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**UNIVERSITY
OF BERN**

Quality assurance at the University

**Participate. Develop.
Communicate.**



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For a university with the very highest quality standards



The University of Bern's greatest asset is the credibility we enjoy in both the world of research and in the public eye. This credibility is something we have earned through the excellence, transparency and extremely high quality standards we apply not only to our teaching and research work, but also to every other aspect of the university's activities.

We are committed to conducting regular reviews of our tasks and services in order to ensure this high level of quality. At the University, quality is assured and developed sustainably in line with national and international standards. While the Vice-Rectorate Quality is responsible for this at the management level, it also concerns not only each and every member of our staff, but our students as well.

We want to promote an awareness of the enormous importance of having a consistent quality culture. This brochure should help do just that.

Prof. Dr. Christian Leumann
Rector of the University of Bern

Shared values for a consistent quality culture

The University of Bern stands for internationally respected research and is characterized by the high quality of its teaching, its targeted promotion of talented young academics and its systematic implementation of equality and sustainability goals.

Quality assurance and development – or QAD for short – helps us continuously optimize the quality of the entire range of services provided by the University, establish a consistent quality culture and work together on its development. It also helps promote our transparency and credibility with respect to society and the realm of politics.

Quality strategy

For the University to achieve its goals and assert itself in a competitive environment, shared values and ideas are essential. The quality strategy formulates the goals of the University's diverse range of tasks as well as its different areas (Figure 1).

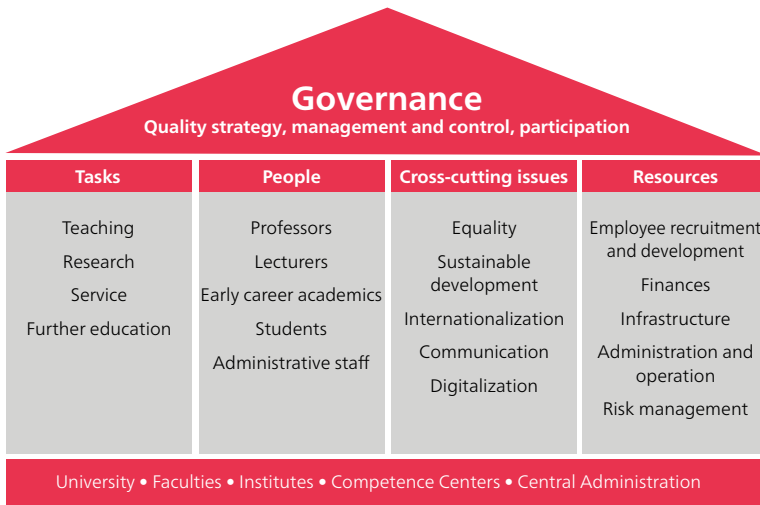


Figure 1: Quality strategy model

Management loop

To ensure that our tasks and services are further developed on an ongoing basis, the University gears its approach toward the management loop shown in Figure 2 (see next page). To reach these goals, measures are set down in plans of action and both tasks and services are regularly evaluated.

Covering everything from course evaluations by students through performance reviews to education profiles offered by university competence centers, we have a wide range of specific tools and activities that help us with our quality assurance and development efforts. Insights gained through these analyses and evaluations flow back into our planning activities.

The University Executive Board discusses the achievement of the defined goals with the faculties at annual strategy meetings, after which the faculties implement their goals with the help of a faculty-specific action plan. This approach takes the unique characteristics of the different teaching and research cultures within the faculties into account. QAD therefore forms an integral part of the University's management and control activities at each and every organizational level and supports the various management boards. ■

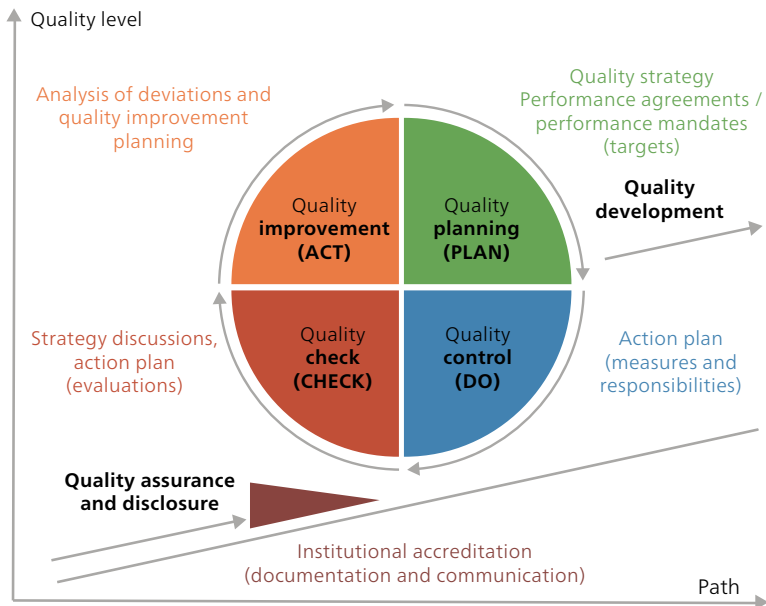


Figure 2: Quality management at the University of Bern

«If people are motivated, they're also automatically interested in delivering quality – through innovation, creativity and diligence. Students have every right to expect high quality at their University – and their own motivation and collaboration are major factors that contribute toward a university's overall quality level.»

Judith Wyttenbach
Professor
Department of Public Law



«Students develop their awareness of quality more towards the end of their studies, or if they've gained insights into another system during a stay abroad.»

Brigitte Hentrich
Bachelor program advisor
Faculty of Veterinary Medicine (Vetsuisse Faculty)



«We lecturers have always endeavored to maintain a high level of quality in both our teaching and our research. In the last few years, however, the concept of quality assurance, in other words checking the quality of our teaching and research work, has increasingly become an established processes at the University.»

Marco Herwegh

Director of studies and professor
Institute of Geological Sciences





«It's not about measuring things on an ongoing basis.»

Silvia Schroer, Vice-Rector for Quality and professor at the Faculty of Theology



«Everything done at our University has to satisfy high standards»

Quality at the University: Something that might seem natural still requires collaboration at many different levels. Silvia Schroer, Vice-Rector for Quality at the University of Bern, explains in an interview why these efforts are about more than just making quantitative measurements and where she still sees room for improvement.

Interview: Vanessa Naef, Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies, ICFG, University of Bern

What does «quality» mean, both within the context of a university and specifically for the University of Bern?

I'd definitely say: As a concept, quality as it relates to a university isn't much different than how it relates to a trade. If we call a tradesperson, we trust that they've undergone thorough training and will complete their work professionally and with the requisite expertise. Similarly, everything done at the university has to satisfy extremely high standards and this compliance has to be verifiable. Not only do the university's students, researchers and staff have a right to expect this, but members of the general public and the political realm as well.

Quality is a virtue.

After all, the university isn't merely subject to Swiss laws, it's actually financed to a large degree by the taxpayer. That means society has every right to expect the highest-possible quality. Motivated by a desire to satisfy this expectation, we make an ongoing effort to work on quality at every level of the extremely complex system that constitutes a university.

This system, which features a wide range of competences, is already highlighted in the guiding principle of the University's 2018–2021 quality strategy. It says: «Quality assurance and development is a complex system and a culture that extends throughout the entire University.» What makes this system so complex and which challenges and duties arise for the University as a result?

The guiding principle stresses that you can't create quality at the push of a button, rather that this requires longer-term processes. A great deal of collaboration is needed throughout the University as a whole in order to create the conditions necessary for a quality culture to mature.

Institutional accreditation gives the University an opportunity to prove that it has an excellent quality assurance system in place.

What's important is that everybody is involved in its development. It's not about measuring things on an ongoing basis, rather about practicing the fine art of taking a closer look. If checks and reviews are in place, these aren't an end unto themselves. Instead, the results of these should be returned as feedback where they should serve as a basis for adjustments or changes. We talk about closing control loops. Put in simpler terms: It's about making improve-

«As a concept, quality as it relates to a university isn't much different than how it relates to a trade.» **Silvia Schroer**

ments, although this by no means implies that the status quo was bad. When all is said and done, everything we check during the quality assurance process should result in further development. In my opinion, one of the biggest challenges is meaningfully incorporating time as a factor. We have to be aware of the fact that we can't change or develop everything at once – we can try, but that requires that we set priorities and stagger our goals.

One major undertaking just around the corner is the University's institutional accreditation, which is scheduled for spring 2021. While there are external institutions helping the University with this review, it's not their job to specify whether the quality of the teaching offered in a specific field is good. What they'll be looking at is whether we have a good internal system in place to determine the quality of teaching in a specific field, meaning that the focus is on the machinery behind quality-focused development. We must convincingly demonstrate that we have a good quality assurance system in place.

Precisely what is the quality culture at the University of Bern like? Could you share a few successful examples?

Quality assurance is always taken into consideration from the very start; it is never incorporated retrospectively.

The course evaluation surveys – which are now electronic – are one well-known process. This tool is very important for both students and lecturers as a way of providing feedback about several different aspects of teaching. The crux of the matter is, what happens if feedback is unsatisfactory. This calls for an orderly approach.

Even in areas where changes need to be made swiftly, quality assurance should never be an afterthought.

What happens if courses repeatedly receive poor ratings? Which member of an institute or faculty is responsible for talking to the member of the teaching staff concerned? We leave a lot of leeway on the question of «how» this is done – there’s no official approach that has to be used by the faculties – but this guarantees that something will happen. Otherwise, the evaluation and questionnaires would all be for nothing.

One lesser-known example of quality assurance might be the topic of waste disposal, which is a normal part of day-to-day operations at a university. The University Executive Board just recently adopted revised waste disposal guidelines. That might sound harmless and you might think it’s just about making sure the garbage simply gets collected somehow, but: It’s also about special waste, specifically radioactive and biomedical waste, and this is a major issue for some of the faculties. Strict, legally compliant regulations are needed because the public and our staff are entitled to a safe, healthy environment. Since our employees are obligated to comply with these regulations, they need to be extremely well informed. While the Risk Management Office is responsible for a few of the more sensitive processes, students and employees bear some of the responsibility as well.

Which developments are currently having a major impact on teaching, research, further education and services?

There’s really a lot happening in the area of teaching, particularly in connection with digitalization, and the pace of these changes is

«We always try to implement equality and sustainability as a central theme.» **Silvia Schroer**

The University's digitalization strategy was developed to be consistent with its sustainability and quality assurance policies.

proving extremely challenging. The University Executive Board came up with a digitalization strategy in response to this development and some of the strategy's subgoals have already been implemented. These efforts have incorporated the concepts of sustainability and quality assurance from the very start rather than focusing first on the speed and addressing them as an afterthought.

Plus, we try to implement objectives like equality and sustainability as a central theme in each and every area – not just in teaching, but also in the areas of research, further education and services.

What are the appointment procedures like for hiring new employees? What can be done to achieve a lasting increase in the proportion of female professors throughout the University? The University sets guidelines for how this process is organized. Each of the structural and appointments committees is advised by somebody from the Office for Gender Equality. This office ensures that applications are not merely weighted based on publication figures alone. As a signatory of the DORA declaration¹, the University of Bern has made a commitment to assess the quality of a selection of publications rather than looking solely at the number of articles a candidate has published. The University has also issued recommendations and directives on the topic of sustainability.


¹ The DORA declaration (San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment) addresses the question of how to fairly assess academic performance.

The importance of the University's status as an environmentally friendly university is on the rise. How can both the total number of trips taken by plane and the total volume of CO₂ emissions

«I've been working at the University of Bern for seven years. During this time, it's been my experience that each and every one of my colleagues shares a strong desire to produce top-notch work. The Quality Office makes this desire visible.»

Korbinian Seitz
Head of Dean's Office
Faculty of Humanities



A woman with short brown hair, wearing a bright red long-sleeved sweater and dark blue jeans, stands against a grey concrete wall. To her left is a small, square window with a wooden frame. The window is slightly open, and some dried leaves are on the sill. The woman has her left hand in her pocket and is looking towards the camera with a slight smile.

«When I hear the word «quality»,
the first thing I think of is the
evaluation sheets we have to
fill out for the courses.»

Stefanie Arnold
Master student
Institute of Systematic Theology

«Teamwork also has quality assurance aspects.» Silvia Schroer

be reduced? Which rules are being made? Just how does the whole «prevent, reduce, compensate» concept work? After all, international research and contacts aren't possible without a certain amount of airplane travel. The same thing applies to every new development: Quality assurance shouldn't be an afterthought, rather it needs to be incorporated from the very beginning.

In light of the enormous diversity of the University as an institution, what is it like to work at the Quality Office?

It's a bit of a challenge for the entire University because the individual professorships, referred to as «chairs», have been largely autonomous throughout the history of our European universities and this autonomy is also entrenched in the universities' cultures.

Once you've reached this position, you're the boss. Those times are over for a variety of reasons, at least to some degree. Respect for freedom in teaching and research and a recognition of research cultures with their individual peculiarities is very important at our University. But some requirements also apply to the university as a whole. I think the culture is shifting toward one in which a certain degree of control is indispensable, otherwise the university as a whole will be unable to achieve certain goals.

These changes are part of an overall trend and that raises my hopes that «highly distinguished» chairs will be a thing of the past. Today, scientific achievements are increasingly the result of teamwork rather than the culmination of work done by a lone academic. Teamwork has quality assurance aspects built into it, in part through flat hierarchies, good organization and competition.

Teamwork and flat hierarchies contribute toward quality assurance efforts.

What message would you like to convey to students, lecturers and staff as representatives of our university's quality culture?

The University of Bern ranks among the best in international comparisons. That should give our sense of pride a boost.

I'd like to strengthen their awareness and self-confidence, because despite the fact that the University of Bern ranks among the best in international comparisons, our sense of pride could use a boost! Maybe it has something to do with Bernese traditions (*laughs*), but we have a false sense of humility here. You could say that there's a disconnect between the way we see ourselves and our University's actual achievements. Looking beyond the confines of a field of study or an area of work and seeing what an extraordinary university we have – that's also part of our quality culture, if you ask me. Plus, the approach we use to set up our quality culture has to be carried out faithfully, in solidarity with and in collaboration with the University community as a whole.

On the one hand, we not only have to establish comparability across faculties based on meaningful numbers and information, but we also have to ensure that specific disciplinary cultures are taken into account at the same time. On the other hand, I think it would be terrible to know that people working here simply went home in the evening, happy in the knowledge that they have some sort of gainful employment. What I want is for everybody who walks in and out of our doors to see the enormity of what we're achieving here. Seeing that big picture and knowing what it means are a huge source of motivation for me. The University of Bern is an amazing institution and employer! ■

Quality in teaching, research, further education and services

The University has a special responsibility to fulfill its core tasks of teaching, research, further education and services. Given the conflicts that exist between academic-, faculty- and general university-related interests, the best approach to take is this: as differentiated as required by the subject matter, as uniform and comparable as possible. This takes both the specific needs and traditions of the various subjects into account while also lending equal weight to achieving the requisite level of comparability. The framework conditions for assessing the University's core tasks can be found in the «QAD guidelines for the university's core tasks of teaching, research, further education and services», which have been set out in more precise terms for the faculties in faculty-specific QAD guidelines. For this, the University relies on both self-reflection and external observations.

Teaching

High-quality teaching is underpinned by research and has many facets. It is based on the academic expertise of the teaching staff and meets high demands in terms of teaching standards. During the teaching and learning process, students are encouraged to think creatively and critically to help prepare them for responsible roles in the realms of research, business and society. Growing importance is currently being attached to the interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary nature of teaching.

Quality assurance tools are used to evaluate the quality of teaching in our courses and study programs.

Research

The University wants to provide the best possible environment for its researchers in order to enable and promote top-quality research.

Its status as a comprehensive university lays the foundation for the University of Bern to fulfill its vision of providing inter-, cross- and multidisciplinary research to a high standard. Ensuring academic integrity is considered a prerequisite for both academic work and society's trust in research.

Evaluating research achievements helps identify strengths and weaknesses while also laying a foundation for us to recognize development opportunities and effect change.

Further education

The University has a diverse range of top-notch further education degree programs and courses with regional, national and international appeal. The offering is science-based and focuses on research. It fosters students' ability to reflect on subject matter in a scientific way and apply what they have learned to the world of work.

To do this, the University formulated its own principles and standards and developed its own tools for its further education program within the scope of the QAD efforts.

Services

The University offers the public high-quality services for which it is specially qualified based on its academic activities and methodological expertise. Services are certified or accredited externally. ■

«Feedback is essential with respect to the quality of both our research and our teaching. Several different evaluations are used to generate this kind of feedback for our teaching activities as well.

Things often get a bit more complicated, though, when it comes to closing the loop and taking specific measures to implement that feedback.»

Daniel Steffen

PhD student

Institute of Economics / CRED





«Given our day-to-day deluge of work, I'm certain that demands to take certain quality assurance measures are often perceived as somewhat irritating. That's actually quite a pity, because quality assurance shouldn't be viewed as yet another monumental task that has to be completed, rather as an attitude that goes hand-in-hand with every activity we undertake.»

Karin Beyeler
Academic staff member
Office for Gender Equality



«The QAD plays a major role in establishing a feedback culture. It gives rise to a platform where students and lecturers can share thoughts about courses and work together to improve them on an ongoing basis.»

Steffen Götze

Teaching and research assistant
Institute of Church History

How QAD is organized at the University

The complexity of the QAD system calls for a finely tuned organization where tasks and responsibilities are clearly defined.

Our QAD is set up as a participatory process and has the support of everybody involved, whether through their membership on boards within the scope of the University's academic self-government policy or through direct involvement in efforts to develop, improve and review the University's services. The Commission for Quality Assurance and Development advises the University Executive Board on all matters related to QAD. The faculties, central administration, intermediate staff and students all delegate one quality officer to join the QAD Commission. Within the faculties, faculty-specific QAD boards made up of representatives from the various academic fields, intermediate staff and students perform this task on behalf of the faculty.

The QAD expert committees therefore serve as information interfaces between the faculties and their disciplinary fields, thereby ensuring that communication and control loops are always closed. ■

Meet the QAD Office



The Office for Quality Assurance and Development (QAD Office) works together with the vice-rectorates, the staff of the University Executive Board and all other units within the University to ensure that the quality strategy is coordinated and implemented throughout all parts of the University. It is additionally responsible for the University's institutional accreditation process, managing the QAD Commission and networking stakeholders in quality-related matters. This office is also in charge of setting up and developing the quality assurance and development system.

Providing information about QAD-related activities is another important aspect that helps ensure both the acceptance of these activities by the University's various organizational areas as well as active participation in them.

The Quality Office communicates regularly with members of the University and provides them with advice and support. This collaborative relationship represents a quality culture that is embodied in the University's day-to-day activities. ■

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*For a list of links about University and faculty QAD,
please go to www.qualität.unibe.ch.*

«Quality assurance and development is a complex system and a culture that extends throughout the entire University.»

Excerpt from the 2018–2021 quality strategy

University of Bern

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