



PROCEDURE FOR THE EUROPEAN APPROACH FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE OF JOINT PROGRAMMES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	INTRODUCTION.....	5
1.1.	Scope of the procedure.....	5
1.2.	Structure of the procedure	6
2.	ACCREDITATION EFFECTS AND RESULTS	7
2.1.	Accreditation effects.....	7
2.2.	Assessment results and levels	7
3.	ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE	9
3.1.	Preparation for assessment	9
3.2.	Application	9
3.3.	Assessment.....	12
3.5.	Decision	14
3.6.	Issuing reports and communicating the assessment.....	15
3.7.	Register (only for Catalan universities)	15
3.8.	Appeals.....	15
3.9.	Flowchart.....	15
4.	RECOGNITION PROCEDURE	17
5.	PUBLICATION	17
6.	MONITORING AND CONTINUOUS ENHANCEMENT	17
	ANNEX I. SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT	18

1. INTRODUCTION

The [European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes](#), adopted by European Ministers responsible for higher education (2015), has been developed to facilitate external quality assurance of these programmes. In particular, it aims to:

- > Remove a major obstacle to the development of joint programmes by setting standards that are based on the agreed tools of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), without applying additional national criteria.
- > Facilitate integrated approaches to quality assurance of joint programmes that genuinely reflect their joint character.

The Spanish Ministry of Universities has established mandatory *ex-ante* (for new programmes) and *ex-post* accreditation (for existing programmes) processes for the delivery of higher education study programmes that can be recognised throughout the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).¹ Therefore joint programmes must meet the minimum requirements of the Spanish authorities in order to be recognised as official degrees.

The European Approach is the appropriate framework to be applied when Catalan universities cooperate with other European higher education institutions in delivering joint programmes. It also applies where the recognition of programme accreditation or assessment are mandatory in Spain.

When Catalan universities cooperate with other higher education institutions outside the EHEA, the European Approach may also be used for joint programmes. In such cases, an agreement between AQU Catalunya and other quality agencies responsible for assessment must be signed in order for accreditation to be recognised by AQU Catalunya.

The cooperating institutions offering a joint programme should jointly select a suitable agency from the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).² As an EQAR-registered agency, AQU Catalunya is in a position to evaluate joint programmes in accordance with the European Approach and to recognise assessments conducted by other registered agencies.

1.1. Scope of the procedure

This procedure, which relates to new joint programmes (*ex-ante* accreditation) and existing joint programmes (*ex-post* accreditation), applies to universities that offer joint degree programmes internationally.

- > **New joint programme / *Ex-ante* accreditation:** the focus of the assessment is the

¹ [Royal Decree 822/2021, of 28 September, establishing the organisation of university degree programmes and the quality assurance process thereof.](#) [Retrieved October 2024]

² [EQAR-registered agencies.](#) [Retrieved October 2024]

potential quality of a new programme.

- > **Existing joint programme / Ex-post accreditation:** the focus of the assessment is the quality of the programme.

This procedure is applicable to the Guide to the accreditation of joint programmes using the European Approach.

1.2. Structure of the procedure

This document is structured into the following sections: accreditation effects and results, assessment procedure, recognition procedure, publication of assessment reports and lastly, monitoring and continuous enhancement.

The assessment guide and the assessment procedure form an integrated assessment model which is aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.³

³ [European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#). [Retrieved October 2024]

2. ACCREDITATION EFFECTS AND RESULTS

2.1. Accreditation effects

Accreditation is granted for a period of **six years** in accordance with the European Approach. During this period, AQU Catalunya must be informed of any changes to the consortium and/or any alterations to the structure, nature or objectives of the degree programme. As a minimum, a follow-up will be conducted every three years following the initial implementation to assess any changes introduced.

2.2. Assessment results and levels

The results of the quality assessment of the joint programme will be classified into in three levels: **accredited**, **accredited with conditions** or **non-accredited** (see Table 1).

Table 1. Criteria for determining the level of compliance with quality standards for accreditation of the joint programme

Level	Criteria for defining compliance with the quality standards of the joint programme
Accredited	Accreditation is fully granted. All standards are judged compliant by the panel.
Accredited with conditions	Accreditation will be fully granted if the specified requirements are met within a set period. One or more (but not all) standards are judged non-compliant. The panel considers it possible to improve the programme so that all standards become compliant within a defined period. Within such a period, the consortium must demonstrate that the requirements have been fulfilled; otherwise, the decision will be revoked and the status will revert to “non-accredited”.
Non-accredited	Accreditation is not granted. None of the standards are judged compliant. Alternatively, one or more (but not all) standards are judged non-compliant but the panel considers it impossible to improve the programme so that all standards become compliant within a defined period.

The European Approach defines a set of standards, each assessed at one of three levels: compliant, compliant with conditions or non-compliant (see Table 2).

Table 2. Criteria for determining the level of achievement of each standard

Level	Criteria for defining compliance with each quality standard of the joint programme
Compliant	The standard is fully achieved by the joint programme.
Compliant with conditions	Compliance with the standard is demonstrated, at least in its fundamental aspects. The review panel considers it possible to improve and achieve full compliance with the standard within a defined period.
Non-compliant	The standard is not achieved by the joint programme. The review panel considers it impossible to improve the standard within a defined period to achieve full compliance.

3. ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

3.1. Preparation for assessment

AQU Catalunya offers a preliminary meeting with the university coordinating the joint programme. This meeting provides information on the procedure, the criteria, the approach to the self-assessment report, the required documentation, the timeline the characteristics of the consortium participating in the joint programme, etc.

AQU Catalunya will liaise with quality assurance agencies from the countries or regions participating in the joint programme, with the primary aim of exploring opportunities for cooperation with quality assurance activities (e.g., involving experts) and analysing any barriers posed by national legislation.

3.2. Application

The university coordinating the joint programme must submit the application and all required documents electronically, including the self-assessment report (see section 3.3), to AQU Catalunya.

In the case of Catalan universities, [application forms](#) must be submitted via the generic procedure for universities dealing with AQU Catalunya, available on EACAT, the electronic platform for processing and submitting documentation between the Government of Catalonia and local bodies. This must be done in accordance with the instructions published on AQU Catalunya's [website](#).

For joint programmes that do not include a Catalan university or joint programmes with external funding, a formal agreement between AQU Catalunya and the coordinating university of the joint programme is needed before the assessment procedure can commence. Institutions should contact AQU Catalunya by mail at: international@aqu.cat.

Applications must be submitted no later than ten months before the expiry of the joint programme's current accreditation or recognition as a new joint programme, bearing in mind that the external procedure takes approximately six months once the self-assessment report is ready.

Self-assessment report⁴

The external quality assurance process is based on the self-assessment report (SAR), which is developed by the cooperating institutions. Drafted in English, the SAR must incorporate comprehensive information that demonstrates compliance with the relevant standards.

The SAR is one of the foremost components in the assessment, providing the review panel with key information in preparation for the site visit. In particular, the key elements are listed below:

⁴ [ImpEA Procedure](#)

- > The SAR must be jointly submitted.
- > It must contain comprehensive information demonstrating the programme's compliance with quality assurance standards.
- > It must contain the necessary information about the respective national frameworks.
- > It must focus explicitly on the distinctive features of the joint programme.

Before starting the assessment procedure, AQU Catalunya strongly recommends verifying the [eligibility](#) of the joint programme, a process that encompasses:

- > Institutional status: institutions offering a joint programme should be recognised as higher education institutions by the relevant authorities in their countries.
- > Consortium agreement: it should be verified that this covers all aspects included in the SAR: coordination and responsibilities of the partners, student admission and selection procedures, student and teaching staff mobility, and examination regulations.
- > Institutional involvement: all cooperating institutions must be involved in the design and delivery of the programme.

According to the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#) (ESG), primary responsibility for programme quality lies with the institutions themselves; therefore, the consortium must verify the legality of the proposal in the first instance. All partners delivering the proposal must be aware of the conditions applicable in each participating country to ensure the joint degree's legal recognition.

Furthermore, the SAR must include any relevant information about the cooperating institutions' national frameworks that may be required by foreign agencies and experts to understand the programme's context, particularly its placement within national higher education systems.

The SAR should highlight the joint programme's unique nature as a collaborative endeavour among higher education institutions from multiple national higher education systems.

Due to the level of collaboration and consultation needed to prepare, draft and approve the SAR, development of the report can be time-consuming, and institutions should allow between six and nine months for its completion. A template for the SAR⁵ is included in Annex I. The SAR must address all standards identified in the corresponding guide.

The SAR must be submitted to AQU Catalunya at least **two months ahead of the site visit**. If the information is considered incomplete, making it impossible to assess all dimensions, the site visit may be suspended or postponed.

⁵ A useful guide to self-assessment is available on the [ImpEA website](#).

Composition of the panel

Peer review is a fundamental factor in guaranteeing the validity, reliability and usefulness of external assessment processes. The assessment of a joint programme is carried out by experts. The panel should include members with expertise in the relevant subject area(s) or discipline(s), including knowledge of the labour market and industry in the specific field(s), experience in quality assurance in higher education, and representation from the student body.

AQU Catalunya will appoint a review panel comprising at least four members to assess the joint programme, along with a secretary to support the panel in its tasks. As a whole, the review panel must have knowledge of all higher education systems represented in the consortium. The panel should include members from at least two of the countries involved in delivering the programme. If Spanish authorities are required to recognise the joint programme, at least one Catalan or Spanish panel member is highly recommended.

The standard composition of a review panel is as follows:

- > Chair: a senior figure with expertise in the HEI's relevant field of knowledge.
- > Academic member: an expert in the degree areas being assessed.
- > Professional member: a representative with working experience in the HEI's field of knowledge.
- > Student: a representative enrolled in a degree of the HEI's relevant field of knowledge.
- > Secretary: an expert in methodology.

As the assessment process and final report will be conducted in English, all panel members must have sufficient proficiency in the English language.

AQU Catalunya reports on the composition of the review panel to the coordinating institution to identify any potential conflicts of interest with the appointed members. The composition of the review panel will only be changed if any conflicts are identified. AQU Catalunya has authority to grant final approval to the composition of the review panel.

The Agency will provide specific training to the experts on the review activity, their roles and the specific aspects of the quality assurance procedure, particularly those regarding joint programmes.

The role of the chair

The review panel chair acts as the coordinator of the review panel and has overall responsibility for the assessment of the joint programme. The chair will have the following key responsibilities: coordinating preliminary meetings with the panel; agreeing on the direction of discussions with stakeholders during the site visit; ensuring sufficient discussion and evidence collection during the site visit to enable the panel to make an informed judgement on the joint programme; providing an oral report on the panel's findings at the end of the site visit; liaising with panel members and the report secretary to ensure the report is drafted within the agreed timeline; and approving the final report for submission to AQU Catalunya by the panel secretary.

The role of the secretary

The panel secretary also has several key responsibilities, including: liaising with AQU Catalunya and the coordinating institution during the preparatory stage and site visit; handling additional documentation and other requests on behalf of the panel; working closely with the chair and panel members to ensure the necessary evidence is collected and recorded during the site visit; and, after the site visit, engaging with the chair and panel members to draft the panel report.

The role of panel members

The panel members have a number of duties to perform, which include: reviewing documentation, including the SAR and any other materials available prior to the site visit; informing the secretary about any essential documentation that needs to be obtained relating to the joint programme prior to the site visit; assisting with preparations for the site visit and with drafting the report; during the site visit, participating actively in all meetings and discussions; and lastly, contributing to any amendments to the review report, if needed.

3.3. Assessment

The assessment consists of the phases described below.

3.3.1 Individual assessment

The review panel members will carry out an individual assessment covering all the standards. Particular attention should be given to the distinctive features of joint programmes and this focus should be reflected in the assessment report. The report should include relevant evidence, analysis, conclusions regarding the standards, best practices, requirements, areas for improvement, and recommendations for further development of the programme.

3.3.2 Site visit

The site visit should enable the review panel to discuss the joint programme based on the self-assessment report and assess whether the programme complies with the standards. During the visit, the review panel will discuss the programme's characteristics based on the self-assessment report and seek to resolve any issues arising from the analysis.

The site visit is typically held at a single coordinating university, although other locations should be included using a hybrid methodology. The visit normally lasts one day and is preceded by a preparatory meeting of the external review panel. The visit will be conducted in English.

The panel will draw up an indicative visit schedule based on the template provided by AQU Catalunya. The university may suggest adjustments to the schedule, which must be validated by the panel. The schedule must allow all necessary information to be collected so that the expert panel can conduct its assessment thoroughly.

The joint programme is responsible for organising attendance at hearings previously agreed upon

with the panel. The following stakeholders must be involved throughout the site visit:

- > Management of the institutions.
- > Management/staff responsible for the joint programme.
- > (Intended) teaching staff.
- > Staff responsible for the quality assurance of the joint programme (if applicable).
- > Students enrolled in the joint programme (if applicable).
- > Student support services staff (if applicable).
- > Other relevant stakeholders, such as alumni (if applicable) and representatives from the professional field.

Prior to, during or after the site visit the review panel may request additional information from the joint programme leaders to support its assessment. The review panel must justify such requests and joint programme leaders must provide the requested information.

At the final session of the site visit the chair presents an oral report outlining the review panel's findings. This report constitutes the formal conclusion to the site visit, providing an opportunity for the chair to share the panel's preliminary findings in respect of the joint programme and its compliance with the standards. However, it is not an opportunity for further discussions since it constitutes the formal end of the site visit and process by the chair.

3.3.3 External assessment report drafting (site visit report)

The review panel will draft the assessment report based on a model that contains relevant evidence, analysis and conclusions regarding all standards. The conclusions should pay particular attention to the distinctive features of the joint programme. In addition to the relevant argumentation, it should also include the following aspects:

- > **Best practices**
Noteworthy aspects of the joint programme that can be transferred to other joint degrees.
- > **Requirements**
Very serious shortcomings that compromise the quality of the joint programme and lead to non-achievement of the standard (non-compliant or compliant with conditions).
These may be subject to appeal by the university.
- > **Enhancement areas**
Shortcomings detected that must be resolved within a maximum period of three years. While significant, they are not serious enough to result in a non-compliant

judgement.

These may be subject to appeal by the university.

> **Recommendations**

Suggestions aimed at promoting the enhancement of the joint programme.
Implementation of recommendations is not mandatory.

These are not subject to appeal by the university.

In the first instance, the members of the panel must agree on the content of the visit report, after which the chair shall endorse it. The draft of the visit report must be sent to AQU Catalunya within a maximum period of **four weeks** after the site visit, excluding holiday periods.

AQU Catalunya will conduct a technical review to analyse the internal consistency of the visit report and the justification for the proposed assessment result. If necessary, the panel may be required to provide clarifications on the content of the report or further justification for the proposed result.

Subsequently, AQU Catalunya will send the external assessment report to the university for review. **The university will have fifteen calendar days to identify and notify any factual errors⁶** in the visit report. If the university reports factual errors, AQU Catalunya will forward them to the panel, which will analyse and review the visit report accordingly. The revised visit report will then be considered as final. If no factual errors are reported by the university within this period, the initially submitted external assessment report will be deemed final.

3.5. Decision

The specific assessment committees (CEA, from the Catalan), established by agreement of [AQU Catalunya's Institutional and Programme Review Commission](#) (CAIP, from the Catalan), are responsible for assessing degree programmes to determine their accreditation status. Their primary function is to issue decision reports on degrees undergoing the assessment process.

In the Spanish context, the Council of Universities makes the final decision regarding registration. More information on the functions and composition of the assessment bodies can be found on the [AQU Catalunya website](#).

The CEA will draw up the corresponding report based on the external assessment visit report drawn up by the review panel. This report will be issued with a classification of “accredited”, “accredited with conditions” or “non-accredited”, taking into consideration the criteria identified in section 2.2 (Assessment results and levels) of this document. It may also include best practices, requirements, enhancement areas and recommendations, depending on each case.

In its decision, the CEA may disagree with the assessments included in the external assessment visit report, setting out the reasons for doing so. The CEA may ask the review panel for additional

⁶ Factual errors refer to inaccuracies in the stated facts or instances where serious misunderstandings have occurred. Universities are not permitted to submit additional documentation at this stage.

information or other clarifications before making its decision.

The institution will have twenty working days following the issue of the preliminary decision report to submit remarks for the CEA to consider. After assessing any remarks submitted, the CEA will issue the final decision report along with a response report, if applicable. If the institution does not submit any remarks, the preliminary report will be deemed final.

3.6. Issuing reports and communicating the assessment

AQU Catalunya will issue the external assessment visit report and the final assessment report for the joint programme together. The accreditation report shall be issued within a maximum of six months from the date of application for assessment.

AQU Catalunya will communicate the assessment outcome to the coordinating university and the quality assurance agencies involved.

3.7. Register (only for Catalan universities)

In the Spanish context, once the final resolution has been issued, the Ministry of Universities will report the decision to the Register of Universities, Centres and Qualifications (RUCT, from the Spanish). When the resolution is favourable, the degree will be registered accordingly. When the resolution is unfavourable, if the degree is new it will not be recorded in the RUCT; alternatively, if it is part of an existing programme, the degree will be recorded as discontinued from that date. In this case, the resolution will declare the study plan as having been discontinued, and the necessary steps must be taken to guarantee the academic rights of all enrolled students.

3.8. Appeals

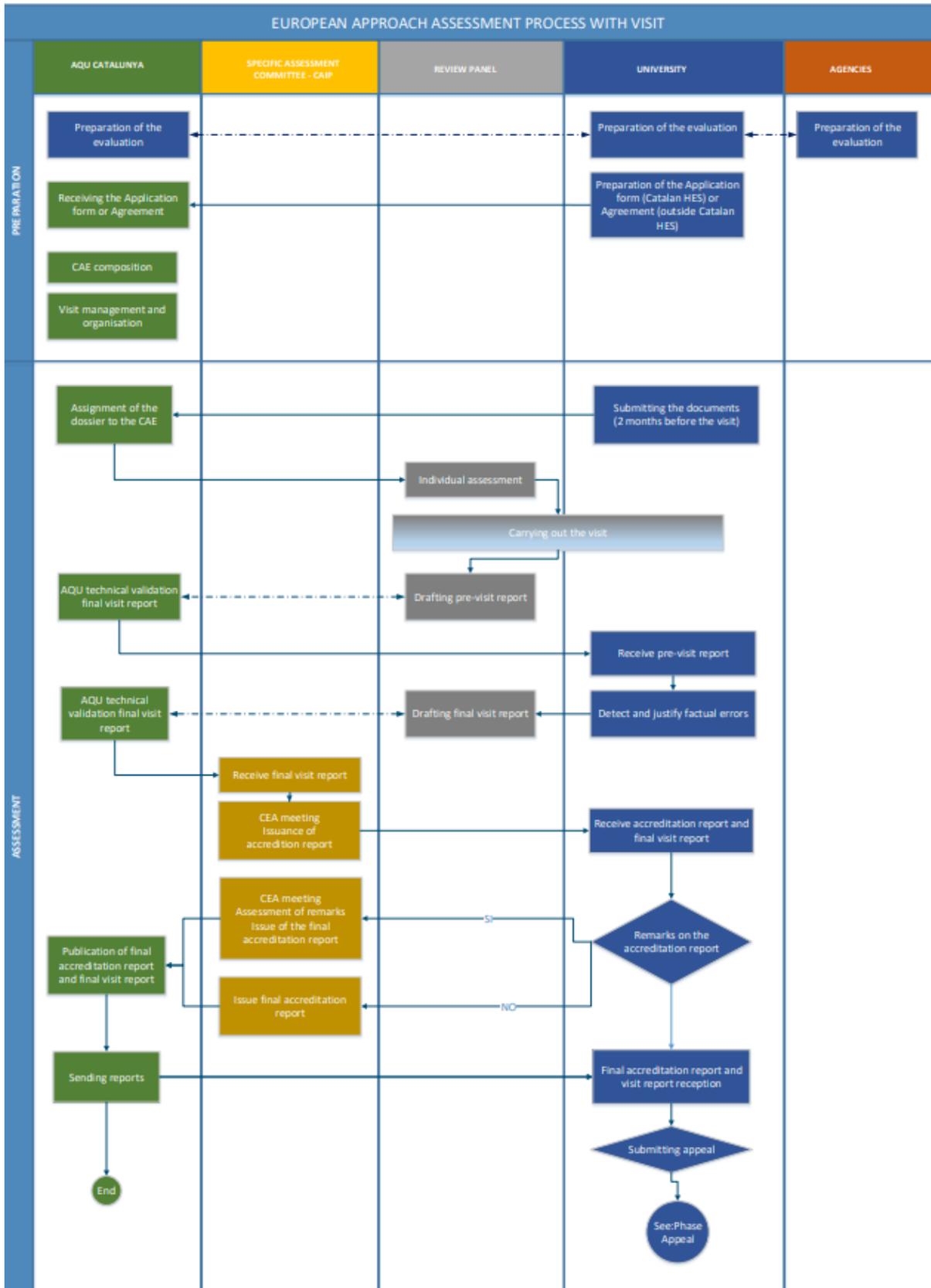
The Appeals Commission is responsible for handling appeals against the decisions of the Research Assessment Commission and the other bodies in the Agency involved in assessment, certification and accreditation referred to in article 11 of Law 15/2015, of 21 July 2015, on the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency. Its decisions exhaust all administrative channels.

The Appeals Commission is responsible for issuing review reports on other determinations made by committees when this is provided for in the assessment, certification and accreditation processes.

The appeals [procedure](#) is published on the AQU Catalunya website.

3.9. Flowchart

The diagram below illustrates the procedure for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes:



4. RECOGNITION PROCEDURE

As mentioned, joint programmes may select an agency from the EQAR list. Catalan universities participating in a joint programme that is assessed by an EQAR agency other than AQU Catalunya must follow a recognition procedure, in accordance with the primary steps shown below:

- > The Catalan university must submit the application [form](#) via the generic procedure for universities when dealing with AQU Catalunya. This process is available on EACAT, the electronic platform for processing and submitting documentation between the Government of Catalonia and local bodies.
- > The institution must attach the following documentation to the form: the external review report issued by the EQAR agency, the joint programme agreement and the SAR submitted for the assessment.
- > AQU Catalunya will issue a formal report confirming that the degree programme has been assessed by an EQAR agency and has followed the European Approach methodology.

5. PUBLICATION

The assessment reports and external assessment visit reports will be published on the [AQU Catalunya website](#) and on the [Database of External Quality Assurance Results](#) of the EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education).

6. MONITORING AND CONTINUOUS ENHANCEMENT

Although monitoring is an internal process within the institution, it is a compulsory procedure and the resulting reports serve as key evidence for the future accreditation process. AQU Catalunya will cooperate with the participating institutions to establish a follow-up procedure aimed at ensuring the fulfilment of requirements and/or the implementation of enhancement areas.

ANNEX I. SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT⁷

Procedure for the european approach for quality assurance of joint programmes

Name of the programme

Name of the coordinating institution

⁷ [Template for self-evaluation released.](#)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GLOSSARY	21
1. GENERAL OVERVIEW	21
1.1. Introduction	21
1.2. Basic information	21
1.3. Joint design and delivery.....	22
2. LEARNING OUTCOMES	22
2.1 Level	22
2.2 Disciplinary field.....	22
2.3 Achievement	22
2.4 Regulated professions.....	22
3. STUDY PROGRAMME	22
3.1 Curriculum.....	22
3.2 Credits	22
3.3 Workload.....	23
4. ADMISSION AND RECOGNITION	23
4.1. Admission.....	23
4.2. Recognition	23
5. LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT	23
5.1 Learning and teaching.....	23
5.2 Assessment of students	23
6. STUDENT SUPPORT	23
7. RESOURCES	24
7.1 Staff.....	24
7.2 Facilities.....	24
8. TRANSPARENCY AND DOCUMENTATION	24
9. QUALITY ASSURANCE	24

ANNEXES	25
Mandatory annexes	25
Additional annexes.....	25

GLOSSARY

1. GENERAL OVERVIEW

1.1 Introduction

A brief general description of the programme, including its aims, objectives and relevant background context. This description should include the genesis and history of the programme, its development process (i.e., stakeholder engagement), its relevance and the rationale behind the consortium composition.

1.2 Basic information

Full name of the programme:

EQF level:

Degrees awarded:

Number of ECTS :

ISCED field(s) of study:

List of institutions delivering the programme:

Name of the institution	Higher education institution (yes/no)	Degree-awarding institution (yes/no)	Role in the consortium (e.g., coordinator, etc.)

Accreditation status per institution:

Name of the institution	Relevant external quality assurance agency (if any)	European Approach allowed (yes/no)	Additional information

1.3 Joint design and delivery

Describe each partner's role in the design and delivery of the programme.

2. LEARNING OUTCOMES

2.1 Level

The intended learning outcomes are aligned with the corresponding level in the Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA) and the applicable national qualifications framework(s).

2.2 Disciplinary field

The intended learning outcomes comprise knowledge, skills and competences in the respective disciplinary field(s).

2.3 Achievement

The programme should be able to demonstrate that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

2.4 Regulated professions

If applicable to the specific joint programme, the minimum agreed training conditions specified in European Union Directive 2005/36/EC or relevant common training frameworks established under the Directive, should be considered.

3. STUDY PROGRAMME

3.1 Curriculum

The structure and content of the curriculum are designed to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

3.2 Credits

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is applied appropriately and the distribution of credits is transparent.

3.3 Workload

A joint bachelor's programme will typically entail a total student workload of 180-240 ECTS. A joint master's programme will typically involve 90-120 ECTS and must not have fewer than 60 ECTS at the second-cycle level (credit ranges according to the QF-EHEA). Joint doctoral programmes have no specified credit range. The workload and the average completion time should be monitored.

4. ADMISSION AND RECOGNITION

4.1. Admission

The admission requirements and selection procedures must be appropriate considering the programme's level and discipline.

4.2. Recognition

Recognition of qualifications and of periods of study (including prior learning) should be applied in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and subsidiary documents.

5. LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

5.1 Learning and teaching

The programme is designed to align with the intended learning outcomes, and the learning and teaching approaches applied are adequate to achieve these. The diversity of students and their needs are respected and addressed, especially considering their potentially diverse cultural backgrounds.

5.2 Assessment of students

The examination regulations and the process for assessment of achieved learning outcomes align with the intended learning outcomes. They are applied consistently among partner institutions.

6. STUDENT SUPPORT

Student support services contribute to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and address specific challenges associated with student mobility.

7. RESOURCES

7.1 Staff

There are enough, suitably qualified staff (qualifications, professional and international experience) to implement the study programme.

7.2 Facilities

The facilities provided are sufficient and adequate to support the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

8. TRANSPARENCY AND DOCUMENTATION

Relevant information about the programme, such as admission requirements and procedures, course catalogue, and examination and assessment procedures, is well-documented and publicly available, taking into consideration the specific needs associated with student mobility.

How is information about the programme and its intended learning outcomes brought to the attention of the public and prospective students?

9. QUALITY ASSURANCE

The cooperating institutions must implement joint internal quality assurance processes in accordance with Part 1 of the ESG.

ANNEXES

Mandatory annexes

- 1) Documents supporting the legal status of the partner institutions.
- 2) Cooperation agreement.
- 3) Documents supporting each partner's legal basis for:
 - a) Participating in the joint programme.
 - b) (Joint) degree-awarding rights (if applicable).
- 4) List of intended learning outcomes, including:
 - a) Matrix of alignment with the Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA).
 - b) Matrix of alignment with the applicable national qualifications framework.
- 5) Course syllabi from all partners.
- 6) Structure of the curriculum/study plan.
- 7) Official documents indicating admission requirements and selection procedures.
- 8) Official documents outlining the procedure for recognition of qualifications.
- 9) Student assessment regulations.
- 10) Academic staff CVs (from all partners).
- 11) Relevant documents outlining the internal quality assurance system.
- 12) Diploma supplement (sample).

Additional annexes

Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya

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