

Institutional accreditation

University of Fribourg

Summary of the self-evaluation report 2021 for the Swiss Accreditation Council

Since its foundation in 1889, the University of Fribourg has taken a humanistic-ethical approach. While maintaining a great emphasis on direct and individualised communication between students and professors, as a comprehensive university, it offers Bachelor, Master and Doctorate programmes in all main fields of study to its approximately 10,000 students.

Teaching is closely linked to research, to which 2,000 researchers are dedicated, including nearly 280 professors. Research is carried out not only in the five faculties, but also in the numerous interdisciplinary institutes and centres of competence. Many research projects are enriched by national and international cooperation with other universities and with partners from industry and society.

The French/German bilingualism is a unique attribute of the university's profile. Most study programmes are offered both in French and in German and in many cases bilingual studies are possible as well. At the Master's level, English is increasingly used as the language of teaching. The University proudly assumes its role as a bridge between linguistic cultures, even though bilingualism produces challenges and implies efforts not only for the students, but also for the 900 employees of the administration as well as for the academic staff.

The quality assurance system

Over the last twenty years, the University has developed a sound quality assurance system, consisting of processes which aim to improve the quality of its activities with a minimum of additional effort for the actors. The Deming cycle with its steps Plan, Do, Check and Act serves as basis. For any given activity, the cycle starts with an evaluation by the actors themselves as well as by stakeholders or experts. Based on these findings, measures are reflected upon, planned, and subsequently implemented in order to remedy weaknesses and consolidate strengths. After a predefined period of time, a second cycle is carried out in the form of a follow-up meeting, in which the effects of the measures are evaluated and it is then decided on whether to implement, modify, or abandon the measures.

The quality assurance strategy was established once the quality assurance processes were in place and widely supported by the university community. The strategy defines values and guidelines and provides a basis for the future development of the quality assurance system. Regulations and guidelines for the areas of teaching, research, services, and continuing education specify how the processes are to be applied.

The responsibilities for quality assurance are laid down in the legal and regulatory bases. Under the overall supervision of the Senate, the Rectorate is responsible for the design and implementation of quality assurance. It is supported in its tasks by the Quality Assurance Commission and the Quality Assurance Service. At the same time, all employees and students are responsible for the quality of their own tasks.

In order to encourage and support the members of the university community to assume their responsibilities and to reinforce their involvement in quality assurance, a proactive communication adapted to the different groups of addressees has been put in place. The current self-evaluation report was written by involving the bodies, the central services, and the faculties: this contributed largely to an awareness of, participation in, and commitment to quality assurance.

The participatory approach and transparent communication are strengths of the University's quality assurance system. They are seen as prerequisites for its acceptance and for the establishment of a quality culture.

The application of the quality assurance system to governance, core tasks, and resources, as well as the planned actions for improvement are briefly presented here, together with the strengths and weaknesses which emerged during the analysis of quality standards.

Governance

The revision of the University Act in 2015 led to a more professional governance. Key elements are the agreement on objectives with the Canton, the multiyear plan, and the performance agreements with the faculties. Based on an analysis of current activities and needs, they define the objectives, the measures needed to meet them as well as criteria for determining, at the end of a given time frame, whether the objectives have been achieved. The evaluation of the achievement of the objectives serves as a basis for the definition of the objectives for the next cycle.

Another important development these past years was the complete renewal of the institutional information system, designed around a modular architecture, taking the specificities of the various stakeholders into consideration, and linked to a complete multidimensional data warehouse. Thanks to this development, the University finds itself in a favourable situation to face the challenges of digitalisation and to respond to the growing need for quantitative information. However, the full potential of the information system is not yet being exploited: more efforts are necessary to further include business intelligence in governance and to increase user awareness in administration.

The culture of participation, which has developed at the University over the past years, is highly appreciated. However, it remains a constant challenge to ensure that it is not only a small number of people who are actively involved. Several measures have been taken to encourage participation and to value institutional commitment more strongly.

While the University has been very active in the area of gender equality, it is currently developing a strategy to further integrate dimensions of diversity and inclusion. Regarding environmental sustainability, a strategy and an action plan have been developed, but major efforts are still needed to implement them.

Teaching, research and services

Teaching, research, and services constitute the institution's core activities. For the coming years, the emphasis will be on strengthening the University's academic profile with one of the focuses being on interdisciplinarity.

All the University's activities periodically go through quality assurance processes which are part of the flexible, yet coherent, quality assurance system. Teaching was the first area to have a systematic evaluation procedure in place, which has been continuously refined since its implementation. The experiences made during the Covid-19 pandemic have already led to reflections regarding digital innovations in teaching. The evaluation of continuing education is also well established, though a greater systematisation is currently being sought. However, stronger efforts need to be made to implement more regular evaluations of study programmes.

In order to take into account the specificities of the different fields of study, quality assurance in research is largely performed at the faculty level. On the one hand, it consists of improving research conditions, and on the other hand, taking into account quantitative indicators. The latter, though, requires a research database, which is currently being developed. The Quality Assurance Commission guarantees a regular exchange of best practices between the faculties.

The quality assurance procedure for central services has been put in place; the coming years will see its extension to faculty services.

Resources

Anchored in cantonal and federal legislation, the funding system guarantees that the institution has the necessary financial resources to carry out its mission. The agreements with the canton give the University a planning security over several years. Compared to the other Swiss comprehensive universities, the University of Fribourg has fewer resources at its disposal and is therefore obligated to set priorities. It seeks to make the best use of its financial resources. Developing instruments to support strategic decision-making, such as the expansion of business intelligence, is essential for this purpose.

The qualification of employees is ensured by precise and transparent recruitment, hiring, and evaluation processes, which are specific to each function. The University intends to continue its efforts, in particular to meet the needs of young researchers. A project aimed at improving the support of doctoral students is thus underway. In order to actively attract and retain qualified and motivated staff, the University is developing a human resources strategy.

There is a strong need for development and investment in certain infrastructures. Due to the lack of resources and specific political and technical circumstances, new construction projects, urgent building renovations, and refurbishments are not progressing as quickly and flexibly as desired, despite the fact that these projects are considered by the University and political authorities to be key factors in ensuring the institution's current national and international position.

Conclusion

In accordance with the Higher Education Act, the University of Fribourg has an effective quality assurance system that ensures the continuous improvement of teaching, research, and services, as well as the appropriate qualification of its staff. All legal admission requirements are met. The ambitious governance reforms carried out since 2015 have led to more efficient management, which takes into account economic, social, and environmental sustainability. The members of all bodies have an adequate role in decision-making and the University encourages equal opportunities and gender equality. The quality assurance procedures and their findings allow both the University and external stakeholders to monitor the fulfilment of its mandate.

The quality assurance system itself is continuously developed based on the needs of its users in order to increase its expediency. Improvement measures concerning the different activities are decided on the basis of the findings of both self-evaluations and external evaluations. While many measures were taken following the recommendations of the 2014 Audit, the preparation for the present accreditation also led to several analyses, which prompted or accelerated various actions for improvements. The planned or ongoing actions are in line with the University's 2030 Strategy and show its determination to continuously improve its activities, based on its strengths and weaknesses as well as on future challenges. These actions will be supplemented by actions based on the recommendations of the accreditation experts and included in the overall development plan for the University. The Rectorate will ensure the follow-up on these actions.