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und qualitätssicherung

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Institutional accreditation

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1 First institutional accreditation

1.1 Aim and object

The Higher Education Promotion and Coordination Act (HEdA) provides the Confederation and the cantons with an instrument to manage access to the Swiss higher education landscape. All public or private higher education institutions that wish to call themselves a 'university', 'university of applied sciences' or 'university of teacher education' – including the compound and derivative designations in all languages must – undergo institutional accreditation. Institutional accreditation is also one of the requirements that higher education institutions must fulfil in order to receive federal funding.

The object of institutional accreditation is the quality assurance system of higher education institutions, with which they guarantee the quality of their teaching, research and services. With this chosen approach, the autonomy of higher education institutions – which are responsible for their own quality assurance and quality development – can be reconciled with their obligation to transparency and their accountability. In addition, the quality culture is strengthened.

The quality assurance system is evaluated by external experts using quality standards. These review the concepts and mechanisms of quality assurance and quality development. They assess whether the various elements form a complete and coherent whole that enables the higher education institution to ensure the quality and continuous improvement of its activities according to its type and specific characteristics. The proportionality between the means used and the results achieved is also taken into account.

The quality standards cover the following areas: quality assurance strategy, governance, teaching, research and services, resources, internal and external communication.

The accreditation procedure is carried out by an agency recognised by the Swiss Accreditation Council SAC (hereinafter: Accreditation Council).

The accreditation decision is made by the Accreditation Council. The decision is based on the agency's accreditation application, the self-evaluation report, the report of the expert group and the statement of the higher education institution.

1.2 Procedure

The procedural steps, the procedural rules and the quality standards are laid down in the Accreditation Ordinance HEdA.

According to international practice, the accreditation procedure consists of the following procedural steps:

- Submission of the application to the Accreditation Council;
- Admission to the institutional accreditation procedure by the Accreditation Council (decision to enter);
- Planning and opening of the procedure including conclusion/signing of the contract between the agency and the HEI;
- Self-assessment by the HEI;

- External evaluation by independent experts, including an on-site visit and a report by the expert group;
- Application for accreditation of the agency
- Statement of the HEI;
- Accreditation decision of the Accreditation Council;
- Publication; and
- Where appropriate, verification of compliance with the conditions.

From the opening of the procedure to the decision of the Accreditation Council, a procedure for institutional accreditation takes at least 15 months. For each procedure, a timetable is set between the higher education institution and the agency.

The higher education institution may withdraw an accreditation application at any time. The costs incurred up to that point shall be charged to the higher education institution.

1.3 Costs

The costs associated with the accreditation procedure are regulated in the SAC Fees Ordinance (FeeO-SAC).

The cost of a procedure, which includes a one-day preliminary visit and a two-and-a-half-day on-site visit involving five experts, amounts to CHF 59,000 (excluding VAT). This comprises a lump sum of CHF 32,000 to cover direct costs (fees, travel expenses, accommodation for the experts), and a flat fee of CHF 27,000 to cover indirect costs (AAQ's activities).

The cost of a procedure, which includes a one-day preliminary visit and a two-day on-site visit (reaccreditation model), is CHF 53,000 (excluding VAT).

All costs associated with self-assessment activities (including internal consultations, preparation of the self-assessment report, and organisation of site visits) are to be covered by the HEI.

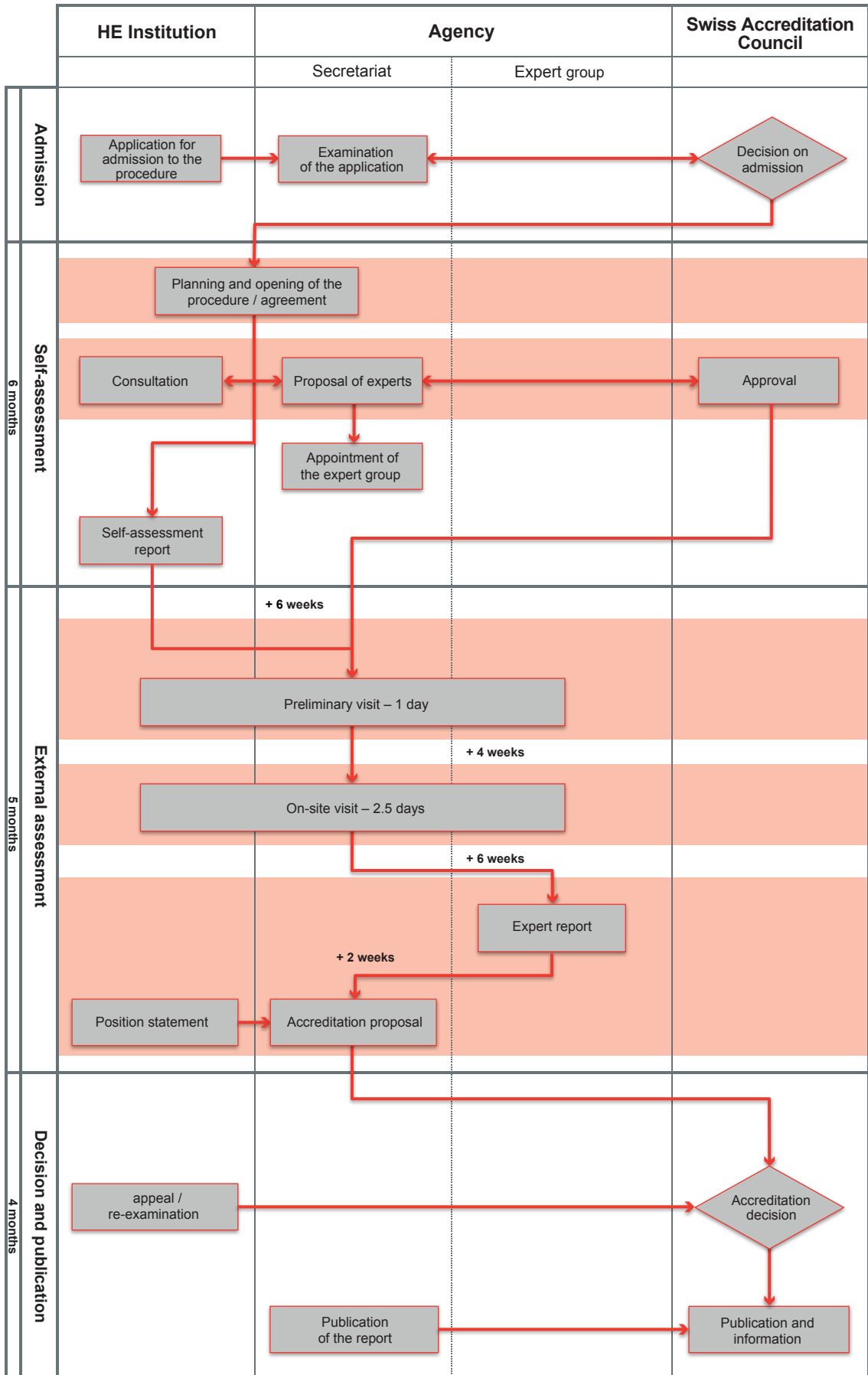
Experts are compensated with a daily lump-sum payment for their participation in both the preliminary and on-site visits.

The terms and conditions of the procedure are defined in contracts concluded by the Agency with both the higher education institution and the experts.

1.4 Duties of the accredited higher education institution

The accredited higher education institution informs the Accreditation Council about fundamental changes affecting the quality standards.

Schematic representation of the process of initial accreditation



1.5 Procedural steps

Opening session

After the Accreditation Council's decision of acceptance, the agency formally opens the accreditation procedure together with the higher education institution. At the opening meeting, the following points are dealt with and recorded in minutes:

- Planning of the accreditation procedure (procedural steps and timetable).
- Language: German, French or Italian. As an administrative procedure, the accreditation procedure must be conducted in an official language. In particular, the decision on admission, the agency's application and the decision of the accreditation procedure must be written in the chosen official language. However, the self-evaluation report, the report of the expert group and other documents may be in English. The interviews may also be conducted in English.
- Profile of the expert group.

Self-assessment

Following the opening, the HEI carries out a self-evaluation and summarises the results in a written report (self-evaluation report). This process, in which representatives of the relevant groups of the HEI have to be integrated – in particular the students, the teaching staff, the administrative staff and the technical staff – also includes reflections on the development of the quality assurance system of the HEI.

The self-evaluation report is self-reflective and self-critical and contains information, descriptions and analyses on the basis of which an assessment of the degree of fulfilment of the quality standards can be made; this includes in particular the following information:

- Portrait of the HEI (special features, organisation, key figures);
- Description and procedure of the self-assessment process;
- Reports or results from previous quality assurance procedures, if applicable;
- Presentation of the quality assurance system;
- Assessment of the quality standards with regard to fulfilment;
- For each quality standard or standard area, presentation of strengths, weaknesses and development opportunities; and
- Action plan for the further development of the quality assurance system.

The explanations on the quality standards are intended to establish a common understanding on the part of the agency, the higher education institution and the expert group.

The self-evaluation report serves the evaluators as a basis for their on-site visit and for assessing the quality standards.

The self-evaluation report should be approximately 50–80 pages long (without appendices). AAQ provides the HEI with a template.

The agency is available for all formal questions regarding the self-evaluation report and plans the visits together with the higher education institution on the occasion of a meeting. Upon invitation, the agency can also contribute to internal information events of the higher education institution.

External appraisal

The external evaluation includes the following elements:

- Composition of the expert group;
- Pre-visit;
- On-site visit; and
- Report of the external evaluation.

Composition of the expert group

The expert group appointed by the Agency shall be composed of at least five people and shall have, in the aggregate, national and international experience as well as knowledge necessary for the performance of its tasks, in particular:

- Experience in the area of managing internal quality assurance and quality development at an HEI;
- Experience in teaching and research and, where appropriate, a non-academic perspective;
- sufficient knowledge of the Swiss higher education landscape; and
- Active knowledge of the language of the case.

Ideally, the chairperson of the review group is an active member of the management of a higher education institution. One member must come from among the students. The composition of the review panel is balanced and takes into account the specifics of the higher education institution. The reviewers must be independent and able to assess the higher education institution in an unbiased manner.

At the opening meeting, AAQ discusses the profile of the reviewer's group with the HEI. AAQ then draws up a longlist of potential reviewers and submits it to the institution. People suspected of having a conflict of interest or lack of independence with regard to the HEI are eliminated from the list.

The agency submits the longlist to the Swiss Accreditation Council for its opinion. It then forms the expert group and appoints a chairperson.

Pre-visit

The preliminary visit takes place at least one month before the on-site visit. It consists of two parts: a working session of the experts and a meeting with the institution.

In the working session, AAQ informs the reviewers about:

- The special features of the Swiss higher education landscape and the HEI;
- Institutional accreditation, with its approach primarily oriented towards the quality assurance system, as well as the quality standards; and
- Their role and tasks.

In addition, this session serves to discuss the following further points:

- Issues and questions to be addressed during the on-site visit;
- Supplementary documents that may be necessary; and
- The programme of the on-site visit.

Subsequently, a first meeting takes place between the experts and the HEI management as well as the people responsible for accreditation. The aims of this meeting are getting to know each other, initial feedback from the experts, clarification of open questions, discussion of any documents that need to be submitted and any final adjustments to the programme of the on-site visit.

On-site visit

The on-site visit gives the evaluators the opportunity to deepen their understanding and knowledge of the quality assurance system of the higher education institution and to assess whether this system can guarantee the quality of teaching, research and services.

The evaluators meet the representatives of the most important groups of the higher education institution, in particular the management of the higher education institution, the people in charge of the most important units, the people in charge of quality assurance, the representatives of the students, the mid-level students, the teaching staff, the administrative and technical staff and the people in charge of the different services. The programme also provides for working meetings of the evaluators.

The programme of the on-site visit – i.e. both its structure and the list of people with whom a meeting is to take place – is compiled by the agency in cooperation with the higher education institution. The special features and needs of the higher education institution are taken into account.

The on-site visit ends with the debriefing, an oral information session in which the evaluators describe their first impressions of the higher education institution and provide an overview of the strengths and the challenges ahead. However, the evaluators do not give a final assessment of the fulfilment of the quality standards. No discussion with the higher education institution is planned as part of this oral information.

The on-site visit usually lasts two and a half days; however, the duration may be adjusted according to the specifics of the higher education institution. The flat rate to be paid by the higher education institution will subsequently be adjusted.

Report of the expert group

After their on-site visit, the experts prepare a report (expert group report) under the responsibility of the chairperson and with the editorial support of the agency. This report contains the following elements:

- An analysis of the handling of results from previous procedures;
- An evaluation of the QM system as a whole
- A description, analysis and conclusion regarding the fulfilment of the quality standards;
- A summary analysis of strengths and weaknesses;
- Proposals for possible requirements to remedy the deficiencies in the area of quality standards;
- Recommendations for the future development of quality assurance; and
- A proposal for accreditation.

Each quality standard is assessed using a scale with the following four levels: fully met, mostly met, partially met or not met. The evaluators take into account the specifics of the higher education institution in their assessment.

- A quality standard is considered to be fully met when quality assurance concepts and mechanisms exist and are fully and coherently implemented and allow the HEI to ensure the quality of its activities.

- A quality standard is considered to be largely met if the concepts and mechanisms for quality assurance and their implementation show only minor deficiencies.
- A quality standard is considered to be partially met if quality assurance concepts and mechanisms exist but significant deficiencies or considerable weaknesses in their implementation are identified, or if quality assurance concepts and mechanisms exist only for certain sub-areas.
- A quality standard is deemed not to be met if there is a lack of central concepts and mechanisms in relation to the quality system and/or if the higher education institution is not able to ensure the quality of its activities with their implementation.

With regard to quality development, the evaluators can formulate recommendations. However, if a quality standard is only partially met or not met, the experts must propose one or more conditions.

A condition is the correction of a significant deficiency that the higher education institution must make or a requirement that it must fulfil in order to continue to hold accreditation. A requirement must always relate to a quality standard. The higher education institution must be able to fulfil the requirement within a specified period of time (usually 18 or 24 months).

If the experts are of the opinion that any deficiencies in the quality assurance system of the higher education institution cannot be remedied within a reasonable period of time, they shall propose the rejection of the accreditation.

The expert group's accreditation proposal is based on an overall assessment of compliance with the quality standards.

The provisions of the Federal Act on Data Protection shall apply to the drafting of the report.¹

Agency accreditation application

After a formal review of the report of the expert group, the agency prepares the accreditation application, which includes the following elements:

- An overview of the procedure; and
- An application for accreditation for the attention of the Accreditation Council.

The agency's accreditation application is based on the higher education institution's self-evaluation report and the report of the expert group. The accreditation application may deviate from the proposal of the expert group in justified cases.

Statement of the HEI

The agency submits its accreditation application and the report of the expert group to the higher education institution for comment.

The agency and the expert group review the statement of the higher education institution and adjust the expert report and the accreditation application if necessary.

The statement is an integral part of the overall documentation of the procedure and is handed over to the Accreditation Council together with the self-evaluation report, the report of the expert group and the accreditation application of the agency, and is also published later.

¹ Federal Act of 25 September 2020 on Data Protection (FADP), SR 235.1.

Decision

The Accreditation Council bases its decision on the agency's accreditation application, the self-evaluation report, the report of the expert group and the statement of the higher education institution.

The Accreditation Council has the possibility:

- To grant accreditation without conditions;
- To grant accreditation with condition(s); and
- To refuse accreditation.

The accreditation is valid for seven years.

Within the framework of the accreditation decision, the Accreditation Council shall determine the deadline and modality of the review of the fulfilment of any conditions.

The Accreditation Council informs the higher education institution and the agency of its decision.

According to Article 65 HEdA, accreditation decisions can be appealed to the Federal Administrative Court. In addition, higher education institutions also have the option of a supervisory complaint (e.g. in the case of complaints about the conduct of the procedure by AAQ).

Publication

The agency publishes the report of the external evaluation after expiry of the appeal period (30 days after opening of the decision).

The Accreditation Council publishes a list of accredited higher education institutions.

Verification of compliance with the requirements

The higher education institution submits a dossier to the Accreditation Council within the set deadline, in which it explains how it has fulfilled the requirements.

The Accreditation Council commissions the agency to review the fulfilment of the requirements. The agency carries out this review – usually with the involvement of experts – according to a defined modality ('sur dossier' or with a shortened visit). It draws up a report for the attention of the Accreditation Council.

The Accreditation Council then decides on the fulfilment of conditions. If the conditions are fulfilled, the accreditation remains valid for the remaining period of the seven-year accreditation period. If the conditions are not fulfilled or not fulfilled within the set period, the Accreditation Council takes the necessary administrative measures according to Article 64 HEdA, i.e. it sets a new deadline, issues new conditions or withdraws the accreditation.

The costs for the condition review procedure will be charged to the HEI.

2 Renewal of accreditation – reaccreditation

2.1 Basic principle: same procedure with adjustments

Every higher education institution that is reaccredited has demonstrated within the scope of the initial accreditation that it has achieved the requirements of the institutional accreditation or that it has at least largely fulfilled the quality standards. The reaccreditation procedure therefore automatically takes into account the effect of the initial accreditation. As far as the assessment of quality standards is concerned, recommendations and conditions are also possible in reaccreditation: requirements for quality assurance systems may have changed in seven years, as may the higher education institutions themselves.

According to the HEdA and the Accreditation Ordinance HEdA, the procedure for ‘first-time renewal of institutional accreditation’ – reaccreditation for short – is basically the same as that for initial accreditation: although the Accreditation Ordinance HEdA makes a conceptual distinction between initial accreditation and first-time renewal of accreditation, it subjects both to the same procedural rules. AAQ uses the leeway allowed by the ordinance to streamline the reaccreditation procedure. In doing so, AAQ uses the term reaccreditation, which is already firmly established in general.

The adjustments to the procedure were triggered by AAQ’s experience from the first procedure cycle, from other national and international procedures, and by various feedback from universities and experts.

The goals of the adjustments are:

- Streamlining and facilitation for higher education institutions and reviewers;
- Inclusion of quality development and transversal themes;
- Increased transparency; and
- Consideration of sustainability aspects.

Unless otherwise described below, the procedures and processes of the initial accreditation apply.

2.2 Submission of the application, opening and timetable

The higher education institution shall apply to the Swiss Accreditation Council for renewal of accreditation in good time so that the decision can be taken before the expiry of the accreditation. The higher education institution chooses an agency to carry out the procedure.

The Accreditation Council informs the higher education institution and the agency about the accreditation. The agency then opens the procedure. It determines the timetable for the procedure together with the higher education institution.

2.3 Procedure report as overall documentation: self-evaluation report, report of the expert group, statement of the higher education institution, application of AAQ

AAQ publishes documentation on the procedure after it has been completed. This is a combined, integrated report that includes editorial parts with different authorship:

- Higher education institution: presentation of the higher education institution, description and self-assessment of the quality standards, statement
- Experts: analysis and assessment of the quality standards, any recommendations and requirements, accreditation recommendation, overall assessment
- AAQ: accreditation application

The self-assessment template is provided with guidance notes which should make it easier for the HEI to respond to the standards in a targeted and concise manner.

In its self-assessment, the higher education institution shall demonstrate the impact of the initial accreditation and describe how the quality assurance system has changed, if any. Major changes in the higher education institution itself must also be described. The higher education institution may refer to the contents of the self-evaluation report from the initial accreditation and attach it as an appendix. However, it is important to maintain readability. The experts should be able to read the self-evaluation report for reaccreditation as a stand alone document.

2.4 External assessment: visits

The concept of a two-stage external assessment with a pre-visit and an on-site visit has proven itself and remains in place for reaccreditation.

The format of 'physical' meetings, i.e. visits conducted on-site at the respective HEI, remains the preferred format. However, experience has also shown that virtual visits are possible in principle. If external circumstances make it impossible to conduct both or one of the rounds on-site as planned, the rounds would not be postponed, but rather conducted online. Hybrid rounds are only planned in exceptional cases.

The following adjustments were made for the reaccreditation programmes compared to the initial accreditation:

Preparation:

The preparation of the experts takes place in advance within the framework of individual briefings.

Pre-visit:

In an 'Open Space – Meet and Greet', various HEI members have the opportunity to exchange views with the experts. AAQ thus offers a platform for a broader HEI public to raise issues and enter into dialogue with the experts. Information from this dialogue can be taken up by the evaluators and deepened or mirrored at the on-site visit if it relates to quality standards.

On the afternoon of the preliminary visit, the reviewers will meet with the HEI management.

On-site visit:

The on-site visit is shortened compared to the initial accreditation: the talks usually last one-and-a-half days and are conducted as a round-table discussion, i.e. different stakeholder groups are represented across the hierarchy. Overall, the number of participants – and thus the effort for the universities – is reduced. With the final meeting of the expert group and the debriefing, the on-site visit usually lasts two days.

The first cycle of institutional accreditation has shown that requirements were spoken about, especially in the areas of quality assurance strategy (audit area I), teaching, research and services (III) as well as in the transversal topics of equal opportunities, sustainability and participation. In order to focus on the impact of the initial accreditation and to support the higher education institutions in these areas, AAQ sets corresponding priorities in its on-site visits. After an initial general round table on basically all subject areas and standards, several focus discussions take place: These each have a special thematic focus or a corresponding perspective. Three focus discussions are thematically predetermined, i.e. the same in all procedures. A fourth focus discussion is determined by the higher education institution, a fifth by the reviewers.

The higher education institution selects either a topic from the standards for its focus topic or a topic that it would like to discuss with the experts without it being directly relevant to accreditation. The experts give oral feedback on this during the debriefing.

The experts, with the support of AAQ, also set a thematic focus based on the documents of the self-assessment and/or the impact of the initial accreditation. This is in the area of quality standards and serves to be able to assess the standards.

- Introductory roundtable on all testing areas
- Roundtable/focus discussion 1: research, teaching and services (test area 3 and others)
- Roundtable/focus discussion 2: transversal topics diversity, sustainability (possible others: digitalisation, transfer)
- Roundtable/focus discussion 3: students' perspective
- Roundtable/focus discussion 4: topic is determined by reviewers
- Roundtable/focus discussion 5: topic is determined by HEI

Examples of focus topics are included in the sample programmes.

2.5 Decision and publication

The decision is communicated to the institution by the Swiss Accreditation Council. The agency publishes the report after expiry of the appeal period (30 days after notification of the decision).

AAQ publishes the report on the procedure without an accreditation decision by the Swiss Accreditation Council.

3 Legal basis and other reference documents

Higher Education Act (HedA):

Federal Act on Funding and Coordination of the Higher Education Sector

<https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2014/691/en>

Accreditation Ordinance:

Ordinance of the Higher Education Council on Accreditation within the Higher Education Sector (HEdA Accreditation Ordinance)

<https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2015/362/en>

Ordinance of the University Council on the Coordination of Teaching at Swiss Universities:

<https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2019/722/de>

(German)

Admission Ordinance FH:

Ordinance of the University Council on Admission to Universities of Applied Sciences and Institutes of Applied Sciences

<https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2021/316/de>

(German)

Ordinance of the Swiss Accreditation Council on the Fees for Accreditation Procedures and Services on behalf of Third Parties (SAC Fees Ordinance, FeeO-SAC)

<https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2018/336/en>

Interpretation aid of the Higher Education Council on the typology of higher education institutions: distinction between universities and university institutes or universities of applied sciences and university of applied sciences institutes

https://shk.ch/images/dokumentation/rechtliche_grundlagen/HSR20200227-503_Hochschultypologie_Auslegungshilfe_DE_def.pdf

(German)

Recommendations of the Higher Education Council on criteria for the qualification of lecturers

<https://shk.ch/de/dokumentation/empfehlungen>

(German)

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area:

<http://www.ehea.info/page-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance>

ECTS User's Guide

https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/ects-users-guide_en.pdf

AAQ's explanations of quality standards

<https://aaq.ch/en/download/explanations-of-quality-standards/>

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