. with their quality assurance system. They prove this, among other things, by fulfilling Quality Standard 3.2, which reads as follows: «The quality assurance system shall provide for a periodic evaluation of teaching and research activities, of services and of results achieved in these areas.»

The explanations of quality standards in the AAQ Guide to Institutional Accreditation state, among other things, that the assessment procedures provide for the involvement of people external to the unit for assessment. These people possess the expertise and skills necessary in order to provide an external view of the quality of the activities, avoiding any conflict of interest.

In higher education, various seals of approval or labels are awarded to study programmes, institutes, faculties and others. These seals of approval confirm that the evaluated unit meets external criteria, usually set by an internationally recognised organisation. As part of its quality assurance strategy, the higher education institution can strive to ensure that selected teaching and research activities or services meet certain labels or quality seals.

With the accompaniment of internal evaluation procedures, AAQ offers an instrument that enables the awarding of external labels with the inclusion of the evaluation carried out internally at the university. In this way, AAQ strengthens the autonomy of higher education institutions to take quality development into their own hands. To do this, AAQ needs the recognition of the organisation that awards the label.

The procedures of the accompanied evaluation are based on internationally recognised and practiced principles of quality assessment procedures, in particular the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), and support the implementation of the requirements of the organisation awarding the label.

Based on the self-evaluation by the higher education institution and the evaluation report written by its expert group, AAQ decides on the award of the label. In the event of a positive decision, it ensures that the label is issued.

In this Guide, AAQ presents the procedure for the accompanied evaluation.

1 Procedure of the accompaniment by AAQ

1.1 Objective, purpose and quality standards

In the application for an accompanied evaluation, the higher education institution specifies the subject of the procedure - the evaluated unit - and refers to the seal of approval or label it is aiming for. The evaluation runs according to a university-internal guideline, in a peer review process with external assessment.

The quality standards used for the evaluation are defined by the university. They are suitable for assessing the fulfilment of the desired label, i.e. in terms of content they correspond to the requirements of the organisation awarding the label. They are the basis for the self-evaluation report and serve the experts for their external evaluation, in which they assess the individual quality standards.

Before opening the procedure, AAQ ensures that the planned procedure and the quality standards are sufficient for the assessment with regard to the desired label. The higher education institution may adopt the quality standards of the label-awarding organisation or supplement its own standards to the extent that they cover the assessment required for the label.

As a guideline for checking whether the university's procedure is suitable for the assessment, AAQ respects the requirements of the label-awarding organization on the one hand, and on the other hand AAQ publishes a guideline for each label that specifies the implementation of these requirements in the Swiss context.

1.2 Procedure

From AAQ's point of view, the accompanied evaluation procedure comprises the following stages:

- Filing the application with the agency
- Verification that the procedure and standards are suitable for the award of the label
- Opening of the procedure, conclusion of the contract
- Proposal of an expert
- Contribution to the preparation of the expert group
- Participation in the debriefing at the end of the on-site visit
- Analysis of the report of the expert group and the statement of the evaluated unit
- Decision of the agency on the award of the label and notification to the competent organisation
- Label award to the evaluated unit and publication of the decision

2 Implementation of the AAQ Accompanied Evaluation

2.1 Application for evaluation, opening

The higher education institution submits an application to AAQ to conduct an accompanied evaluation procedure. It also submits the quality standards and further information on the procedure to AAQ. The application must be signed by the university management and designate the contact person for AAQ.

AAQ examines the documents by comparing the quality standards and the applicant's procedure with a valid guideline and with the requirements for awarding the label. On the basis of this review, AAQ may demand additions and improvements. If the requirements for the award of the label are met, AAQ confirms this to the applicant. AAQ's guidelines are mentioned in the appendix and are available on the website. The guidelines used by the label-awarding organisations are also given in the appendix.

A representative of the agency may attend the opening meeting of the procedure in an advisory capacity.

2.2 Conclusion of contract and costs of the procedure

AAQ concludes a contract with the client on the subject of the procedure and the standards to be applied, the implementation, the time frame and the costs of the procedure..

The costs of the evaluation procedure are at the expense of the higher education institution. AAQ calculates the costs in accordance with the Fee Regulations of the Swiss Accreditation Council (GebV-SAR) of 23 March 2018 . The costs depend on the specific procedure and are shown and justified in the contract. The label-awarding organisation may additionally invoice for the award of the label.

2.3 Procedure of the internal higher education institution procedure

The further procedure is based on the usual phases as provided for in the ESG: Self-evaluation of the unit to be evaluated, formation of a group of independent experts, visit by the group of experts, who then write the report on the evaluation, and finally the statement of the evaluated unit. The details can be found in the guidelines that apply to the respective label (see appendix).

AAQ provides the following services to accompany the evaluation:

- Proposing of an expert who has the necessary competencies in relation to the desired label. The higher education institution is responsible for recruiting the other members of the group.
- Contribution to the preparation of the expert group with regard to the desired label, together with the responsible persons of the institution.
- Participation in the debriefing at the end of the on-site visit. The organisation and monitoring of the visit is the responsibility of the higher education institution and follows the procedure communicated before the opening.

3 Final phase

The university sends AAQ the reports on the self-evaluation and the external evaluation as well as the position statement.

3.1 Decision of AAQ, awarding of the label

AAQ takes its decision on the awarding of the label on the basis of the documents submitted. It makes the decision at the request of the responsible AAQ project manager to the Director and to the person in charge of evaluations at the agency. The decision may stipulate conditions, the fulfilment of which must be documented after a specified period of time.

The decision is forwarded to the responsible management body of the higher education institution, which takes over further communication. In the event of a positive decision, AAQ initiates the necessary steps with the awarding organisation to award the label.

The higher education institution undertakes to notify AAQ immediately of any fundamental changes within the evaluated unit.

3.2 Publication of the results

AAQ publishes the award of the label on its website by means of a simple message, linked to the university's decision on the evaluation.

3.3 Period of validity

The period of validity depends on the requirements of the label-awarding organisation.

4 Appendix

4.1 Valid guidelines for the AAQ Accompanied Evaluation

- Guide for programme evaluation to award the EUR-ACE label, 2022

4.2 Requirements taken into account for the award of the label

- EUR-ACE Framework Standards and Guidelines (EAFSG), 2021
- ENAEE: a proposed approach to awarding the EUR-ACE label, 2020

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