

ENQA REVIEW. PROGRESS REPORT OF AQU CATALUNYA

September 2009

Based on improvement recommendations arising from the ENQA coordinated review of AQU Catalunya in August 2007.

Summary

This progress report was requested by the ENQA Board on the actions undertaken since the reconfirmation of AQU Full membership in ENQA; the document is answering the review panel recommendations and the proposals formulated in AQU's self-evaluation document.

Independence of the Agency

AQU has drafted a proposal for a new and specific law for the Agency which is at the moment under consideration of the Government in the way to the Parliament. In this new law AQU's board is reconfigured:

- AQU's Board it is entitled to appoint directly executives and the rest of AQU's committees' members.
- The presence of different stakeholders in AQU's Board is enriched with the participation of students and representatives from the Catalan society.

The need for a consistency and periodicity in the external QA processes

A new concept of quality assurance for study programmes based on a cyclical process (ex-ante, follow-up and ex-post evaluations) has been developed and implemented.

The need for a systematic, long-term approach in order that the agency can achieve its goals and objectives. There should also be documentation to demonstrate how the mission statement is translated into clear policy and management plan

AQU has elaborated and approved a strategic plan for the period 2009-2012, giving more consistency to all its activities.

The need to develop an appeal system and formal follow-up procedures

In the drafted proposal for AQU's new law it is established an Appeals Commission composed by 5 members (one member of AQU's Board and 4 external members).

At the moment formal follow-up procedures are managed by AQU's QA Committees.

In parallel, AQU has implemented meta-evaluation processes. Reviewers, assessed units and other relevant stakeholders (vice-rectors, government representatives and others) receive a questionnaire or they are interviewed in order to collect their view and opinions about evaluation processes. AQU's QA Committees are informed about the results of their follow-up processes.

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1. Recommendations contained in the report of the panel of August 2007

The recommendations (which are not numbered in the report) are listed in the same order as they appear.

3.1 ESG 3.1 (and section 2)/ENQA criterion 1: Use of external QA procedures

R1: The review panel recommends that for the new bachelor degree programmes it should develop a concept for their evaluation (e.g. starting a pilot project)

The current Spanish legislation for the quality assurance of university study programmes establishes three different stages situated in a cyclical process:

1. Verification: is an ex-ante assessment process for all proposals of new study programmes to be delivered in Spanish Universities (including the bachelor degree programmes),
2. Follow-up evaluations: is a quality assurance process that observes the implementation of all new approved study programmes before to be accredited, and between the first and the next accreditations. This stage is going to be focused on how Higher Education institutions apply the principle of transparency on the content and the quality of their provision, and about the results of the study programmes. At the same time the follow-up evaluations include the treatment of study programmes modifications.
3. Study programme accreditation: every 3 years, for master programmes, and every 6 years for bachelors; to be repeated in a cyclical way.

At the moment AQU is recognised by the Spanish law as a competent body to carry out follow-ups and accreditations of the official study programmes. AQU, through the Government of Catalonia, is in advanced negotiations with the Spanish Ministry in order to include the ex-ante verification in its own quality assurance scheme. Actually, the technical capacity to conduct ex-ante verification by the Catalan Agency was proved in the years 2006, 2007 and 2008 (before the current law) when AQU was required by the Government of Catalonia to carry out ex-ante verifications for approximately 400 official postgraduate programmes.

In 2009 AQU agreed with the rest of Spanish QA agencies, members of REACU (Spanish Network Of University Quality Assurance Agencies), to develop the guidelines for the follow-up evaluations. It is expected that the follow-up process is going to provide the basis for study programmes accreditation.

REACU's guidelines were presented to the Catalan universities and AQU has started an experimental project with the them in order to implement the follow-up process for bachelor and master programmes.

Finally AQU is going to cooperate with other Spanish agencies in REACU, in order to define the accreditation guidelines. The architecture of this cyclical QA process points out the relevant situation of follow-up stage, in which the accreditation process is going to be presumably based on the results of the follow-up procedure.

Evidences

- Royal Decree 1393/2007, 29 October, concerning the reform of recognised higher university degree programmes: < http://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_27428326_1.pdf> [ca]
- REACU Recommendations regarding the monitoring of recognised degrees: <http://www.aqu.cat/actualitat/noticies/58707395_en.html> http://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_56415835_1.pdf [ca]
- AQU verification process for master programmes: <http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/ensenyaments/pop/index_en.html>
- AQU experimental follow-up process for bachelors and masters: <http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/ensenyaments/ajuts_seguiment_en.html>

R2: The review panel recommends that AQU develops a strategic plan together with universities and the Government

In 2009 AQU's Board of Directors approved a Strategic Plan for the period 2009-2012. The Strategic Plan has been presented and discussed in AQU's QA Commissions, with the universities and with the Government of Catalonia.

The Strategic Plan states a mission for AQU and establishes 8 different priorities or themes: 1) Management and internal organisation; 2) Assessment of teaching staff; 3) Assessment of institutions and degree standards; 4) Analysis of the university system; 5) Communication; 6) Staff and experts; 7) External relations; and 8) Students..

Evidences

- Strategic Plan AQU Catalunya 2009-2012: <http://www.aqu.cat/aqu_catalunya/pla_estrategic/index_en.html>

R3 (Expands and details R2): AQU should develop a clearer view about reaching a better balance and dedicating enough resources between all its assigned missions (see AQU Statutes) within its future activity, including the evaluation of services and management. In the view of the review panel the drafting of a strategic plan, as mentioned above, could be a useful tool to reach more consistency and synergy between all evaluation activities and help to consider giving more room to the progressive development of cyclical institutional evaluation

1. Strengthening the work of internal quality units at the universities and the internal QA methods is an AQU key strategy and it is materialised through a set of actions:
 - a) Cooperation with universities in developing and enhancing internal quality assurance systems. The results of the first call for an assessment of the design of internal quality assurance systems are available on the Internet. (AUDIT programme).
 - b) AQU is also offering training activities to the internal quality assurance units' staff. AQU is preparing a plan to promote visits for QA staff working at the universities to other European HE institutions for a benchmarking of internal quality assurance

systems (SUPPORT programme). A first action of that plan was organised in July 2009 with a workshop with presentations of international experts.

2. Training students on QA is also considered strategic in order to build up a more self-regulated QA system in which students and other stakeholders are more active in the quality assurance and the enhancement procedures. AQU agreed with 6 universities to implement training courses for students' representatives and other interested students in QA.
3. The role of transparency is underlined in a cyclical QA system for all new Bologna study programmes. Better information about the contents, objectives, teaching and learning strategies, etc. is going to be required to be public on universities' websites. Academic results and study programme performances must be also publicly available on the Internet ready to be used by different stakeholders.
4. In that scenario AQU is also promoting new institutional evaluations, expected to rationalise the way universities and study programmes are externally assessed. This new approach can be seen in a programme devoted to assess the quality of all Catalan Higher Education centres affiliated to universities. This evaluation is organised to see the capacity of those institutions to deliver new official study programmes.

AQU is expecting that QA evaluations at institutional level, with an increasing implication and responsibility of the internal quality assurance units, jointly with better opportunities for stakeholders to be informed on QA results and to be active in QA developments, should contribute in building up more advanced, efficient and consistent QA systems.

Evidences:

- AUDIT programme: < http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/centres/audit/index_en.html>, <http://www.aqu.cat/actualitat/noticies/18985122_en.html>
- SUPPORT programme: <http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/tallers_jornades/jornada_url_2009.html>
- Students' participation in QA: http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/estudiants/index_en.html <http://www.aqu.cat/actualitat/noticies/45382503_en.html> <http://www.aqu.cat/actualitat/noticies/31302613_en.html>
- New "Bologna" study programmes: <http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/ensenyaments/index_en.html>
- Affiliated centres: <http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/centres/adscrits_en.html>

R4: It is also advisable for work to be done on the criteria for the ex post evaluation of master degree programmes (as this will have to begin in two years' time)

AQU is cooperating with other agencies in REACU to develop an accreditation process for official study programmes. At the moment AQU recommends to use the ex-ante verifications as

a starting point and to trust on the results of the follow-up process for building up the main basis for study programmes' accreditation.

Moreover AQU's experimental follow-up for official study programmes, implemented in Catalonia for 22 study programmes is expected to confirm and improve that strategy. One bachelor and one master in each university will take part in that experimental follow-up and it will be a first opportunity to see how internal quality assurance systems operate in this field.

Evidences

- AQU experimental Follow-up process for bachelors and masters:
<http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/ensenyaments/ajuts_seguiment_en.html>

R5: It should be safeguarded that the relevant stakeholders are informed about AQU's quality assessment conclusions

All AQU's activities on QA are informed through AQU's website.

A renovation of AQU's website was carried out and it offers a particular access path for students, teachers and universities.

AQU is cooperating with universities in organising specialised training activities for students' representatives and other interested students in QA. AQU is at the same time working in the establishment of an AQU advisory commission composed by students from all Catalan universities.

Evidences

- Students website access: <http://www.aqu.cat/estudiants/index_en.html>
- Teaching staff website access: <http://www.aqu.cat/professors/index_en.html>
- Universities website access: <http://www.aqu.cat/universitats/index_en.html>
- Students involvement: <http://www.aqu.cat/actualitat/noticies/45382503_en.html>

R6 (Expands and details R2): In relation to the weaknesses detected in the follow-up procedures, AQU should draw up a concept for undertaking such reviews on a cyclical basis. The review panel suggests that the strategic plan mentioned above should focus particularly on this matter in consultation with HEIs

The priority or theme 3 "Institutional and programme review" of AQU's strategic plan includes the following vision for AQU in 2012:

"We have a programme for the cyclical review, monitoring and accreditation of higher education institutions and the degrees they offer, which is used for enhancement purposes and is recognised as a European standard.

The Agency applies international standards and impetus is given to methodological advances and studies in this sphere".

The strategic plan also includes the following strategic objectives:

1. To foster institutional review on a cyclical basis using a recognised methodology, with an emphasis on internal quality assurance systems and the impact of outcomes.
2. To have available an integrated model for the evaluation, monitoring and accreditation of degree programmes, in accordance with international benchmarks, with a recognised methodology.

Evidences:

- Strategic Plan AQU Catalunya 2009-2012. Themes:
<http://www.aqu.cat/aqu_catalunya/pla_estrategic/eixos_en.html#a3>

R7 (overlaps with R1 and R4): Regarding the new bachelor and master degree programmes, the review panel suggests to draw up evaluation concepts which incorporate system-wide analyses in their methodology

AQU's is cooperating with universities and the Government of Catalonia in consolidating an advanced data base for the whole Catalan University System. That data base is at the moment used to calculate an extended list of indicators to be consulted and included in QA procedures. It was also agreed with universities to facilitate access to that general data base to specialised staff in universities, government and AQU in order to facilitate system-wide analyses. There is an Internet portal (UNEIX) that gives access to the indicators.

Calculated indicators are going to be used in the official programmes follow-up procedure and to inform the public through appropriate means. In fact, at the moment, some of those indicators can be reached through out the Government of Catalonia's website.

Evidences:

- UNEIX: <<http://uneix.gencat.net/>>
- Indicators provided by Catalan Government:
<http://www.gencat.cat/diue/serveis/estudis_estadistiques/ur/universitats/index.html>

3.2 ESG 3.2/ENQA criterion 2: Official status

(No recommendations on this standard)

3.3 ESG 3.3/ENQA criterion 1: Activities

R8 (duplicates R3). There seems to be a need for developing a coherent and integrated system of quality assurance activities on the side of AQU

(See pages 4 and 5 of this report).

R9 (duplicates R3). The Agency still seems to be in need of finding the right balance between these different kinds of activities and finds it difficult to prioritise

(See pages 4 and 5 of this report).

R10 (duplicates R2 and R3) Moreover the Agency should work on developing a strategic and integrated picture of its activities as well as clear and effective follow-up procedures for the evaluations. This would also help to consider establishing progressively a focus on cyclical institutional evaluation procedures, in addition to its present programme evaluation activities

(See pages 4 and 5 of this report).

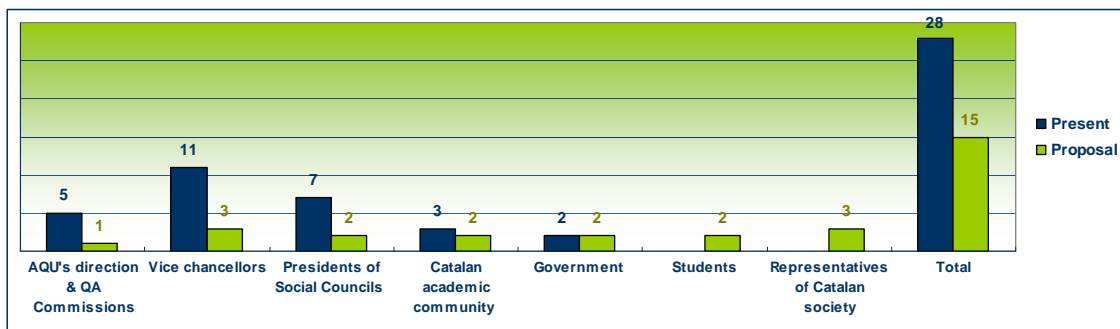
3.4 ESG 3.4/ENQA criterion 3: Resources

R11. The Board appears to be fairly big, which might pose a difficulty for it to act effectively as a steering body. The review panel therefore recommends that AQU reflects on the role of its Board and Standing Committee

AQU's current regulations are included in the Catalan Act for Universities. However AQU has drafted a proposal for a new and specific law for the agency itself, which is under consideration by the Government in the way to the Parliament. In that proposal the number of representatives in the Board is reduced from 28 members to 15.

In the new proposed composition of AQU's Board students and members of the Catalan society are included in a relevant position. This should make easier the role of those two important groups of stakeholders in AQU's governance. This policy is also reflected in the standing committee with the presence of the stakeholders.

Composition of AQU's Board of Directors



The proposal for a new AQU's law is particularly asking the agency Board to take responsibility in approving the general framework for external QA in the Catalan University System. AQU's Board is going to be advised by a technical committee composed by national and international experts in QA for Higher Education. The Board is also going to be responsible in the establishment of permanent and non permanent QA Committees of AQU and in the appointment of its members.

Moreover a specific Appeals Commission for AQU is included in the proposal for a new law. That body is going to be chaired by a member of AQU's Board plus four recognised representatives from the academic community with no direct links with AQU.

R12 (duplicates R2 and R3). The review panel stresses here on its former recommendation that there should be at hand a clear strategic plan for at least four or five years, providing a general framework incorporating all of the Agency's activities, reducing parallel activities, which might prove a powerful tool in the annual activities planning

(See pages 4 and 5 of this report).

R13 (duplicates R3). AQU has yet to more systematically implement and operationalise its mission and integrate the various activities within a coherent general framework. Thus, the review panel recommends that AQU should take steps for developing a more integrated system of external quality assurance and a clear policy and management plan, including when appropriate, all necessary details on the division of labour with relevant stakeholders in higher education

(See pages 4 and 5 of this report).

3.6 ESG 3.6/ENQA Criterion 5: Independence

R14. Another crucial point is the nomination and appointment of the executives and members of AQU's committees in the light of operational independence from higher education institutions and governments. The chairpersons of the CAQ, CLiQ and CAR committees and some of their members in particular are appointed directly by the incumbent of the government department (Ministry) with jurisdiction over universities

In the proposal of new AQU's law it is stated that the executives and the rest of AQU's committees' members are going to be appointed by AQU's board.

R15. The Board of Directors is mainly constituted by representatives from HE institutions and the Catalan government. A more balanced makeup of the Board including students or representatives from the professional world might make AQU less vulnerable to external pressures

(See pages 8 and 9 of this report).

3.7 ESG 3.7/ENQA Criterion 6 & 8: External quality assurance criteria and processes

R16. The review panel recommends that since Catalonia has a relatively small HE-system, the number of reviewers coming from other regions in Spain and also from other countries should still be increased

The following table shows the distribution for the main AQU's external QA activities at institutional and study programme level:

Academic experts in the external review panels in study programmes and institutional evaluations (2007-2009)

Activity	Assessed units	Catalan experts	Spanish experts	International experts
Verification of master programmes	82	21	24	9
AUDIT	16	-	15	-
Affiliated Centres	13	20	10	-
E-learning programmes	8	3	5	-
Total	119	44	54	9

Evidences:

- Verification of master programmes:
<http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/ensenyaments/pop/curs2008_09.html> [ca]
<http://www.aqu.cat/actualitat/noticies/45035079_en.html>
- Experts in the assessment of verification of master programmes 2008-2009:
http://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_73867494_1.pdf [ca]
- AUDIT programme;
http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/centres/audit/convocatoria_2007_en.html>
<http://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_14157204_1.pdf>
<http://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_28596703_1.pdf>
- Affiliated centres: < http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/centres/adscrits_en.html>
<http://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_34690160_1.pdf>
<http://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_12029450_1.pdf>
- E-learning programmes:
<http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/ensenyaments/virtual_ensenyaments_en.html#a3>

R17 (Duplicates R6). Concerning the follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report, there is still a considerable lack of enforcement and monitoring. This is due

mostly to the pressure giving understandably priority to establishing procedures rather than organizing at the same time follow-up and ex post evaluations within a general cyclical evaluation and planning framework

(See pages 6 and 7 of this report).

R18. Regarding the interaction and synergy of the Agency's different activities there is still room for improvement: the lack of communication between the different working groups and the compartmentalization of their work mean that opportunities for shared learning and for rationalization of the work load may be missed

AQU's strategic plan includes, as a following operational objective for the priority or theme 1, "Management and organisation", to establish a good system for internal planning, communication and monitoring that takes into account the enhancement of efficacy and efficiency in procedures

AQU is, at the same time, organising internal meetings for project coordination and follow-up.

Evidences:

- Strategic Plan
- Coordination meetings
- ISO certification
- Projects follow-up meetings

3.8 ESG 3.8/ENQA Criterion 7: Accountability procedures

R19. The review panel recommends building up systematic internal and external feedback mechanisms in order to inform its own development and improvement and to create a common evaluation culture within the entire organisation

AQU has implemented a meta-evaluation procedure applied to its most important procedures (verification official programmes, teaching assessment staff, etc.)

AQU has been certified according to new ISO standards with neither major nor minor observations which can be interpreted as a confident external view on how internal quality assurance is implemented in AQU.

Evidences:

- ISO certification: <http://www.aqu.cat/qualitat/iso_en.html>
- Meta-evaluation reports
- Projects' follow-up meetings

2. Proposals for improvement contained in the self-evaluation report (and not included in the recommendations above)

P1. To promote, within the framework of the EHEA, internal mechanisms for quality assurance in the universities through evaluation, certification and institutional assessment programmes

(See pages 4 and 5 of this report).

P3. To adjust the Agency's manpower service resources to improve the quality assurance services that it provides

The following chart shows the changes in AQU's staff between 2007 and 2009, in which the technical staff devoted to QA has been increased from 9 (29% of the total) to 17 (39% of the total).

AQU's staff

	2007	2009
Managers Institutional & Programme QA	1	2
Officers Institutional & Programme QA	5	9
Administration Institutional & Programme QA	1	2
Managers Teaching staff evaluations	1	1
Officers teaching staff evaluation	2	3
Administration teaching staff evaluation	5	5
Managers supporting activities	4	5
Officers supporting activities	7	7
Administration supporting activities	4	7
Part time QA experts	1	3
Total	31	44

P7. To study how the Information and Communication Technologies could be used in order to improve the evaluation processes

AQU's IT technologies have been improved. AQU has established its own network and has acquired a new set of servers. There is also a new data warehouse for the back-up service and a process of servers' virtualisation.

There is indeed, ready to be implemented, an extranet to be used by the reviewers working in remote positions.

P8. To increase student participation in external quality assurance processes in the universities

One of the main objectives of the training courses for students on QA is to increase their participation in internal QA processes at the institutions, directly by being members of the self-evaluation teams or indirectly via their representation in bodies dealing with university governance.

P10. To improve the methodology for evaluating teaching staff so that it is more inclusive

As a first step on this issue AQU has organised (October 2008) a general conference to foresee the position of the teaching staff in the year 2015. One of the main points dealt in the conference was on teaching staff evaluation and its future vision. As a second step, a conference about the assessment of the research of university teachers in Humanities and Social Sciences is being prepared for January 2010.

Evidences:

- University teaching staff in 2015: profile, contract policies and performance evaluation: http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/tallers_jornades/tallers_jornades/taller_udg_2008_en.html
- The assessment of the research of university teachers in Humanities and Social Sciences: http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/tallers_jornades/taller_ub_2010_en.html

P11. To establish mechanisms for coordination between the committees CAR and CLIC

AQU's strategic plan includes, as a strategic objective in the priority or theme 2 "Academic staff assessment", to bring about greater integration of the assessment of academic staff into the overall process of quality enhancement.

Periodic meetings are organised between the presidencies of both AQU's committees.

P15. To improve the software package that deals with the Agency's administrative management in general

Besides the renovation of PC and multimedia equipment new acquisitions, AQU has introduced the following packages software: SAP; Microsoft Office 2007; Adobe Acrobat 9; the renovation of the antivirus software; and the renovation of the servers' software.