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quality assurance

Institutional accreditation

Guide | 01/07/2015 (Last amended on 15/07/2026)

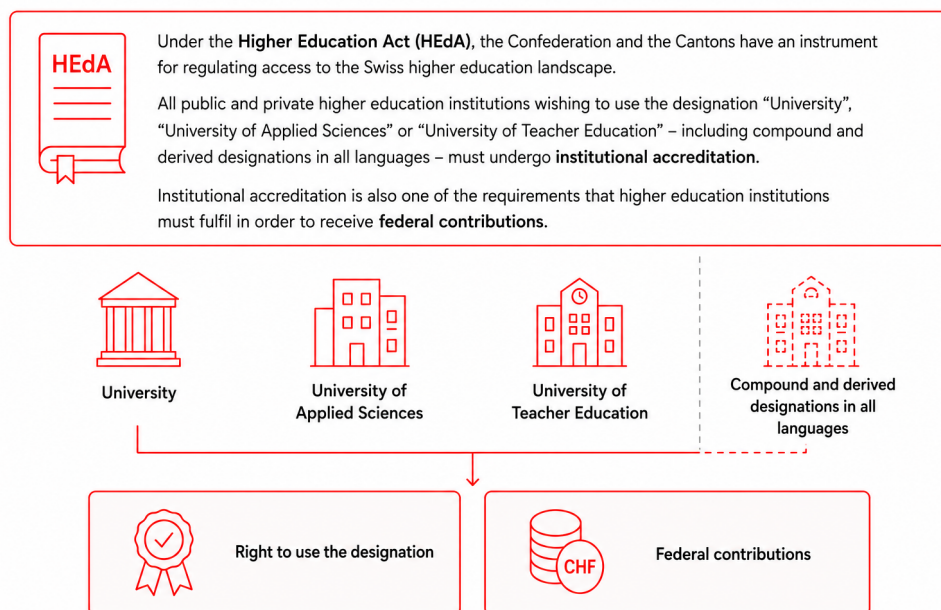
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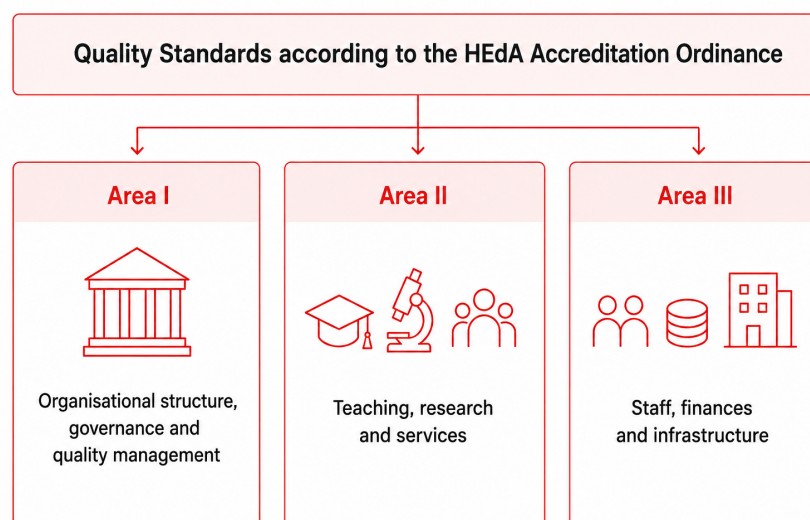
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1. Institutional accreditation

Purpose and object



The object of institutional accreditation is the higher education institution's **quality assurance system**, through which it ensures the quality of its **teaching, research, and services**. This approach makes it possible to reconcile the autonomy of higher education institutions – which are themselves responsible for quality assurance and quality development – with their transparency and accountability obligations. Furthermore, it strengthens the quality culture.



The quality assurance system is evaluated by external experts on the basis of quality standards. They examine the concepts and mechanisms for 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 of its activities and their continuous

development in accordance with its type and specific characteristics.

Role of the actors

The **Swiss Accreditation Council (SAC)** admits the higher education institution to the accreditation procedure and mandates the Swiss Agency of Accreditation and Quality Assurance (AAQ), or another recognised agency, to conduct the procedure. In its role as the supervisory body of the AAQ, the SAC receives the longlist of potential experts for a position statement. At the end of the procedure, the SAC makes the accreditation decision and communicates it directly to the higher education institution. The SAC maintains a list of accredited higher education institutions on its website.

The **higher education institution** submits the application for accreditation to the SAC. It writes the self-assessment report and provides the expert group with all relevant documents and information required for the assessment of the quality standards. It provides the necessary facilities for the visits and invites internal stakeholders to the interviews. The higher education institution comments on the report of the expert group and on the AAQ's accreditation proposal. Following the accreditation decision, it informs the SAC of any fundamental changes affecting the quality standards (HEdA Accreditation Ordinance, Art. 17).

Based on the higher education institution's self-assessment and the visits, the **expert group** assesses the fulfilment of the quality standards. The experts participate in the preliminary visit and the on-site visit, conduct interviews with the higher education institution's stakeholders as "critical friends" and write the report of the expert group, which also includes an accreditation proposal.

The **AAQ** conducts the institutional accreditation procedure. It supports the higher education institution throughout the accreditation process, appoints an expert group and assists them in fulfilling their mandate. Based on the higher education institution's self-assessment and the results of the external assessment, in particular the report of the expert group, the AAQ submits an accreditation proposal to the SAC. In addition, the AAQ publishes the accreditation report on its website.

Procedure

The procedural steps, procedural rules and quality standards are laid down in the HEdA Accreditation Ordinance. The institutional accreditation procedure follows the Administrative Procedure Act and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The procedure consists of the following steps:

- submission of the application to the SAC;
- review of the application and admission to the institutional accreditation procedure by the SAC (decision on admission);
- planning and opening of the procedure, including the conclusion and signing of the contract between the AAQ and the higher education institution;
- self-assessment report by the higher education institution;
- external assessment by independent experts with a two-part visit (preliminary visit and on-site visit);

- report of the expert group;
- accreditation proposal of the agency;
- statement of the higher education institution;
- accreditation decision of the SAC;
- publication of the accreditation report (overall documentation consisting of the self-assessment report, the report of the expert group, the statement of the higher education institution, and the AAQ's accreditation proposal);
- where applicable, verification of the fulfilment of conditions (separate follow-up procedure).

From the opening of the procedure to the accreditation decision by the SAC, an institutional accreditation procedure takes at least 18 months. In the case of a renewal of institutional accreditation (hereinafter referred to as "reaccreditation"), the AAQ opens the procedure no more than 24 months before the expiry of the accreditation period.

For each procedure, a timetable is set between the higher education institution and the AAQ. The higher education institution may withdraw its application for accreditation at any time.

Costs

The costs related to the accreditation procedure are laid down in the SAC Fees Ordinance (FeeO-SAC).

First-time accreditation: CHF 59,000 (excluding VAT)

The costs are calculated for a procedure comprising a one-day preliminary visit and a two-and-a-half-day on-site visit involving five experts. They consist of a flat rate of CHF 32,000 for direct costs (fees, travel expenses, and accommodation of the experts) and a flat rate of CHF 27,000 for indirect costs (AAQ expenses).

Reaccreditation: CHF 53,000 (excluding VAT)

The costs for reaccreditation are lower because the on-site visit is reduced to two days (instead of two and a half days in the case of first-time accreditation).

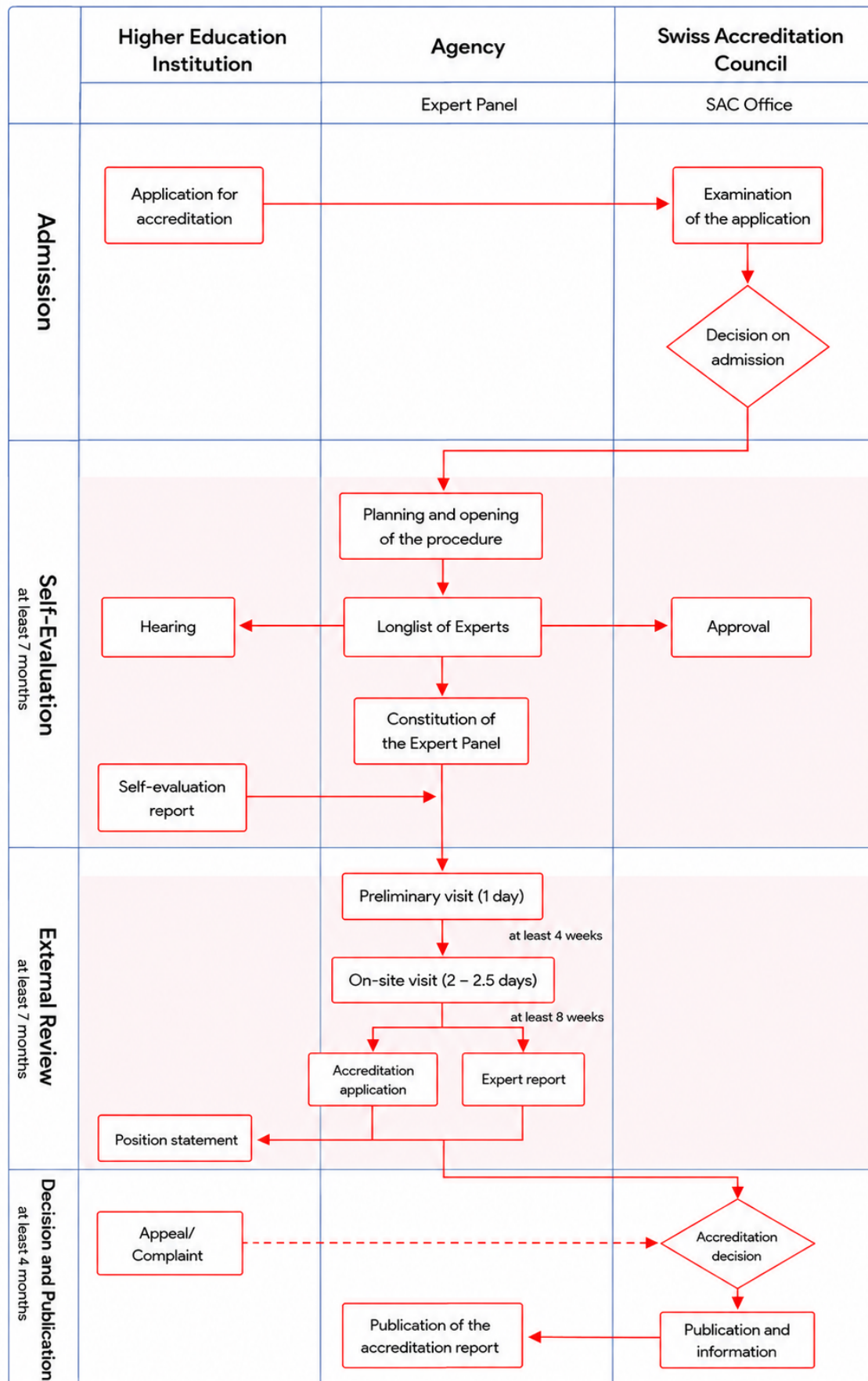
The terms and conditions are set out in contracts that the AAQ concludes with the higher education institution on the one hand and with the experts on the other.

If a higher education institution withdraws its application for accreditation during the procedure, the costs incurred up to that point will be charged.

The costs associated with the self-assessment (internal consultations, drafting of the self-assessment report, organisation of the visits, etc.) are borne by the higher education institution.

The experts receive a daily flat rate from the AAQ for their participation in the visits.

Schematic overview of the procedure



Procedural steps

Opening meeting

After the SAC's decision on admission, the agency formally opens the accreditation procedure together with the higher education institution. The following points are discussed at the opening meeting and recorded in the minutes:

- planning of the accreditation procedure (procedural steps and timetable);
- language: German, French, Italian or English. One language must be defined for the accreditation procedure; a change of language or a combination of several languages within the procedure is not foreseen. As this is an administrative procedure, the agency's accreditation proposal and the accreditation decision are drafted in an official language. The self-assessment report, the report of the expert group, further documentation and the interviews may be entirely in English upon request;
- profile of the expert group (see next chapter).

Composition of the expert group

The expert group appointed by the AAQ consists of at least five members. Its composition takes into account the type, profile, size and other specific characteristics of the higher education institution. The group of experts possesses, as a whole, the national and international experience and knowledge required to carry out its tasks.

In particular, the expert group brings together the following perspectives and experience:

- experience in the area of steering internal quality assurance and quality development within higher education institutions;
- experience in teaching and research and, where applicable, a non-academic perspective or professional experience;
- sufficient knowledge of the Swiss higher education landscape;
- active knowledge of the language of the procedure.

One member of the expert group is a student.

Ideally, the chair of the expert group has recent experience in the management of a higher education institution.

If the higher education institution runs an integrated university of teacher education, the corresponding expertise must be represented within the expert group.

The composition of the expert group also takes into account a diversity of backgrounds and perspectives. The experts must be independent, impartial and capable of assessing the higher education institution objectively.

At the opening meeting, the AAQ discusses the profile of the expert group with the higher education institution. In addition to the criteria laid down in the Accreditation Ordinance, further criteria tailored to the specific characteristics of the higher education institution may be defined.

The AAQ then draws up a longlist with the names of potential experts and submits it to the higher education institution. Individuals for whom a conflict of interest or a lack of independence in relation to the higher education institution is suspected are excluded from the list.

The AAQ submits the longlist to the Swiss Accreditation Council for a position statement. It

then appoints the expert group and designates a chairperson.

The AAQ coordinates the collaboration with the experts and prepares them for their role. The documentation provided includes information on the specific features of the Swiss higher education landscape and on the institutional accreditation procedure. The preparation is tailored to the respective expert group and the type of higher education institution.

Self-assessment

The higher education institution writes its self-assessment using the AAQ's report template and follows the drafting instructions provided therein. The number of pages is specified in the respective chapters; the maximum length of the self-assessment report (including the text forming part of the template) is 100 pages.

The AAQ recommends that the self-assessment process be designed in a participatory approach, i.e. that representatives of the relevant internal stakeholder groups, in particular students, academic mid-level staff, teaching staff, administrative staff and technical staff be involved.

The self-assessment report adopts a reflective and self-critical approach. It contains information, descriptions and analyses that enable the quality standards to be assessed. In particular, it includes the following information:

- a profile of the higher education institution (specific characteristics, organisation, key figures); in the case of reaccreditation, changes within the higher education institution since the first-time accreditation;
- the results of previous quality assurance procedures and the developments derived therefrom, particularly in the case of reaccreditation;
- a presentation of the quality assurance system;
- a description and analysis of the fulfilment of the quality standards (without indicating the degree of fulfilment);
- a presentation of strengths, weaknesses and areas for further development;
- where appropriate, an action plan for the further development of the quality assurance system.

The self-assessment report focuses on the essential aspects. Supporting evidence and additional documentation are provided in the annexes. In drawing up the self-assessment, the higher education institution also takes into account the document "Guidance on the Interpretation of the Quality Standards for Institutional Accreditation".

The self-assessment report serves as the basis for the experts' preparation of the interviews taking place during the visits and for their assessment of the fulfilment of the quality standards.

The AAQ is available to answer any formal questions regarding the self-assessment.

Planning meeting

During a planning meeting, the AAQ and the higher education institution jointly draw up a tailor-made programme for the two visits. Any formal questions relating to the self-assessment can be clarified with the AAQ during the planning meeting.

Preliminary Visit

The AAQ organises the external assessment, which comprises two visits carried out on the premises of the higher education institution: a one-day preliminary visit and a more in-depth on-site visit.

The preliminary visit takes place at least one month before the on-site visit. It includes the preparation of the experts as well as first interviews with representatives of the higher education institution. Furthermore, the expert group approves the final programme for the on-site visit and communicates, where necessary, any requests for additional documentation.

Following the preliminary visit, the AAQ provides the higher education institution with summary minutes of the visit.

On-site visit

The on-site visit gives the experts the opportunity to deepen their understanding and knowledge of the higher education institution's quality assurance system and to assess whether this system is capable of ensuring and further developing the quality of teaching, research and services.

The experts meet representatives of the higher education institution's key groups, in particular the management, heads of the main organisational units and those responsible for quality assurance, as well as representatives of students, academic mid-level staff, teaching staff and administrative and technical staff. The programme also includes working sessions for the experts.

The programme of the on-site visit – i.e. both its structure and the list of interview partners – is prepared by the AAQ in cooperation with the higher education institution. In doing so, the institution's specific characteristics and needs are taken into account.

The on-site visit concludes with a so-called "debriefing", an oral information session in which the experts share their initial impressions with the higher education institution and provide an overview of its strengths and upcoming challenges. At this stage, no final assessment of the fulfilment of the quality standards is yet provided. No discussion with the higher education institution is scheduled as part of this oral feedback session.

In the case of a first-time accreditation, the on-site visit generally lasts two and a half days; in the case of reaccreditation, it lasts two days.

Report of the expert group

Following the on-site visit, the experts write the report of the group of experts with editorial support from the AAQ.

The report includes, in particular:

- an analysis and assessment of the fulfilment of the quality standards;
- an overall assessment (final analysis of strengths and weaknesses);
- where appropriate, proposals for conditions to remedy deficiencies identified regarding the quality standards;
- recommendations for the further development of quality assurance;
- an accreditation proposal (consensus).

The assessment of the fulfilment of the quality standards is carried out as follows:

 The expert panel assesses each standard on a four-level scale: fully fulfilled, largely fulfilled, partially fulfilled, not fulfilled. This is based on the following concept:			
LEVEL	ASSESSMENT	MEANING	CONSEQUENCE
1 	Fully fulfilled	A quality standard is fully fulfilled if concepts and mechanisms for quality assurance exist and these are fully and coherently implemented and allow the higher education institution to ensure the quality of its activities.	 No action required
2 	Largely fulfilled	A quality standard is largely fulfilled if the concepts and mechanisms for quality assurance and their implementation show only minor deficiencies .	 No action required
3 	Partially fulfilled	A quality standard is partially fulfilled if concepts and mechanisms for quality assurance exist, but significant deficiencies or considerable weaknesses are identified in their implementation, or if concepts and mechanisms for quality assurance only exist for certain sub-areas. A quality standard is also considered partially fulfilled if the concepts and/or mechanisms have not yet been implemented .	 Action(s) required
4 	Not fulfilled	A quality standard is not fulfilled if there is a lack of central concepts and mechanisms in relation to the quality assurance system and/or if the higher education institution is unable to ensure the quality of its activities by implementing them.	 Action(s) required
 Recommendations Recommendations can be made irrespective of the degree to which a quality standard is fulfilled and serve to further develop quality. Recommendations possible in all cases			

A condition is intended to remedy a significant deficiency or to ensure compliance with a requirement necessary for accreditation to be maintained. It always relates to a quality standard. In its analysis, the expert group identifies the missing concepts or mechanisms, or the weaknesses in their implementation.

The higher education institution must be able to fulfil the condition(s) within the specified timeframe and to document the fulfilment of the condition(s). The deadline is 6–18 months for first-time accreditation and 12–24 months for reaccreditation. If the expert group concludes that the identified deficiencies cannot be remedied within this period, it proposes that accreditation be refused.

With regard to quality development, the expert group may formulate recommendations. Recommendations are intended to support further development and do not necessarily have to be implemented by the higher education institution. They may be formulated regardless of the degree of fulfilment of a quality standard.

The accreditation proposal of the expert group is based on an overall assessment of the fulfilment of the quality standards.

The writing of the report is subject to the provisions of the Federal Act on Data Protection (FADP).

Accreditation proposal of the agency

After a formal review of the report of the expert group, the AAQ draws up an accreditation proposal for the attention of the Swiss Accreditation Council.

The agency's accreditation proposal is based on the higher education institution's self-

assessment report and the report of the expert group. In justified cases, the accreditation proposal may deviate from the expert group's proposal.

Statement of the higher education institution

The AAQ submits its accreditation proposal and the report of the expert group to the higher education institution for comment. The higher education institution submits its position statement on the report of the expert group and on the accreditation proposal in a formal letter.

The AAQ and the expert group review the higher education institution's statement and, where appropriate, amend the report of the expert group and the accreditation proposal.

The position statement forms an integral part of the overall documentation of the procedure and is submitted to the SAC together with the self-assessment report, the report of the expert group and the agency's accreditation proposal; it is then published.

Decision

The SAC bases its decision on the higher education institution's self-assessment report, the report of the expert group, the agency's accreditation proposal and the position statement of the higher education institution.

The SAC may:

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

Accreditation is valid for five years in the case of first-time accreditation and for eight years in the case of renewal of accreditation.

In its accreditation decision, the SAC determines the terms and conditions for verifying the fulfilment of any conditions. The deadline is 6–18 months for first-time accreditation and 12–24 months for reaccreditation.

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

In accordance with Article 65 of the HEdA, accreditation decisions may be contested to the Federal Administrative Court. In addition, higher education institutions also have the option of a supervisory complaint (e.g. concerning the conduct of the procedure by the AAQ).

Publication

Once the appeal period has expired (30 days after notification of the decision), the AAQ publishes the accreditation report, regardless of whether the accreditation decision is positive or negative.

If a higher education institution withdraws its application for accreditation before the accreditation decision is issued, the accreditation report is not published.

The SAC maintains a list of accredited higher education institutions.

Verification of fulfilment of conditions

The verification of the fulfilment of conditions (hereinafter referred to as the “verification of conditions”) is a follow-up procedure carried out by the agency in accordance with the terms and conditions determined by the SAC.

Within the deadline set by the SAC, the higher education institution submits a dossier to the SAC, setting out how it has fulfilled conditions. The dossier consists of a report and any annexes that enable the assessment of the fulfilment of the conditions. Neither the agency nor the SAC provides a template for this documentation; the higher education institution therefore chooses an appropriate reporting format.

The SAC mandates the AAQ to verify the fulfilment of the conditions. The AAQ carries out this verification in accordance with the defined terms and conditions (with or without experts, “sur dossier” or with a short on-site visit).

If the procedure is carried out with experts, the AAQ appoints experts from the accreditation procedure’s expert group or from the longlist established during the accreditation procedure.

If the SAC has decided that the verification of conditions is to be carried by means of a short on-site visit, the AAQ draws up the programme in consultation with the higher education institution.

The AAQ writes a report in which it assesses whether the conditions have been fulfilled. If only parts of a condition have been fulfilled, the condition is considered not fulfilled in its entirety. Therefore, the four-level assessment scale used for evaluating the quality standards in the accreditation procedure does not apply.

The higher education institution receives the report for comment. In the context of the position statement, no new documents may be submitted that would require a re-examination.

The report concludes with an overall assessment and the AAQ’s conclusions.

The SAC then decides on the fulfilment of the conditions. If the conditions have been fulfilled, the accreditation remains valid for the remainder of the accreditation period. If the conditions have not been fulfilled, the SAC takes the administrative measures in accordance with Article 64 HEdA, i.e. it sets a new deadline, imposes new conditions, or withdraws the accreditation.

The costs of the procedure for the verification of the fulfilment of conditions will be invoiced to the higher education institution. The costs are calculated on the basis of the terms and conditions set out (“sur dossier” or with an on-site visit, number of experts) in accordance with the SAC Fees Ordinance. If the AAQ’s expenditure significantly exceeds the estimated costs calculated on the basis of the flat-rate fees laid down, the AAQ charges the additional costs in accordance with the SAC Fees Ordinance (based on the actual expenditure).

The AAQ publishes the accreditation report on its website (once the 30-day appeal period has expired).

2. Renewal of accreditation / reaccreditation

Any higher education institution undergoing reaccreditation has demonstrated, during its first-time accreditation, that it meets the requirements for institutional accreditation and that it fulfils, at least to a large extent, the quality standards.

Reaccreditation therefore also focuses on the effects of the first-time accreditation. Recommendations and conditions may still be issued.

In accordance with the HEdA and the HEdA Accreditation Ordinance, the reaccreditation procedure aligns, in principle, with the first-time accreditation procedure. Although the Accreditation Ordinance distinguishes terminologically between first-time accreditation and renewal of accreditation, both procedures are subject to the same rules and quality standards.

The AAQ uses the flexibility provided by the regulatory framework to streamline the reaccreditation procedure while at the same time complementing it with elements relating to quality development.

The corresponding adjustments are based on the AAQ's experience during the first accreditation cycle, insights from international practices and feedback from higher education institutions and experts.

Reaccreditation according to the AAQ's concept differs from first-time accreditation in the following respects:



Shortened on-site visit

The on-site visit for reaccreditation generally lasts two days instead of the two and a half days for a first-time accreditation. This reduces both the strain of internal resources of the already accredited higher education institution and the costs of the procedure. The preliminary visit, however, remains one day long, as with a first-time accreditation.



Freely chosen focus topic

The higher education institution may identify an area for development that it wishes to explore in greater depth with the experts. The focus topic is addressed within the framework of the regular accreditation procedure and does not entail any additional costs. In this way, the AAQ aims to provide targeted support to higher education institutions in their further quality development.



Open slot meet & greet

This open discussion format enables members of the higher education institution who are not involved in the on-site visit to get in touch with the expert group. It is not intended for the assessment of the quality standards and may be omitted at the request of the higher education institution.

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: Differences between 'tier-one universities' and 'tier-one colleges' and between 'universities of applied sciences' and 'UAS colleges'

https://www.shk.ch/dam/de/sd-web/9wo4KHPD5WGi/HSR20200227-5.03-Hochschultypologie-Auslegungshilfe_EN_def-1%5B1%5D.pdf

Recommendations of the Higher Education Council on Criteria for the Qualification of Lecturers

https://www.shk.ch/dam/de/sd-web/b4puFemMyOGK/HSR20220224_4.05-3d_Qualifikationen_von_Hochschuldozierenden_259-21%5B1%5D.pdf (German)

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

https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

ECTS User's Guide

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

Guidance on the Interpretation of the Quality Standards for Institutional Accreditation

This document complements the "Recommendations and Interpretation Aids" issued by the Swiss Conference of Higher Education Institutions (<https://www.shk.ch/de/empfehlungen-und-auslegungshilfen> (German)) and replaces the AAQ's previous "Explanations of Quality Standards"

<https://akkreditierungsrat.ch/en/download/guidance-on-the-interpretation-of-the-quality-standards-for-institutional-accreditation/?tmstv=1791290074>

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