

Capacity utilisation audit of laboratory services

Swiss Federal Institute of Metrology

Key facts

The Federal Institute of Metrology (METAS) is the Confederation's competence centre for all issues relating to measurements (measuring equipment and procedures). It implements the Metrology Act and can perform other tasks in accordance with the Federal Act on the Federal Institute of Metrology. For this purpose, it operates more than 20 physics, chemistry and technical laboratories. In 2019, METAS received CHF 17.4 million plus CHF 6.8 million for premises from the Confederation. In addition, on behalf of the Federal Council, METAS performs directly remunerated tasks for the Federal Administration worth a total of CHF 7.5 million.

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) conducted a performance audit of METAS, which showed that it is run according to economic principles to the extent possible. METAS has developed positively since it was spun off from the Federal Administration in 2013. Growth in headcount, expansion into new areas and an increase in the turnover for third-party contracts have been accompanied by a fall in costs for the Confederation. Within the Federal Administration, there are indications of further potential for synergies in the laboratories area. This would require greater cooperation between the federal offices.

Good resource management and comprehensive information on strategic direction

The largest expense item at METAS is personnel costs, which are around CHF 35 million annually. Services are managed and invoiced on the basis of the hours recorded by staff. Uniform and transparent time recording is essential for the management and invoicing of services. The SFAO observed a high share (over 20%) of internal hours at certain laboratories. METAS has already taken appropriate measures.

The second large cost item is premises, which are cost-neutral for METAS. Utilisation of spatial capacity at METAS is very high. However, the SFAO found that the construction has an unfavourable ratio of useful floor area to overall floor area. In the SFAO's view, improvements could be achieved by making better use of office space, for example by further increasing the concentration of desks or introducing desk sharing. METAS is already planning a project to assess the use of floor space.

METAS has a comprehensive reporting structure at all levels: owner, Institute Council and Executive Board. The flow of information is clear. The economic aspect is appropriately reflected in the reporting, but mainly in relation to third-party funds.

The SFAO sees potential for improvement in contract calculation for assigned tasks and the demonstration of costs for the legal mandate. The extent to which METAS consistently takes measures to regularly adjust the established organisation to the strategy and objectives is still open.

Scant interest in the centralisation of laboratory services, despite successes

The 2010 federal laboratory strategy defined various strategic principles and measures for the federal laboratory landscape. This includes, for example, a focus on performance, full cost transparency, dealing with very small laboratories and the assessment of outsourced services.

At federal level, there is no central office responsible for the ongoing implementation of the measures.

Some measures, including the integration of the Federal Customs Administration (FCA) laboratories into METAS, have been implemented. This has led to synergies, for example by concentrating staff on existing METAS premises or integrating them into a professional laboratory environment while freeing up space at the FCA that can be used for other purposes. However, it would be wrong to expect that the integration of laboratories into METAS will result in economies of scale. METAS does not cater for the mass market, but rather focuses on highly specialised services and research and development.

Nevertheless, the SFAO has identified potential as regards cooperation between federal laboratories. An example is the Federal Office of Communications, which set up its own measurement station for electromagnetic compatibility (EMC) in 2013, despite the fact that METAS has a highly professional EMC laboratory whose technical infrastructure is not being used to capacity. The SFAO recommends that the General Secretariat of the Federal Department of Finance, together with the Federal Department of Justice and Police, should examine the overarching cooperation on laboratory strategy with the aim of achieving future positive effects across the whole of the Federal Administration.

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