

# AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION. THE EXAMPLE OF THE AUSTRIAN ACCREDITATION COUNCIL (ÖAR)

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## **Abstract**

*The ongoing necessity of quality and quality assurance in the whole Bologna process remains one of the main issues for European policy makers. The aim to create comparable systems to guarantee quality within higher education systems are the reasons for national developments and their eagerness to reform. The situation in Austria is in the centre of discussion and shall exemplify one way to cope with international developments and the need to establish a comprehensive quality assurance system. The main purpose of this paper is to provide a deeper insight into the work and problems of the Austrian Accreditation Council (ÖAR), a quality assurance agency which is responsible for re-/accreditation and supervision of Austrian private universities. As the author was a former scientific staff member at the office of the ÖAR, the paper looks behind the scenes of higher education policies and will strengthen the insistent demand for further reforms. In spite of the short history the ÖAR can be considered as one of the main national key players in the field of quality assurance as well as an internationally accepted quality assurance agency.*

**Key words:** accreditation, quality assurance, Bologna process.

## **Introduction**

Quality is one of the main issues of the institutional and political agendas of higher education policies throughout Europe. While funding is certainly a limit to their expansion, higher education is still growing; with a transition process of Western societies towards technology-based economies and a need to mobilize human resources being visible (Neave/Van Vught 1991). Nevertheless European universities have always tried to evaluate their activities by a way of examinations and published papers. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century especially governments have been interested in the quality of higher education because of “*underwriting the finance of higher education as well as defining the legal and administrative framework within which that institution evolved*” (Neave, 1988, p.8).

In almost all nations quality assurance is regulated in national laws (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004) and managed within the lines of academic disciplines (“*peer review*”) (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p.86). Quality assurance is linked to certain standards which are based on shared understanding (formal rules and regulations) (Luijten-Lub, 2007, p.61). Different kind of monitoring procedures have been elaborated from the governmental processes for evaluating quality in terms of indicators. The main reason for more monitoring procedures is the massification of higher education and as consequence the lack of public money to finance this expansion (Harvey & Akling, 2002, pp. 1-2).

Today’s universities are expected to concentrate on results (productivity of scientific work,

scientific discoveries, training of professionals etc.) to fulfil their goals. Though, governments increased the autonomy of universities as a new strategy of self-regulation (Neave 1990). However, the political context of most Western European higher education systems changed dramatically in the past which consequently affected quality control mechanisms in a significant way. One of the important issues is the accreditation of higher education systems which is rooted in American higher education and is defined in the Anglophone literature as “*a process of quality control and assurance in higher education, whereby, as a result of inspection or assessment, or both, an institution or its programs are recognized as meeting minimum acceptable standards*” (Adelman, 1992, pp.1313-1318). Accreditation includes quality control and approval of academic programmes as well as the recognition of institutions and programmes. In the last decades the tendency to establish cross-national and multiple accreditation systems in European nations is visible (Maassen, 1997, p.122).

In the European context the call for more visibility, transparency and comparability of quality in higher education is tightly connected with the Bologna Declaration of the European Union Ministers of Education in 1999 and this tendency continues to be one of the central themes in the whole Bologna Process (Prague 2001, Berlin 2003, Bergen 2005, London 2007). The necessity of quality and quality assurance in the whole Bologna process is still ongoing and did not decrease, especially now that the international legal framework for recognition in the European Higher Education Area is more or less established. Nevertheless, Europe needs to develop a system concerning both the qualification of formal knowledge, as well as the knowledge of quality (and accreditation) (Rauhvargers, 2004, p.345).

In most European countries, quality assurance agencies are autonomous and organized on a national or regional level, in both the university sector, as well as in the non-university sector. The functions of European agencies could be ‘*disseminating knowledge and information*’ and ‘*accreditation*’ (accountability, transparency and comparability seen as objectives of the performed activities). A board or a council with some kind of academic board members are common in most of these agencies with mainly governmental funding of the evaluation activities (Thune et al., 2003, pp.7-8).

In the following the development of quality assurance in Austrian higher education is described in a system-wide perspective before concentrating on one quality assurance agency – the Austrian Accreditation Council (ÖAR).

#### *Austria – Accreditation in various ways*

Austria has a short history in terms of accreditation and evaluation in higher education. While public (i.e., state) universities are still on their way to find their suitable quality assurance models, the *Fachhochschul*-sector as well as private universities have already implemented internationally recognised forms of accreditation and evaluation schemes (Pechar & Klepp, 2004, p.45).

The practice of quality assurance was introduced into policy discussions and reforms quite lately compared to other European countries (f.e., in Finland first discussion on quality assurance started in the mid-1980s). Discussions on quality assurance and strategies started not till the 1990s and were primarily linked “*to enhance the efficient and effective use of public financial resources (i.e., accountability) and to the idea of loosening ties between state ministries and institutions (i.e., autonomy)*”. With the “*management*” reform through the UOG 1993 deregulation, decentralisation, effective planning and governance structures have been promoted as well as evaluation and quality control mechanisms have been implemented (deans of studies, university management teams etc.) (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002, pp.363ff). In this regard Austria was a European exception because other countries already had experiences with evaluation, benchmarking, rankings and similar procedures while Austria had to meet the challenge to develop internal instruments for quality assurance procedures. First of all only the feedback of students has been collected but the findings have not been implemented most of the time. The Austrian Rectors’ Conference (since 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2008 the Austrian Rectors’ Conference was re-named *Universities Austria*) took part in a European pilot project on quality assurance in the mid-1990s, where dramatic shortcomings even in basic data and analysis of student feedbacks compared to international developments have been figured out. Thus, the relatively rigid Austrian higher education system was forced to change from the outside in different ways (Konrad & Fiorioli, 2007).

In this context Austria developed a higher professional education sector (non-university sector) parallel to the university sector. Compared to other international policies the Austrian higher education system entered the road to institutional differentiation very late with the creation of a non-university sector of higher education (Leitner, 2006, p.8; Pfeffer et al., 2000, pp.1ff) as for instance, the British polytechnics or the *Instituts universitaires de technologie (IUT)* in France were already established in the 1960s (Teichler, 2008, p.1). Nevertheless the establishment of a non-university sector is comparable with the mainstream of national policies in European higher education systems (Huisman & Wende, 2004, p.351). The *Fachhochschulrat* (in short: FHR) was newly set up in 1994 and builds up by accrediting new programmes rather than transforming existing educational institutions. The establishment of this new higher education sector was a radical break from the previous traditional system with state-run universities (Leitner, 2006, p.8). The development of the Austrian FH-sector shows that private initiatives and market-orientation can be only successful if a careful quality assurance through a system of accreditation and evaluation is applied (Leitner 2004, p.110). With the establishment of a non-university sector Austria shows “*entrepreneurial potential*” and has developed a serious competition for universities (Leitner, 2006, p.9).

Another type of higher education institutions in Austria was introduced eight years ago – since then it was possible to establish a private university. This higher education sector will be explained in more detail in the next chapter.

These new sectors implicated transformation according to the quality assurance of the whole system because it was necessary to introduce at least the approval of institutions or academic programmes in form of an *ex ante*-accreditation. Though, these two segments keep relatively small in the higher education system because they only count approximately 12% of the whole student population (Konrad & Fiorioli, 2007).

For public universities the University Act 2002 (UG 2002) brought essential changes because universities became autonomous institutions which goes in line with the concepts of neoliberalism and increased bureaucratic authority (Leitner, 2006, p.8). Furthermore, according to the UG 2002 universities can develop their own quality management systems (Pechar & Pellert, 2004, p.325). Due to the new national concurrence the public higher education sector developed or adopted internal and external quality assurance. Nevertheless, no governmental approval of the curriculum and its quality is added. External evaluation can be made (supra-institutional) and system-wide evaluations of single disciplines are made occasionally (Beerkens, 2003, p.56; Pechar, 2005). Although there are legal regulations for public universities to develop an internal university quality management there are no defined parameters for the design of the quality management system. It lies within the institutions to implement different processes. Though, external quality assurance is not compulsory which “*runs the risk of external quality assurance being largely avoided*” (Hanft & Kohler, 2008, p.53). At the beginning of 2004, the *Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA)* was set up to assist higher education institutions to implement quality assurance procedures, coordinate evaluations and elaborate quality assurance standards (Pechar & Pellert, 2004, p.325). Nevertheless, quality assurance schemes at public universities are still quite flexible.

## ÖAR – Austrian Accreditation Council (ÖAR)

As the Austrian higher education sector is segmented into different kind of institutions they are consequently differently organised in terms of financing, governing as well as in terms of their quality assurance procedures. In this respect the concentration will be laid on the private higher education sector, which is the most recent development in Austrian higher education and keeps to be the smallest sector.

As in many other countries in the world Austria followed the tendency and opened up the higher education sector to private providers. Until 1999 there have been only public universities under the legislation of Austrian law. With the establishment of the non-university sector a private form of organisation was implemented although these institutions are public (Pechar, 2001, p.261). Thus, in November 1999 there was set an important step for the higher education sector in Austria: since then, the University Accreditation Act (UniAkkG) allows private institutions to apply for accreditation and to achieve the status of a private university in Austria. The growing interest of foreign and

transnational institutions in offering academic programmes in Austria and the necessity to provide a legal basis and an instrument of quality control were the main reasons for implementing this law.

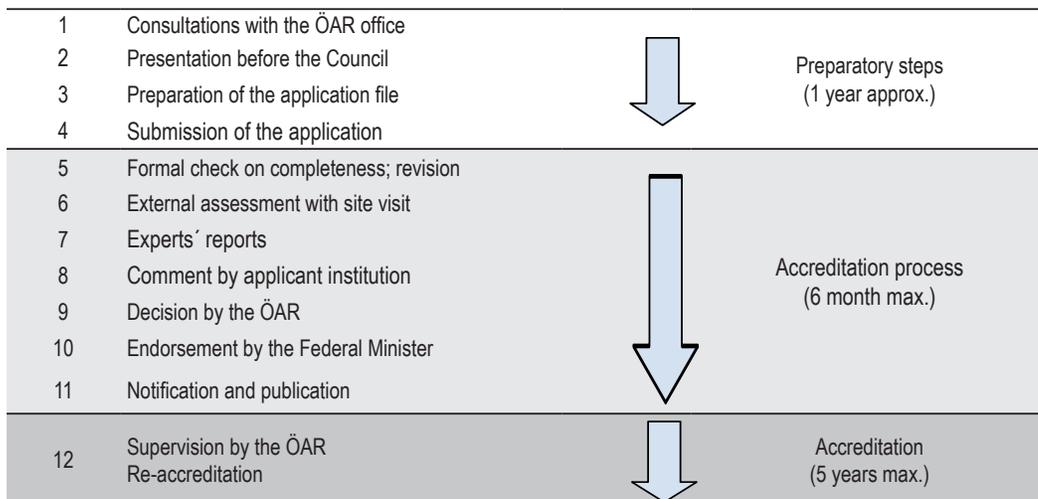
The Ministry of Science and Research (previously Ministry of Education, Science and Culture) established in 1999 the *Austrian Accreditation Council* (ÖAR) with full decision-making authority in terms of accreditation of private universities. Thus, the university sector was opened up for private suppliers and quality was ensured at the same time. The Council consists of eight members who are acknowledged experts in the field of higher education and not bound by any directives (Pechar & Klepp, 2004, p.52; Fiorioli et al., 2007). Furthermore, the Council is not an advisory but a decision-making body. Currently four of the members are from Austria whereas the others are from other European countries. Due to this composition of the Council a Austrian majority on decision-making is not possible. In that way independence in national conflicts of interests in the decision-making process can be guaranteed.

To clarify the term “*private*” in this context it has to be stated that private universities in Austria do not have to be private in terms of privately financed. The only exception is that private universities are not to receive subsidies from the Federal Government (as it is for public universities) but funding from the regions or from municipalities is possible.

The ÖAR decides on accreditation as well as reaccreditation of private universities and their academic programmes. Furthermore the ÖAR is responsible for the supervision of accredited private universities. Private universities are accountable to the Accreditation Council concerning expenditure for classroom space, current expenditure and personnel costs and quality assurance (Beerkens, 2003, p.43; Fiorioli et al., 2007). The accreditation procedure, which is seen as learning experience by the Council, is illustrated in figure 1.

An accredited institution has the right to award recognized Austrian degrees and titles as well as to use the name private university. Currently there are twelve private universities with 149 academic programmes (theology, law, social sciences, business, cultural studies, public health, medicine, information technology, music and arts) accredited which already comprise more than 4200 students.

Next to carry out accreditation procedures the ÖAR has to submit an annual report on its activities to the National Assembly by implication (Beerkens, 2003, p.43; Fiorioli et al., 2007). At the international level the ÖAR plays a central role and is member of various international networks in the field of quality assurance (f.e., ENQA, ECA, INQAAHE, D-A-CH) which shows its embedding and involvement into the international quality assurance community. Last year the ÖAR underwent an external evaluation to examine if the tasks of the UniAkkG, the membership criteria of ESG/ENQA (*European Standards and Guidelines for External Quality Assurance Agencies*) and the ECA *Code of Good Practice* are fulfilled. Summarizing it can be stated that the ÖAR fulfils mainly the criteria and prolonged the ENQA membership (expert report, recommendations and follow-up measures are listed on the ÖAR website under <http://www.akkreditierungsrat.at>).



**Figure 1. The accreditation process.**

Where are the key features of the Austrian private sector? To be pointed out positively private universities have selective admission requirements, offer innovative forms of training together with intensive support and fill niches where completing an academic programme was not possible before. Furthermore students at private universities are more seen as customers as they have to pay for their education and at the same time are able to complete their studies on time. On the other side private universities are completely new institutions and are only accredited for a certain time limit. They only offer a small range and variety of programmes and often lack of a “critical mass” (flying faculty). Moreover the lack of research activities is pointed out and the teacher’s qualification is questioned. In that respect accreditation on institutional level strengthens their position in terms of management (structural changes and internal quality culture) and faculty (long term contracts, teaching load, research funding). On the programme level accreditation concentrates on different aspects concerning the curriculum which are stated in the Bologna Process: ECTS/workload, modularisation, learning outcomes, skills and competences.

The ÖAR can be seen as gatekeeper in the private higher education sector when looking at the number of applications, especially in terms of institutional accreditation: in terms of applications including the number of projects (that did not submit an application) only 15% have been accredited positively.

Especially interesting to establish a private university is the new situation in Austria that courses with university character (in German: *Lehrgänge universitären Charakters*, LUC), which could be provided by private suppliers outside universities (f.e. further education institutions, Federal Economic Chambers, etc.) and offer courses with academic grade or title, are losing their legal basis by 2010. Now those providers are searching for new possibilities as f.e. offering courses together with public universities or even establishing a private university. The tendency to establish more private universities and the interest of students to attend an academic programme at a private university will continue.

## Conclusion and Discussions – Where to go?

This national framework on quality assurance in higher education shows the necessity of quality assurance instruments for the discussion at the international level. Austria has taken great efforts in its educational sector to make their population fit for future challenges and to develop as well as enhance their quality assurance systems continuously. At present the ÖAR is responsible for private universities and the FHR for the non-university sector while quality assurance schemes at public universities have been lax until now. Initiatives at the public sector have been made, however, to implement quality assurance procedures, coordinate evaluations and elaborate quality assurance standards with the help of AQA.

As in Austria there are various quality assurance agencies with different objectives it would be interesting to see the interactions between them and how these links will be developed. In this context Hackl (2008) asks the following questions: “*Will there be eventually be only one quality assurance agency for all higher education? Will this put an end to the binary system? Will this be by accident or design?*” (p.40). At the beginning of 2007 the grand coalition decided on a mutual consent the reorganisation of AQA, further development of the ÖAR and the quality assurance of university continuing education (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich, 2007, p.101). Till now nothing changed in all these aspects and in summer 2008 the grand coalition broke up. What a new coalition will bring and which effects it will have on the quality assurance system in Austria is still unclear. The need to enhance quality and create a more comprehensive quality assurance system is evident but the road Austria is going to take is not decided yet.

In whole Europe the discussion on a comprehensive accreditation of public universities in all academic fields is visible. In that respect it has to be balanced between a realistic assignment of personal and the desired reliability of the outcomes. Till now the discussion is still ongoing if a pure quality audit of institutions or a comprehensive accreditation of all academic programmes is the better way and an arguable compromise can be found. In Austria the establishment of accreditation procedures can be interpreted as a shift towards international competition rather

than cooperation (Huisman & Wende, 2004, p.354) while the public sector in Austria can and will not refuse to participate in the whole discussion process.

Although there is no European “model” of quality assurance, the closest form is set up in the Bologna declaration in 1999 with the goal to develop comparable criteria and methodologies in terms of quality assurance. As all quality assurance agencies (FHR, ÖAR and AQA) are full members of ENQA there is a common framework all agencies are following. While it can be seen as a good starting point, it must be noted that each agency has specific additions or requirements to modify and extend this “general model” (Brennan & Shaw, 2000). This is the road that has been taken by Austria – having common features in terms quality assurance in different types of higher education institutions while trying to modify their quality assurance system to their purposes.

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*Useful links*

Austrian Accreditation Council (ÖAR)

[www.akkreditierungsrat.at](http://www.akkreditierungsrat.at)

University Accreditation Act (UniAkkG)

[www.akkreditierungsrat.at/files/downloads\\_engl\\_08/E\\_UniAkkG.pdf](http://www.akkreditierungsrat.at/files/downloads_engl_08/E_UniAkkG.pdf)

Fachhochschul-Council (FHR)

[www.fhr.ac.at](http://www.fhr.ac.at)

Austrian Quality Assurance Agency (AQA)

[www.aqa.ac.at](http://www.aqa.ac.at)

Federal Ministry of Science and Research

[www.bmwf.gv.at](http://www.bmwf.gv.at)

The Bologna-Process

[www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna)

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

[www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu)

European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA)

[www.eaconsortium.net](http://www.eaconsortium.net)

International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

[www.inqaahe.org](http://www.inqaahe.org)

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