



AUS

American Institute
of Applied Sciences
in Switzerland

QUALITY ASSURANCE STRATEGY

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1. INTRODUCTION

In order to ensure the systematic development of its operations, the quality assurance system at the American Institute of Applied Sciences in Switzerland (AUS) was designed to cover the whole range of institutional activities, including teaching, research, governance, administration, services, and resources, and to be operated in close alignment with Part I of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education specifically and the European Higher Education Area more generally.

At AUS, quality assurance is understood as the sum of actions undertaken by the institution to meet the expectations of its internal and external stakeholders as well as the expectations the institution has defined for itself through its Strategic Plan and the formal system of policies, with the overall aim of enhancing the quality of the student learning experience through principles of transparency, predictability, continuous improvement, and stakeholder engagement. Quality assurance lies at the core of AUS operations and is an internal strategic mechanism of high relevance for good teaching, management, and administration.

The responsibility for quality assurance is of organizational nature and does not rest only with a dedicated unit or person, but it is a concern of each and every member of the institutional staff. The institution actively promotes a quality culture and the concept of quality enhancement within the organization. AUS leadership supports quality assurance and enhancement, including through adequate allocation of funds, sufficient human resources, and training of designated staff. In order for the internal quality assurance system to yield effects, the institution's staff members need to identify themselves with it.

Strategic objectives, goals, operations, processes, and instruments are the main pillars of a coherent internal quality assurance system that forms a cycle for continuous improvement and contributes to the accountability of the organization. Therefore, the present document is the guiding element that determines how the strategy is implemented in practice.

2. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Quality assurance and enhancement serve the student's academic success, strategic achievements, and the motivation and satisfaction of all staff members, and reassures external accountability. In order to develop and secure quality, the liberty and personal responsibility of all involved has to be supported. Besides, the top management levels have to create organizational prerequisites and must take responsibility for the procedures and results of the quality assurance system.

Quality assurance at AUS is realized as a communicative task and an executive function. The basis for the quality assurance system is a level-appropriate organization and the regulation of responsibilities in this field. The distribution of roles and responsibilities in the implementation of the present strategy can be illustrated as follows:

AUS President

Will assume responsibility for operations management of the institution and will ensure quality in strategic management; they are also in charge of resource allocation for quality assurance arrangements.

The Management Committee

Is responsible for the approval, monitoring, and revision of the strategic and operational plans, determining, therefore, the mandate, focus, and priorities of the quality assurance strategy. The role of the committee is also to support the quality assurance system by facilitating the policy management processes, as well as the alignment to regulatory expectations. The Committee adopts the Quality Assurance Strategy and approves any modifications to it, approves new and amended policies across the institution, as well as reviews, receives, recommends actions, and monitors plans.

The Quality Assurance Director (QAD)

Is responsible for the overall design, development, and implementation of the quality assurance system, as reflected in the present document, so that it supports the institution in reaching its strategic objectives; QAD duties include the coordination of the quality assurance work, development of quality assurance tools, coordination of the policy-making and revision at the institutional level and providing functional leadership and direction to AUS staff in all matters of quality assurance strategy implementation; the Director also prepares the institution-wide quality assurance system for external accountability processes.

Academic and administrative staff

Are involved in developing the quality assurance system and in the implementation of its supportive tools in order to ensure that their expectations are taken into account. Staff is also responsible for ensuring that AUS policies and procedures, for quality assurance and otherwise, are reflected at all levels of their activity. Staff are expected to embrace an enhancement-oriented approach to quality and understand that quality development is a task that belongs to everyone, in particular with their cooperation and commitment to the usage of quality data in the further development of their activity.

Students

Are seen as “competent, active and constructive partners” in the establishment and shaping of the European Higher Education Area, according to the European Ministers responsible for Higher Education (Prague Communiqué, 2001). As such, AUS puts efforts into ensuring that students contribute to the development and implementation of all quality assurance tools.

3. THE INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

The quality assurance system of AUS covers all areas of the institution’s operations, including teaching, research, governance, administration, services, and resources. Quality assurance activities provide relevant information and data to support the institution in achieving its strategic objectives and goals and the continuous development of its operations.

The quality assurance system at AUS operates based on the following strategic directions:

3.1. Use the Strategic Planning Process for Sustained Institutional Growth

Considering its role in the monitoring of and reporting on the achievement of strategic objectives, the quality assurance system provides an effective early warning system that has the capacity to detect and signal irregularities, provide potential sources of the problem and support the solution finding. Also, the system includes a quality cycle that correlates objectives, operations, and results in order to enable continuous quality improvement by closing the quality circle and ensuring that steps are taken to match the quality of the achievements with the strategic objectives.

The Quality Assurance Strategy and the Strategic Plan communicate with each other closely and support each other's implementation.

The Quality Assurance Director oversees the processes for the drafting and approval of the strategic and operational plans. The Strategic Plan is valid for a period of 5 years whereas the Operational Plans are drafted for a timeline of one academic year. The Strategic Plan can be amended in light of changing circumstances. The Quality Assurance Director also collects the quarterly reports when the Management Committee takes note of the organization-wide progress.

3.2. Enhance Governance and Administration for Effective Leadership

The quality assurance system at AUS ensures that the organizational structure and governance bodies are designed in a way that meets basic conditions to operate independently, is fit for purpose, and supports AUS in fulfilling its mission and achieving its strategic objectives. In doing so, the quality assurance system ensures that all internal and external stakeholders, including students, administration, faculty, and representatives of the labor market, are appropriately represented.

Furthermore, the quality assurance system supports the institution in reflecting good governance principles, such as transparency and accountability, by overseeing the regulatory documentation of all governance bodies and ensuring that they work in an open manner so as to facilitate access to its policies and decisions by the public.

The quality assurance system ensures that the administrative and academic staff are qualified to fulfill their roles, and, to this end, it contributes to processes relating to recruitment, periodic performance assessment, and career development of staff.

3.3. Ensure a Transparent and Predictable Student Experience through Policy Management

The policy management component is based on the principle of institution-wide participation in the formulation of policies, as well as the timely implementation of policies and monitoring

thereof. The quality assurance system serves as a single point of contact for all formal arrangements at AUS and ensures that all policies, procedures, and processes are defined, communicated, and applied systematically, transparently, and consistently; furthermore, it ensures that all relevant areas are regulated and that policies do not contradict or overlap each other.

3.4. Leverage Data and Evidence-Based Practices for Informed Decision-Making

The data function of the quality assurance system supports institutional planning, decision-making, management, and monitoring of all key institutional processes. It also facilitates the development of appropriate institutional systems, student, graduate, faculty, staff, and employer surveys, and impact studies. It also creates value from the generated data and helps in more proactive/seamless decision-making management and monitoring processes. The quality assurance system systematically contributes to providing relevant and current quantitative and qualitative information on which AUS relies to make current and strategic decisions. This is achieved through a series of instruments designed to collect data later on used to improve the quality of education and learning outcomes as part of the monitoring and feedback segment of the quality cycle; this includes all internal and external stakeholders in the development of its operations.

3.5. Develop and Implement Evaluation Systems for Teaching, Learning, and Research Excellence

The quality assurance system ensures that AUS activities correspond to its type, specific features, and strategic objectives and are carried out in accordance with the principle of freedom and independence. To this extent, periodic evaluations of teaching, research, and the results achieved in these areas are conducted.

The quality assurance system operates in conjunction with the arrangements and instruments for the enhancement of academic quality, design, monitoring, and review of study programs and procedures established for clarity and consistency, with the overall scope of improving the quality of training and student learning experience.

In order to contribute to the quality enhancement of the student life-cycle and ensure that students are enabled to succeed in the AUS programs, the quality assurance system ensures compliance with the criteria for admission, for the assessment of the student performance, and for issuing final diplomas according to the AUS mission.

3.6. Foster a Culture of Quality and Institutional Excellence

At AUS, quality culture is defined by two components that support and reinforce each other: a procedural component that enhances the organizational transparency by determination of responsibilities, identification of appropriate KPIs, standards, rewards, and accountability mechanisms, procedures, and process descriptions; secondly, an attitudinal component involving all internal and external stakeholders in anchoring quality-based thinking in the

organization.

It is within the scope of the quality assurance strategy to contribute to the enhancement and development of a quality culture where everyone assumes and understands their role in the enhancement of quality as restless excellence, defined as a collective, commonly agreed goal.

3.7. Promote Continuous Improvement through the PDCA cycle

The quality assurance system is based on an improvement cycle which implies that strengths and weaknesses are identified, and plans are designed for dealing with the challenges. This area is based on the quality assurance cycle detailed below, with the understanding that the core mission of the quality assurance system is to support and guide the decision-making process based on data and close the feedback loops that contribute to the enhancement of institutional operations.

At AUS, particular attention is paid to transparency of reports on collected data, commitments in action taken in response to feedback and dissemination of the implemented solutions.

3.8. Conduct Regular Internal Self-Assessments for Performance Enhancement

Within the quality assurance system, periodical internal assessments are conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the system and smaller parts within it and seek ways to improve it. Academic performance reports are produced on a termly basis and global institutional self-evaluation reports are drafted at the end of each academic year.

3.9. Ensure Compliance and Accountability through External Reviews and Standards

The quality assurance system ensures that the organization is compliant with the expectations and requirements of regulators, accreditors, and academic partners. In addition to the compliance component, particular attention is given to the enhancement one; AUS is dedicated to addressing all areas for improvement identified in the external quality assurance processes and is committed to implementing all recommendations and suggestions it receives during accreditation exercises.

4. THE QUALITY ASSURANCE CYCLE

Considering the fact that the quality assurance system is not isolated from strategic planning and operations management, the quality cycle at AUS is approaching these three levels in a unitary approach with the common goal of ensuring the institutional effectiveness of its individual units and the institution as a whole.

Therefore, the quality cycle encompasses strategic planning, quality assurance, and operations management as a unitary, systematic, and continuous process.

The cycle is available to all staff in the institution for the creation and development of their individual targets and action plans to be in line with the institution's strategic objectives, as

well as to incorporate all quality assurance instruments aimed at the enhancement of their roles.

AUS implements the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) model to ensure that continuous improvement is achieved periodically and systematically in all organizational areas. This is a multi-step, ongoing, and cyclical process that includes the following:

- **Planning** stage ensures clear objectives are in place aligned with AUS's mission. The quality level of the achievements in teaching, management, and administration is tailored and determined in the form of strategic objectives, goals, and measurable targets. The planning stage is based on a situation analysis aimed at providing a holistic determination of the strengths and challenges of the institution and the areas in need of improvement.
- **Doing** stage involves the implementation, communication, and documentation of measures and processes to enhance the quality. It has to be assured that everyone involved in this step is aware of the goals and targets and has the knowledge to put them into practice.
- **Checking** stage is about periodic monitoring and evaluation and determining the needs for improvement based on specific KPIs. It covers the ongoing observation of the implementation of a measure or a process designed for quality improvement and achievement of strategic goals. Thus, the quality assurance system also acts like an early warning system that helps identify undesirable developments and allows the possibility to make adaptations in time. The implementation of goals is measured and examined against the corresponding agreed targets. This examination can take place by means of self-evaluation and/or by means of external evaluators. Here, the determination of reasons for possible deviations from the objectives plays a major role. The root-cause analysis is discussed with those involved intensively. Based on the results of the evaluation, reporting, etc., adaptations and improvements concerning the assurance and development of the quality are made.
- **Acting** stage is about improvement, changes, handling complaints, and satisfaction measurement. The degree to which targets are achieved, the effects of a certain measure, and its side effects are determined and serve as a base for development.

AUS is keen to ensure that the quality assurance system in place is being regularly revised. To this extent, the Quality Assurance Director is responsible for its revision in two regards:

- a. To make a constant analysis so that to ensure the internal quality assurance system covers the whole range of activities of the institution;
- b. To ensure that all quality assurance instruments are valid as data collection instruments, they are fit for purpose, and they are achieving the impact they were designed for.