

## Communiqué of the AQU Board of Management

### YES TO VALIDATION, NO TO THE CURRENT PROCEDURE

The AQU Catalunya Board of Management (hereafter, the Board)<sup>1</sup> hereby sets out its position regarding the validation process (ex-ante accreditation) that university degree programmes<sup>2</sup> must currently undergo before they can be introduced or modified and realigned to better meet society's needs and fulfil its expectations.

The Board recognises the willingness of the university authorities in Catalonia and their efforts to offer top quality degree programmes. Over the last eighteen months, programme validation involving new degrees has successfully been carried out in Catalonia, together with revalidation in the case of several of the first courses that were adapted in compliance with EHEA guidelines.

It also stresses the importance of validation as an essential step prior to the introduction of any course of study, the purpose being to guarantee the existence and coherence of the initial course plan (programme content). If validation did not exist, it would need to be created to assure programme quality right from the very beginning.

Validation is important. Nevertheless, it merely represents the first stage in the continuous improvement of degree courses, which is followed by monitoring, external review and accreditation. The approach to these different stages is harmonious and integrated as a result of the Framework for the validation, monitoring, modification and accreditation of recognised programmes of study in Catalonia (VSMA Framework), which was endorsed by the Board in 2010. Monitoring is the core framework process in the continuous improvement of degree courses that, together with external institutional review, leads naturally and in a consistent way to degree accreditation.

On the basis of the conclusions of the Workshop on the meta-evaluation of the validation, modification and monitoring processes<sup>3</sup>, the Board finds that the approach established in the VSMA Framework is threatened by a process of validation that, as a consequence of state (Spanish) legislation, has taken on a disproportionate dimension and involves complex

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<sup>1</sup> The Board of Management is the governing body of AQU Catalunya and is made up of the Agency's President; the rectors of the public universities, together with the rector of the UOC; a maximum of three rectors of private universities; the chairs of the boards of trustees of the public universities; three leading members of the academic community; two members from the competent department of the Government of Catalonia with jurisdiction over universities; the chairs of the Research Assessment Commission (CAR) and the Collaborating and Tenure-Track Teaching Staff Commission (CLiC), and the director of AQU Catalunya.

<sup>2</sup> This process stemmed from the passing of Royal Decree 861/2010, 2 July, which amended Royal Decree 1393/2007, 29 October, on the academic governance of recognised degrees and awards.

<sup>3</sup> The objectives of this workshop, which took place in March 2012 with the participation of more than two hundred people from all the universities in Catalonia, were to report on and account for the experience over the past eighteen months, carry out an in-depth analysis of how these processes can be improved and plan ahead for the most important aspects for external review and accreditation.

dynamics that are removed from the needs of the universities, the responsibility of AQU Catalunya and the interests of society.

Furthermore, this has been exacerbated by the application software used for validation provided by the Spanish ministry with jurisdiction over universities. Instead of facilitating the validation process, the application software is an instrument in which the filling out of fields and selecting from list boxes is an unnecessary obstacle course.

The Board believes that the current validation procedure needs to be simplified in at least two respects: on the one hand, by distinguishing between those aspects that are specific to each degree course and those that are common to all programmes being offered and taught in a faculty or university, and thereby put an end to the reiterated demand for information, which calls for the copy and pasting of text that through repetition becomes trivial; and, on the other, to retain in the process only those aspects that deal with course planning (programme content) and to leave aside all others that can be evaluated using real data during the monitoring process, not theoretically on the basis of statements of intention.

The Board considers that the validation procedure needs to be modified so that the universities and the Agency can carry out monitoring, external review and accreditation and thereby complete the cycle of continuous improvement of university degree courses. The Board thus pledges to continue to guide the efforts and activities of AQU Catalunya towards a greater simplification of the processes in all areas in which it is competent, as is apparent from the development of projects such as Winddat.<sup>4</sup>

The rectors and chairs of the university boards of trustees who sit on the Board also consider it necessary to defend the VSMA Framework from the point of view of their respective universities and other bodies that they form part of and, in particular, of the vision of the continuous improvement process set out in the Framework.

Lastly, it urges the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia through the Secretariat for Universities and Research that, in its support for the VSMA Framework, it also promotes measures addressed to the Ministry (Central Government) to simplify the validation procedure so that accredited quality assurance agencies have the maximum autonomy to carry this out in accordance with national and international criteria and, above all, to replace or at least reduce the requirements of the Ministry's software platform.

Excellence in universities has to be constructed in a progressive way by providing instruments that enable them to continuously analyse how they are running and introduce improvements and enhancements that stem from such analysis. Without full implementation of the VSMA Framework, no matter how sophisticated and complex the validation process, it will be impossible for universities in Catalonia to assure the quality and ensure the continuous improvement of their degree courses.

Barcelona, 28 March 2012

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<sup>4</sup> Web page with a series of teaching indicators that include all degree courses offered by the public universities (data will also soon be available on the private universities), which can be used for analysis in the monitoring of each programme of study and defining enhancement proposals.

Members of the AQU Board of Management (28.03.2012):

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