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Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Switzerland

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A long history of decentralization and federalism has led to the creation of a highly diverse educational system in Switzerland. Higher education has been regulated individually by a mix of different cantonal and federal laws and consequently their respective quality evaluation systems were also implemented under different legal provisions. This is about to change, as a new law to regulate tertiary education is being developed by the federal council. Initial versions of the proposed law have been developed by various stakeholders from September 2007 to January 2008. The Federal Council is expected to present a consolidated report by the end of May 2008 to the two chambers of parliament for debate. In Switzerland, the quality assessment of higher education has, so far, been regulated by the federal government based on two distinct laws reflecting two different types of higher educational systems. These laws or revised laws are in vigor since December 2000 and October 2005 respectively.

While Switzerland has a highly developed and decentralized network of public higher education institutions, which ask for a “Matura” (equivalent to US college degree) as an entry requirement, there is also a great number of higher education institutions, such as the Universities of Applied Sciences, which focus more on practical learning and are thought mainly to attract those students who decide, after 9 years of obligatory schooling plus completion of an apprenticeship programme. Although the requirements are not harmonized, apprenticeship programmes last for several years, to which one year of study needs to be added in order to qualify for studying at a University of Applied Sciences (UAP).

An overview of quality assessment in higher education and its structure in Switzerland:

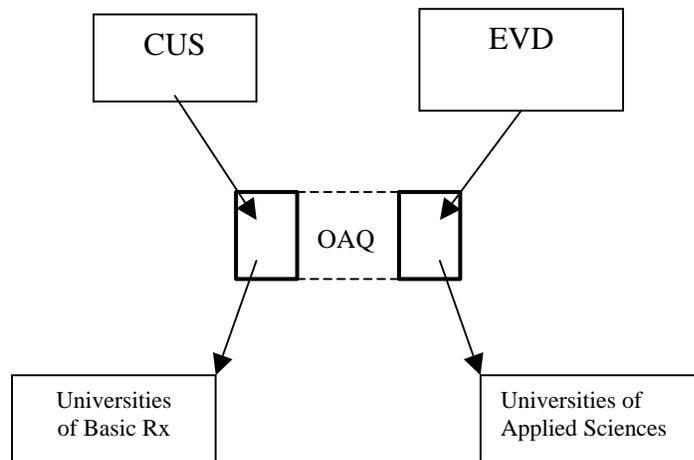
The main policy instrument used in Switzerland for the evaluation of university education has been Accreditation. The accreditation of universities is based on article 7a of the 14th of December 2000 convention on the co-operation of higher education between the federal government and the 16 cantons (provinces) hosting public universities.

The national organization for the accreditation and the quality assurance of Swiss higher education institutions (OAQ), performs the procedures of accreditation and quality assurances at the university level. This is done on behalf of the Conference of Swiss Universities (CUS), which is the joint organization of the cantons and the Confederation for university politics. While requests of private and public institutions alike are sent to the OAQ, it is the CUS which has the authority to make final decisions based on recommendations provided by the OAQ. With regard to the procedures of accreditation, the OAQ benefits from full independency in regard to working process and decision-making.

The current accreditation system in the field of Swiss Universities of Applied Sciences is the result of a partial revision of the federal law regulating the Universities of Applied Sciences, which took effect in October 2005. Specifically, article 17a defines the rules to and procedures of the accreditation of the Universities of Applied Sciences and the individual study programs. As of January 2008 the OAQ has been recognized officially as one of 5 agencies, which can audit Swiss Universities of Applied Sciences for institutional accreditation. After completion of such audits, the OAQ presents a proposal to the Swiss Department for Economic Affairs (EVD), which takes a final decision on requests and renewals for accreditation. With regard to study programmes, the OAQ can perform audits and

accredit autonomously, without having to refer to the Ministry of Economic Affairs (EVD) for final approval.

As an external evaluation report of the OAQ puts it, the OAQ finds itself in a special situation in the sense that it is “serving a wide variety of customers and ... applying numerous different procedures”.



Swiss universities are required by law to install and maintain a quality assurance system. In order to receive federal subsidies, they are obliged to successfully pass a quality audit. The legal sources of that obligation are article 7a and article 11a of the federal law on the promotion of universities (UFG) of the 8th of October 1999.

However, although the Higher Education Institutions have to respect certain common standards, they enjoy a large autonomy with regard to the type of quality assurance system.

For some Universities of Applied Sciences the before-mentioned federal law, regulates accreditation but is also requires the HEIs to establish quality assurance systems. However, this federal law is rather unspecific on the issue and the Federal Department for Economic Affairs simply states on its homepage that, in conformity with the European goals formulated in the Bologna declaration, a new quality

assurance system will be introduced by the year 2007. This new Q.Q. system is being developed at the current time.

Goals:

The goals of quality assessment are multifold. Accreditation represents a formal and transparent procedure consisting of clearly derived standards, which are used to verify whether an institution or a specific study programme fulfills the minimal quality requirements. Accreditation allows for increased national and international visibility of higher education capacities and can serve students, representatives of higher education institutions, politicians, employers and society as a whole as an instrument for orientation and decision-making. Additionally, accreditation contributes to recognition of Swiss image and to the improving of the comparability of a study certificate of Switzerland at national and international levels.

Quality audits help to identify practical aspects of structural problems, which are not frequently planned during accreditation. The two processes can therefore be considered to be a complement to any policy implemented instruments.

The OAQ, as the National Organ of Accreditation and Quality Assurance, has also been a member of different international networks and has concluded various agreements on bilateral and multilateral cooperation and the sharing of information and expertise. The latter is the case with Spain's ANECA (September 2003) and DACH, a regional network with Germany and Austria, (July 2003). The OAQ also represents Switzerland in the two major European quality assurance agencies (ENQA and ECA), whose main objectives are the coordination of European Quality Assurance and the transnational recognition of national accreditation respectively.

Policy:

The policy of the OAQ and of the Swiss federal government with regard to accreditation and quality assurance is based on two principles. The first principle aims to safeguard international best practices and to make sure that Swiss higher education institutions are competitive and ranked highly on the global scale of HBI. The second principle aims to find balance between the central government's policy preference, the OAQ and the Swiss federal government who needs to take into consideration Swiss specificities of higher education but also in terms of administrative organization.

Swiss Higher education and primary and secondary education have long had an impeccable reputation and represented the overwhelming majority of education at institutions. Private schools, often of good international reputation, have received little recognition and their students are subject to particular scrutiny when looking for employment in the national labour market. It is only recently that a change in attitude has taken place, which has led to an increased acknowledgment and even promotion of private education institutions. This has been particularly reinforced by the results of the PISA studies, which for the first time, has made it possible to compare, although to a quite limited extent, the efficiency of education systems across different countries. Swiss schools and universities performed rather well but taking into account the fact that Switzerland pays itself, by far, the world's most expensive education system, many have been disappointed by the results and have asked for better organization, of which the first step has been found to be national harmonization and better coordination. However, private institutions are still treated with suspicion and their access to official and nationally owned education accreditation remains difficult and restricted.

Policy Implementation:

Accreditation

In terms of accreditation as well as of quality assurance it is important to distinguish between assessments at the institutional level and assessments at the programme level and to identify strengths and weaknesses of both policy instruments.

Institutional assessments enhance institutional quality mechanisms and facilitate the development of a quality culture. They are also a resource-efficient methods, since they respect the autonomy of tertiary education institutions, while at the same time making sure that minimum requirements are being implemented. Programme assessments are useful for higher education institutions, which have specialized in a particular academic field. As an HB initiative gives more weight and priority to a specific program from the overall, institutional context, it attempts to make meaningful comparisons on the grounds of educational content and objectives. Such specialization made it easier for a future Higher Education Institution to create an education programme along the lines required by the Bologna reforms, hence making it easier to compare it with other programmes through what is known as the Bologna reform, which standardizes study certificates and is meant to harmonize the level of acquired knowledge

In contrast with other European countries, Switzerland's accreditation system is so far not mandatory. Public and private institutions as well as study programmes can apply for accreditation but do not have to undergo it.

The Accreditation process takes place in three steps: The first step consists of a self-assessment by the concerned university. The second step is an external assessment through an independent group of experts and the third step is the final decision taken by the CUS based on the recommendation of the OAQ. The final step could result in yes, no or a "conditional yes". An unconditionally positive answer leads to an accreditation valid for 7 years. There exists the possibility of a pre-accreditation for university institutions, which have not yet started their activities. Such pre-accreditations, if successful would be valid for 3 years. Applicants undergoing a preliminary examination by the OAQ, which it conducts according to a published list of criteria. Failure to pass the examination results in a CUS decision

to reject a request for accreditation. However, this decision can be contested at an independent arbitral authority.

The accreditation of Universities of Applied Sciences takes place in a very similar fashion, except that decision making power has now shifted from the CUS to the Federal Department of Economic Affairs.

At the beginning of the year 2003 the OAQ received a mandate from the federal government to control the internal measures for quality assurances taken by Swiss universities. After approval of OAQ's concept for these controls was approved by a subunit of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs in May 2003, quality audits were conducted for the first time from July 2003 to May 2004. Quality audits have followed the same rationale consisting of an initial self-assessment followed by an external assessment by an independent organization.

The consolidated results are then published and made available to the public. In February 2005, the OAQ published a final report on the 2003/04 audit cycles. This report and the discussion of the results with the different Swiss universities led to the development of guidelines (including instruments) for internal quality assurance, which amongst other things, made sure that the quality audits were in conformity with the ENQA guidelines.

Since it was decided that these audits were to take place every four years, another audit cycle was undertaken in 2007/08, the results of which are not currently available to the public. Meanwhile, in December 2006 the CUS elaborated guidelines for quality assurance based on ENQA-standards, which, amongst other things, emphasized a) the need for a publicly accessible education strategy, b) availability of knowledge about procedures and responsibilities of the respective HB institutions, c) self-assessment, d) personnel development, e) systematic collection and analysis of information and f) transparent communication. It has been stressed in the OAQ's concept that quality audits should cover not only quality control but also quality development and that quality assurance must be understood as an

integral part of the university's' overall strategy, covering all subunits through systematic application. Hence, the results of internal and external evaluations must be used continuously to improve the quality of teaching and research.

In general, the evaluation of quality audits has shown good results. While the average satisfaction of expert panels was 4.6 (with the scale maximum being 5), the universities actually graded themselves poorer, with an average satisfaction rate of 3.6. The quality audits also seem to have contributed to certain changes introduced after the first audit cycle took place in 2003/04. The University of Lausanne, for example, introduced a vice-rectory for quality, a committee for the valorization of teaching and research and has now moved on to systematically evaluate all of the faculty members. The University of Bern organized various events during the academic 2006/07 year, which it termed the "quality year", and subsequently developed a quality concept.

Changes:

On the 21st of May 2006 the Swiss people voted on the "federal resolution for the rearrangement of the constitutional provisions with regard to education".

According to Swiss law, any change to the constitution requires approval by a popular vote. Approval of new laws are only reached if approval is reached based on a simple majority of votes in the first chamber and by a qualified vote of at least more than 13 cantons of the 26 cantons. The result of the particular vote was 85,6% in favor, and 14,4% against it!

This overwhelming majority shows that changes in education at the federal level were not only the result of external and administrative concerns but also a response to popular demand. With increased intra-cantonal mobility, there was a greater demand for the harmonization of the educational systems, mainly at the primary and secondary level. Inter alia, they asked for the harmonization of the entry age

into obligatory school, of similar length and level objectives of teaching, of comparable examination and the recognition of diplomas issued by different cantons.. As the population perceived the cantonal governments to be rather reluctant to agree to harmonization, they pressured the federal government, which hitherto had a traditionally weak authority in education matters, to amend the constitution in such a way that it could enforce solutions on a national level if cantons would not work out something by themselves.

With regard to higher education, a draft version of a new law on “the promotion of tertiary education and the coordination of the higher education field” has been proposed and it has gone through a consultation process from September 2007 to January 2008 with more than 150 stakeholder organizations involved. The federal government’s consolidated report is expected to be made public by May 2008.

Quality assurance is just one of the many issues that were to be reformed but so far, it can be said that the following changes seem to receive support from a multitude of stakeholders:

- **Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences are put on an equal footing and a new accreditation council will be established which deals with accreditation of both types of higher education. It will consist of 15 –20 independent members, elected by the Swiss Higher Education Conference, which represents the highest instances in the field of higher education in Switzerland. This highest instance is composed of the seven federal councils or (ministries) who form the government, and representatives from the 14 cantons, which host at least one higher educational institution. The members of the accreditation council will be elected for a period of four years with the possibility of a one-time re-election. The elected members will represent the circles of teaching, scientific research, the economy and the world of employment as well as the student bodies. The OAQ will be subordinated to the accreditation council. Through its independent nature,**

the accreditation council will live up to the European requirements of decision making by non-political bodies.

- **In the case of institutional accreditation, the OAQ's role as an auditor is exclusive. This centralization of authority helps to address adequately the specificities of the Swiss education system as well of the specifically Swiss development in the field of quality assurance. In the European higher education field, institutional accreditation is defined as a national, sovereign act. The current system provides for homogeneity and transparency in the procedural conduct.**

- **In the case of programme accreditation, the OAQ is but one of several accreditation agencies recognized by the accreditation council.**

- **Quality assurance remains a responsibility of the Higher Education Institutions themselves. Common standards put in place by the Swiss federal government are required but the procedure remains vague. This means that comparing the efforts of the different Higher Education Institutions in the field of quality assurance will remain a difficult task, as methods are neither homogeneous nor coherent nationally. However, the OAQ will carry on performing quality audits periodically in order to make sure that higher education institutions comply with their minimum legal obligations.**

Only higher education institutions, which have been accredited according to the law, are entitled to call themselves “University” or “University of Applied Sciences” or any derivative of these denominations. Yet, in the consultation process that has been finalized a few months ago, the OAQ has pointed out to the fact that these denominations are only considered in the official Swiss languages and this regulation does not include English versions, which are often used (and abused) by privately owned institutions.

Conclusions:

Swiss educational policy regulating Higher Educational Institutions has undergone several important adjustments and continues to be affected by new developments in parliament and in the Government. An general understanding seems to exist that the HEI need to be seriously overhauled and the same accounts for the Universities of Applied Sciences.

What is not yet very much developed is the understanding of the great majority of the teaching faculties, is that continued education and life long learning have not yet been sufficiently addressed by the current debates in the government, parliaments and the media and need to be covered by future legislation including possible coverage of enterprise training and adult training.

Bibliography

Final report on the evaluation of the Center for Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss universities, Conference of Swiss Universities, Berne, 2006

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Laws covering Higher Education in Switzerland

Art. 17a¹ Accréditation et assurance qualité

¹ La Confédération, les organes responsables des hautes écoles spécialisées et les hautes écoles spécialisées assurent et encouragent la qualité de la formation sanctionnée par le diplôme, de la recherche appliquée, du perfectionnement et des prestations à des tiers. Les hautes écoles spécialisées et leurs filières d'études sont accréditées.

² Le département accrédite les hautes écoles spécialisées et leurs filières d'études. Il édicte des directives sur l'accréditation.

³ Le département peut convenir avec les cantons de déléguer à des tiers l'examen des demandes d'accréditation et, sur demande et dans des cas dûment motivés, l'accréditation de certaines filières d'études.

⁴ La Confédération prend à sa charge les frais de l'accréditation et de l'examen des demandes. Lorsque l'accréditation d'une filière d'études est déléguée sur demande à des tiers, la Confédération prend à sa charge 50 % au plus des frais imputables.

Art. 63a¹ Hautes écoles

¹ La Confédération gère les écoles polytechniques fédérales. Elle peut créer, reprendre ou gérer d'autres hautes écoles et d'autres institutions du domaine des hautes écoles.

² Elle soutient les hautes écoles cantonales et peut verser des contributions à d'autres institutions du domaine des hautes écoles reconnues par elle.

³ La Confédération et les cantons veillent ensemble à la coordination et à la garantie de l'assurance de la qualité dans l'espace suisse des hautes écoles. Ce faisant, ils tiennent compte de l'autonomie des hautes écoles et des différentes collectivités responsables, et veillent à l'égalité de traitement des institutions assumant des tâches de même nature.

⁴ Pour accomplir leurs tâches, la Confédération et les cantons concluent des accords et délèguent certaines compétences à des organes communs. La loi définit les compétences qui peuvent être déléguées à ces organes et fixe les principes applicables à l'organisation et à la procédure en matière de coordination.

⁵ Si la Confédération et les cantons n'atteignent pas les objectifs communs par leurs efforts de coordination, la Confédération légifère sur les niveaux d'enseignement et sur le passage de l'un à l'autre, sur la formation continue et sur la reconnaissance des institutions et des diplômes. De plus, la Confédération peut lier le soutien aux hautes écoles à des principes de financement uniformes et le subordonner à la répartition des tâches entre les hautes écoles dans les domaines particulièrement onéreux.