AQU CATALUNYA SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT 2017

External review of compliance with the ESG (2015) for confirmation of full membership of ENQA and renewal of registration with the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)

ENQA
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FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance (QA) agencies in higher education must undergo an external review of compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for the External Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ESG) once every five years for the purposes of recognition in Europe. This is the third review for AQU Catalunya, following two previous ones in 2007 and 2012, and it will take place at a time during which:

- The Agency has had to adapt its activities to the requirements of the new ESG and new legislation[1], both of which date from 2015.
- The Agency is at the height of the implementation of the Framework for the validation (ex-ante accreditation), monitoring, modification and accreditation of recognised degree programmes (VSMA Framework). The Agency has already reviewed more than 500 degree courses in 2016.

In the five years since the previous ENQA review, AQU Catalunya has made important progress in the following areas:

1. Full implementation of the VSMA Framework, the main instrument for the external quality assurance of programmes of study delivered at Catalan universities, and endorsement of the new VSMA Framework (2016).
2. The endorsement and implementation of the Strategic Plan for 2015-2018, specific details of which are set out in the annual Action Plan.
3. Impetus has been given to the ex-post certification of internal quality assurance systems (IQAs) in institutions in Catalonia.
4. The launching of a new methodology for the quality assurance of research being carried out at department level in the universities, the purpose of which is to give specific impetus to research as a dimension of strategic thrust in the Catalan university system.
5. Accreditation of the teaching assessment handbooks, a procedure that is taken into account in ex-post IQAS certification.
6. Promotion of WINDDAT, an open public system that provides indicators to the entire university system in Catalonia for use in programme provision analysis.

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[1] Law 15/2015, 21 July concerning AQU Catalunya.

7. The development and dissemination of the EUC and *EUC Reports* web portals, which provide easy to understand (non-expert) information on quality and quality assurance in the university system in Catalonia.
8. Carrying out of the graduate employment outcomes surveys (2014 and 2017) and the employers' opinions survey (2014).
9. Application of the Transparency Act[2] and enhanced accountability procedures.

This self-assessment report has been produced with the following aims:

1. To revise the state of the commitments undertaken and the recommendations made in the previous reviews regarding compliance with the ESG which, as can be seen, have been introduced in substantially all cases.
2. To critically analyse how AQU Catalunya complies with the current ESG. The work undertaken in this regard has been highly rewarding as it has provided the Agency with a more grounded approach to all of its QA procedures and their follow-up.
3. To reflect on both present and future challenges facing AQU Catalunya and that will need to be dealt with in the forthcoming years. This document sets out the lines for future action that the Agency considers it will need to work on, all of which is aligned with prevailing regulations and the AQU Catalunya Strategic Plan 2015-2018.

All references given throughout this self-assessment report are underlined and are linked to either different sections of the self-assessment report and the AQU Catalunya website or other webpages. AQU Catalunya's website is the Agency's main platform for communication and it gives the description of all of the activities that the Agency develops and undertakes. The complete version is in Catalan and efforts are constantly made to update and stay abreast with developments in the Spanish and English versions.

The figures given in this self-assessment report are from 10 October 2016.

Lastly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who was involved and gave their time in producing this self-assessment report and for their critiques and comments. The sum total of everybody's work has greatly helped us in being able to make improvements and easily adapt to change as it has occurred. This current review by ENQA is a great opportunity for the Agency to grow and as such we willingly approach and have every intention of making the very best of the ENQA review procedure.

Thank you.

Josep Joan Moreso

President, AQU Catalunya

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[2] Act 19/2014, 29 December, on transparency, access to information and good governance.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT (SAR)

2.1. Development of the self-assessment report

This self-assessment report (SAR) follows the guide of content provided in the <u>Guidelines for ENQA Agency Review (2016)</u> and is structured according to *Annex II. Guide of content for the self-assessment report*.

The production of the SAR was carried out in the following stages:

Figure 1. Steps in producing the self-assessment report

Planning (March-April 2016)
- Definition of the project: stages, timetable and participants
- Definition of the content

Draft SAR (April-Sept 2016)
- Draft SAR
- Internal review

Final revision and endorsement (Oct-Nov 2016)
- Appointment of the self-evaluation committee
- External review by the stakeholders and a public hearing
- Drafting of the final SAR by the self-evaluation committee
- Endorsement by the Standing Committee, as delegated by the Governing Board

The first two stages involving the planning and drawing up of the draft were completed internally. The project and the report's contents were defined by the director of AQU Catalunya together with the Agency's Internal Coordinating Committee, and a draft was drawn up on the basis of an analysis of the evidence and an assessment of the progress made since the previous review. The intention behind the SAR is to describe the way/s in which AQU Catalunya works and set out its strengths and weaknesses, together with enhancement proposals for the short and medium-term.

The completed draft was then sent out to the stakeholder for review and feedback. The groups revising the SAR were as follows:

Table 1. SAR revision groups

Revision groups
The Governing Board of AQU Catalunya
AQU's QA commissions: Institutional and Programme Review Commission/CAIP; Appeals Committees; the CAIP's subject and function-specific committees; and external review panels
Advisory committees: Committee of Vice-Rectors in charge of QA; Committee of QA Technical Units and the Student Advisory Committee
Self-evaluation Committee
AQU Catalunya staff
Advisers and collaborators of AQU Catalunya
Former directors of AQU Catalunya
Public announcement on the website

The external revision stage began on 11 October and was concluded on 27 October 2016.

A self-evaluation committee was set up to review and revise the SAR and to make any relevant contributions and met on 7 November 2016 to assess the contributions received as a result of the external consultation and to draw up the definitive SAR. The self-evaluation committee was made up of:

Table 2. Self-evaluation committee

Self-evaluation committee
Martí Casadesús Fa, director of AQU Catalunya, chairman of the self-evaluation committee
Josep Eladi Baños, academic member on the Governing Board, AQU Catalunya
Jessica Marques, student member on the Governing Board, AQU Catalunya
Montserrat Giralt Batista, vice-rector for Quality Assurance, Rovira i Virgili University
Mari Paz Álvarez del Castillo, head of the Teaching Quality Assurance Office, Autonomous University of Barcelona/UAB
Josep Manel Torres, head of Quality Assurance, AQU Catalunya
Núria Comet Señal, in charge of internal quality and information security management, AQU Catalunya
Maria Giné Soca, secretary to AQU Catalunya and the Governing Board, member and secretary of the self-evaluation committee

The SAR was endorsed on 21 November 2016 by AQU Catalunya's Standing Committee, as delegated by the Governing Board, and will be referred to ENQA and EQAR for the external review of AQU Catalunya's compliance with the ESG (2015).

2.2. Assessment of the drafting of the SAR

AQU Catalunya has made a constructive assessment of the self-assessment process that can be summarised in the following points:

- The Terms of Reference (ToR) provided by ENQA and EQAR were of great help to AQU Catalunya in reinforcing the focus of external accreditation at international level and the provision of foreign programmes being offered in Catalonia. The work of AQU Catalunya focuses on the quality assurance of programme delivery in Catalonia because the volume of these activities far exceeds that of all of its other external QA activities (over the last five years it has reviewed more than 2,000 applications from programmes run at higher education institutions (HEI) in Catalonia, compared to three reviews of foreign programmes and institutions that it has undertaken). The guidelines provided were therefore of great use in helping the Agency understand the need for greater importance to be given to these review programmes, given that this is also a dimension with a potential for growth in the future.
- The high level of commitment of AQU Catalunya's staff and collaborators in drawing up, revising and reviewing the SAR, and the volume and high quality of their contributions.
- The usefulness of the procedure, which has so far served to carry out a comprehensive review and put forward short and medium-term proposals, for example, greater harmonisation of the structure of the Agency's QA methodologies and closer monitoring of certain external QA procedures.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION AND QA OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CATALONIA

3.1. The higher education system in Catalonia

The higher education system in Catalonia consists of twelve universities, seven of which are public and five private. Four of the public universities have their campuses in Barcelona and the city's metropolitan area: University of Barcelona (UB, 1450), Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB, 1968), Polytechnic University of Catalonia (UPC, 1971) and the Pompeu Fabra University (UPF, 1991). The other three public universities have their area of influence in the three other provincial capitals in Catalonia: the University of Girona (UdG, 1991), the University of Lleida (UdL, 1991) and, in Tarragona, the Rovira i Virgili University (URV, 1991).

Figure 2. Map of the higher education system in Catalonia

The other universities are the Ramon Llull University (URL, 1991), the Open University of Catalonia (UOC, 1995), which offers distance learning courses, the International University of

Catalonia (UIC, 1997) and the Abat Oliba University (UAO, 2003), all four of which are located in Barcelona province and the University of Vic/Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC, 1997).

In the 2015-2016 academic year there were 241,270 students enrolled in Catalan universities, with 73% in public HEIs and 20,378 teachers. Provision totalled 1,298 programmes: 488 Bachelor's, 570 Master's and 240 doctoral programmes.

Table 3. Size of the higher education system in Catalonia (2015/2016)

University	No. students	Teaching staff[3]	Under-graduate programmes	Master's programmes	PhD programmes
UB	50,642	5,532	71	145	48
UAB	37,686	4,236	82	99	63
UPC	29,067	2,712	59	58	50
UPF	18,489	1,270	37	55	9
UdG	15,109	1,358	49	28	10
UdL	9,670	1,040	33	33	9
URV	13,775	1,723	47	38	27
UOC	41,120	246	20	29	3
URL	14,096	939	36	52	10
UVic-UCC	6,197	571	30	11	4
UIC	3,636	527	13	12	4
UAO	1,783	224	11	10	3
Total	241,270	20,378	488	570	240

Source: UNEIX information system for the data on the number of students and teaching staff, and the Official Register of Catalonia for the number of degree programmes.

3.2. The distribution of powers and external quality assurance in Catalonia

Details regarding the distribution of powers between Spain and the regional Autonomous Communities (including Catalonia) concerning recognised programmes and awards are given in standard 3.2 (Official status).

Aside from the powers detailed here that focus fundamentally on programme and institutional review, it is important to point out that, unlike the rest of Europe, in Spain there are various QA agencies that involved in the quality assurance of teaching at HEIs. AQU Catalunya, as the corresponding QA agency for Catalonia, has since 2003 been carrying out the assessment of contract academic staff prior to selection by the public universities for the posts of collaborating

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[3] Data updated to the 2014-2015 academic year.

lecturer, tenure-track lecturer, tenured assistant professor and full professor;4 it carries out the quality assurance of teaching at private universities in Catalonia in compliance with the Spanish Organic Law/Executive Order 1/2003, on universities in Spain,5 which stipulates that 50% of university teaching staff must be in possession of a doctorate degree, of which 60% must be in possession of accreditation from a QA agency; and since 2006 it has been evaluating the individual merits in teaching, research and management of public service and contract teaching and research staff at Catalan universities within the framework of merit-based salary bonuses for teaching staff.6 In accordance with the ToR agreed with EQAR and ENQA, teaching staff remains outside of the scope of this self-assessment report.

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4 Article 42 et seq. of <u>Law 1/2003 19 February, on universities in Catalonia</u> (LUC). Translator's note: these are roughly equivalent academic positions of col·laborador, lector, agregat and catedràtic.
5 Article 72.2 of <u>Organic Law/Executive Order 6/2001, 21 December on universities in Spain</u>.
6 Article 72 of <u>Law 1/2003 19 February, on universities in Catalonia</u>. <u>Decree 405/2006, 24 October</u> (LUC), which established additional salary allowances for both public service (civil servant) and contract teaching and research staff at public universities

4. HISTORY, PROFILE AND ACTIVITIES

4.1. History

Pursuant to Decree 355/1996 29 October, the Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari a Catalunya was founded twenty years ago by the Government of Catalonia (Generalitat de Catalunya) as a consortium consisting of the public universities and the Government of Catalonia. The Catalan QA agency was set up to make a useful contribution, not just to promote and implement quality assurance and continuous review and assessment of the universities, but also to gather and channel a constant flow of information between each university and its users in order to better understand their needs and requirements and as a way of obtaining data and criteria to maintain the higher education system in Catalonia permanently updated and adapted to changing requirements. Tasked with this important challenge, AQU Catalunya began its activities twenty years ago and was the first QA agency to be established in Spain and one of the first in Europe.

One of the main contributions of this legislation (Decree 355/1996), which at the time was referred to as "the Catalan model", was the inclusion of all rectors of public universities on the Agency's then Board of Management. This led to close cooperation between the universities and the Agency that in turn engendered trust as the universities could see that lines of action were established and implemented in a participatory way, with full respect for both the total independence in the Agency's QA criteria and university autonomy. This combined effort resulted in an open attitude of respect that enabled progress to be made with QA models that were improved and enhanced over time through the design and combined gathering of qualitative and quantitative indicators. A system of comparable indicators as the basis for institutional and programme review procedures is now a distinctive feature of the higher education system in Catalonia.

This design was seen to be an important step forwards and, as a result, in the next regulatory reform the Board of Management was enlarged to include all rectors from both public and private universities in Catalonia.

The second regulatory reform was laid down in Catalan legislation (Law 1/2003, 19 February, on universities in Catalonia, or Law 1/2003-LUC), which enacted the Spanish State's Organic Law 6/2001 of 21 December on universities in Spain under the powers granted to the Catalan Parliament. The main contribution of Law 1/2003-LUC was that it allocated powers and jurisdiction to AQU Catalunya over the quality assurance of academic staff prior to their

participation in staff recruitment processes by universities in Catalonia, as well as the assessment of merits in teaching, research and management of teaching and research staff at Catalan universities.

The most recent regulatory reform was in 2015, when the Parliament of Catalonia passed Act 15/2015, 21 July, on the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency/AQU Catalunya[7] (hereinafter, Law 15/2015) in response to the recommendations of the external reviews of compliance with the ESG coordinated by ENQA in 2007 and 2012. New legislative developments in Law 15/2015 included greater organisational independence, with the Governing Board[8] playing a more important role in appointing the chairpersons and members of the QA commissions and committees; improved safeguards for those undergoing review and evaluation with the setting up of an independent Appeals Committee; greater flexibility in its organisational structure by conferring powers to the Governing Board to set up QA bodies; and the reinforcement of its powers, in particular in the international sphere.

Over these twenty years, and following the three regulatory reforms, AQU Catalunya has become a recognised QA agency at international level, it sets high standards nationwide in Spain and it has firmly established its position as the main instrument for the assurance and enhancement of quality in the university and higher education system in Catalonia.

AQU Catalunya has always aspired to international frameworks of reference, in particular at European level. It is one of the founder members of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since 2002, and in 2008 it became one of first three agencies to be registered with the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). It has been a member since 1998 of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), for which the Agency has hosted the Secretariat since 2013; and it has been a member since 2009 of the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA).

In 2000 AQU Catalunya became the first European QA agency to be ISO 9001-certified for internal quality assurance systems, and it has been ISO 27001-certified for information security management since 2015.

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[7] Articles 2 and 3.

[8] Formerly the Board of Management.

Video 1. Presentation of AQU Catalunya

4.2. Profile and activities 2012-2016

In the five years since the last external review of compliance with the ESG by ENQA, improvements have been introduced as a result of the recommendations pending from the 2007 review and those formulated in the 2012 review, as evidenced by section 12 of this self-assessment report.

In this period of time, the AQU Catalunya Strategic Plan 2015-2018[9] was also produced and is being implemented, the aims of which are to improve and upgrade the technical aspects of the Agency's QA activities; heighten our knowledge and understanding of, and to be able to better adapt, international best practices; increase the universities' involvement in QA procedures; and enhance the reputation and visibility of AQU Catalunya among the various different stakeholders while maintaining its rigorousness.

Once every six months, the Internal Coordination Committee monitors the progress made towards compliance with the strategic and operational objectives established in the Strategic Plan.

The tasks and actions that stem from the Strategic Plan are specified in the annual Action Plan, the undertaking and fulfilment of which is set out in the Annual Report. These two documents are endorsed by the Governing Board, the first at the start of the fiscal year and the latter as a form of accountability and closure.

AQU Catalunya's activities take into account the views and opinions of all the stakeholders.

A brief description of the main activities undertaken in the period between 2012-2016, which are organised according to the strategic areas of priority in the Strategic Plan and the Action Plan, is given below:

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[9] The Strategic Plan 2015-2018 was endorsed by the AQU Board of Management on 15 December 2014.

4.2.1. Institutional (and programme) quality

This area of strategic priority covers the institutional and programme review activities undertaken by AQU Catalunya in the higher education system in Catalonia.

VSMA Framework (2010-present). The VSMA Framework for the validation (ex-ante accreditation), monitoring, modification and accreditation of recognised degree programmes is the Agency's main external review programme and, at the same time, the core series of procedures used for the external quality assurance of programmes of study being offered and taught at Catalan universities.

In the period between 2012-2016, the VSMA Framework was fully deployed and implemented and in 2016 a new version was endorsed. See section 5.1.

Certification programme for IQAs Implementation (2015-present). The deployment of AUDIT, an external institutional review programme, ensures compliance by the universities with the implementation of internal quality assurance systems (IQAs). An IQAS implementation certification procedure ("ex post IQAs certification") is currently being set in place in at faculty level. See section 5.2.

Quality assurance of research at department level (2015-present). An external institutional QA programme, the objective of which is to underpin and reinforce the universities as high-level research organisations at international level. A pilot project was carried out in 2015 to validate the review methodology. See section 5.2.

4.2.2. Quality assurance of teaching

This area of strategic priority covers activities involving the quality assurance and enhancement of teaching staff at higher education institutions in Catalonia.

The quality assurance of teaching staff prior to selection by Catalan universities for the categories of <u>non-PhD collaborating staff</u>[10], <u>tenure-track lecturer</u>, <u>senior lecturer (assistant professor)</u> and <u>full professor</u> (2003-present[11]). Under this programme, an applicant's scientific and academic curriculum is assessed for accreditation to ensure that an applicant fulfils the requirements of the contractual category being applied for. In 2013 and 2015 this included participants in the <u>Serra-Húnter Programme</u>, which is funded by the Government of Catalonia. Between 2003 and 2015, a total number of 15,131 applications were processed.

Assessment of the individual merits in <u>research</u> and <u>management</u> of public service and contract teaching and research staff at Catalan universities (2005-present). Merit in research is assessed directly by the Agency, which notifies candidates of the outcome of the assessment in accordance with an established procedure and informs each university of the favourable assessment of successful candidates for the purposes of the provision of additional salary allowances. With regard to merit in management, the Agency certifies the assessments made by the universities according to scales set by the government. Between 2007 and 2015, 11,348 applications for the assessment of merit in research were processed, and 4,188 applications for merit in management between 2005 and 2015.

<u>Teaching assessment handbooks used in Catalan universities (2003-present).</u> This is an external institutional review programme in which the universities apply the procedures given in the respective AQU-accredited handbooks in the quality assurance and assessment of teaching staff. <u>See section 5.2.</u>

4.2.3. <u>Knowledge generation and transfer</u>

This area of strategic priority covers the Agency's activities in producing analytical studies and reports, including at international level, that provide the different stakeholders with added value in decision-making.

<u>The graduate employment outcomes survey (2001-present)</u>. Since 2001, AQU Catalunya and the Catalan universities have been carrying out a joint survey once every three years (2001, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, with the 2017 survey in progress) on the graduate employment outcomes of graduates of <u>undergraduate</u>, <u>Master's</u> and <u>doctoral</u> programmes at Catalan universities, the aim being to acquire information on their entry into the world of work and job situation and to establish, amongst other things, the quality of their employment, their degree of satisfaction with undergraduate studies and the usefulness of the skills acquired, together with their overall satisfaction with their studies. With more than 80,000 records, Catalonia has one of the most complete and reliable databases on graduate destinations at international level. Indicators that are obtained are used in external QA procedures applied to programme review.

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[10] Calls for applications by Catalan universities for the category of non-PhD collaborating staff ceased as of May 2013, and the call for applications launched in September 2012 was the last to accept applications.

[11] Translator's note: these are roughly equivalent academic positions of *col·laborador*, *lector*, *agregat* and *catedràtic*.

Survey of employers' perceptions of the employability and skills of recent graduates in Catalonia (2014-present). The first survey and study on the opinions of employers regarding recent graduates of Catalan universities were completed between 2014 and 2016. Four separate generic surveys were carried out of enterprises (companies as employers), public administration (institutions as employers), education and the health sector (medicine and nursing) and a qualitative analysis subsequently made of the results with focus groups for 12 sectors of production. The findings continue to be analysed in various research studies.

Graduate satisfaction survey (2015-present). The main objective of this project is to set up a system of common indicators on the level of satisfaction of the graduate population and make information available for the purposes of programme improvement for use in external QA processes. The first survey (of undergraduate programmes) was carried out in 2015 and preparations for a Master's programme survey are currently under way.

Indicators of programme delivery (WINDDAT, 2012-present). Using the data uploaded by the universities to UNEIX[12], in 2012 AQU Catalunya launched the WINDDAT web portal which provides indicators on the running and delivery of degree programmes at Catalan universities that are used in monitoring and accreditation under the VSMA Framework. The repository, which also contains indicators obtained from the graduate employment outcomes surveys, has been updated since 2012 and has a section with the exact indicators required for monitoring and accreditation (see example).

Analytical studies. AQU Catalunya produces and provides support for analytical studies on specific areas of higher education and the university system in Catalonia in order to obtain a more objective overview of the system. More specifically, it has produced reports based on QA procedures including the meta-evaluation reports and the Inclusive review report on Master's programmes in teaching training for compulsory secondary education and upper secondary education (baccalaureate), vocational training and language teaching. It also produces sector studies, including Gender and graduate labour market outcomes; studies on equity and the impact of the economic crisis on university degree studies; one study on the adaptation and alignment of programmes and awards in Catalonia with the EHEA overarching framework for qualifications; and an analysis of the curriculum pathways of university teaching staff based on the curricula of teaching staff at Catalan universities who have been favourably reviewed as a result of QA procedures. It also participates every year in the ICU report on quality, QA procedures and Spanish universities produced by REACU, the Spanish body that coordinates the network of higher education QA agencies in Spain, for the Ministry of Education.

Others. As a way of disseminating and transferring the knowledge generated through its activities to the university community, AQU Catalunya updated its Digital Library (2010-present), a repository for electronic documents specialising in quality assurance, the universities and

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[12] In 1998 the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia, the Catalan universities and AQU Catalunya began working in collaboration to set up UNEIX, an information system on universities and research in Catalonia that today provides reliable information at programme level for planning, programming and decision-making, for the analysis of results and outcomes, and for the enhancement of quality and quality assurance in the higher education system as a whole.

higher education, which forms part of the Agency's website and is freely accessible. To this same end, it regularly organises <u>events and workshops</u> on different issues and also participates in numerous seminars and symposia and gives talks and presentations as a way of disseminating the activities that it undertakes.

4.2.4. Internationalisation

This area of strategic priority covers the activities at international level carried out by AQU Catalunya.

Institutional relations. This mainly encompasses the Agency's activities in the sphere of participation and cooperation in international bodies (ENQA, EQAR, ECA and INQAAHE). Of particular note is AQU Catalunya's hosting of the Secretariat of INQAAHE since 2013. It also undertakes advisory and consulting activities under specific agreements and on demand (<u>for example, with the Government of Andorra</u>).

International accreditation with AQU Catalunya. An external institutional QA project in which the Agency certifies institutions (faculties, schools and institutes) that have demonstrated rigorous academic standards, in accordance with European norms and that, at international level, are reliable and trustworthy as partner institutions for cooperation and academic mobility. <u>See section 5.3.</u>

Quality assurance of foreign HEIs in Catalonia. AQU Catalunya carries out an ex ante QA review of foreign higher education institutions offering programmes leading to degrees that have no equivalent to a recognised award in Catalonia, prior to authorisation by the Catalan Government. <u>See section 5.4.</u>

Participation in international projects. AQU Catalunya participates in international projects which have as their objective internationalisation, innovation, cooperation and benchmarking. <u>See section 8.2.</u>

4.2.5. Strategic management

In addition to coordinating activities with the universities and the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia; ensuring the smooth running of the governing, review and advisory bodies; and keeping all of AQU Catalunya's communication tools (including the website, the quarterly e-newsletter in three languages and Twitter) up to date, particular mention is made of the following:

State relations. The Agency is a founder member of REACU, the Spanish body that coordinates the network of higher education QA agencies in Spain, and also undertakes advisory and consulting activities under specific agreements with other QA agencies in the organisation (<u>for example, the Basque QA agency</u> and the <u>Balearic Islands QA agency</u>).

Students. AQU Catalunya has included students in all of the external review panels for more than ten years, and it encourages <u>the training of students in QA procedures</u>.

The EUC web portal (University Studies in Catalonia) and the *EUCReports* portal. A new web portal <u>University Studies in Catalonia</u> was launched in 2016 as a result of the need for the quality

of degree programmes at universities in Catalonia to be presented in a way that is easy to understand for all stakeholders, in particular prospective university students and their families, and school counsellors in secondary education. The _EUCReports_ portal, which is an updated version of WINSUC (2012-2016), an earlier website on review reports, was also launched at the same time.

4.2.6. Internal organisation

This section covers all the activities involving the running of AQU Catalunya, including accountability, the system for internal quality and information security management (ISO 9001 and ISO 27001), human resources, IT (information technologies), infrastructure, economic management, and the legal and contractual activity (See all the agreements)

4.3. Structure and functioning of AQU Catalunya

Law 15/2015 clearly distinguishes between two types of body in the Agency: the governing bodies and QA bodies, and it also provides for the setting up of advisory bodies and committees.

The staff at AQU Catalunya are organised according to sections and provide the necessary assistance to the governing bodies, the QA bodies and the advisory bodies for the performance of their duties.

Figure 4. Organisation chart of AQU Catalunya
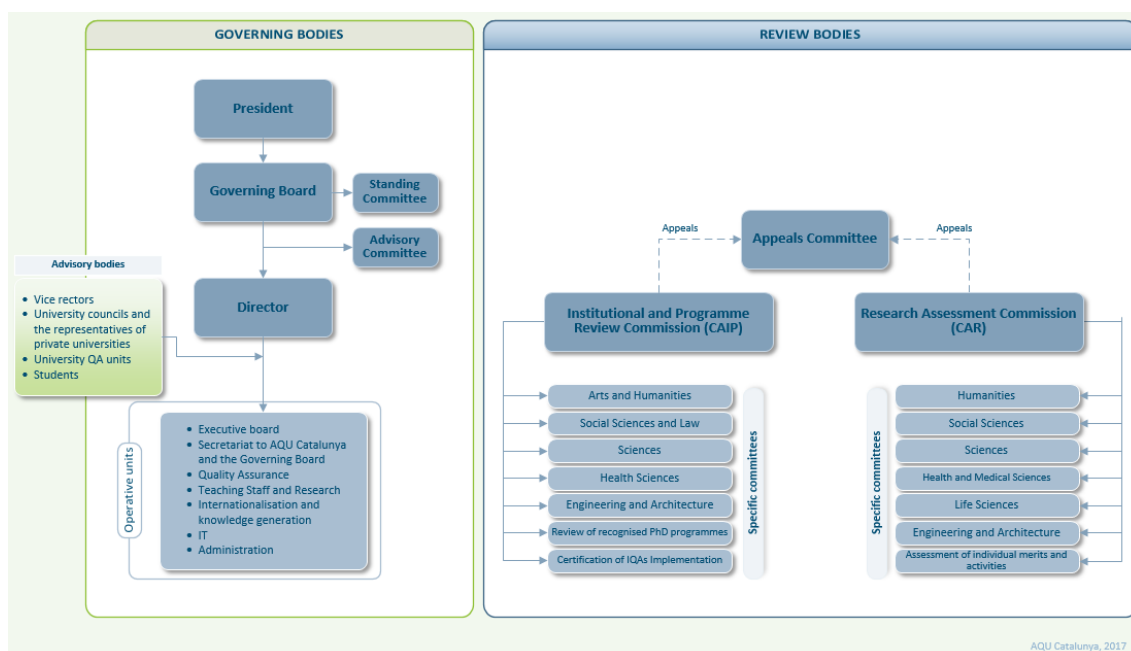
4.3.1. <u>Governing bodies</u>

<u>**President**</u>. The president of AQU Catalunya chairs the Governing Board and its Standing Committee, he/she acts as the institutional representation of AQU Catalunya and is appointed by the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia, on the proposal of the minister of the corresponding government department with jurisdiction over the universities and higher education.

<u>**Governing Board**</u>. The Governing Board is the main governing body that oversees the running of AQU Catalunya and is formed of the president and director of the Agency; the rectors of the public and private universities; the chairpersons of the public universities' social councils; three academics; two people from the corresponding government department with jurisdiction over the universities and higher education; the chairperson of the Research Assessment Commission (CAR); and, subsequent to the passing of Law 15/2015 and based on the recommendations of the preliminary review reports in compliance with the ESG, two students and two representatives of labour organisations. The Governing Board appoints the secretary of AQU Catalunya on the proposal of the Agency's president, who attends board meetings in an advisory capacity.

The Governing Board may meet and act either in plenary sessions or as the Standing Committee.

<u>**Director**</u>. AQU Catalunya's director is responsible for the technical and administrative management of the Agency and implementation of resolutions by the Governing Board and the Standing Committee. As a consequence of Law 15/2015, the process of appointment of the director was modified[13] and it is now based on an open, competitive and freely contested process, in accordance with criteria set by the Governing Board. This modification was also the result of a recommendation in an external review report on compliance with the ESG.

4.3.2. <u>Review bodies</u>

<u>**Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP)**</u>. The work of the CAIP is to ensure that the series of QA instruments and procedures used by AQU Catalunya in its review activities are correctly applied. Its work is divided into two main areas, programme review and institutional review. When exercising its functions, the CAIP works through a series of subject and function-specific committees.

<u>**Research Assessment Commission (CAR)**</u>. The CAR is responsible for the quality assurance of teaching and teaching staff. More specifically, it issues the necessary reports and accreditation for research and advanced research prior to selection for the recruitment of academic staff; and it assesses the individual merit (in teaching, research and management) of public service and contract teaching and research staff in public and private universities in Catalonia. When exercising its functions, the CAR works through a series of subject and function-specific committees.

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[13] The director was previously appointed by the minister for the corresponding government department with jurisdiction over the universities and higher education on the proposal of the president of AQU Catalunya.

Appeals Committee. The Appeals Committee is one of the new developments as a result of Law 15/2015 and also a result of an external review of compliance with the ESG. It is responsible for ruling on appeals filed against decisions by the Agency's review, certification and accreditation bodies. In all cases of appeal, the decisions of the Committee are final. The Committee is also responsible for issuing reports that revise other acts and proceedings issued by the Agency's panels and committees, when stipulated in QA and certification procedures.

4.3.3. Advisory bodies

The Advisory Committee. This body is another new development as a result of Law 15/2015. The Advisory Committee cooperates with the Agency in providing guidance and advice on strategies, defining and improving procedures and developing proposed measures and actions, for the purpose of the quality assurance of the Agency's activities in accordance with international benchmarks[14].

The Committee of Vice-Rectors for quality assurance. Through this committee, which is comprised of all the vice-rectors from the universities in Catalonia, AQU Catalunya coordinates the strategic and institutional aspects of its activities and provides guidance on proposed QA methodologies.

The QA Technical Units Committee. Through this committee, which is comprised of all the heads of the QA technical units at universities in Catalonia, AQU Catalunya coordinates the ways in which QA procedures and methodologies are applied.

The Student Advisory Committee. Comprised exclusively of students from universities in Catalonia, this committee works to broaden and systemise the involvement of students in QA activities, advise the Agency on projects that have a direct impact on the student body, and participate in analytical studies that are of benefit to students.

The Committee of secretaries to the Social Councils of the public universities in Catalonia and interlocutors from the private universities. This committee manages the funding and monitoring of the graduate employment outcomes survey that is carried out once every three years.

The Surveys Technical Committee. Comprised of technical staff from all the universities in Catalonia who are specialists in carrying out surveys, this committee coordinates the content and carrying out of surveys and data mining.

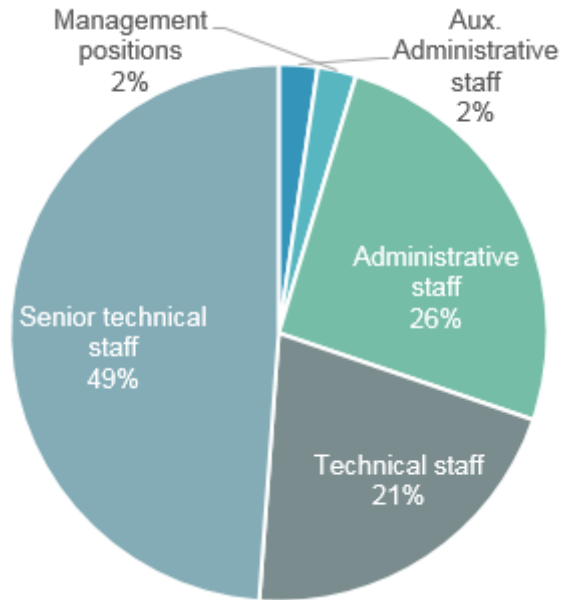## 4.3.4. Organisational structure

The staff composition at AQU Catalunya is as follows:

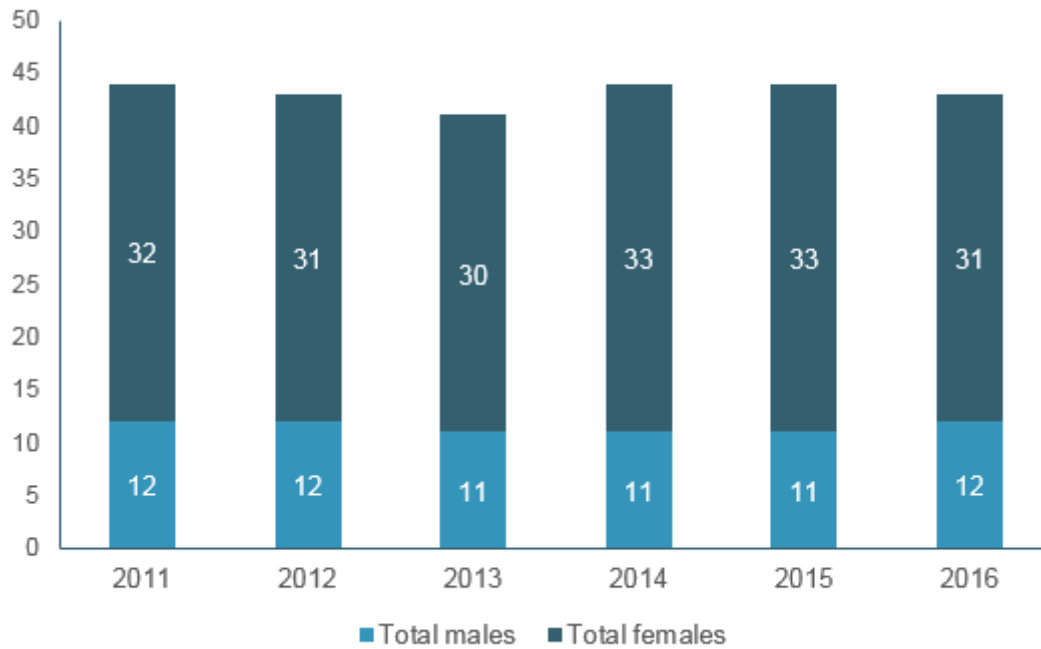[14] Pursuant to Law 15/2015, the Advisory Committe can only be constituted when the Statutes of AQU Catalunya have been endorsed.

Graph 1. Staff composition

Graph 2. Total number of staff (last five years)

In operational terms, the Agency's staff are organised according to the following sections and units (or "areas") that support the roles and functions of the various governing, review and advisory bodies:

Management: This section provides support to the director in the performance of his/her duties, in particular the production and implementation of the Strategic Plan, the Action Plan, the budget and the organisation of human resources. It also covers legal guidance, internal quality assurance and project coordination, communication, the Board Secretary's office, reception and the register.

Quality Assurance. This section is in charge of managing and coordinating the activities attributed by law to the Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP) and its various subject and function-specific committees. These activities involve the review, accreditation and certification of programmes, activities, faculties and schools, and QA systems and procedures, as well as carrying out and coordinating analytical studies connected with these functions.

Teaching and Research. This section is responsible for managing and coordinating the activities attributed by law to the Research Assessment Commission (CAR) and the respective subject and function-specific committees. These activities involve the issue of reports for recruitment by the public universities in the categories de tenure-track lecturer, senior lecturer (assistant professor) and full professor, and the assessment of merit of academic staff in research, teaching and management.

Internationalisation and Knowledge Generation. This section is responsible for promoting, managing and coordinating activities and projects at international level and knowledge generation.

Information Technologies. AQU's IT section is responsible for the management and coordination of all activities associated with information technologies, including applications software, hardware and infrastructure

Administration. Administration is responsible for the management and coordination of the Agency's economic and financial aspects, as well as human resource management, procurement, and occupational health and safety.

For internal coordination, there are three types of committee:

- *Strategic Management Committee*. This convenes as required. Attended by the AQU director and the members of the Internal Coordination Committee, it reflects on and guides the activities undertaken by the Agency.
- *Internal Coordination Committee*. Meeting once every two weeks, this coordinates efficiency and interrelationship between all of the Agency's sections and units and the harmonious implementation of agreements. It is comprised of the heads and coordinators of the sections, together with those responsible for internal QA and legal matters.
- *Information Quality and Security Committee*. Meeting three times a year, the IQSC monitors the Agency's internal quality assurance system. It is made up of the AQU director and the members of the Internal Coordination Committee. It also has a joint

study committee, consisting of the external auditors who monitor approved measures and actions.

- *Crisis Team*. This meets on an annual basis and produces the Agency's contingency plan and monitors the measures adopted and tests carried out in connection with business continuity. It consists of the director and various heads of section.

Coordination meetings are also held in each section and unit, as well as project meetings to define different project stages and activities.

Use is made of a web platform for teamwork and document management as a way of enhancing project-based management in the Agency, as well as improving in-house communication.

5. HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE ACTIVITIES OF AQU CATALUNYA

In accordance with the terms of reference for the external review coordinated by ENQA and revised by EQAR, the four external QA activities of AQU Catalunya described below are submitted for review of compliance with the ESG:

The importance given to these programmes varies markedly due to the fact that the main focus of AQU Catalunya's activities is higher education quality assurance in Catalonia. It is for this reason that most resources are allocated mainly to activity 5.1 and also 5.2, whereas far fewer resources are allocated to activities 5.3 and 5.4 as they are undertaken on demand.

A description of the Agency's external review activities is given below.

5.1. Programme level external reviews

The Framework for the validation (ex-ante accreditation), monitoring, modification and accreditation of recognised programmes (VSMA Framework) is the Agency's main QA programme and the focus of all external quality assurance by the Agency of programmes run in Catalan universities.

Video 2. The VSMA Framework
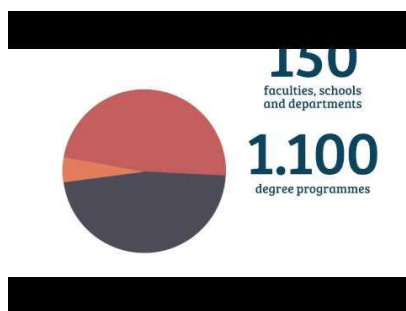
The VSMA Framework combines the quality assurance of programmes with institutional review and provides a structured and integrated overview of the four QA procedures that take place in a cyclical manner: validation (ex-ante accreditation), monitoring, modification and accreditation. The new VSMA Framework (2016) also includes the ex-post certification of internal quality assurance systems with the aim of promoting institutional review.

5.1.1. Validation (*ex-ante* accreditation)

In accordance with the legal regulations in Spain, in order for a new degree programme to be introduced a university must first submit the proposed course of studies to a process of ex-ante accreditation, or validation, by a Spanish QA agency that is a member of ENQA and registered with EQAR[15]. This procedure is also applicable to courses leading to Bachelor's-equivalent programmes in the Performing and Visual Arts run at HEIs that specialise in courses and awards in the Arts. AQU Catalunya has full legal authority and the technical expertise to issue ex-ante accreditation reports for subsequent validation by the Spanish Universities Council, the national body responsible for ex-ante accreditation. Once a degree course has been validated, authorisation by the Government of Catalonia is necessary for the programme to be introduced, which then takes place according to programming criteria across the university system and funding availability. Authorised programmes are then registered in the national Register of Higher Education Institutions and Degrees (RUCT), following which they can be introduced. The objective of validation (ex-ante accreditation) is to ensure that new courses of study are formulated in accordance with the requirements of the EHEA, the European qualifications framework, and that there is consistency of content and outcomes across subjects and disciplines.

Over the last five years, 878 courses of study underwent validation, 93% of which were favourable (see following graph).

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[15] Article 24.3, Royal Decree 1393/2007.

5. Higher education quality assurance activities of AQU Catalunya

Graph 3. Results of validation/ex-ante accreditation 2012-2016
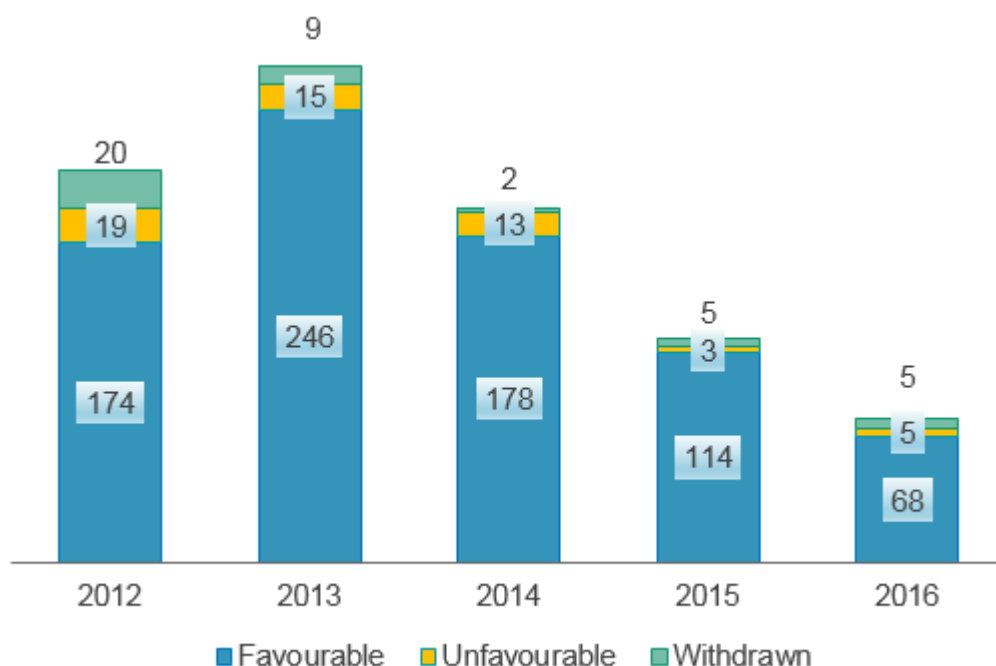
During this period, 63% of all validations were of Master's programmes, 11% undergraduate degrees and 27% doctorate degrees.

5.1.2. Monitoring

In accordance with the prevailing legal framework, the monitoring (follow-up) of RUCT-registered recognised degrees by QA agencies shall be based on the available public information, up until such a time when they must undergo review for accreditation renewal. The VSMA Framework stipulates that it is the university that is primarily responsible for the monitoring of its programmes, with AQU Catalunya acting as an external agent of quality assurance. There have been two stages in monitoring under the VSMA Framework:

- **Stage one (2011-2013)**: In this initial stage, the universities produced monitoring reports that they referred to AQU Catalunya. An analysis was made of programmes that required special attention, which was followed by the presentation of supporting arguments and finally the issuance by the Agency of a report on each programme and a report on each university.

- **Stage two (2014-present)**: With the introduction of site visits for programme accreditation, in order to make the system sustainable in accordance with a recommendation in the previous external review of compliance ESG (2012), the Agency made the following change in the focus of monitoring: at least once every two years the universities shall produce monitoring reports at faculty level in which they analyse programme delivery, and once every three years in the case of doctoral degrees. These reports are harmonised with the requirements of accreditation and are used as evidence

in the external site visit. Faculties that are awarded a conditional accreditation (i.e. with prescriptions) are required to submit a monitoring report within two years of accreditation as evidence that stipulated improvements have been implemented. 2016 is the first year in which these reports have been compulsory. These improvements will be assessed by AQU Catalunya, which will then issue a report on the subject that will be issued to the different stakeholders.

Over 400 programmes have been monitored over the last five years, and it is anticipated that from 2016 onwards more than 100 programmes will be monitored every year. Monitoring in 2014 and 2015 focused on undergraduate programmes in the Performing and Visual Arts which, due to the timetable for the introduction of these courses of study, took place after the monitoring of recognised programmes:

Graph 4. Programme monitoring 2011-2015
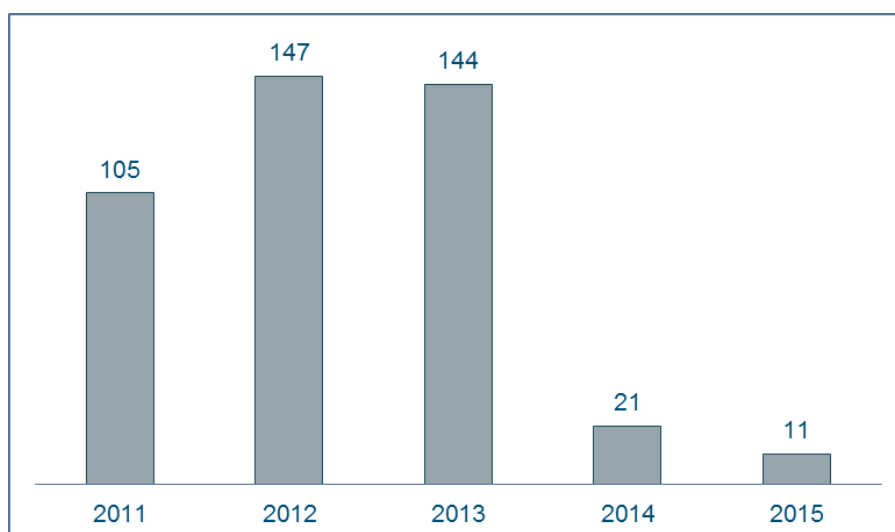
5.1.3. Modification

Institutions can make changes to their study programmes subsequent to monitoring, with changes being classified as follows:

- Minor changes that make improvements to a degree programme can be introduced by the institution after monitoring and any such changes are incorporated into the programme specification as part of modification.
- Changes that affect the structure of a degree programme must be requested in the modification procedure.
- Changes affecting the nature and learning outcomes of a degree programme can only be made through application for the validation of a new degree and discontinuation of the degree course that is running

Over the last five year 527 applications for proposed modifications were received, of which 96% were favourable:

Graph 5. Modification procedures 2012-2016
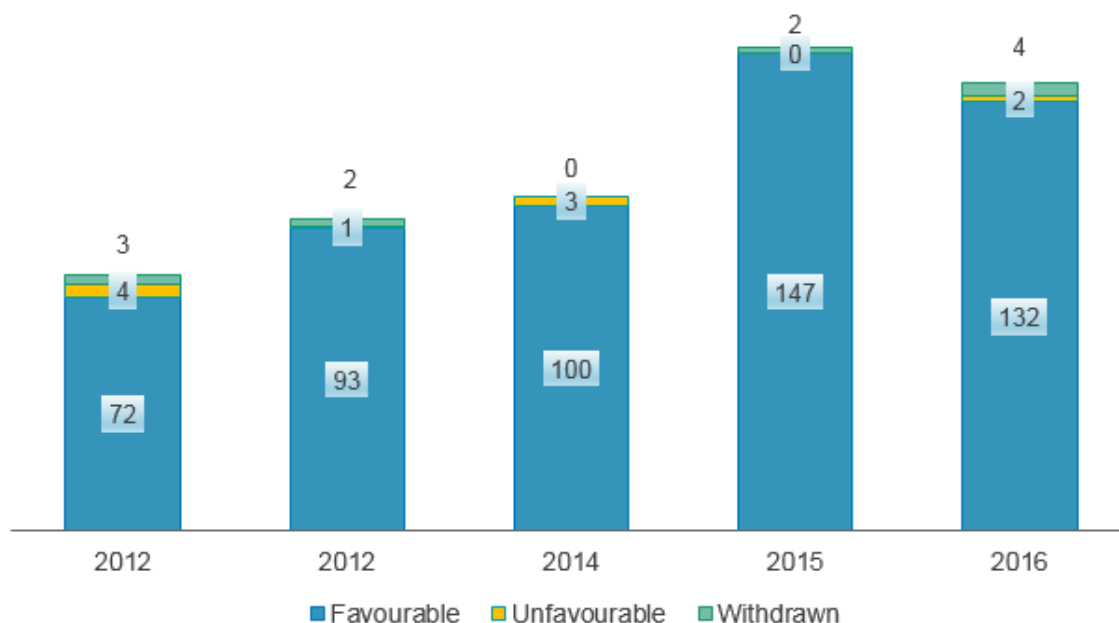
81% of all modifications were made to undergraduate Bachelor's-level programmes, and 19% to Masters.

5.1.4. Accreditation

All recognised degree courses must undergo accreditation within six years of validation (or within six years of a previous accreditation) in the case of Bachelor's and doctoral/PhD degrees, and four years in the case of Master's degrees. In order for a programme to retain its recognised status, a review including an external site visit will be necessary, together with a resulting positive report stating that the corresponding curriculum is being adhered to in accordance with the initial project. Faculty-level site visits for programme review are organised every year to optimise the review procedure. The overarching objective is for all recognised programmes to undergo external review at least once within the period stipulated in the legal regulations.

In spite of the fact that the administrative procedure for accreditation stipulated by the Ministry can only result in a "favourable" or "unfavourable" outcome, the Agency has a system that provides for four outcomes: accreditation with excellence (or "on track to excellence"), accreditation, accreditation with conditions (prescriptions) and accreditation withheld. Programmes that are successful are awarded one of the distinguishing certificates and either a quality label or seal of excellence that are valid for either four or six years according to the corresponding degree cycle.

The accreditation procedure designed by Agency adds two more elements of added value to programmes in Catalonia:

- **Additional dimensions**. The QA model proposes the possibility of the voluntary review of programmes in the following three additional dimensions for them to be distinguished from other programmes: entry into work and employment outcomes; research-teaching linkages; and internationalisation.
- **The awarding of subject-specific quality seals and labels**. A framework for the positioning of AQU Catalunya as to subject-specific quality labels has been set in place[16] that is based on mutual recognition with other ENQA-recognised agencies that award quality seals and labels. The Agency provides support to universities in Catalonia wishing to obtain a quality label, with the procedure being integrated as much as possible into the framework of accreditation, given compliance with certain characteristics. Two agreements, one with the German QA Agency ASIIN (Framework collaboration agreement and Specific collaborative agreement) and another with ANECA (cooperation agreement), were entered into that have enabled different joint external QA procedures to be put into practice in Catalonia.

Since 2014, a total of 183 site visits to institutions have been made and 633 programmes reviewed, with 439 programme accreditation reports being issued in the last two years. 17% of programmes were awarded accreditation with excellence, 74% were awarded accreditation, 9% were accredited with prescriptions and accreditation was only withheld from two programmes.

Up until the date of issue of this report, 44 programmes were reviewed in different additional dimensions, of which 43 were successful in the following categories: 22 internationalisation, 8 in entry into work and employment outcomes, and 13 in research-teaching linkages. In addition, 13 programmes were awarded a label (either EUR-ACE or EURO-INF) in a procedure integrated into the AQU review process (10 with ASIIN and 3 with ANECA).

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[16] Documents endorsed by the then AQU Catalunya Board of Management on 2 April 2014.

Graph 6. Overall accreditation results 2014-2016
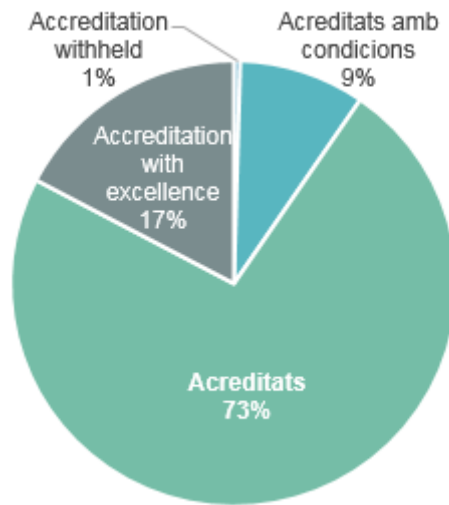
Graph 7. Accreditation results according to field of study 2014-2016
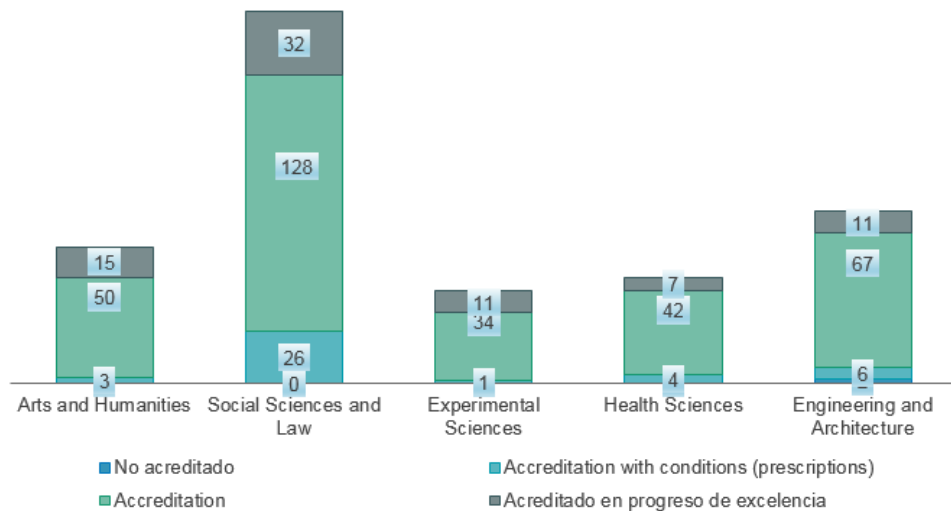
Out of all the programmes that underwent accreditation 48% were Master's programmes and 52% undergraduate/Bachelor's level programmes.

5.2. Institutional-level external reviews

The work of AQU Catalunya in the sphere of institutional review has focused mainly on the implementation of programme IQAs (internal quality assurance systems) in the universities and other HEIs in Catalonia; the quality assurance of teaching and teaching staff, using the teaching assessment handbooks; and it recently produced the requisite methodology for evaluating

research work being carried out in university departments as a means of better organising high-level research in Catalan universities.

5.2.1. Ex-post IQAs certification

The AUDIT programme,[17] which promotes the use and implementation of internal quality assurance systems (IQAs) for programmes of study in Catalan universities (IQAs) was launched in 2007. There have been three stages to the programme:

- IQAs design orientation
- Review of IQAs design, prior to implementation
- IQAs implementation certification (ex-post IQAs certification)

By 2015, the Agency had completed the first two stages, in which the entire university system in Catalonia participated, together with eleven institutions running programmes in the Performing and Visual Arts, and the same year (2015) it started the ex-post IQAs certification programme that, in accordance with the new VSMA Framework, makes steps towards self-accredited/self-accrediting institutions, the aim being to:

- Lay the foundations for the certification of IQAs implemented in all university faculties in Catalonia as a consequence of the AUDIT programme;
- Pave the way to a new scenario of greater university autonomy and mutual trust between the different stakeholders in higher education;
- Comply with the Royal Decree on the setting up and recognition of universities and their faculties which stipulates that, in order for a faculty to obtain institutional accreditation, it must be ex-post IQAs certified.

IQAs certification forms part of the VSMA Framework, in that faculties that are ex-post IQAs-certified are not required to present programme IQAs for review (in procedures where this would normally be a requirement, i.e. validation/ex ante accreditation or accreditation).

IQAs certificates are valid for five years and are distinguished by the certificate and the quality label below:

2015 saw the ex-post IQAs certification of the Pere Tarrés Faculty of Social Education and Social Work (URL) and in 2016 the URV's Faculty of Economic and Business Sciences.

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[17] In collaboration with ANECA and ACSUG.

5.2.2. Teaching assessment handbooks

AQU has worked closely with the universities since 2003 in developing and implementing models for the quality assurance of teaching and teaching staff, the purpose being to support the universities in designing their own mechanisms for managing the quality assurance of teaching and teaching staff and to promote staff development and recognition, in accordance with the ESG.

Teaching assessment at Catalan universities is based on the application of the respective teaching assessment handbooks and takes place once every five years.

Institutions design their handbooks according to set guidelines and AQU Catalunya subsequently certifies and then monitors implementation of the handbooks and lastly accredits their correct functioning for a period of five years.

Development of the handbook programme has been as follows:

- **Public universities**. 7 public universities in Catalonia have participated from the experimental stage (2003-2007), which was followed by the accreditation of their respective handbooks in 2009 and renewal of accreditation in 2014.
- **Private universities**. Five private universities in Catalonia participate, three of which are in the accreditation stage, while the other two are in the monitoring stage.

The handbook programme forms part of the broader ex-post IQAs certification programme, as universities with an accredited teaching assessment handbook are not required to include academic staff in the ex-post IQAs certification procedure.

5.2.3. The quality assurance of research at department level

AQU Catalunya has developed a methodology to carry out the quality assurance of research at department level in institutions in Catalonia. The long-term purpose of the methodology is to consolidate the universities as top-level research organisations. In this respect, the method provides an instrument for improving policies for research, determining the type of research being conducted and identifying the most dynamic areas and environments for research. This methodology is applicable to all fields of knowledge.

A pilot project for the methodology, which is a pioneering development in Spain, was tested in all the departments (a total of 8) at the Pompeu Fabra University. Due to the fact that it was a pilot programme, the review reports have not been publicly released so as to not adversely affect the departments that voluntarily took part in relation to those that did not.

The favourable assessment of departmental research is distinguished with the following certificate and quality label:

The programme is carried out on demand by the universities.

5.3. International quality assurance

Accreditation is awarded to institutions that can demonstrate academic rigour in accordance with the European standards and reliability and trustworthiness as a partner institution for cooperation and academic mobility at international level, in particular with institutions in the university system in Catalonia.

The publication of the guide, *International quality assurance of higher education. A tool for international academic mobility*, forms part of AQU Catalunya's efforts to promote mobility and academic cooperation at international level. The Agency has so far not promoted this strategy and has only complied with certain specific requests.

Two institutions took part in this programme in 2009, one of which applied for certificate renewal in 2016. Click here for the results.

Successful institutions receive a certificate that is valid for five years and are distinguished by a certificate and the following quality label:

5.4. Quality assurance of foreign institutions offering degrees in Catalonia

Transnational programmes represent one of the variants in which the internationalisation of higher education is apparent, and it is one of the areas in which AQU Catalunya, in its capacity as a higher education QA agency, is actively involved. Pursuant to Law 1/2003-LUC[18], institutions wishing to offer programmes leading to qualifications awarded by a foreign institution that have no recognised degree-equivalent in Catalonia must be favourably evaluated by AQU Catalunya prior to authorisation by the Government of Catalonia. The quality assurance of such programmes is conditional on request by the Government of Catalonia. Two institutions were reviewed under this programme between 2012-2016. Click here for the results.

[18] Article 113.

6. PROCESSES AND THEIR METHODOLOGIES

6.1. The review process

In order to avoid the repetition of content given in the sections on compliance with the standards, a brief explanation is given below of the Agency's review procedures, the methodology used and the selection and role of experts.

6.1.1. Review bodies in charge

External review programmes undertaken by AQU Catalunya are the responsibility of the following review bodies, which issue the reports referred to in the table:

Table 4. Areas of responsibility of the different review bodies

Procedure	Committee in charge	Subject and/or function-specific committee	External review panel
Validation	CAIP	Review report	
Modification	CAIP	Review report	
Monitoring	CAIP	Review report	
Accreditation	CAIP	Accreditation report	Site visit report issued
Ex post IQAS Certification	CAIP	Certification report	Site visit report issued
Teaching assessment handbooks	CAR	Certification report	Site visit report issued
Univ. department research	CAIP		Site visit report issued
International accreditation	CAIP- certification report		Site visit report issued
Foreign institutions	CAIP- final review report		Site visit report issued

Pursuant to <u>Law 15/2015</u>[19], all review bodies shall act *in compliance with current regulations, they shall have technical and professional independence, they must produce and endorse the criteria and procedures for evaluation, accreditation, certification and auditing, and they shall carry out in their respective areas of responsibility reviews and evaluations, certifications and accreditations that fall to AQU Catalunya, and for which they shall be ultimately responsible.*

The Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP) and the Research Assessment Commission (CAR) endorse the review procedure, methodologies and criteria, whereas the subject and function-specific committees, in the case of VSMA review procedures, ex-post IQAs certification and the teaching assessment handbooks, undertake the reviews, accreditation and/or certification according to agreed methodologies and criteria, and are ultimately responsible for the review. The final results of reviews undertaken by the Agency are therefore the result of a collegial procedure.

Each subject or function-specific committee has a chairperson, members (academics, students and professionals) and a secretary. The structure of AQU Catalunya's committees is designed to be integrated, with committee chairpersons, who are academics, also sitting as members on either the Institutional and Programme Review Commission or the Research Assessment Commission. This reinforces consistent application of the review methodologies and criteria across all of the Agency's review bodies and allows for any difficulties that arise during QA procedures to be shared and resolved (see following diagram).

Figure 5. Example of the integration between specific committees and the QA comissions
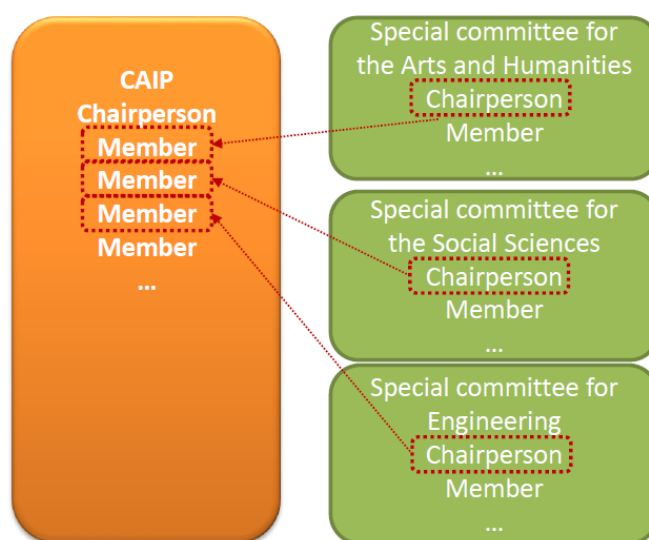
This same framework is also generally applied in the case of the external review panels, which whenever possible will include a member of the subject or function-specific committee.

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[19] Article 18.

Decisions by the subject or function-specific committees can be appealed before the Appeals Committee.

6.1.2. The annual review timetable

Calls for applications for review under the VSMA Framework (external programme reviews) are public and the dates for applications and actual review procedures are set by the universities.

In the case of validation (ex-ante accreditation), applications to start the review process are only eligible from programmes previously accepted for review under agreement between the universities and the Government of Catalonia within the framework of university programming.

In the case of accreditation, every year the Governing Board endorses the site visits that will be undertaken the following year in compliance with set time limits that are made public. These planning arrangements are agreed in advance with the universities through the Committee of Vice-Rectors in charge of QA.

In the accreditation teaching assessment handbooks, the timetable is cyclical and is related to the date of the previous accreditation.

The review timetable for ex-post IQAs certification, research at university department-level, international accreditation and foreign institutions offering degrees in Catalonia is established at the time of agreement to the review procedure.

6.1.3. The review procedure

The review procedures described in section 5 of this SAR follow the ESG and are based on a self assessment, a subsequent external review by a panel of experts, the publication of a final report and a monitoring/follow-up procedure to evaluate enhancement proposals. The procedures are set out and published in each of the review guidebooks. See standard 2.2.

Reviews are planned in accordance with IQA procedure OP01. Review/accreditation of programmes and institutions[20].

The infrastructure used for reviews are the Spanish State Ministry's software platform for downloading applications and uploading reports; AQU Catalunya's Avalua platform for the evaluation of applications; the Agency's intranet which stores all project documentation and the reports issued; the EUC Reports web portal, which links up the VSMA Framework procedures with the EUC portal; and the AQU Catalunya website.

Each guidebook specifies the procedure, the criteria and the members of the review bodies. When the process has been completed and all stakeholders duly informed, AQU Catalunya publishes the results and the review reports on the Agency's website, the EUC portal and the EUC Reports portal. For more details of the review process, see standard 2.3.

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[20] Procedure available to the panel at the time of the site visit.

6.2. Experts

AQU Catalunya appoints external experts to its review procedures who are normally academics, professionals and students, although the latter two are optional according to the purpose of a review. All members appointed by AQU Catalunya are selected for their profile and on the basis of independence, objectivity and the non-conflict of interests.

The profile of experts is public and adapted according to the review requirements targeted in the preparation and planning of the project.

For recruitment, use is first made of the AQU Catalunya reviewer database (pool of experts) and, in the case where there are insufficient reviewers with the necessary profile, an active search is made on the Internet and through contacts provided by reviewers.

Optimal management of the eligibility of the experts is a key objective of AQU Catalunya. In this regard, a project was started in 2008 to define all of the procedures connected with their management: recruitment, selection, training, management, assessment and retention. AQU Catalunya has been supporting the development of software since 2014 to facilitate and improve these procedures.

For more information see standard 2.4.

6.3. Methodology

As a result of the approval of the new ESG and the passing of Law 15/2015 in 2015, it was necessary to revise the Agency's overall methodology materials, which in turn revealed that it was necessary to harmonise and systemise the sections in the guidebooks in order for there to be greater consistency in the Agency's review procedures. The Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP) therefore approved the following structure, on the basis of which the Agency's guidebooks were gradually adapted. The universities were informed of the structure by way of the Committee of Vice-Rectors in charge of QA and it was also publicised on the AQU Catalunya website:

1. **Introduction**
   1.1. Purpose of the guidebook
   1.2. Regulatory framework
2. **Review organisation and planning**
   2.1. Review bodies
   2.2. The review process
   2.3. Appeals
3. **Review dimensions and standards**
4. **Outcome of assessment**
   4.1. Final report
   4.2. Quality labels
   4.3. Effects of the review
5. **Follow-up and continuous enhancement**
6. **References**
7. **Annexes**

Les methodologies designed by the Agency are aligned with the purpose and objectives of QA reviews and provide professional guidance to those who participate in internal and external review processes, the aim being that the resulting conclusions and decisions are the result of a working method that is both sound and coherent. The methodology is developed prior to the start of review procedures and will take into consideration the opinions of the different stakeholder groups. Following approval by the corresponding Commission, the guidebooks are made public and posted on the AQU Catalunya website.

For more information see standard 2.2.

7. AQU CATALUNYA'S INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

AQU Catalunya's quality and information security management system (IQA) is an integrated system that includes the management of quality and its information systems.

Quality assurance aims at ensuring that procedures are carried out according to previously established and validated guidelines, including the key aspects of revision and enhancement. Information security ensures the availability, confidentiality and integrity of data and information handled by AQU Catalunya, ensuring non-interference by either error or intentionally of review data and results. AQU Catalunya's IQA covers all of the Agency's processes (see figure below):

Figure 6. Process map of AQU Catalunya
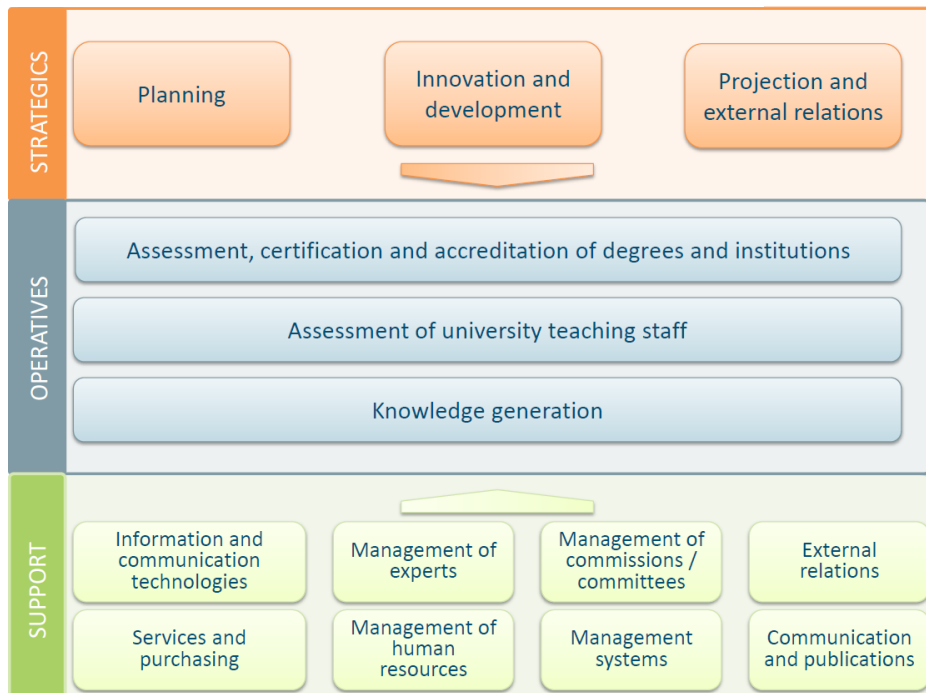
June 2012

The implementation of AQU Catalunya's IQA serves as a mechanism for managing the organisation in a systematic and visible way for both the Agency's management team and staff. The running of the IQA helps to create an atmosphere of trust for both those working in the Agency and the users of its services.

The management of the IQA covers the following activities:

- Process identification.

- Determining the sequence and interaction between processes.

- Determining the criteria and necessary methods to ensure that both process operation and control are efficient.

- Ensure the necessary availability, protection (non-interference) and confidentiality of information.

- Carrying out of the monitoring, measurement and analysis of the continuous enhancement of these processes.

- Implementation of the required actions to achieve the planned results.

In order to maintain the IQA and optimise the Agency's resources, an organisational structure made up of a **Quality and Information Security Committee** and a **Joint Study Committee** has been set up. This ensures consistency in decision making about quality and information security and ensures correct implementation.

The documentation system for the IQA is based on the policy and handbook on quality and information security, which result in a four-level documentation system, as shown in the following diagram:

Figure 7. AQU Catalunya's documentation system
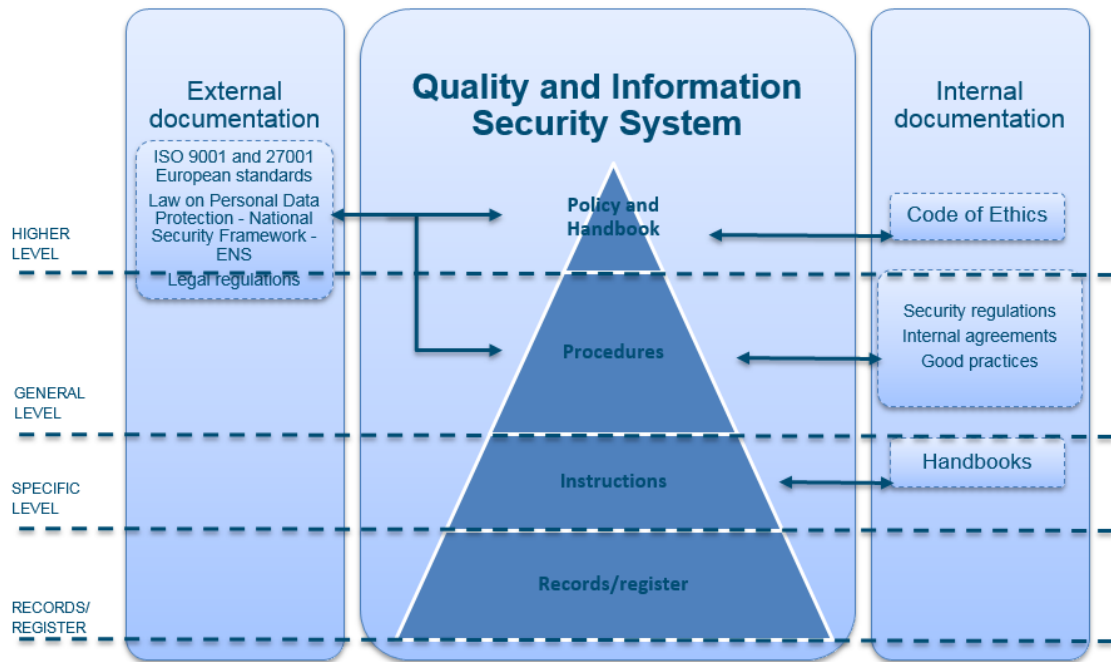
A description of the processes included in AQU Catalunya's IQA is given on the AQU Catalunya website.

8. AQU CATALUNYA'S INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

AQU Catalunya is active at international level in four main areas. Two are described in section 5 of this self-assessment report: **international accreditation with AQU Catalunya** and the **quality assurance of foreign institutions offering degrees in Catalonia**. In addition to these activities, the Agency is also active in the following two areas:

8.1. Institutional relations

This section describes AQU Catalunya's participation in and institutional relations with the main European and international quality assurance bodies.

8.1.1. ENQA

AQU Catalunya has been a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since the founding of the organisation in 2000.

AQU's Technical Director for Quality Assurance was a member of the ENQA Board from 2008 until 2015 and the vice-president from 2013-2015.

AQU Catalunya has cooperated with ENQA in the following projects: ENQA working group on the impact of QA (2012-2015), ASEAN-QA (2011-2015), ENQA quality procedures project, 4th edition (2014-2015), and ENQA e-learning group (2016-2018). For more information see Annex 2.

8.1.2. EQAR

The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) is a register of higher education QA agencies that are subject to regular external review at international level and demonstrate compliance with the Standards and guidelines for

quality assurance. AQU Catalunya was one of the first three European agencies to be registered with EQAR on 5 December 2008. The Agency's registration with EQAR was renewed in 2012.

AQU Catalunya has been an independent member on the EQAR Register Committee since 2015.

8.1.3. INQAAHE

The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) is an international association with more than 280 organisations active in the theory and practice of quality assurance in higher education, the great majority of which are QA agencies. **AQU Catalunya has hosted the network's Secretariat since October 2013, which was recently renewed and extended until 30 June 2018**. The activities that it carries out are: the handling of various annual calls and projects; support to the Board of Directors; support to the members and the organisation's economic administration.

8.1.4. ECA

AQU Catalunya has been a member agency of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) since 2010. The primary aim of the consortium is the mutual recognition of accreditation and QA decisions. Most of the ECA activities are conducted by working groups, each one of which is made up of representatives from the member bodies of the consortium.

AQU Catalunya coordinates the ECA working group on mutual recognition and joint programme accreditation. The group analyses ways in which the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes can be implemented. It is understood that the different member states of the EHEA are open to recognising the accreditation of these programmes, regardless of the EQAR-registered agency that coordinated the review process.

AQU Catalunya is also on the ECA Board.

8.1.5. Others

Collaborations have been established with other QA agencies and external institutions for various reasons.

In order to explore the possibility of combining programme review under the VSMA Framework with other forms of recognition, an agreement was signed with the German ASIIN Agency. Under this agreement, an experimental joint external review procedure between the two agencies has been implemented in Catalonia under a Framework collaboration agreement and a Specific collaborative agreement.

Another collaborative project is the project between the <u>Government of Andorra's Department of Higher Education and Research and AQU Catalunya for the deployment and support for programme review in the Principality of Andorra in accordance with the ESG</u>.

AQU Catalunya also ensures that its activities are disseminated in different international forums (see following table):

Table 5. Presentations by AQU Catalunya in international forums

Year	Total
2013	11
2014	24
2015	19
2016	12
TOTAL	66

8.2. <u>Participation in international projects</u>

All of AQU Catalunya's activities are based on international standards and benchmarks and it promotes joint projects with higher education institutions (HEIs) and other national and international agencies and bodies. The international projects in which the Agency participates focus on and are developed in the following areas: internationalisation; innovation, through the international development of standards and guidelines, processes and other dimensions associated with quality assurance; cooperation, with the aim of sharing and making connections between QA models in Catalonia and Europe with other systems of higher education; and international benchmarking. The international projects that AQU Catalunya has participated in over the last five years are as follows: **JOQAR (2010-2013), EQuAM (2012-2015), CeQuInt (2012-2015), ERANET-MUNDUS (2011-2015)/ERANET-PLUS (2012-2016), TeSLA (An Adaptive Trust-based e-assessment System for Learning) (2016-2018), IMPALA (Lifelong Learning Programme) (2013-2016), ISLAH (2013-2015), PACAgro (2014-2016) and EQTeL (2015-2016). For more information see <u>Annex 2</u>.**

9. COMPLIANCE WITH EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES (PART 3)[21]

9.1. ESG Standard 3.1. Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

STANDARD:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

Purpose, objectives and principles of action

AQU Catalunya was established in 1996 as the primary instrument to promote quality assurance in the higher education system in Catalonia. Its purpose, objectives and principles of action are regulated by Law 15/2015, which formally sets out that AQU Catalunya is the external QA agency for higher education in Catalonia[22].

Actions by AQU Catalunya are based on the Agency's Strategic Plan, which is public. The current plan is the Strategic Plan 2015-2018, which defines its mission, the values that drive the Agency and its strategic areas of priority, and vision. Details of the Strategic Plan are contained in the Agency's annual Action Plan, which is endorsed by the Agency's Governing Board and is the instrument that sets out the projects and activities to be carried out by AQU Catalunya during the year. The Action Plan is organised according to the same main areas of strategic importance

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[21] The analysis of compliance with all the ESG applies to the four external QA activities. So, in the majority of the cases the same procedure is applied to all the processes. AQU Catalunya descrives the procedure individually when it is different to the rest of the QA activities.

[22] Articles 1-4.

as those in the Strategic Plan and at the end of the year the Agency produces a summary annual report on the development of the Action Plan. The summary annual report is also endorsed by the Governing Board and finally made public.

AQU Catalunya has been carrying out activities associated with external quality assurance at both institutional and programme level right from its very beginnings twenty years ago. Within this time, there have been two periods, 1996-2010 and 2010-present, as a consequence of the adaptation of degrees and qualifications to EHEA guidelines.

The first period included the following programme reviews: Pro-QU 1996-2006, EHEA adaptation pilot plan (2004-2009), Recognised postgraduate programmes (2005-2008) and the Virtual Programme (2007-2008); reviews of services, including library services 1999-2008; and institutions, including research institutes 2006-2008, affiliated schools and institutes 2008-2010 and AUDIT 2007-present. Details of activities in the second period are given in section 4.2. of this self-assessment report. The corresponding purpose and objectives of all the activities was/has been described and made public.

The way in which external programme review is carried out in Catalonia is laid down in the updated version of the VSMA Framework (2016), which retains the approach of the 2010 version of the VSMA Framework while opening up new forms of institutional review in validation (ex-ante accreditation), modification and accreditation based on ex-post IQAs certification and benchmarking to improve programme consistency (two benchmarks are currently being developed for Tourism and Computer Sciences).

With regard to institutional review, work continues with ex-post IOAs certification, which includes the review of the teaching assessment handbooks programme; impetus is being given to the research at university department-level programme and, in accordance with the draft Action Plan 2017, a model for institutional review for the entire higher education system in Catalonia is to be developed.

In the case of the international accreditation programme, pursuant to the new powers attributed to AQU Catalunya under Law 15/2015, an approach to the internationalisation of accreditation is to be developed that provides added value to the EHEA.

The quality assurance of foreign institutions offering degrees in Catalonia and subsequent authorisation by the Government of Catalonia for such programmes to be introduced will continue to be offered on demand.

All other areas of work not directly related to external quality assurance, for example, the survey on graduate employment outcomes, the employers survey and the student satisfaction survey, are directed and implemented by the Agency's management with the cooperation of the various different committees: the Vice-Rectors committees, QA technical units, the Student Advisory Committee and the Surveys Technical Committee.

The stakeholders

As explained in section 4.1. History above, AQU Catalunya has compiled a record of close collaboration with the universities. In this regard, Law 15/2015 stipulates the participation of all

stakeholders (text coloured in blue in the following figure) in the Agency, and the Governing Board[23] entrusted the director of AQU Catalunya with the <u>function of constituting, modifying and abolishing committees in a consultative basis</u> (text coloured in orange in the following diagram). The stakeholders that participate in the Agency[24] are:

Figure 8. Stakeholder involvement in AQU Catalunya

Government of Catalonia	Universities	Academics	Students	Society
• Appoints the president of AQU Catalunya (art.6) • Designates two representatives to the Governing Board (art.7 and 8) • Proposes the appointment of the chairperson and 4 members of the Research Assessment Commission/CAR (art.12) • Exercises control over the efficiency and effectiveness of AQU's activities (art.1)	• Rectors/ex officio members of the Governing Board and the Standing Committee (arts.7 and 8) • Advisory committees (vice-rectors, quality units, and survey specialist, etc.)	• 3 members on the Governing Board and Standing Committee (arts. 7 and 8) • On the Advisory Board (which includes international academics) (art. 10)	• 2 members on the Governing Board and the Standing Committee (arts. 7 and 8) • On the Advisory Board (art. 10) • On the Student Advisory Committee • External review panels	• Chairs of the universities' social councils are ex officio members of the Governing Board and the Standing Committee (arts. 7 and 8) • 2 labour organisation representative members on the Governing Board and the Standing Committee (arts. 7 and 8) • Labour organisation representatives on the Advisory Board (art. 10) • Committee in charge of the graduate employment outcomes survey

International experts

As regards the inclusion of international members in agency committees, the <u>Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP)</u>, together with its subject and function-specific committees, includes international members as, in accordance with its <u>internal rules of procedure</u>, the CAIP and its committees must include members who are from outside the Catalan higher education system. On the other hand, the Research Assessment Commission (CAR), which is responsible for the quality assurance of the teaching assessment handbooks, consists, pursuant to <u>Law 15/2015</u>, exclusively of Catalan academics[25], although its subject and function-specific committees may include members who are from outside the Catalan higher education system.

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[23] Meeting on 30 November 2015.
[24] For more details on the structure of AQU Catalunya, see section <u>4.3. Structure and functioning of AQU Catalunya,</u> and for the composition of all the bodies, see the <u>Organisation section on the AQU Catalunya website</u>.

[25] Article 12.

On the other hand, Law 15/2015 stipulates that the <u>Advisory Committee</u>[26] *"shall be formed of both national and international academics with international experience and of recognised standing"*. For the level of internationalisation of the external experts, see <u>section 10.4</u>.

Where applicable, AQU Catalunya includes international experts in QA procedures either as external experts (in the case of validation) or as members of external review panels (in the case, for example of accreditation and department reviews). AQU Catalunya currently has 44 international experts on its QA commissions and external review panels, the majority (86%) of which joined the Agency in the last two years.

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[26] Article 10.

9.2. ESG Standard 3.2. Official status

STANDARD:

Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

Official institutional status

AQU Catalunya is a formally recognised QA agency and a separate legal entity with its own legal personality and patrimony. It is a government-run public agency subject to private law that comes under the jurisdiction of the competent department of the Government of Catalonia with jurisdiction over universities. [27]

AQU Catalunya was founded in 1996 and is currently regulated by Law 15/2015 enacted by the Parliament of Catalonia, which concretises the Statutes of AQU Catalunya, which in turn expand on the legislation and stipulate how it is to operate.

Official status of the functions exercised by AQU Catalunya

Higher education in Catalonia is regulated by both the Spanish Constitution and the Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia.[28]

Joint competence between the Spanish State and the Autonomous Community of Catalonia covers the review and assurance of quality and excellence in higher education.

Regulatory enactment in higher education has been structured mainly in accordance with the national State-level Organic Law 6/2001 of 21 December on Universities, which lays down the basic conditions for the majority of the aspects of higher education. Competences in Catalonia are enacted through Catalan legislation Act 1/2003, 19 February, on the universities in Catalonia (Law 1/2003-LUC).

In accordance with the abovementioned normative provisions, Law 1/2003-LUC defines the university system of Catalonia as consisting of the universities established in Catalonia and details the objectives and applicable principles; it also covers higher education activities, which consist of teaching and research; it defines the university community as comprising the student body, teaching and research staff, and administrative and services staff; it refers to governance and representation in the public universities and the legal framework of universities and the

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[27] Article 1, Act 15/2015, 21 July, on the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency/AQU Catalunya.

[28] Under the Spanish constitution of 1978, a limited degree of autonomy was granted to the 17 regions (Autonomous Communities) that comprise Spain.

organisation and academic governance of university studies and structures; it addresses quality assurance in higher education and the universities and regulates certain aspects of the economic and financial system of the public universities.

Of the aforementioned regulations, one area stands out as affecting the activities of AQU Catalunya, which is the related to programme review.

As regards programme review, the Spanish Government laid down that degrees and higher education qualifications must follow a system of validation (ex-ante accreditation), modification, monitoring and accreditation[29]. In order to enact this legal mandate in accordance with the *European Standards and Guidelines for the external Quality Assurance of Higher Education* (ESG), AQU Catalunya, in collaboration with the universities and the Government of Catalonia, designed the **Framework for the validation (ex-ante accreditation), modification, monitoring and accreditation of recognised programmes** (VSMA Framework), which was first endorsed in 2010 by the then Board of Directors of AQU Catalunya and subsequently updated in 2016[30] in line with the new ESG. The first VSMA Framework took into account the recommendations of the work commission for the monitoring and accreditation of recognised programmes, in which the Ministry of Education and QA agencies from other Autonomous Communities (Castile and Leon, Galicia and Aragon, as well as Catalonia) participated, together with government representatives from the Autonomous Communities and rectors from Spanish universities.

The VSMA Framework is compatible with all applicable general State regulations, the agreements adopted in Catalonia by the Inter-university Council of Catalonia and the regulations of the Government of Catalonia. Nevertheless, the VSMA Framework is broader in scope than any of these legal requirements and enactment of the framework seeks to avoid certain contradictions that can arise from a literal and non-contextualized interpretation of current legislation. The 2016 version of the VSMA Framework opens up channels for institutional quality assurance.

This legal and judicial framework encompasses the activities that AQU Catalunya can undertake and, as such, the Agency fulfils and complies with all of the requirements of the jurisdiction in which it operates. Its activities of quality assurance, accreditation and certification are considered to be administrative actions or proceedings that are subject to public law and its safeguards.[31]

Activities involving external programme review, more specifically validation, modification and accreditation, and the quality assurance of foreign institutions offering degrees in Catalonia are

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[29] Royal Decree 1393/2007, 29 October, establishing the regulation and academic governance of recognised degrees and awards; Royal Decree 1614/2009, 26 October, on the academic governance of recognised degrees and awards for Higher Studies in the Arts, regulated by Organic Law 2/2006, 3 May, on education; and Royal Decree 99/2011, 28 January, concerning the regulation of doctorate studies.
[30] Endorsed by the Governing Board on 18 July 2016.
[31] Article 18, Act 15/2015, 21 July, on the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency/AQU Catalunya.

activities carried out for regulatory purposes. In the case of external programme review, the corresponding legislation (Royal Decree) lays down that QA agencies must issue assessment reports that shall be *prescriptive and decisive* for the start, modification and renewal of programme accreditation[32]; and in the latter case of foreign institutions, pursuant to Law 1/2003 19 February on universities in Catalonia, the authorisation to establish educational institutions that issue foreign awards and qualifications is conditional on *the issuance of a favourable preliminary report by AQU Catalunya[33]*. AQU Catalunya is therefore fully recognised to undertake both of these activities under the existing legal framework.

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[32] Royal Decree 1393/2007, Royal Decree 1393/2007, 29 October, establishing the regulation and academic governance of recognised degrees and awards, article 25.2 and 27.1.

[33] Law 1/2003 19 February, on universities in Catalonia (LUC), article 113.2.

9.3. ESG Standard 3.3. Independence

STANDARD:

Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

Organisational independence

Law 15/2015 enshrines the independence of AQU Catalunya. Article 1 of the Law establishes that:

> *AQU Catalunya is a government-run public agency subject to private law that, as a separate legal entity, possesses its own legal personality and patrimony.*

> *AQU Catalunya, in the exercise of its functions in the promotion and assurance of quality in higher education, shall act objectively and with technical and professional independence, without instruction from any public administration or other institution in the fulfilment of its objectives.*

This legislation also increased the Agency's independence from the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia in the appointment of staff members (see table below) through reinforcement of the powers of the Governing Board. This legal modification complies with one of the main recommendations of the review for compliance with the ESG coordinated by ENQA in 2007.

Table 6. Legislative amendments to the appointment of senior staff and members of AQU Catalunya

	Law 1/2003-LUC, 19 February, on universities in Catalonia	Act 15/2015, 21 July, on the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency/AQU Catalunya
Appointment of academic members of the Governing Board (art. 7 and 8)	Three prominent individuals from the academic community, nominated by the incumbent minister of the corresponding government department with jurisdiction over the universities.	Three academics of recognised international standing, chosen by the Inter-university Council of Catalonia.
Appointment of the director (art. 9)	Designated by the incumbent minister of the corresponding government department with jurisdiction over the universities, on advice from the Board of Management, for a period of four years, renewable twice.	Appointed through an open, competitive and freely contested process, in accordance with criteria set by the Governing Board of AQU Catalunya for a four-year term, renewable once, on the basis of merit, ability and suitability.

Appointment of the chairperson of the Research Assessment Commission (art 12.)	Nominated by the incumbent minister of the corresponding government department with jurisdiction over the universities from candidates with outstanding merits in science.	Nominated by the Governing Board of AQU Catalunya from candidates proposed by the incumbent minister of the corresponding government department with jurisdiction over the universities with outstanding merits in science.
Appointment of the members of the Research Assessment Commission (art. 12)	Four people designated by the incumbent minister of the corresponding government department with jurisdiction over the universities.	Four people designated by the Governing Board of AQU Catalunya at the proposal of the incumbent minister of the corresponding government department with jurisdiction over the universities.

Operational independence

Article 1 of Law 15/2015 continues to uphold the operational independence of the QA commissions as it provides that:

> *AQU Catalunya, in the exercise of its functions in the promotion and assurance of quality in higher education, shall act objectively and with technical and professional independence, without instruction from any public administration or other institution in the fulfilment of its objectives.*

Furthermore, article 18 stipulates the technical and professional independence and the public availability of the criteria for and functioning of the QA commissions, committees and panels. More specifically, article 1 of the Law refers to the functioning of QA commissions, committees and panels, which:

> *"(...) shall act in accordance with prevailing regulations, with technical and professional independence, develop and endorse the criteria and procedures for quality assurance, accreditation, certification and audit, and undertake in their respective areas review, certification and accreditation that fall to the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency, for which they shall be ultimately responsible. The Governing Board shall ensure the technical independence of all QA commissions, committees and panels."*

This mandate is incorporated in the Agency's new Statutes and the internal rules of procedure of the Governing Board and its Standing Committee, the Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP) and the Research Assessment Commission (CAR), as well as all external review procedures.

AQU's QA commissions, committees and panels therefore continue to be guaranteed their technical and professional independence to establish the criteria and procedures for quality assurance, accreditation, certification and auditing and to issue value judgments in accordance with the provisions, in a way that is totally independence from the universities and government.

AQU Catalunya is also autonomous in financial terms. The Agency is allocated sufficient economic resources in the budget approved by the Parliament de Catalonia to carry out its work with complete financial independence and, with the implementation of the new Law, a 4-year

funding agreement contract programme is anticipated. See section 9.5 of this self-assessment report.

Independence of formal outcomes

The independence of all reports for which the Agency is responsible is safeguarded by assuring the independence of all external experts and their work through:

1) The nomination procedure, as it is the chairpersons of the QA commissions (Institutional and Programme Review Commission/CAIP and Research Assessment Commission/CAR) who nominate them. See standard 2.4. External experts.

2) Through acceptance of the *Commitment to comply with AQU Catalunya's principles of action, its values, Code of Ethics and Policy for quality and information security, and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* available on the reviewers database extranet that reviewers receive together with their review assignment. The Commitment document makes express reference to ESG standard and guidelines 3.3 on reviewers.

9.4. ESG Standard 3.4. Thematic analysis

STANDARD:

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

The Agency implements this standard in three areas: reports resulting from review procedures; sector reports and dissemination actions.

Reports resulting from QA procedures

AQU Catalunya produces meta-evaluation reports that describe and analyse the functioning and conclusions its main external QA activities, including: validation (ex-ante accreditation) and modification of undergraduate and Master's programmes, the monitoring of undergraduate and Master's programmes and the accreditation de undergraduate and Master's programmes[34], for use in and by the university system in Catalonia for improvement and enhancement purposes.

It also produces and disseminates reports on specific programmes, such as the *Inclusive university-system review report. Master's degree programmes in teaching training for compulsory secondary education and upper secondary education (baccalaureate), vocational training and language teaching*, which was referred to the coordinators of this Master's programme in all the universities where it is run and the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia for decisions regarding the approach of the Master's programme and planning. Another example is the *Report on the situation of Design studies in Catalonia within the regulatory framework of programmes in the Performing Arts and Visual Arts in the European Higher Education Area*, produced from the information gathered during the validation (ex-ante accreditation) and accreditation of programmes in Design and referred to the Government of Catalonia's Ministry for Education and the Ministry for Economy and Knowledge.

With the same objective, and on completion of the accreditation of all the courses in Catalonia, the inclusive review report on undergraduate programmes in teaching training for compulsory secondary education and upper secondary education (baccalaureate), vocational training and language teaching is nearing completion, and the production of three inclusive reports is anticipated for 2017 to provide a more accurate perspective of specific aspects of the higher education system in Catalonia, namely the undergraduate Bachelor's degree in Law and Master's degrees in Law and Engineering.

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[34] In preparation.

In addition, and with the clear aim of dynamically and efficiently providing information for analysis, the Agency uses WINDDAT, a webpage that provides indicators on teaching for programme delivery and analysis, which facilitates all information required by university authorities for analysing programme delivery. WINDDAT enables different types of comparison to be made between programmes and universities in Catalonia by providing information that is much more dynamic that a customary report. During this period, the Agency adapted WINDDAT to programme accreditation (see example) so that all published indicators are aligned with those used during an accreditation process. WINDDAT provides indicators that are essential for programme coordinators in carrying out monitoring and preparing for accreditation, identifying trends and making comparisons with other programmes in the higher education system in Catalonia. WINDDAT provides more than 40 types of indicator on each programme, organised according to accreditation, admission and enrolment, students, teaching, teaching staff, academic outcomes, mobility and graduate employment outcomes. The fact that WINDDAT is now more closely integrated into QA and review processes has led to an upsurge in its use.

In parallel to this, the Agency regularly reports the aggregate results of programme accreditation to the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia for use in new programming proposals and also monitors the activities undertaken and the results obtained, which are periodically presented to the advisory committees and QA commissions in their meetings, a process that concludes with the production of the Annual Report, which is referred to the Governing Board for its approval and then published and posted on the AQU Catalunya website.

Open access to accreditation results is available on the EUC web portal (University Studies in Catalonia) which gives the rating of programmes according to a series of different dimensions. This website is available in three languages (Catalan, Spanish and English) and allows for the easy comparison of degree programmes at national and international level.

In the draft Action Plan 2017[35], there are also plans to draw up a personalised report on each university to the rector and vice-rectors responsible for quality and teaching staff, with the data and figures that the Agency has available on the quality assurance of programmes and teaching staff compared to the mean for Catalonia, for the purposes of reflection and decision-making in each individual university.

Sector reports

AQU Catalunya has a robust and reliable information system that allows it to produce reports that include both the results of its external QA activities and other sources of information, such as data obtained from the graduate employment outcomes survey, the employers survey that it coordinates, and others. The following figure shows the different sources of information that the Agency uses in producing reports:

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[35] Activity 20.

Figure 9. System of available information for producing reports
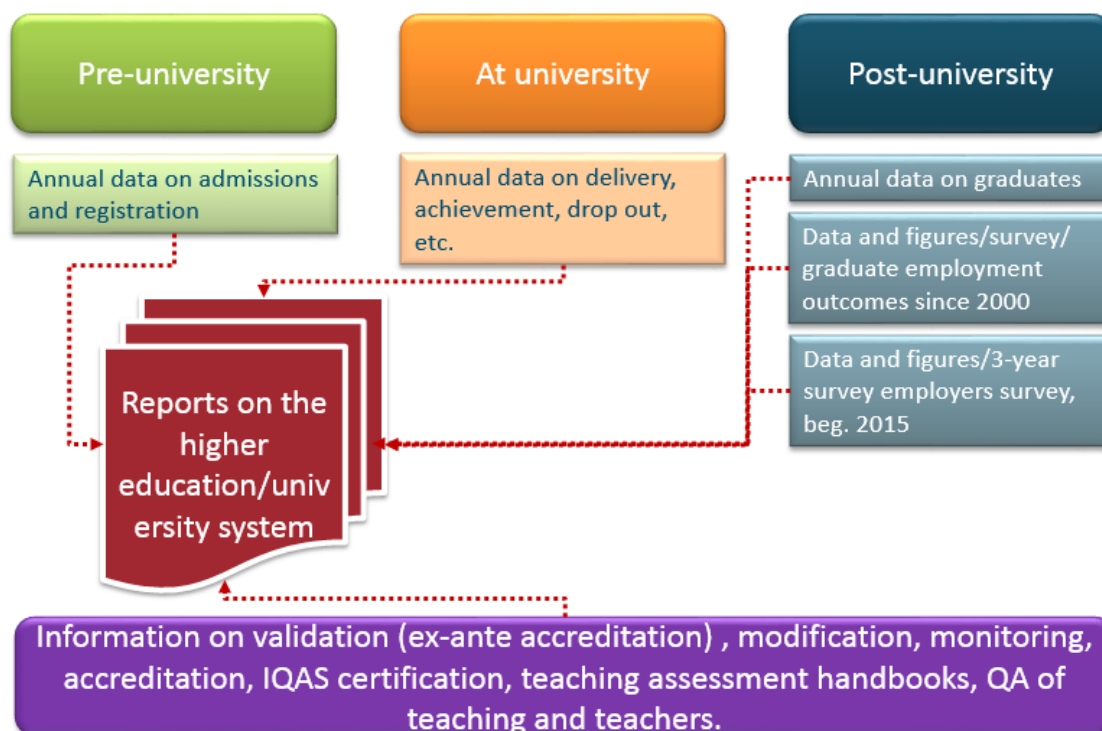
Over the same period, the Agency produced and carried out the fifth survey of graduate employment outcomes and promoted the first survey of employers and their perceptions regarding the employability of recent graduates, which together have so far resulted in nineteen different research studies in different universities in Catalonia (see following table) and numerous reports produced on demand, for example, the cross-referencing of data on university supply and demand with employment outcomes, for any given university, programme, etc. Some studies have compared the results with national benchmarks (for example, the graduate employment outcomes surveys of Galicia and the Basque Country, and the quarterly survey of the working population).

With regard to graduate employment outcomes surveys, the Agency is preparing the sixth survey, which will be carried out between January and March 2017 and the second survey of employers and their perceptions regarding the employability of recent graduates. In addition, a project is being developed through the Catalan Institute for Statistics to obtain annual registry information from the Social Security authorities in order to complete the three-year study.

Work is also under way to incorporate the data obtained from the Bachelor's graduate satisfaction surveys gathered annually since 2015 into these studies when the level of data reliability is high enough.

Table 7. Sector reports published between 2012-2016

Title	Year
SUPORT programme [Catalan]	2012
University and employment in Catalonia 2011 [Catalan]	2012
Gender and graduate labour market outcomes [Catalan]	2012
How to produce, tutor and assess a Master's dissertation [Catalan]	2013
The employment outcomes of doctoral degree holders from universities in Catalonia	2014
Universities and employment in Catalonia 2014	2014
The employment outcomes of Master's degree holders from universities in Catalonia	2015
Employers' perceptions of the employability and skills of recent graduates in Catalonia	2015
The employability and skills of new teachers. The opinion of preschool, primary and secondary education institutions [Catalan]	2015
The employers survey: a qualitative analysis. The opinion of school principals regarding the training of preschool and primary school teachers [Catalan]	2015
The employers survey: a qualitative analysis. The opinion of school principals regarding the training of secondary school teachers [Catalan]	2015
The opinions of finance companies, insurance companies and real estate companies regarding graduates in Economics, Business Administration and Management, and Business Studies [Catalan]	2016
The opinions of firms and businesses regarding the preparation and training of production engineers [Catalan]	2016
The opinions of firms and businesses regarding graduates in Communication [Catalan]	2016
The opinions of employers regarding graduates in Medicine [Catalan]	2016
The opinions of firms and businesses regarding architects and civil engineers [Catalan]	2016
The opinions of firms and businesses regarding communication engineers [Catalan]	2016
The opinions of consulting firms regarding graduates in Economics, Business Administration and Management, and Business Studies [Catalan]	2016
The opinions of employers regarding graduates in Nursing [Catalan]	2016
Effects of the crisis on graduate employment outcomes [Catalan]	2016
Equity in access and the occupational integration of university graduates:	2016

Chapter 1. Trends in the occupational integration of graduates: from expansion to on-going crisis [Catalan] Chapter 2. The effects of studying and working at the same time on academic results and employment outcomes [Catalan] Chapter 3. The social composition of access to university [Catalan] Chapter 4. The transition to university [Catalan]	
The adaptation of programmes and qualifications in Catalonia according to EHEA guidelines (pending publication) [Spanish]	2017
Report on the situation of Design studies in Catalonia within the regulatory framework of programmes in the Performing Arts and Visual Arts in the European Higher Education Area, June 2016 (pending publication)	

Several of these reports have been translated into Spanish and English to enhance the internationalisation of knowledge generated in the higher education system in Catalonia and facilitate comparability between different countries.

Dissemination actions

AQU Catalunya organised the following workshops, seminars and discussion forums dealing mainly with the higher education system in Catalonia, with an average attendance of 150 participants, in which the results and findings of activities organised by the Agency were presented:

Table 8. Seminars and workshops organised by AQU Catalunya (2012-2016)

Title	YEAR
Workshop on the meta-evaluation of the validation (ex-ante accreditation), monitoring and modification of recognised programmes	2012
The social impact of the universities at a time of crisis	2012
Reaccreditation of the teaching assessment handbooks used in public universities in Catalonia	2013
Indicators of graduate employment outcomes: an instrument for HEI marketing (attracting students) and careers guidance	2013
The accreditation of recognised programmes of study	2014

Presentation of the results and findings of the fifth survey of graduate employment outcomes	2014
Quality, an instrument for the internationalisation of degree programmes at Catalan universities	2014
What needs to be improved in doctoral training?	2014
Employers' opinions regarding university graduates: results, findings and challenges	2015
Programme accreditation as a tool for internationalisation	2015
How can teacher training be improved and enhanced?	2015
The impact of the crisis on graduates	2016
Impact evaluation of quality management in higher education. A Contribution to Sustainable Quality Development of the Knowledge Society	2016
What is the purpose of external quality assurance?	2016
How to improve nursing skills and training (planned)	2017
How to improve doctors' skills and training (planned)	2017

The Agency also presented its QA activities and analytical studies on different subjects as a way of contributing to reflection on and the enhancement of QA policies and procedures in institutional, national and international contexts:

Table 9. Presentations of AQU Catalunya's activities (2013-2016)

Scope	2013	2014	2015	2016
Catalonia-related	11	12	20	13
Spain-related	4	5	7	1
International-related	11	24	19	12
TOTAL	**26**	**41**	**46**	**26**

9.5. ESG Standard 3.5. Resources

STANDARD:
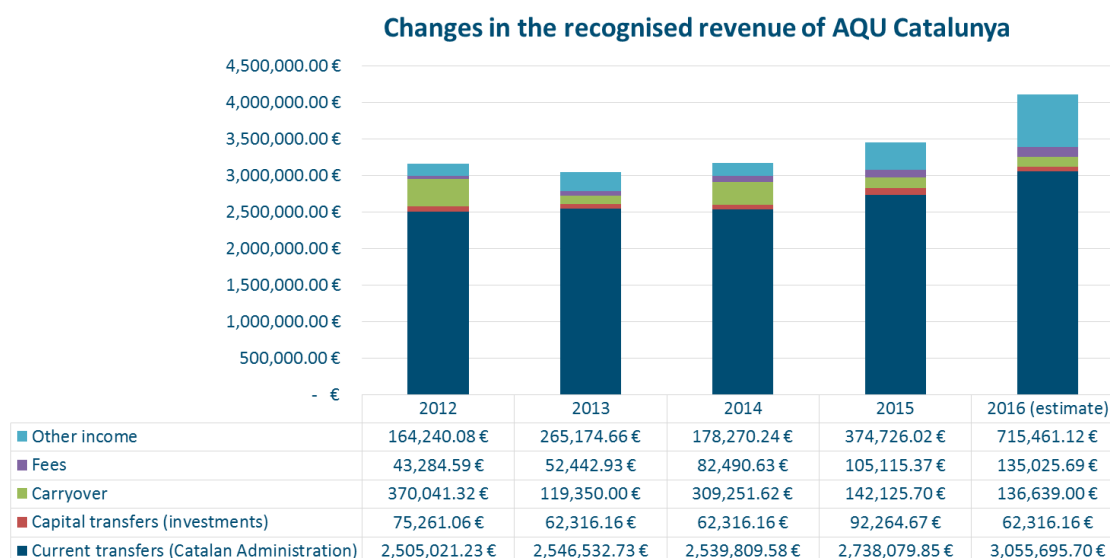
Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

Economic resources

The AQU Catalunya budget forms part of the budget of the Government of Catalonia that is annually approved by the Parliament of Catalonia. The Agency's budget for 2015 was €3.5M, which was 9% more than in 2012, and in 2016 19% more than in 2015, as a consequence of the increase in funding to cover programme review in Catalonia and non-governmental funding for projects.

Graph 8. Changes in the recognised revenue of AQU Catalunya 2012-2016

Changes in the recognised revenue of AQU Catalunya

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016 (estimate)
■ Other income	164,240.08 €	265,174.66 €	178,270.24 €	374,726.02 €	715,461.12 €
■ Fees	43,284.59 €	52,442.93 €	82,490.63 €	105,115.37 €	135,025.69 €
■ Carryover	370,041.32 €	119,350.00 €	309,251.62 €	142,125.70 €	136,639.00 €
■ Capital transfers (investments)	75,261.06 €	62,316.16 €	62,316.16 €	92,264.67 €	62,316.16 €
■ Current transfers (Catalan Administration)	2,505,021.23 €	2,546,532.73 €	2,539,809.58 €	2,738,079.85 €	3,055,695.70 €

AQU Catalunya has statutory independence to assign the budget as it wishes in order to fulfil the activities set out in the annual Action Plan. In 2015, AQU Catalunya allocated €1M to the quality assurance of programmes in Catalonia; €0.35M to knowledge generation and transfer; and €0.14M to international projects.

AQU Catalunya closes each fiscal year with a balanced budget (expenditure does not exceed income), it is arrear and debt-free, and it successfully undergoes external economic and financial audits on an annual basis. The Catalan Agency therefore has sufficient resources to carry out its

annual activities. For more information, see the section (in Catalan) on *Pressupost i contractació* on AQU Catalunya's Transparency web portal.

With regard to the Agency's economic resources, the medium-term challenge consists of the drawing up and approval of the Agency's contract programme with the Government of Catalonia, as laid down in Law 15/2015[36], which must agree to the Agency's funding agreement for a four-year period.

Human resources

In terms of human resources, staff at AQU Catalunya consist of the following, distributed according to the different areas, sections and units:

Graph 9. AQU Catalunya QA staff distribution
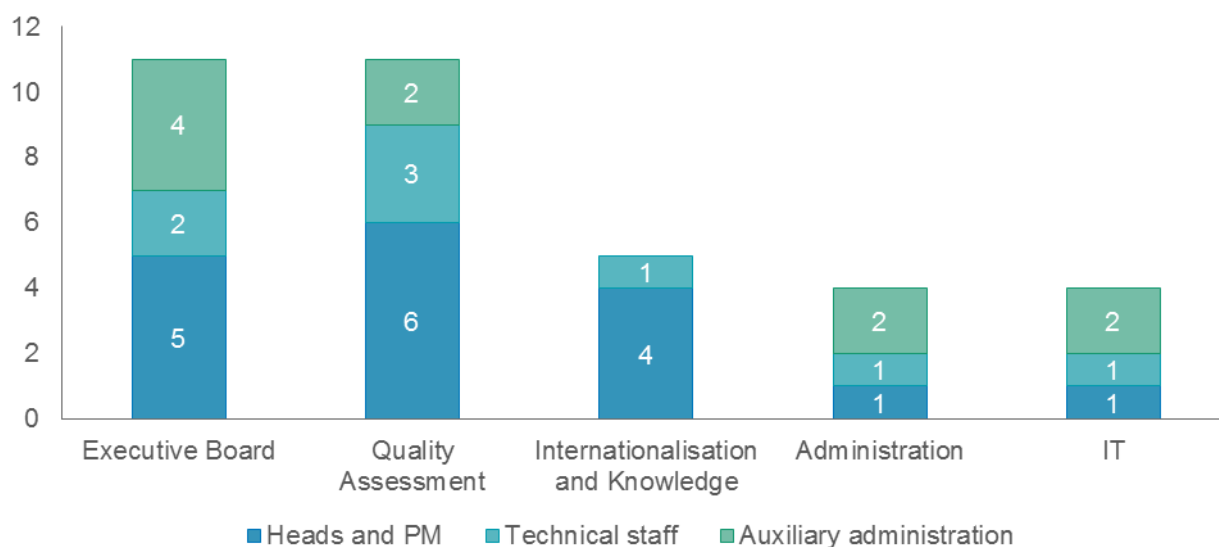
In spite of restraints on hiring and recruitment imposed by the Spanish national and Catalan government authorities, AQU Catalunya has sufficient human resources to deal with the increase in its activities. At the same time, the Agency's QA section has been reinforced by tapping the knowledge and expertise of technical specialists in other sections of the Agency.

The technical staff at AQU Catalunya, which represents around two-thirds of all the staff, manages and participates not only in external QA activities, but also provides support in drawing up the reports on QA and review procedures; coordinating, developing and carrying out analytical studies and surveys (on graduate employment outcomes, satisfaction, etc.) for knowledge generation; participating in international projects; and disseminating the knowledge

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[36] Article 19.

and information acquired by way of articles and the presentation of papers at congresses, symposia and workshops.

All staff working for the Agency are required to comply with the obligations set out in the Code of Ethics and the conflict of interests document, which they sign on being selected following an assessment and selection process. The signing of these documents ensures that individuals are competent and that they act in a professional and ethical way and in the absence of any conflict of interests.

In addition, AQU Catalunya has in place a human resource management procedure that defines all selection and recruitment procedures, which includes orientation for new employees and the training programme, which in different ISO 9001 audits has been assessed as one of the Agency's strengths.

New developments include the approval in 2015 of the Strategic Policy for Human Resources, which sets out the guidelines and values upheld by AQU Catalunya in this sphere for efficient staff management, the objective being to build up an organisation that is efficient, flexible, open and enhancement and results-based with a team of competent, creative and satisfied people. The policy regulates human relations and the profile of staff; recruitment, selection, appointment and orientation; salaries; training and knowledge management; and quality assurance and recognition. The actions that the Agency has carried out to implement the policy include a revision and updating of all Agency job descriptions in 2016, in order to bring them up to date for the first time in seven years since they were first approved (2009); an agency-wide job evaluation in 2016 to ensure salary equity; and reorganisation of AQU's organisational structure to better adapt to new and changed needs and requirements. It is currently working on the design and implementation of a QA project on professional skills, which is partially based on the ENQA document, *Quality assurance professional competencies framework* (2016), that will be used to realign the Agency's staff training programme in a more skills-based way.

Technical infrastructure and office premises

AQU Catalunya has its own IT section that manages all software applications, it develops new applications to cover all of the Agency's requirements regarding its quality assurance activities, and it has the necessary technical infrastructure to carry out all of its activities. Its most important platforms and their functions are:

- **AVALUA**: on-line platform for the management of external review procedures, institutional and programme.

- **The AQU Catalunya Extranet**: platform for the management of reviewers and experts.

- **Sharepoint**: An AQU Catalunya repository for documentation.

- **NEXUS**: internal management of reviewers and experts, commissions, invoiciong, and committees and panels.

- **VENUS** (under construction): repository for statistical data for data mining, to generate indicators and for use in programme reviews reports and others.

The IT section is responsible for implementing the main information security measures that ensure the availability, integrity and confidentiality of data. AQU Catalunya has been ISO 27001-certified for information security management since 2015.

AQU Catalunya occupies a total useful floor area of 385m^2 in the building at Carrer dels Vergós, 36-42 of Barcelona, together with the shared use of seven meeting rooms and an auditorium, which are sufficient for the Agency to carry out its activities. Workshops are organised in collaboration with the universities, which often make their facilities available for use.

It also shares a server room that assures adequate conditions to house its technical infrastructure.

9.6. ESG Standard 3.6. Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

STANDARD:

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.
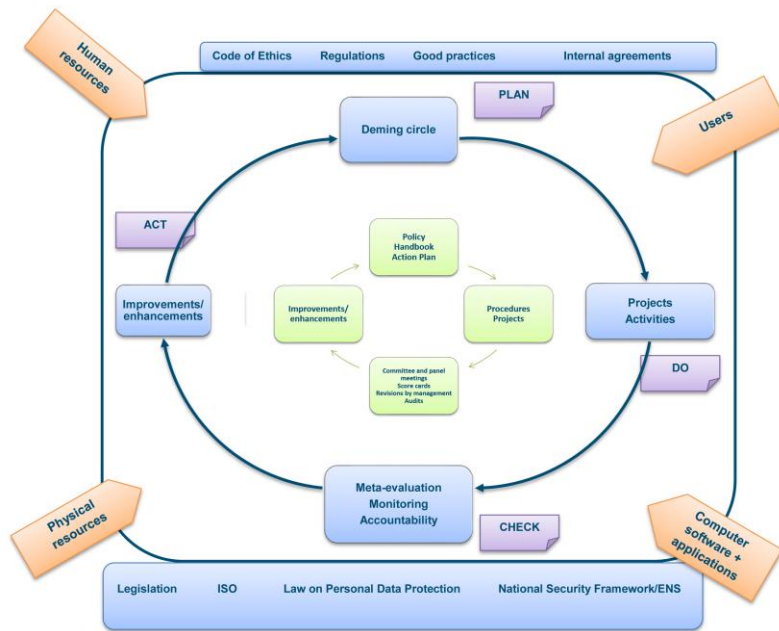
Compliance by AQU Catalunya

The Agency's quality and information security management system is based on AQU Catalunya's quality and information security policy, which is available on the Agency's website, and comprises:

- All the processes described in the AQU process map.

- All information systems involved in the provision of services including personal data protection.

- All users of AQU Catalunya's information systems.

Internal quality assurance was introduced when the Agency was founded and it has been externally certified since 2000 when it became the first QA agency in Spain to be ISO 9001-certified. AQU Catalunya's certification is renewed on an annual basis. In 2012, the Agency started a process to incorporate information security into its management system, and in 2015 the Agency successfully completed external certification with ISO standard 27001.

The IQA facilitates and promotes improvement and enhancement through Deming's PDCA (plan-do-check-act) cycle, which is followed in the Agency's day-to-day activities as well as its IQA.

Figure 10. The Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle at AQU Catalunya

The following table summarises the evidence of the regular application of AQU Catalunya's quality and information security management system (IQA):

Table 10. Summary of the evidence of the application of AQU Catalunya's IQA

	Evidence:
PLAN	Strategic Plan Annual Action Plan Planning of projects Policies
DO	Implementation of the following Plans: ■ Internal procedures-instructions, which define the activities to be carried out, the responsibilities and the outputs ■ Review guides ■ Regulations ■ Reports/register
CHECK	Monitoring of the Agency's activities: coordination meetings, strategic meetings, project monitoring meetings Quality and Information Security Management Committee Indicator monitoring and analysis

70	Meta-evaluation (annual accounts of the Agency's different sections)
	Meta-evaluation of projects (annual accounts of the Agency's different sections)
	Follow-up of incidents and internal and external enhancement proposals (intranet portal/webpage mailbox/corporate mail)
	Internal audits
	External audits
ACT	The improvement Plan for each of the Agency's different sections
	Periodic revision of the review guides and procedures

In order to advance systematic improvement in the effectiveness of the IQA, a system revision is undertaken every year by the Management, through the Quality and Information Security Committee, based on the following:

- A revision of the Quality and Information Security Policy and the Quality and Information Security Handbook.

- The state of the actions proposed in previous revisions.

- Analysis of any changes in the external and internal activity of AQU Catalunya that may be important for the IQA.

- Information on the outcomes of AQU Catalunya's activity, bearing in mind audit outcomes; users' complaints and petitions; corrective measures; the users' opinions; and indicator results, trends and defined objectives.

- Enhancement proposals.

- Business impact analysis.

- Risk treatment plans and information security risk assessment.

The Quality and Information Security Committee undertakes a comprehensive revision of the internal quality assurance system once every year, which also takes into account the meta-evaluation by the heads of the different sections and projects.

The conclusions of the Management System Review are referred to the Quality and Information Security Committee and are drawn up once a year in a Report, which is circulated throughout the entire organisation to help raise the levels of motivation and commitment among all of the Agency's staff and contribute to the continuous enhancement of its processes and activities.

In relation to the guidelines under this standard:

- Training ensures that all persons involved in the Agency's activities are competent. AQU Catalunya gives specific training to experts for each project and has an approved training scheme for AQU staff based on the system for assessing professional skills and staff training requirements for each project or activity. One of the documents used as a guide reference is the *ENQA Quality assurance professional competencies framework* (2016).

- The Agency's quality and information security management system (IQA) has internal and external feedback mechanisms, in which the opinions of internal and external users are gathered and taken into account by way of the petitions and surveys portal, for internal users, and the corporate mailboxes, satisfaction surveys, proceedings of meetings and direct communication (telephone calls, e-mails, postal mail) for external users. For more information on the stakeholders' opinions, see section 11. These mechanisms end with the annual system meta-evaluation, which drives the continuous improvement of the system.

- AQU Catalunya's human resources policy (2015) lays down, in the section on work environment, that "*any form of psychological or sexual harassment or discrimination is prohibited, and that procedures for action shall be established to actively detect and eliminate any such form of behaviour*". In this regard, an internal committee has been set up to draw up an Equality Plan, in accordance with the regulations of the Government of Catalonia.

- The quality and information security management system stipulates the communications to be maintained by the Agency with institutions and individuals that undergo a review procedure, as well as for each sphere of action. AQU Catalunya also incorporates the different stakeholder groups in its governing and advisory bodies. The Governing Board monitors the Agency's activity in terms of its efficiency and efficacy and deals with the Agency's strategic and institutional matters. In the case of the advisory bodies, including the Committee of Vice-Rectors and the QA technical units, meetings deal more with operational aspects and coordination.

- AQU Catalunya does not subcontract or outsource any QA activity in the higher education system in Catalonia to third parties.

- AQU Catalunya operates in the university system in Catalonia and, on demand, undertakes external QA activities in accordance with the ESG. AQU Catalunya also provides support to institutions in the university system in Catalonia for QA procedures that do not depend directly on AQU Catalunya. For example, in the case of programmes applying for a sector quality label, AQU Catalunya manages the corresponding review and fully integrates it into the QA procedure for accreditation by AQU Catalunya, as laid down in the Guide to obtaining a quality label for undergraduate and Master's programmes, within AQU Catalunya's accreditation process.

For more information on AQU Catalunya's quality and information security management system, see section 7 of this self-assessment report.

9.7. ESG Standard 3.7. Cyclical external review of agencies

STANDARD:

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

AQU Catalunya's commitment to compliance with the ESG is one of the Agency's strengths. From the time it was established it has always looked to Europe and, from its position as a QA agency, sought to contribute to the setting up and consolidation of the EHEA. It thereby became a founder member of ENQA, it participated in the development and revision of the ESG, it was one of the first agencies for which ENQA coordinated the external review and it was one of the first agencies to be listed on the EQAR register.

In addition to this dedication, however, Law 15/2015 requires that both the promotion and quality assurance of higher education are in accordance with the European standards for quality[37]:

> *"The purpose of the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency is to promote and assure the quality of higher education in accordance with international and European academic and social standards for quality assurance in accordance with prevailing legislation, and provide stakeholders in higher education with criteria and rules for achieving the highest standards of quality in the fulfilment of their functions, in line with the interests of society in quality assurance in higher education".*

And, in this regard, it establishes the obligation of undergoing a periodic cyclical review:

> *"In accordance with international standards and guidelines for quality assurance, AQU Catalunya shall, at the proposal of the Governing Board, undergo a regular international external review of the quality of the services it provides for the purpose of the Agency's continuous improvement and external recognition"*[38].

In addition to strict compliance with Law 15/2015, AQU Catalunya therefore undergoes the international external review for compliance with the ESG once every five years. The Agency's review in 2017 will be the third time for a review of this type to be carried out, following the previous reviews in 2007 and 2012. In these two previous reviews, the panels formulated a total number of 28 recommendations, 90% of which have been incorporated into the Agency's activities and actions, 7% were curtailed due to changed circumstances following their proposal

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[37] Article 2.
[38] Article 26.

and the impossibility of their being introduced, and one recommendation is pending introduction:

Table 11. Summary of the recommendations implemented and action by the Agency

Visit	Total number of recommendations	Implemented	Curtailed	Pending introduction
2007	19	17	1	1
2012	9	8	1	—
TOTAL	**28**	**25**	**2**	**1**

See section 12 to consult the recommendations and corresponding actions by the Agency.

10. COMPLIANCE WITH EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES (PART 2) [39]

10.1. ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

STANDARD:

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

AQU Catalunya's VSMA Framework (2016) clearly defines the implementation of internal quality management systems (IQAs) in institutions as being one of the key factors in quality assurance in universities and higher education institutions in Catalonia. More specifically, it lays down that:

> *"The four main elements that the VSMA Framework (2016) revolves around are:*
>
> - *Certification of quality assurance systems: The development of a system of certification for quality assurance systems that are being implemented in institutions should be the cornerstone for simplifying all procedures associated with the VSMA. This should lead to progress towards quality assurance at institutional level, in accordance with the line of work at international level. The aspiration is for universities in the Catalan system to form part of the category of self-accredited/self-accrediting institutions. (...)"*

As such, and in the practical application of these principles laid down in the VSMA Framework, AQU Catalunya takes into account the efficacy of the internal quality assurance system (IQAs) in the following aspects:

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[39] The analysis of compliance with all the ESG applies to the four external QA activities. So, in the majority of the cases the same procedure is applied to all the processes. AQU Catalunya descrives the procedure individually when it is different to the rest of the QA activities.

- The Agency promotes and recognises IQAs certification in that it is indispensable for the institutional accreditation of an institution. This means that the individual accreditation of an institution's programmes no longer makes sense in a system where it is only the IQAs that require certification, together with half of the programmes.
- IQAs certification is one of the essential requirements for the use of 'pathway 2' in validation (ex-ante accreditation) defined in the VSMA Framework, according to which the universities may directly handle this procedure.
- IQAs implementation is promoted through the inclusion in the VSMA guidebooks (Guides to the validation, modification, monitoring and accreditation of recognised programmes) of a specific section for the review of IQAs design and/or implementation (where appropriate) in each institution.

All of these actions aim at the promotion and recognition of, as well as giving impetus to, IQAs implementation, as well as helping to greatly reduce the Agency's volume of QA processes through greater trust being placed in the universities' internal QA systems.

One should also bear in mind that all external QA review processes organised by AQU Catalunya are EHEA-inspired, they reflect national and international recommendations and they take into account the effectiveness of the internal QA procedures described in Part 1 of the ESG, where applicable. The following table shows the standards in Part 1 of the ESG that are covered by the Agency's review guides:

Table 12. Standards in Part 1 of the ESG as set out in AQU Catalunya's QA guidebooks

Guidebook   ESG

	1.1.	1.2.	1.3.	1.4.	1.5.	1.6.	1.7.	1.8.	1.9.	1.10.
Validation (ex-ante accreditation) and modification	3.9	3.5 / 3.9	3.3 / 3.5 / 3.8	3.4	3.6	3.7	3.9	3.9	4 / 5	5
Monitoring	3.3	3.3	3.1 / 3.6	3.1	3.4	3.5	3.2	3.2	4 / 5	5
Accreditation	3.3	3.3	3.1 / 3.6	3.1	3.4	3.5	3.2	3.2	4 / 5	5
Ex post IQAs certification	3.1.	3.2.	3.3.	3.3.	3.4.	3.5.	3.6.	3.6.	4 / 5	5
Teaching assessment handbooks	B External Guide		D,E External Guide		D External Guide	D External Guide	A, B, C External Guide	C, E External Guide	A, B External Guide	A, B, F External Guide

Quality assurance of research at department level	3.1		3.1		3.1	3.1			4 / 5	5
Foreign institutions	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1	4 / 5	5
Quality assurance of foreign institutions offering foreign degrees in Catalonia	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	4 / 5	5

1.1: Policy for quality assurance; 1.2: Design and approval of programmes; 1.3: Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment; 1.4: Student admission, progression, recognition and certification; 1.5: Teaching staff; 1.6: Learning resources and student support; 1.7: Information management; 1.8: Public information; 1.9: On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes; 1.10: Cyclical external quality assurance.

As can be seen from the table above, only two guidebooks and two of the standards in Part 1 of the ESG are not covered, and these are not subject to review according to the aim and purpose of each of the two guidebooks.

10.2. ESG Standard 2.2. Designing methodologies fit for purpose

STANDARD:

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

The methodologies designed by the Agency are aligned with the purpose and objectives of its review activities and provide professional guidance to people who participate in internal and external QA procedures, in such a way that findings and decisions are the outcome of a sound and coherent method of work. The methodology is produced prior to the start of any review procedure.

Technical staff at AQU Catalunya design, produce and implement the methodology on the basis of the purpose and objectives to be achieved, external benchmarks and standards (Spain and international), with the involvement of the institutions under review and the stakeholder groups. The proposed methodology is revised internally and subsequently referred to the advisory committees for consultation, as follows:

- Committee of vice-rectors responsible for quality.
  A follow-up of the review methodologies is scheduled on a periodic basis, in general once every three months, with new methodologies also being proposed.
- Committee of QA technical units
  Meetings are held on a periodic basis for the technical follow-up of the review methodologies, with the heads of QA technical units from all the universities.
- Depending on the body responsible for its approval, either the Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP) or the Research Assessment Commission (CAR) is consulted.
  These two commissions have the powers to modify and approve new methodologies, according to the functions assigned to them. Approval is undertaken fully independently although with consideration, where applicable, of any aspects noted by the advisory committees described above. The guidebooks are also consulted in the respective subject and/or function-specific committees.
- External review panels: opinions gathered during review processes are also incorporated in the revision and development of new methodologies.

In addition:

- Generally speaking, consultation is extended to other groups when considered to be necessary. For example, various different meetings were held recently with all the directors of doctoral schools in the Catalan university system in reference to the design of the monitoring guide for doctoral studies.

- Whenever possible, voluntary pilot or experimental programmes are run to test the consistency of new proposed methodologies, for example, the programme dealing with the quality assurance of research at university department-level (2015).
- In other cases, stages for instrument design have been established prior to actual implementation, for example, as in the case of the <u>Teaching assessment handbooks</u> and <u>Ex-post IQAs certification projects</u>.
- In the case of the Guide to accreditation, there was a public consultation of teachers and students.

The current QA guidebooks by AQU Catalunya that are used and applied in external review procedures are as follows:

Table 13. Current QA guidebooks by AQU Catalunya

Scope	Methodology
Validation (ex-ante accreditation) and modification	Guide to the formulation and validation (ex-ante accreditation) of proposals for Bachelor and Master's programmes
	Guide to the formulation and validation (ex-ante accreditation) of proposals for recognised doctoral programmes
Monitoring	Guide to the monitoring of recognised Bachelor and Master's degree programmes
	Guide to the monitoring of recognised doctoral programmes
	Guide to the monitoring of programmes in the Performing and Visual Arts
Accreditation	Guide to the accreditation of recognised Bachelor and Master's degree programmes
	Recommended evidence and indicators for the accreditation of Bachelor and Master's programmes
	Guide to the award of quality labels for Bachelor and Master's programmes, as part of the AQU accreditation process
	Guide to the assessment of additional dimensions in the accreditation of recognised Bachelor and Master's programmes
Internal quality assurance system (IQAs)	Guide to ex-post IQAs certification
	Guide to the assessment of IQAs design of programmes in the Performing and Visual Arts
Teaching assessment handbooks	Guide to the accreditation of the teaching assessment procedure given in the teaching assessment handbooks. Internal self-assessment stage
	Guide to the accreditation of the teaching assessment procedure given in the teaching assessment handbooks. External review stage

10. Compliance with European Standards and Guidelines (Part 2)

Quality assurance of university research at department-level	Guide to the quality assurance of university research at department-level
International accreditation of quality	International quality assurance of higher education. A tool for international academic mobility
Quality assurance of foreign institutions offering foreign degrees in Catalonia	Guide to the quality assurance of foreign institutions offering foreign degrees in Catalonia

The purpose and objectives of the guides being currently used, which are set out in the first section of each guidebook (section 1.1), are briefly as follows:

Table 14. Purpose and objectives of current review guidebooks

Guides	Purpose and objectives
Validation (ex-ante accreditation) and modification	To facilitate the drawing up by programme coordinators/academic managers of proposals for new recognised degree courses and their modification, for internal revision by the institution itself, and for independent external review by AQU Catalunya.
Monitoring	To offer an instrument that can be used by institutions to analyse the delivery of degree courses, diagnose and draw up enhancement proposals and corrective measures for any deviation identified between the programme design and normal delivery, and enhancement proposals identified during accreditation. Monitoring is also intended to be a source of evidence for accreditation.
Accreditation	Based on an external site visit, to check that a programme is being delivered according to planned in the validation (ex-ante accreditation) stage and accordingly renew its continuity within the time-frame prescribed by law (4 years in the case of Master's programmes and 6 years in the case of Bachelor's and doctoral programmes).
	This includes the optional assessment of additional dimensions (career development, employability and recruitment; internationalisation; and research-teaching linkages) and the corresponding label-related review.
	AQU Catalunya also provides support to universities in Catalonia wishing to get a subject-specific quality label, with the procedure being integrated as much as possible into the framework of accreditation, given compliance to specific characteristics. See section 5.1.4.
Internal quality assurance system (IQAs)	To certify that an internal quality assurance system has been introduced and is being implemented in a faculty/institution that is responsible for

	programme delivery, and that the IQAs is fit for purpose for programme quality assurance.
Teaching assessment handbooks	To evaluate and review the functioning and application of QA procedures for teaching in each university in accordance with the criteria set by AQU Catalunya, on the basis of the principles of transparency, stakeholder satisfaction and accountability.
Quality assurance of research at department level	To assess research being carried out in university departments in order to: ▪ Serve an instrument for the improvement of research policies. ▪ Determine the type of research being conducted in the universities. ▪ Identify the most dynamic areas and environments for research. ▪ Promote processes and change in line with the research objectives of the university ▪ Identify possible synergies between research being conducted in different departments of the same university.
International accreditation of quality	Certify institutions that can demonstrate academic rigour in accordance with European standards and that, at international level, are reliable and trustworthy partner institutions for cooperation and academic mobility, in particular with institutions in the university system in Catalonia.
Quality assurance of foreign institutions offering foreign degrees in Catalonia	Provide the required information on programme quality to the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia for authorisation and subsequent introduction and delivery in Catalonia.

Once a methodology has been officially approved, it is disseminated on the website, the quarterly newsletter and Twitter, so that it is accessible for consultation by the stakeholders concerned. In some cases, a specific workshop or presentation event has been organised, as in the case of the accreditation of recognised degree programmes, which was attended by more than 300 registered participants. AQU Catalunya therefore makes absolutely sure, prior to starting a review process, that all stakeholders, external reviewers and those being reviewed understand the purpose, the objectives and the methodology that is to be applied.

In the specific case of the Guide to Programme Accreditation and given its impact on the university system as a whole, AQU Catalunya produced a video with the guide content.

Video 3. The Guide to programme accreditation

AQU Catalunya takes very much into account the volume of work and cost involved in reviews for institutions. It is for this reason that their opinions are taken into consideration when reviews are undertaken and their internal time-frames are respected, insofar as the regulations permit this. Nevertheless, in order to reduce the workload and associated costs, the following are carried out:

- Meta-evaluation sessions with all those involved to perfect the processes, specify improvements and find solutions to optimise both economic and human resources, for example, the discussion session for the accreditation procedure with the QA technical units (2015).
- Improvements to, and the promotion of, <u>WINDDAT</u> as a support instrument for review processes in Catalonia. More than 70% of the data (indicators) required in programme accreditation are currently accessible in the same format and totally validated from this platform.
- Support in establishing and facilitating indicators for research, as in the case of the quality assurance of university research at department level through the use of tools for bibliometric analyses. This means that it is not necessary for institutions to allocate resources to providing these data to departments that are undergoing review.
- System-wide joint coordination of data/indicator collection, thereby avoiding the need for each university to obtain them individually. For example, the <u>surveys on graduate employment outcomes and satisfaction</u> which, aside from facilitating procedures such as accreditation, help the universities in decision making. AQU Catalunya bears the cost of the coordination, management and execution of the entire process, which means an important saving for the universities. The graduate employment outcome surveys are co-funded by the social councils of the public universities and the boards of trustees of the private universities in Catalonia.

In relation to the need for processes to support institutions in quality enhancement, it should be noted that Law 1/2003-LUC laid down that the quality assurance and promotion of Catalan universities shall be incumbent on the universities themselves and on the corresponding government department for universities and defines the Agency as the primary instrument for the promotion and assurance of quality. In this regard, and in reference to QA processes, it should be noted that:

- At the end of each QA/review procedure or period, the Agency regularly undertakes a series of meta-evaluation processes to analyse how things worked, which also includes the level of satisfaction of the stakeholders who have participated in the review (from meetings, focus groups and satisfaction surveys), the results and outcomes as well as enhancement proposals for prospective reviews in the future. AQU Catalunya has developed meta-evaluation processes for almost all of its review programmes. In the meta-evaluation, AQU Catalunya provides support to institutions and facilitates processes that assist them in implementing continuous quality enhancement.

- AQU Catalunya provides support through the ex-post IQAs certification programme and the teaching assessment handbooks and reinforces the role of the universities as being primarily responsible for the quality assurance of study programmes and the assessment of their teaching staff. With the approval of the new VSMA Framework (2016) these instruments take on a special significance in that institutions with an ex post IQAs certification can choose to become self-accredited/self-accrediting institutions i.e. they themselves can validate and accredit the programmes they deliver under the supervision of AQU Catalunya, which gives them much greater flexibility.

- In parallel to this, AQU Catalunya has participated in projects such as IMPALA (Impact Analysis of External Quality Assurance Processes of Higher Education Approach), the aim of which is to develop a methodology to determine the effects of external quality assurance. Projects like this indirectly serve to underpin the support given by AQU Catalunya to the higher education system in Catalonia.

With regard to the need for processes that enable institutions to demonstrate improvements and enhancements made, it should be noted that:

- All processes designed by AQU Catalunya allow institutions to demonstrate the improvements made, more specifically in the monitoring stage, which takes place at least once every two years for programmes in Catalonia. Another example is the teaching assessment handbooks, where institutions have the opportunity once every year of updating improvements made to their handbooks as a consequence of the accreditation reports.

- Review reports set out the improvements made by institutions, together with good practices in a specific section of the report.

Lastly, and with regard to the information provided on outcomes and monitoring (follow-up):

- All of the guides have a special section (section 4) on the "Review outcomes", which details the content of the final reports, the quality labels that have been awarded and the effects of the review. Review reports that have been issued are public and clearly specify the outcome of the review, together with the aspects that need to be improved for follow-up.

- At the same time, all guides contain section 5, on "Follow-up/monitoring and continuous enhancement", which sets out the procedure for the follow-up of the review. Both this and the previous section are new compared to earlier editions of the guides, in which follow-up was dealt with in a less harmonious way.

10.3. ESG Standard 2.3. Implementing processes

STANDARD:

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, consistently implemented and published. They include

- ■ a self-assessment or equivalent;
- ■ an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- ■ a report resulting from the external assessment;
- ■ a consistent follow-up.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

All review and assessment procedures by AQU Catalunya comply with the ESG (2015) and are based on a self-assessment, a subsequent external assessment by a panel of experts, the publication of a final report and a follow-up procedure to evaluate any proposed enhancement actions. The review and assessment procedures are set out and published in each review guide. More specifically:

Table 15. Layout of QA and review procedures at AQU Catalunya

	Validation	Monitoring	Modification	Accreditation	IQAs	TAH	UR-DL	International accreditation	Foreign institutions
Self-assessment	VR	•	MR	•	•	•	•	•	•
External review	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Supporting arguments	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Publication of reports	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Quality labels and certificates	•			•	•		•	•	
Follow-up	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Appeals	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

IQAs: IQAs certification; TAH: Teaching assessment handbooks; UR-DL: Assessment of university research at department-level; VR: validation report (ex-ante accreditation); MR: modification report.

- All procedures have an internal self-assessment stage which has to take into account the aspects required in the external review. Exceptions to this are validation (ex-ante accreditation) and modification, for which validation reports and modification reports must be submitted, respectively.
- An external review by an external review team that interviews the stakeholders.
- All procedures include the possibility of the presentation of supporting arguments during the reporting period and/or appeals before the Appeals Committee.
- All programme and institutional reports are published on the EUC Reports web portal, with the exception of reports on certification procedures on international mobility and the review of foreign institutions that do not directly involve the higher education system in Catalonia and are published in the corresponding section of the AQU website.
- The majority of the Agency's external QA activities have associated quality labels and certificates.
- All procedures have a follow-up/monitoring stage, which has its own section in all the guidebooks (section 5 of each guide).

Given that the VSMA Framework is the Agency's main external review procedure, the QA/review guides and other relevant sources are published for all VSMA review procedures (see following table):

Table 16. Other published sources for external review procedures

Scope	Other sources
Validation (ex-ante accreditation) and modification	Guidelines for reducing the intensity of review in validation (ex-ante accreditation) and modification
	Guidelines for the validation (ex-ante accreditation) of Bachelor-level studies with a lower credit load
	Processes for communicating and/or reviewing modifications made to Bachelor-level and Master's programmes
	Processes for communicating and/or reviewing modifications made to doctoral/PhD programmes
Monitoring	Guidelines for the monitoring of recognised Bachelor and Master's programmes
Accreditation	Guidelines for the accreditation of recognised Bachelor and Master's programmes
	Criteria for dealing with quality labels obtained directly by institutions
	Deadlines and procedure for programme accreditation applications
	Recommended evidence and indicators for the accreditation of Bachelor and Master's programmes

All reviews are planned according to IQA procedure OP01. Review process/accreditation of programmes and institutions[40].

The review procedure is specified in section 2 of each guide: "Review organisation and planning".

AQU Catalunya's technical staff are responsible for ensuring that the corresponding methodology is applied consistently in all institutions participating in the same review project. In the case of VSMA projects, a technical expert is assigned with handling the projects within one university in order to better harmonise the process within the institution. Technical staff meet once a week for internal coordination to analyse and coordinate the consistent development of projects in and across the higher education system. All other review projects (IQAs certification[41], teaching assessment handbooks, the assessment of research in university departments, international accreditation of quality, quality assurance of foreign institutions offering foreign degrees in Catalonia), due to their scope, are assigned a technical expert for each project, who is then responsible for controlling the process in an integrated way.

Each institution starts the self-assessment process with a clear idea who the AQU technical expert is and who will guide them through the entire process and resolve any queries that the institution may have.

In parallel to this, AQU's technical staff prepare the external review process. Firstly, the members of the external review panel are nominated, except for procedures involving validation (ex-ante accreditation), monitoring and modification, for which it is the subject and/or function-specific committee that carries out the review[42] (see section 10.4, referring to standard 2.4. Peer-review experts); the timetable and programme for the site visit are agreed, which will include the corresponding stakeholders to be interviewed, although the following are proposed: teaching staff, students and graduates, administrative and services staff, employers, programme/institution coordinators, the management team and the QA technical team.

The external review team is responsible for producing an evidence-based site visit report that includes recommendations for enhancement to be introduced by the programme/institution being reviewed. The external review panel also validates an enhancement plan at the end of the entire process, with specific actions to be implemented and followed up. See section 10.6, in reference to standard 2.6: Reporting.

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[40] Document available to external reviewers from AQU Catalunya at the time of carrying out the site visit.

[41] It is envisaged that, when the volume is larger, the coordination of this programme will be assigned to individual AQU technicians according to university/universities.

[42] In the case of accreditation, it is the subject and/or function-specific committees that issue the accreditation report, whereas the external review panels draw up and issue the external review report.

In procedures involving validation (ex-ante accreditation), modification, monitoring, accreditation, assessment of research in university departments, international accreditation of quality and the quality assurance of foreign institutions offering foreign degrees, the role of AQU Catalunya comes to an end with the final report. In procedures involving validation (ex-ante accreditation), modification and accreditation, it is the Spanish Universities Council (Consejo de Universidades) that completes the validation/accreditation of a programme or authorises its modification. In the case of the quality assurance of foreign institutions offering foreign degrees, it is the corresponding Government of Catalonia department with jurisdiction over the universities that authorises the establishment of the institution in Catalonia.

In procedures involving ex post IQAs certification and accreditation of the teaching assessment handbooks, the external review reports are the basis on which the subject and/or function-specific committees make their considerations for accrediting and certifying a faculty/institution.

In every case where a review by AQU Catalunya is favourable, the corresponding quality label is issued.

The decisions of the committees and panels may be appealed before the Appeals Committee for review and ruling.

All procedures, as stipulated in the QA/review guides (section 5 of all guides), provide for a follow-up stage within the period set for each procedure. In external review procedures involving the international quality assurance and the quality assurance of foreign institutions offering foreign degrees, which in the context of AQU Catalunya have so far been insignificant, it has been detected that there is still clearly definite room for improvement regarding follow-up. For this reason, the Agency has worked internally on revising the corresponding review guides to reinforce the systematic follow-up of programmes and institutions for which AQU Catalunya has implemented external review procedures.

Given that the most important procedure in the VSMA Framework is accreditation, the Agency produced a video on how the framework works:

Video 4. How the accreditation site visit works

In validation (ex-ante accreditation) under the VSMA Framework, there are three aspects that AQU Catalunya is working on to improve:

- The deadline and late applications for validation (ex-ante accreditation) and modification. AQU Catalunya works within a very tight time frame and if the universities fail to submit their applications within the established time frame (October every year any), and this does occur, even though the Agency complies with the deadline for completing the processing of applications as laid down by prevailing legislation (6 months for validation and 3 months for modifications), it is impossible for the universities to receive the review reports by March (which is when the Education Fair takes place), by which time the academic provision (approved courses) for prospective students in the university system for the following academic year already needs to be consolidated and in place. This issue is being dealt with together with the universities and the Directorate General for Universities so that applications are submitted on time.

- The coordination of validation (ex-ante accreditation) with university programming. All applications for programme validation must have prior authorisation under system-wide programming in Catalonia. AQU Catalunya and the Directorate General for Universities are in the process of establishing a protocol to increase coordination between the two agencies prior to programming to enable progress to be made in certain problem areas (programme titles, etc.) prior to approval being given for programming and offer a greater guarantee of success to new programmes that are included in university programming.

- Prior to issuing the final report in any QA process, the Agency issues a preparatory report, which gives the institution the opportunity to correct any shortcomings or weaknesses in its application. In the case mainly of validation procedures, the more robust the institution's IQAs and QA technical unit are, the fewer reports will need to be issued. The more reports there are, the more time the whole process takes, which again leads to difficulties for the universities because they cannot offer a recognised degree until it has been validated. AQU Catalunya has organised meetings with the academic managers/programme coordinators and QA technical staff at several universities in order to mitigate errors that are repeated.

10.4. ESG Standard 2.4. Peer-review experts

STANDARD:

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

In accordance with the ESG (2015), AQU Catalunya includes external experts, individuals of recognised standing in academic and professional field (optional) and students in external quality assurance, and takes into account the criteria of independence, objectivity and the absence of any conflict of interests.

External experts on the subject and function-specific committees and external review panels are nominated by the chairpersons of either the Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP) or the Research Assessment Commission(CAR), according to the corresponding functions.

The profiles and prerequisites for experts are public and adapted according to review requirements envisaged in the preparation and planning of the project.

The composition of the external review panels is stipulated in section 2 of the review guides: "Review organisation and planning". Generally speaking, the external review panels consist of five members: two academics, one student, one professional and a secretary, who will also be a QA methodology specialist.

All external review panels constituted by AQU Catalunya therefore include students, aside from those set up to assess university research at department level that, given the purpose and objectives of such reviews, do not require a student member on the team.

Professionals also take part in all external review procedures aside from those where, given the purpose and objectives of such reviews, they are not required, which include review procedures involving the teaching assessment handbooks and the assessment of university research in department level.

AQU Catalunya has two mechanisms in place to avoid any conflict of interests:

- For external experts, through their acceptance of the *Commitment to comply with AQU Catalunya's principles of action, its values, Code of Ethics and Policy for quality and information security, and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* available on the reviewers database extranet that reviewers receive together with a review assignment. The Commitment document makes express reference to ESG standard and guidelines 3.3. on reviewers.
- For programmes/institutions that are being reviewed so they can state if there is any conflict of interest at the selection stage and prior to appointment. A list of experts who have participated on external review panels is published every year on the AQU website.

For recruitment, use is first made of AQU Catalunya's pool of experts and the reviewers database. If there is an insufficient number of reviewers with the required profile, an active

search is carried out on the Internet and through contacts provided by reviewers. AQU Catalunya has also entered into numerous collaboration agreements with professional bodies to facilitate the involvement of professionals in QA and review procedures. In the case of students, AQU Catalunya promotes training courses in QA procedures through the universities, which are a source of student recruitment, as well as AQU's Student Advisory Committee and relations with CEUCAT[43], the student council body for Catalan universities.

In order to participate in QA and review processes, all new experts are required to fill out a CV form on the extranet database. Experts are then selected on the basis of the profile required for each review procedure.

Once the experts have been selected, they are contacted and informed of their nomination. If they accept:

- For the subject and function-specific committees, appointment is for 4 years and on nomination their CVs are published on the Agency's website.
- In the case of the external review panels, their participation is proposed to the institution/programme being reviewed so they can state if there is any conflict of interest and, if not, they are appointed. A list of experts who have participated on external review panels is published every year on the AQU website.

Following appointment, they are provided with access to the experts' extranet in order to fill out the forms for handling and managing their personal data and invoicing. They are also required to accept the *Commitment to comply with AQU Catalunya's principles of action, its values, Code of Ethics and Policy for quality and information security, and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* provided on the reviewers extranet.

When the experts have accepted the Commitment with the Code of Ethics and have validated all their data, they are given access to the relevant platforms and invited to a training session in preparation for an actual review procedure. All reviewers are made to participate in at least one training session prior to the start of the review process. AQU Catalunya also provides training materials for experts via the Agency's website that are used as background and support material in the training sessions and, in the case of accreditation, the explanatory videos produced by AQU Catalunya on the VSMA Framework, and the accreditation methodology and procedure. The training session has the same structure fot all the QA processes: the presentation (contextualization) of the project, the procedure of evaluation, the metholodogy, and, if it is necessary, some practical case studies. The training session takes from 3 hours (ex-post IQAs certification, teaching assessment handbooks, the quality assurance of research at Department level, international quality assurance and quality assurance of foreign institutions offering degrees in Catalonia) to 5 hours (programme level external reviews in Catalonia).

The Agency manages the participation of experts in all review procedures and, on completion of the activity, they are paid their fees and, where applicable, their resignation is processed. They

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[43] www.ceucat.cat

are also asked to give their opinions by way of a satisfaction survey and an assessment made of their role in the review procedure according to different aspects (technical knowledge, expertise, reliability, fulfilment of responsibilities, preparation of meetings, attitude, etc.) in order to upgrade the wealth of information that exists on AQU Catalunya's reviewers database. This assessment at the end of the entire process is fundamental for the optimum upkeep of the experts database.

The management of external experts is handled in accordance with IQA procedure S02: Management of experts[44].

The external quality assurance procedures set out in this self-assessment report currently involve the following participants:

Table 17. Profile of those currently participating in external QA procedures

Profile	Catalonia	Rest of Spain	International	TOTAL
Academics	124	284	41	**449**
Professionals	99	6	1	**106**
Students	97	30	2	**129**
Total	**320**	**320**	**44**	**684**

Students and professionals who form part of external review panels and the subject and function-specific committees are normally Catalan, whereas the academics come from outside the Catalan higher education system. As can be seen from the following table, over the last five years, there has been an increase in the number of members from outside the Catalan higher education system in external review procedures coordinated by AQU Catalunya:

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[44] Document available to external reviewers from AQU Catalunya at the time of carrying out the site visit.

Table 18. Involvement of experts in external quality assurance procedures

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016[45]
Members from institutions in Catalonia	9	5	46	92	40
Members from elsewhere in Spain	18	11	41	112	61
International members	1	0	1	27	11
Total	28	16	88	231	112

Although budgetary constraints have limited the participation of international experts, AQU Catalunya has the intention, with the support of the Government of Catalonia, of increasing their presence in areas where this is possible and appropriate, especially because institutions have expressed the need in certain cases for experts with more relevant profiles.

Optimised management of the eligibility of experts is one of the objectives of AQU Catalunya. In this regard, a project was started in 2008 to define all of the procedures connected with their management: recruitment, selection, training, management, assessment and retention. AQU Catalunya has been supporting the development of software since 2014 to facilitate and improve these procedures.

[45] As of 10 October 2016.

10.5. ESG Standard 2.5. Criteria for outcomes

STANDARD:

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

All external review procedures by AQU Catalunya, whether they include the possibility of formal decisions as a result of the external review procedure or not, have corresponding review guidebooks that describe the procedures, dimensions/scope and criteria for review. These criteria are given in section 3 (Dimensions and standards) of each guide. It is important to point out that the guidebooks are designed to provide one source document for the methodological requirements of both the internal self-evaluation and the external review teams. This means that the person who is reviewing and the person being reviewed both have the same information on the scope of the review and the criteria being used. See standard 2.2. of this report.

In the specific case of the site visit for programme accreditation, a standard is set for each dimension, which in turn is divided into the components parts of the standard with a description given of the evidence to be provided and the indicators to be assessed[46]. An explanation is also given of the way in which the reviewers assess compliance with each component part of a standard according to four levels: accreditation on track to excellence, accreditation, accreditation with prescriptions and accreditation withheld, for which use is made of rubric charts to describe the assessment of each component part. This ensures maximum consistency between the review and the final report.

In order to ensure consistency in the application of the review outcomes, AQU Catalunya organises training sessions for experts taking part in committees and panels in order to provide a uniform overview of the purpose and objectives of the review, together with standard guidelines for the application of the review methodology and criteria. Practical case studies are worked on in these training sessions.

The Agency's QA commissions have a secretary who, in addition to having his/her own functions, is responsible for standardising the application of the criteria across the corresponding QA commissions to ensure the highest levels of coherent and consistent decision-making by the commissions. The position of secretary is, wherever possible, filled by a member of the Agency's technical staff. When this is not possible due to the volume of visits, the position is filled by an

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[46] In the case of accreditation, indicators for standards 1, 4 and 6 are facilitated by WINDDAT.

external member who receives a more in-depth and intense training in order to be able to undertake the site visits in a uniform and harmonious way. Institutions have however commented that there is greater uniformity and harmony in the application of the criteria when staff from AQU Catalunya participate in the site visits for accreditation, due to their experience and more comprehensive understanding of the process.

One aspect worth pointing out, in reference to accreditation, in which work is being done to simplify the process and raise the levels of coherence and consistency is that the preliminary reports for the site visit and accreditation are referred to the institution at the same time. This means that the reports have to be revised in parallel by the external review panel and the subject or function-specific committee, bearing in mind that the external review panels are more aware of the actual delivery of each programme because they have carried out the site visit whereas the perspective of the subject or function-specific committee is more comprehensive and greatly enhances the review. This twofold review can overly extend the time frame for the issuance of the reports. Work has been done on the interrelationship between the external review panels and the subject or function-specific committees to reduce delays to a minimum and thereby increase consistency as much as possible.

The fact that there have been very few appeals is an indicator that the criteria are explicit, known and applied coherently. Since AQU's Appeals Committee was set up, seven (7) appeals have been filed in relation to review procedures out of a potential total number of more than 500. Subsequent to its analysis of these reports by independent external experts, the Appeals Committee has so far ratified all of the review procedures and decisions by the subject and/or function-specific committees.

10.6. ESG Standard 2.6. Reporting

STANDARD:

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

Content of the reports

The reports produced by AQU Catalunya are comprehensive and clear, even though some of them of necessity relate to administrative processes.

As commented in section 6 of this self-assessment report, there is a specific section in each review guide on the "final report", which specifies the characteristics, content and public nature of the report issued at the end of each review procedure. These reports include the following sections:

- Description of the context
- Description of the procedure used in the review
- Tests, analyses and outcomes are given
- Conclusions of the review
- Good practices demonstrated by the institution
- Follow-up actions (Included under section 5 of the guides: Follow-up and continuous improvement
- The procedure for submitting supporting arguments (included under section 3 of the guides: Review organisation and planning)

On the basis of this content, AQU Catalunya's team of technical experts is responsible for ensuring that the language and style used in the reports is appropriate and standardised. In the case of the site visit and accreditation reports, the use of rubric charts makes for the easier use of standard language in all reports.

As explained in each guide (section 3 of the guides; Review organisation and planning), before the final report is issued, a preparatory report is always issued to give the institution the opportunity of presenting any supporting arguments and pointing out what it considers to be any errors of assessment in the reports.

Public availability of the reports

AQU Catalunya ensures that all review reports are accessible to the academic community, external collaborators and the stakeholders. All reports produced by AQU Catalunya on programmes delivered in Catalonia are public.

The only reports that are not published are the validation (ex-ante accreditation) reports on programmes that have not been introduced and that therefore will not be delivered or offered to prospective students in the future. There have been isolated cases of programmes for which a negative report was issued by AQU Catalunya and, following a successful administrative appeal to the Spanish Council of Universities, authorisation finally granted. In such cases, AQU Catalunya publishes the negative validation report.

EUC portal: The EUC portal, which was launched in response to a recommendation in the previous ENQA external review (2012) on ways of presenting reports in a more comprehensible way to non-experts, offers easy-to-understand information on the quality of all recognised degree programmes offered in Catalonia. The EUC portal provides a summary in three different languages (Catalan, Spanish and English) of the outcomes for each dimension assessed in the external site visit and accreditation of all recognised programmes delivered at higher education institutions in Catalonia.

EUCReports: External review reports from programme and institutional reviews by AQU Catalunya in Catalonia are published on the EUC Reports portal, and programme reports can also be accessed via the EUC portal, which is linked to EUC Reports. Searches on the EUC Reports portal can be carried out according to either university, faculty, degree course or review programme.

Reports on the international accreditation of quality and the quality assurance of foreign institutions in Catalonia are published in the corresponding section on the AQU Catalunya website.

10.7. ESG Standard 2.7. Complaints and appeals

STANDARD:

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

Compliance by AQU Catalunya

The complaints process

Any complaint about review procedures undertaken by institutions, teaching staff or students are handled according to IQA procedure S.04.01 - Improvement: Complaints and corrective measures[47]. Systems for dealing with complaints include, among others, the complaints section on the website, corporate mailboxes and periodic meetings with the different stakeholders (in particular the Committee of Vice-Rectors responsible for quality and the Committee of QA technical units). Complaints are processed within one week of the receipt of the complaint, and all complaints are analysed once every three months by the Quality and Information Security Committee.

The appeals process

One of the developments of Law 15/2015 was the establishment of AQU Catalunya's Appeals Committee[48] in fulfilment of one of the commitments made by AQU Catalunya following the review by ENQA in 2012.

The Appeals Committee is the body responsible for reviewing and ruling on appeals filed in relation to decisions by the Agency's permanent and/or ad hoc bodies involved in quality assurance, certification and accreditation procedures. It is also responsible for issuing status reports on other proceedings by these bodies, where applicable to QA, certification and accreditation procedures.

The Appeals Committee consists of:

a) One member from the Governing Board from among the people stipulated in article 7.2.d, Law 15/ 2015, who chairs the Committee and is appointed for the same period of time as he/she is appointed as a member of the Governing Board.

b) Two or more persons, to be determined by the Governing Board, of either an academic, scientific or professional standing and with technical expertise, who is not on any other AQU Catalunya body, and who is appointed for a once-renewable period of four years, renewable by halves every two years.

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[47] Document available to external reviewers from AQU Catalunya at the time of carrying out the site visit.

[48] Article 16.

The inaugural meeting of the Appeals Committee was held on 2 December 2015, in which the committee's <u>rules of internal procedure</u> were established and endorsed, together with the <u>procedure for reviewing and ruling on appeals filed in relation to decisions by the Agency's permanent and/or ad hoc bodies involved in quality assurance, certification and accreditation procedures</u>. The setting up and functioning of the Committee, which has met six times all together, has clearly resulted in improvements to AQU Catalunya's external review procedures.

The rules of internal procedure regulate the Committee's composition; its functions; the regularity of its meetings; the performance of its duties and the replacement of the chairperson and the committee members; the functions of the chairperson and the committee secretary; the convening of meetings at least twice a year, which may be in person, online or mixed; committee meeting agreements and proceedings, which once approved are published on the Agency's website, in compliance with the regulations on transparency, personal data protection and AQU Catalunya review, certification and accreditation procedures; and reform of the rules.

The procedure for rulings on appeals filed in relation to decisions by the Agency's bodies involved in quality assurance, certification and accreditation procedures establishes two types of arrangement:

> 1. Rulings on appeals: the Agency has its own procedure for rulings on appeals filed in relation to reviews and their outcomes, with individuals or institutions being notified of the appeal ruling. The Committee's ruling brings an appeal application process to a definitive close although an appeal for judicial review may be made before a disputes tribunal; and

> 2. Review report: This forms part of an inter-administrative evaluation procedure, which can be either binding or discretionary for an administrative body, but are notified by a different public administration/authority. In such cases, the Appeals Committee would issue a review report, which then forms part of a ruling by a separate administrative body that is not part of the Agency.

For each type of arrangement there is an established procedure, which forms part of AQU Catalunya's review, certification and accreditation procedures that are set out in the <u>review methodologies</u>. Special mention is made in all the review guides to section 2 (Review organisation and planning), which refers to the appeals process.

The Appeals Committee has to periodically issue reports and other informative documents on the outcome of appeals and review reports issued, classified according to the type of call for applications, fields of knowledge, etc. In this regard, the Committee can request non-binding reports as deemed appropriate from external advisers appointed by the Committee chairperson. It may also refer reports and observations on review, certification and accreditation procedures to AQU Catalunya's QA commissions and governing bodies in accordance with the supporting arguments presented and decisions by the Committee in order to improve the aforementioned procedures.

11. INFORMATION AND OPINIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS

In accordance with its quality and information security management system, AQU Catalunya assesses the opinions of its external and internal users.

AQU Catalunya classifies its external users according to the following groups:

Figure 11. AQU Catalunya stakeholders

Stakeholders	Users who receive the services
1. Members of the Governing Board 2. Institutions: vice-rectors and QA technical units	1. Teaching staff undergoing assessment 2. Members of the QA commissions, committees and review panels 3. Institutions that have been reviewed 4. Participants in workshops, seminars and events 5. Students and others 6. Seminar organisers

Different instruments are used to assess the level of satisfaction of these groups:

- Corporate mailboxes
- Satisfaction surveys
- The minutes and proceedings of meetings
- Direct communication with the users (telephone calls, e-mail and postal mail)

A summary of the stakeholders' opinions is given in the following table:

Table 19. Summary of the stakeholders' opinions 2015-2016

Stakeholder	Positive	To be resolved
Governing Board	1. Passing of Law 15/2015 and its enactment 2. Analytical studies produced by AQU Catalunya (graduate employment outcomes and employers)	1. Full funding of AQU Catalunya's QA activities 2. The quality assurance of temporary senior teaching and research staff 3. The interaction between programming and validation (ex-ante accreditation)
Institutions university	1. Passing of Law 15/2015 and its enactment 2. Approval of the Guide to the quality assurance of university research at department-level and the Guide to ex-post IQAs certification	1. Spanish Royal Decree 43/2015 and the 3+2 change in university structure 2. The request for excessive amounts of evidence in accreditation procedures 3. Increase the number of international experts with a relevant profile for added value in terms of an outside point of view and experience 4. Better training and more consolidated experience of external secretaries in drawing up review reports

In a meeting of the Governing Board of AQU Catalunya in 2016, students representatives from the student council body for Catalan universities (CEUCAT) expressed that, in spite of the fact that there are students on AQU Catalunya's different QA bodies and there exists a specific Student Advisory Committee, they do not have access to the content of the meetings of the various QA commissions, committees, panels or advisory bodies.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS AND MAIN FINDINGS FROM PREVIOUS REVIEWS AND AGENCY'S RESULTING FOLLOW-UP

AQU Catalunya successfully underwent two external reviews coordinated by ENQA in accordance with the ESG in 2007 and 2012. In these two review processes, the external review panels formulated a total number of 28 recommendations (19 in 2007 and 9 in 2012), that have been dealt with as follows:

Table 20. Recommendations made in the reviews for compliance with the ESG in 2007 and 2012

ESG	Review	N.	Recommendation	Action	State
3.1.	2007	1.	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)	VSMA framework (2010 and 2016)	Completed
3.1	2007	2.	The review panel recommends that AQU develops a strategic plan together with universities and the Government	Strategic Plan 2009-2012 Strategic Plan 2015-2018	Completed
3.1	2007	3.	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	Strategic Plan 2009-2012 Strategic Plan 2015-2018	Completed

			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		
3.1	2007	4.	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)	Guide to the Accreditation of recognised Bachelor and master's degree programmes (November 2014)	Completed
3.1	2007	5.	It should be safeguarded that the relevant stakeholders are informed about AQU's quality assessment conclusions	AQU Catalonia web site Webpage with review reports on the higher education system in Catalonia - EUC Reports In 2007 AQU Catalunya has created the EUC webpage, to present the information as comprehensible as possible to non-experts. The Governing Council includes the relevant stakeholders (academics, governing bodies, university authorities, students and union representatives)	Completed
3.1	2007	6.	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	VSMA framework (2010 and 2016)	Completed

			focus particularly on this matter in consultation with HEIs		
3.1	2007	7.	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	VSMA framework (2010 and 2016) WINDDAT, a tool for monitoring recognised degree programmes	Completed
3.3.	2007	8.	There seems to be a need for developing a coherent and integrated system of quality assurance activities on the side of AQU	VSMA framework (2010 and 2016) Webpage with review reports on the higher education system in Catalonia EUC Reports WINDDAT, a tool for monitoring recognised degree programmes	Completed
3.3	2007	9.	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	VSMA framework (2010 and 2016) Webpage with review reports on the higher education system in Catalonia EUC Reports	Completed
3.3	2007	10.	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	Strategic Plan 2015-2018 VSMA framework (2010 and 2016) AQU Catalunya system for internal quality and information security management requires the annual review of all the assessment programmes	Completed
3.4.	2007	11.	The Board appears to be fairly big, which might pose a difficulty for it to act	Law 15/2015, of 21 July did not included this recommendation, given that the Parliament of	Curtailed

12. Recommendations and main findings from previous reviews and agency's resulting follow-up

| | | | effectively as a steering body. The review panel therefore recommends that AQU reflects on the role of its Board and Standing Committee | Catalonia, after listening to all the stakeholders, considered important to maintain the presence of all the Catalan universities in AQU Catalunya Governing Council. Likewise, the new Council includes students and union representatives.

The Governing Council may act in plenary or Standing Committee, which consists of 12 people. The Standing Committee and has powers delegated by the Governing Council | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 3.4. | 2007 | 12. | 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 | Strategic Plan 2009-2012
Strategic Plan 2015-2018 | Completed |
| 3.4 | 2007 | 13. | AQU has yet to more systematically implement and operationalize 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 | VSMA framework (2010 and 2016) | Completed |

			relevant stakeholders in higher education		
3.4	2012	14.	AQU should plan carefully for staffing demands when all four elements of the Framework (including Accreditation) come into play.	The Governing Council approved as a minimum of six months the evaluations planned for the following year. Prior to this meeting, the financial and human needs are agreed with the Government of Catalonia. In addition, measures have been taken (process monitoring) to free resources and using them for accreditation. The growth of assessments has been an added strain on the Agency's staff. In 2017 the number of evaluation will be lower than in 2016.	Completed
3.6.	2007	15.	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	The Law 15/2015, of 21 July, AQU Catalunya has attend this recommendation. Only the president of AQU Catalonia is appointed directly by the Ministry of Catalonia, increasing the organizational independence of AQU Catalonia respect the Ministry.	Completed
3.6.	2007	16.	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	The Law 15/2015, of 21 July, AQU Catalunya includes in the Governing Council students and union representatives.	Completed

			professional world might make AQU less vulnerable to external pressures		
3.7.	2007	17.	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	Academic reviewers: Catalan: 124 Others Spanish regions: 284 International: 41	Completed
3.7.	2007	18.	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	VSMA framework (2010 and 2016)	Completed
3.7.	2007	19.	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	The first strategic plan included 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 Catalunya has strengthened the coordination meetings, but for the Strategic Plan 2015-2018	In the process of implementation

				has to improve the project management and the communication (internal and external).	
3.8.	2007	20.	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 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. AQU Catalunya has implemented a meta-evaluation procedure applied to its most important procedures (VSMA framework, teaching assessment staff, etc.)	Completed
2.1.	2012	21.	The form and demands of the progress report in the VSMA Framework should be more closely focussed on ESG Part 1	The Governing Council approved the new version of the VSMA Framework (2016.07.18)	Completed
2.1.	2012	22.	In the arrangements that apply under the new law, AQU should continue to focus on the internal quality management of HEIs, which was a feature of the Audit programme.	AQU Catalunya carries out the certification of the IQAs based on AUDIT programme.	Completed
2.4.	2012	23.	AQU should try to use international experts for site visits, when the accreditation procedure gets under way.	AQU Catalunya tries to use international experts for site visits when it is possible. For example in the research assessment of the universities departments, or when assesses the international dimension of the degree programmes.	Completed
2.5.	2012	24.	AQU should consider how to take reports as	In order to present the information as comprehensible as possible to non-experts, AQU Catalunya has created the EUC	Completed

			comprehensible as possible to non-experts.	webpage. EUC provides information about the quality of the current recognised degree programmes at the Catalan universities.	
2.6.	2012	25.	A report about universities' implementation of recommendations should be included in the process of (re-) accreditation.	It is included in the Guide to the accreditation of recognised bachelor's and master's degree programmes	Completed
2.6.	2012	26.	There is an internal discussion at AQU about the frequency of monitoring, and the Panel encourages this debate. However the matter should be determined promptly to preserve the confidence of universities in AQU operations.	The monitoring process is described in the Guide to the monitoring of recognised Bachelor and Master's programmes .	Completed
__	2012	27.	AQU should consider how some reference to teaching abilities may be brought into assessments for professorial position. (Academic Staff Evaluation Programme)	By Law, the pre-selection assessment of academic staff contracted for posts of tenure-track positions takes into account the teaching abilities. On the contrary, the pre-selection assessment for posts of tenured assistant professor and full professor only takes into account the research. AQU Catalunya certifies the teaching assessment reports of teaching an research staff issued by the university, taking into account their current AQU-certified teaching assessment manuals.	Curtailed
__	2012	28.	AQU should pay particular attention to the ways in which the functions now carried out by CLiC and CAR and within the "Docentia"	The Law 15/2015, 21 July, merges the CLiC Committee with the Research Assessment Committee (CAR) and the CAR	Completed

		programme may be brought more closely together. (Academic Staff Evaluation Programme)	assumes the function to develop the Docentia programme. Now, all the academic staff evaluation are included in the same programme	

With regard to the requirement that is in the process of being resolved with regard to improvements to internal management and communication, work is under way in accordance with the Agency's Strategic Plan for 2015-2018. More specifically, the following actions have been undertaken in response to this requirement:

a. A Human Resources policy was approved and is being implemented.
b. The description of all jobs in the Agency has been updated on the basis of the *ENQA Quality assurance professional competencies framework* (2016) document, and an assessment made of all jobs to ensure internal equity.
c. The internal structure of AQU Catalunya has been reorganised.
d. A procedure for assessing the professional skills of AQU staff is in the process of being designed.
e. Internal communications have been underpinned with communication courses for all staff, and a Strategic Plan designed for external communications.
f. A project is being developed to improve and upgrade project management.

13. SWOT ANALYSIS

This SWOT analysis is a revised version of a previous analysis carried out in May 2014 during the drawing up of the AQU Catalunya Strategic Plan 2015-2018.

Table 21. SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
Clear and explicit mission, objectives and plans for action through the Strategic Plan, which is public available and gives a comprehensive view of the different aspects of quality assurance	Insufficient impact of reviews and analytical studies on decision-making in relation to university policy and public awareness in general
Independence of AQU Catalunya in QA procedures, methodology design, the selection of reviewers and results-based decision-making	Limited involvement, due to financial reasons, of international reviewers and experts on review panels
The Agency's transparency regarding the content and ease of access to information on its activities and the results of its work	Insufficient short-term financial returns associated with internationalisation-related activities and the difficulty of evaluating the indirect benefits of these activities in the medium and long-term
[49]IQAS-based action as evident in the adoption of the Code of Ethics, the application of ISO standards, audits and meta-evaluation procedures	A very large volume of activity for the number of staff
The commitment of AQU's trained and expert human capital to the activities undertaken by the Agency, and its abilities to drive new projects in	Project management that is excessively segmented and lacking integration in terms of an overall vision

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[49] Internal quality assurance system

both QA and knowledge generation for the purposes of decision-making	
Activities that are based on continuous enhancement, innovation and international benchmarks	Reactive external communications
Consolidated track record of QA and knowledge generation projects in Catalonia	The reduced budget has affected the reviewers' fees.
A robust in-house technical support structure that provides for integrated project management	

Opportunities	Threats
Institutional recognition ratified in specific legislation on AQU Catalunya, and prominence at international level as a result of its presence in international associations, networks and projects	Dependency on legislation and IT applications from the Spanish State that make it more difficult to design more flexible, continuous enhancement-based QA models
Progressive awareness on the part of institutions of the need for quality enhancement of their services	A trend towards increasing centralism in the distribution of powers between the central government and the regional Autonomous Communities
Good institutional relations between the Agency, the university authorities, and the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia, and satisfaction with its activities	Frequent changes in university policy, which generates uncertainty
Progressive awareness of the students to participate in internal and external QA activities	The restrictive budgetary context
Favourable position for establishing cooperation actions and obtaining additional funding with national and international entities	Contractual limitations for staff due to Spanish and Catalan regulations
Recognition at European level through ENQA and EQAR and, at international level, with INQAAHE	Competition among Spanish QA agencies in the recruitment and selection of academic reviewers within the Spanish higher education system
A positive perception in Catalonia, Spain as a whole and at International level of AQU's work as a serious and rigorous Agency with high level standards of quality	A national view of QA procedures that is embodied in Spanish State legislation and applied to the Agency in the form of an inspection-based, bureaucratic (State) vision as opposed to one with

	a focus on accompanying and backing efficient, continuous enhancement (AQU)
Innovation and design capabilities for QA projects and knowledge generation	Lack of awareness among students and prospective students of the results of programme review (QA of study programmes)

An analysis of the above SWOT analysis is set out below, together with the following priorities:

1. In the contract programme to be agreed between AQU Catalunya and the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia, it is necessary to pursue a strategy for improving the fees of experts so that international reviewers can be incorporated more extensively into QA procedures, together with funding for key activities that support the higher education system in Catalonia at international level.

2. Develop projects that are of value to the higher education system and that have additional funding, given the innovation, the design capabilities for QA projects and knowledge generation available to AQU Catalunya.

3. Upgrade:
   a. Project-based management, which will enable the volume of activity to be adjusted to the number of staff and allow for optimisation of the required resources.
   b. External communication processes, in order to communicate more effectively with the target audience/groups and increase the impact of QA reviews on the stakeholders by assisting them in decision-making.

14. CURRENT CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The first big challenge facing AQU Catalunya is to fully comply with the requirements of Law 15/2015 in the following areas:

1. The setting up and constituting of the Advisory Committee, which is responsible for collaborating with the Agency in strategic guidance, the definition and improvement of procedures and producing proposals for action, the purpose being quality assurance of the Agency's activities in accordance with international standards.

2. The drafting and approval of the contract-programme between the Government of Catalonia and AQU Catalunya, a document that is valid for four years and which will need to include *the objectives, funding that is outcomes-based, and instruments for follow up and the monitoring of its activities*. The contract programme will be the Agency's main funding instrument and will need to include a gradual raise in reviewers' fees.

In the sphere of external quality assurance, AQU Catalunya anticipates the following challenges:

1. Deployment of the new VSMA Framework (2016), with benchmarks being set to facilitate validation (ex-ante accreditation) for institutions, together with better and greater consistency in the map of programmes and qualifications in the university system in Catalonia, and cross-discipline and cross-university reports on the functioning of the higher education system.

2. Deployment of ex post IQAs certification as the initial step towards institutional accreditation as envisaged by state legislation.

3. Increase the presence of international experts in the areas of review and quality assurance where this is applicable and complete the automation of the processes for managing and handling experts.

4. The consolidation of indicators on graduate employment outcomes (annual data from Social Security and employers), the satisfaction surveys of students and teaching staff, the entry of these data and figures into WINDDAT and subsequent dissemination on the EUC portal.

5. Consolidate WINDDAT as an instrument for programme accreditation and the EUC as the online source for inquiries about programme quality, for which certain aspects of external communication by the AQU Catalunya will need to be reinforced.

6. Define the personalised report for each university aiming at the rectors and vice-rectors in charge of quality and teaching staff, using the data available to the Agency on the quality assurance of programmes and teaching and a comparison with the average for Catalonia, to facilitate reflection and decision making by institutions, the purpose being to focus on the aspects that each institution needs to improve. This may also help to enhance the role of IQAs at faculty level and lead to a higher levels of quality in applications and proposals that are submitted, all well as compliance with given time frames, which will help to improve the levels of overall satisfaction.

7. Implement the measures being designed to improve coordination between university programming (Directorate General for Universities) and the assessment of applications for validation/ex-ante accreditation (AQU Catalunya), together with improved compliance with deadlines and time frames.

Areas for prospective development in the future include:

1. Define and promote a model for institutional review for the higher education system as a whole in Catalonia.

2. Define and promote a model for the assessment of teaching staff policies in Catalan universities.

3. Promote the quality assurance of university research at department-level as an instrument that consolidates the universities as top-level research organisations**.**

4. The controlled development of internationalisation as one of the Agency's strategic areas of priority in areas that are of use to the EHEA. Impetus given to international accreditation with AQU Catalunya.

5. Promote projects on knowledge generation and transfer at international level for the comparison of available data (indicators) with international benchmarks.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Table 222. Acronyms and definition

Acronym	Description
AQU	Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency
CAIP	Institutional and Programme Review Commission
CAR	Research Assessment Commission
CIC	Inter-university Council of Catalonia
CLiC	AQU Commission that dealt with tenure-track and collaborating teaching staff
ECA	European Consortium for Accreditation
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines for the external Quality Assurance of Higher Education
INQAHEE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
LUC	Law 1/2003-LUC, 19 February, on universities in Catalonia
REACU	Spanish Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
RUCT	Spanish Register for Higher Education (institutions, degrees and awards)
SAR	Self-assessment report

IQAs	Internal quality assurance system and quality and information security management system
IQA	AQU Catalunya Internal quality assurance and information security management system
ToR	Terms of reference
VSMA	Framework for validation (ex-ante accreditation), monitoring, modification and accreditation

ANNEXES

Annex 1. List of figures, graphs, tables and videos

Figures

Graphs

Tables

Videos

Annex 2. Description of international projects

ENQA WORKING GROUP ON THE IMPACT OF QA (2012-2015):
AQU Catalunya coordinated this working group, which consisted of representatives from twenty European QA agencies, to identify the impact of quality assurance on higher education, ranging from the impact on better teaching practices, programme management to the setting in place of new policies for the sector. The group worked on identifying the objectives and missions of QA agencies and the possibilities of measuring the impact through the achievement of intended learning outcomes. The potential areas of impact of external QA procedures were also defined. The group's work resulted in the publication of the Workshop Report 23, *Analysis of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in External Review Reports: System-Wide Analysis, Resources, and Independence*.

ASEAN-QA (2011-2015): An ENQA programme aimed at developing quality assurance in higher education for countries in South-East Asia, in particular the quality assurance and enhancement of programmes of study and the recognition of credits and undergraduate qualifications based on a series of principles of quality assurance and standards through the exchange of experience. AQU Catalunya participated in the project as an ENQA representative and cooperated with experts from the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD) and the German Rectors Conference in training staff from QA agencies in ASEAN countries. It also participated in two programme reviews at institutions in the region. The group managing the project agreed to develop a semi-distance learning programme for the heads of QA technical units in the universities in the ASEAN region. The project was coordinated by the University of Potsdam and DAAD, with AQU Catalunya taking part on behalf of the ENQA. Experience accumulated in this region enabled ENQA, together with other partners, to form a consortium selected for funding by the EU-SHARE programme. AQU Catalunya represented ENQA in this project, the objective of which was to share the experience in Europe of setting up the EHEA to the ASEAN region, which itself is in the process of building a regional higher education area.

ENQA QUALITY PROCEDURES PROJECT, 4th edition (2014-2015): AQU Catalunya coordinated the fourth QPP survey, which focused on internationalisation and QA processes in the EHEA. The purpose of the survey, which included all of the member agencies of ENQA, was to identify the degree to which QA agencies are "internationalised" in terms of their activities in the European Higher Education Area and beyond. The survey included aspects referring to the perceptions of QA agencies concerning the possible development of a European quality assurance market, the risks associated with internationalisation, and the resources invested by agencies to raise their

level of internationalisation. The project management group consisted of AQU Catalunya and the QA agencies from Austria (AQ), France (CTI), Lithuania (SKVC) and the UK (QAA). <u>The results of the project were published in an ENQA occasional paper in 2015</u>.

ENQA E-LEARNING GROUP (2016-2018): AQU Catalunya coordinates this working group that aims to set up an inventory of QA and e-learning resources; establish an agreed definition for e-learning and agree on recommendations for QA agencies and institutions of higher education regarding institutional review.

JOQAR (2010-2013): Joint programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded. This Erasmus Mundus programme aimed at promoting the development of a multilateral recognition agreement for QA and accreditation results between agencies and the establishment of common ground among ENIC-NARICs regarding the recognition of degrees awarded by joint programmes. AQU Catalunya was a member of the consortium in charge of the development of the project, which was coordinated by ECA and NVAO.

EQuAM (2012-2015): Enhancement of Quality Assurance Management in Jordanian Universities. Coordinated by the University of Barcelona (UB), the aim of this project was to promote quality management systems in Jordanian universities. One of the impacts of the project has been to improve academic cooperation between Europe and Jordan. AQU Catalunya participated as a partner and advised on good practices in quality assurance.

CeQuInt (2012-2015): The EU's Lifelong Learning Programme, Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation. A project coordinated by the NVAO to lay the foundations for a series of procedures leading to certification of the internationalisation of European universities. One of the resulting products of the project was the CeQuInt quality certificate. This quality label is linked to implementation of the additional dimension of programme internationalisation, described in <u>section 5.1.4. of the VSMA framework: Accreditation</u>.

ERANET-MUNDUS (2011-2015)/ERANET-PLUS (2012-2016): Erasmus Mundus ERANET-MUNDUS/ERANET-PLUS. These are projects coordinated by the University of Barcelona (UB) to promote mobility and links between universities in Russia and the European Union. AQU Catalunya is an associate member of the consortium in charge of developing the project, which is coordinated by the University of Barcelona. The working goal of the project is the development of QA systems to cover academic mobility.

TeSLA (An Adaptive Trust-based e-assessment System for Learning) (2016-2018): AQU Catalunya is a member of the TeSLA consortium, which is developing a European framework programme Horizon 2020 project

on an e-assessment system for use with information technologies in education. The aim of the TeSLA project is to develop a system that facilitates online examination and guarantees that the right student has logged in (authentication) and personally taken an exam (authorship). AQU Catalunya is responsible for analysing the integration of these technologies within the established framework of quality assurance for higher education and of ensuring that the pilot implementation of this technology proceeds correctly. AQU Catalunya coordinates one of the work packages dealing with the quality assurance of online study programmes, and the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) is the coordinator of the project.

IMPALA (Lifelong Learning Programme) (2013-2016): Impact Analysis of External Quality Assurance Processes in Higher Education Institutions. Pluralistic Methodology and Application of a Formative Transdisciplinary Impact Evaluation. AQU Catalunya participated as a partner to the consortium in this project which analysed the impact of actual external QA procedures on institutions of higher education. Work teams with members from both a QA agency and the institution were set up and different approaches to both institutional and programme external review taken into account, in four different countries (Germany, Finland, Romania and Spain/Catalonia). The Autonomous University of Barcelona/UAB was a partner to the project.

ISLAH (2013-2015): Instruments of Support of Labour Market and Higher Education. The purpose of the ISLAH project, which was coordinated by the Italian consortium AlmaLaurea, was to establish two national observatories, or monitoring centres, in Morocco and Tunisia with graduate CV databases to facilitate the exchange and match of information between the higher education system and the requirements of the labour market. The Agency was a member of the consortium in charge of the ISLAH project development and shared good practices and its experience in setting up graduate employment indicators.

PACAgro (2014-2016): Development of the Public Accreditation of Agricultural Programmes in Russia, coordinated by the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra (Slovakia). The main objective of this TEMPUS project has been to set up a QA agency for programmes run at faculties and higher education institutions of agriculture in the Russian Federation. One interesting aspect of this project has been the very active participation of the professional and business sector, together with its willingness to be formally involved in the running of the agency. Promoted by the universities and the professional sectors, the project also received funding from the federal government, due to the strategic nature of the agribusiness sector in Russia. AQU Catalunya participated as a partner and expert adviser in the management of the QA procedures. The University of Lleida also participated as a partner in the project.

EQTeL (2015-2016): Enhancing Quality of Technology-Enhanced Learning at Jordanian Universities, a project (EQTeL) funded by the European Lifelong Learning Tempus Structural Measures sub-

programme. Coordinated by the Princess Sumaya University for Technology (PSUT) in Jordan, the project aims at developing QA mechanisms for distance learning programmes and improving the quality and relevance of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) at Jordanian higher education institutions. The Open University of Catalonia (UOC) also participated in the project.

Annex 3. Description of EUC and EUC*Reports*

The **EUC portal** is a search engine that can be used to obtain a description and information on the quality of any recognised Bachelor or Master's degree course at a university in Catalonia; the most recent QA reports on the programme that have been published; the quality label which shows whether the programme has undergone *ex-ante* (validation) and *ex-post* accreditation; the results of accreditation with details according to the dimensions assessed and the indicators for each programme on admissions and enrolment, delivery (teaching staff, completion/drop-out, etc.) and graduate employment outcomes.

The **EUC Review Reports portal** is a repository that contains all of the institutional and programme review reports on the higher education system in Catalonia produced by AQU Catalunya. Reports are organised according to study programme, faculty/school and university, and report type.

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