



Agència
per a la Qualitat
del Sistema Universitari
de Catalunya

SELF-EVALUATION REPORT 2012

External review for the reconfirmation of AQU Catalunya
as a full member of the European Association for
Quality Assurance in Higher Education



Quality, the assurance of improvement.



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INTRODUCTION

The report you have before you is the result of the self-evaluation stage carried out by AQU Catalunya in the process of the international external review for the reconfirmation of the Agency's full membership to the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

The purpose of this document is to demonstrate that AQU Catalunya, as an institution and in the current development of its functions, complies with ENQA membership criteria and the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education (ESG).

This report is linked to an international review of AQU Catalunya of a cyclical nature which began in 2007 when, following an international external review, the ENQA Board endorsed the Agency as a full member of the European association of quality assurance agencies.

In 2009 AQU Catalunya submitted a progress report that was also endorsed by the ENQA Board. This progress report endorsed the Agency's position regarding the recommendations made by the external panel in the first ENQA review.

Within the context of this cyclical review process, the purpose of this report is to set out in an orderly manner all of the evidence in support of the current position of AQU Catalunya according to the ESG.

The preparation of the report involved combining the in-house perspective originating from the management and staff of AQU Catalunya together with a more external one which stemmed from sharing the contents of the report with public authorities, high ranking university representatives and external experts and students connected with the quality assurance (QA) processes carried out by AQU Catalunya.

0. THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CATALONIA

0.1 The higher education system in Catalonia

The universities

The Catalan higher education system consists of twelve universities, seven of which are public, four private and one of a mixed nature. Four of the public universities have their campuses in Barcelona and the city's metropolitan area: the Universitat de Barcelona (UB, 1837), the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB, 1968), the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya (UPC, 1971) and the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF, 1990). The remaining three public universities have their area of influence in the three other provincial capitals in Catalonia: the Universitat de Girona (UdG, 1990), the Universitat de Lleida (UdL, 1990) and, in Tarragona, the Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV, 1990).

Diagram 1. Map of the higher education system in Catalonia



The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC, 1995), which offers distance learning courses, is a private university governed by a foundation, the main stakeholder of which is the Government of Catalonia (Generalitat de Catalunya). The other universities that make up the higher education system in Catalonia are the Universitat Ramon Llull (URL, 1991), the Universitat de Vic (UVic,

1997), the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya (UIC, 1997) and the Universitat Abat Oliba (UAO, 2003), all four of which are private, with three located in Barcelona and one in Vic.

Size and scope of the system

In the 2010-2011 academic year there were 246,655 students enrolled in Catalan universities, with 70% in public higher education institutions (HEIs), and 18,572 teachers. There was a total number of 1,191 programmes: 445 Bachelor's, 483 Master's and 263 Doctoral degrees.

Table 1. Size of the higher education system in Catalonia. Number of students, teachers and programmes according to each university

University	Students	Teachers	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctorate
UB	45.499	3.880	62	125	69
UAB	31.162	2.712	87	98	74
UPC	23.434	2.544	67	47	43
UPF	10.186	808	27	34	9
UdG	11.064	1.052	42	26	5
UdL	7.602	759	24	32	8
URV	11.291	1.119*	44	42	26
UOC	8.822	225	14	8	1
URL	11.347	579*	33	43	13
UVic	4.567	248	23	13	6
UIC	3.405	119*	14	13	7
UAO	1.039	33**	8	2	2
Total	169.418	14.078	445	483	263

Source: The UNEIX information system for the data on students and teachers and the Official Register of Catalonia¹ for the number of degrees.

* Data for the 2009-2010 academic year; ** Data for the 2008-2009 academic year

0.2 The structure of quality assurance systems in accordance with Catalan and Spanish legislation

Higher education in Catalonia is regulated by both the Spanish Constitution and the Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia. The distribution of powers in this matter lies exclusively with the State² regarding the promotion and general coordination of scientific and technical research, staff regulations and conditions of employment, and regulation of the conditions regarding the obtaining, issuing and recognition of academic and professional awards and the basic principles for the development of law in education and university autonomy. The exclusive competence of the autonomous community of Catalonia³ includes the programming and coordination of the higher education system in Catalonia, the legal framework governing specific HEI-endorsed (non-recognised) degrees, the self-funding of universities and the pay and conditions of teaching and research staff contracted by universities and the conditions for additional benefits

¹ *Registre Oficial de Catalunya*

² Article 149.1.1a, 15a, 18a, 30a of the Spanish Constitution.

³ Article 172 of the Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia.

for public service (civil servant) teaching staff. Matters that fall within shared competences between the State and the autonomous community of Catalonia include regulation of the requirements for the setting up and recognition of universities, the legal system applicable to the organisation and running of public universities, the regulation of contract and public service (civil servant) teaching and research staff and the evaluation and assurance of quality and excellence in university education, as well as teaching and research staff.

Regulatory development and implementation in higher education in Spain is mainly based on Organic Law 6/2001 (LOU), 21 December, concerning universities in Spain. This was amended by Organic Law 4/2007 (LOMLOU), 12 April, which laid down the basic conditions regarding the majority of the aspects of university education. The development of competences in Catalonia was laid down in Law 1/2003 (LUC), 19 February, on universities in Catalonia (hereafter, the Catalan Universities Act).

Pursuant to the aforementioned regulatory provisions, the Catalan Universities Act defines the higher education system in Catalonia as consisting of universities established in Catalonia, with details of the objectives and underlying principles; it also deals with university activity, which comprises teaching and research; it defines the university community as consisting of the student body, teaching and research staff, and administrative and service staff; it refers to the governing bodies and representation of the public universities, the legal status and academic and corporate governance of universities; it deals with the quality assurance of universities and, lastly, it regulates certain aspects of the economic regulations and the system of funding of public universities.

There are two areas of the aforementioned legislation that affect the activity of AQU Catalunya, namely, the quality assurance of programmes and awards, on the one hand, and university teaching staff, on the other.

With regard to the quality assurance of recognised programmes and awards, the Spanish Government has laid down that degree programmes must conform to a system of validation⁴, modification, monitoring and accreditation.⁵ In order to effect this legal mandate in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for the external QA of higher education, AQU Catalunya, in collaboration with the universities and the Executive Council (*Govern*) of the Government of Catalonia, designed the **Framework for the validation, monitoring, modification and accreditation of recognised programmes** (VSMA⁶ Framework), which was endorsed in 2010 by the Agency's Board of Management and has been implemented since 2011.

⁴ Previously referred to as "ex-ante accreditation".

⁵ Royal Decree 1393/2007, 29 October, on the academic governance of recognised degrees and awards (amended by Royal Decree 861/2010, 2 July), Royal Decree 1614/2009, 26 October, on the academic governance of recognised degrees and awards for Higher Studies in the Arts (Music, Dramatic Arts, Dance, Design, Restoration and Preservation of Cultural Heritage), regulated by Organic Law 2/2006, 3 May, on Education, and Royal Decree 99/2011, 28 January, concerning the regulation of doctorate studies.

⁶ The Catalan acronym for the four framework processes (V) *verificació*, (S) *seguiment*, (M) *modificació* and (A) *acreditació*.

Unlike the rest of Europe, QA agencies in Spain undertake the quality assurance (assessment) of teaching staff at universities. Since 2003, AQU has been carrying out the assessment of contract academic staff prior to selection by Catalan public universities for the posts of collaborating lecturer, tenure-track lecturer, tenured assistant professor and full professor;⁷ it assesses teaching staff at the private universities in Catalonia in compliance with the Catalan Universities Act,⁸ which lays down that 50% of university teaching staff must be in possession of a doctorate degree, of which 60% must be accredited by a QA agency; and since 2006 it has been assessing 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.⁹

⁷ Article 42 ff. of Law 1/2003, 19 February, on universities in Catalonia. Translator's note: these are roughly equivalent academic positions of *col-laborador*, *lector*, *agregat* and *catedràtic*.

⁸ Article 72.2 of Organic Law 6/2001, 21 December, on universities in Spain.

⁹ Article 72, Law 1/2003, 19 February, on universities in Catalonia. Decree 405/2006, 24 October, which established additional benefits for both public service (civil servant) and contract teaching and research staff at public universities in Catalonia.

1 ■ AQU CATALUNYA

1.1 The Agency

Objectives and functions

The Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (*Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya*, hereafter AQU Catalunya) is the main instrument for the promotion and assurance of quality in the higher education system in Catalonia. The role of AQU Catalunya is the assurance, accreditation and certification of quality in universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) in Catalonia (courses, teaching, faculties and schools, and services).

The functions ascribed to AQU Catalunya pursuant to the Catalan Universities Act are as follows:¹⁰

- The QA of degree courses leading to the award of recognised and non-recognised (awarded by a specific HEI) awards taught at universities and other HEIs.
- Certification of the quality of university degree courses, management and activities.
- Degree course accreditation within the context of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area.
- The institutional review of HEIs established in Catalonia that offer programmes leading to higher degrees awarded by foreign HEIs.
- Accreditation of QA systems and processes in universities, including teaching.
- The issuance of pre-recruitment reports and accreditation for teaching staff.
- Quality assurance of research work by researchers.
- Quality assurance of research and management by teaching and research staff in relation to salary bonuses.
- Quality assurance of research by teaching and research staff at private universities.
- Quality assurance of the activities, programmes, services and management of universities and other higher education institutions.
- The promotion of quality assurance and comparison of quality criteria at European and international levels.

¹⁰ Article 140, Law 1/2003, 19 February, on universities in Catalonia (Catalan Universities Act/LUC).

- To conduct studies on the enhancement and innovation of models for review, certification and accreditation.
- To issue review reports for the universities, education authorities, social partners and society in general.
- Expertise and advice for government education authorities, universities and other institutions within the scope of its functions.
- To establish cooperation and collaboration with other regional, national and international agencies that have the functions of quality assurance, accreditation and certification.
- All tasks commissioned to it by the competent government department with jurisdiction over universities¹¹ and the universities, by means of agreement.

History and milestones

The *Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari a Catalunya* was founded as a consortium on 29 October 1996. With the passing of the Catalan Universities Act in 2003, the consortium was transformed into the Agency as it is today¹². It was the first QA agency to be established in Spain and the first in Europe to be ISO 9001 (2000) certified. In 2011 the Agency successfully passed the external audit for ISO 9001:2008 certification. Certification covers university quality assurance, which includes institutional review and the quality assurance of university teaching staff. ISO 9001:2008, which is the international standard for quality management systems, contains guidelines that enable any user to design and implement a made-to-measure quality management system for the quality assurance of a product or service and increase user and customer/client satisfaction.

AQU Catalunya is a founder member of ENQA (2000), and its full membership was reconfirmed following the first international external review in accordance with the ESG coordinated by the Association in 2007. It also forms part of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR, 2008), the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE, 1998), the Spanish Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (REACU, 2006) and the European Consortium for Accreditation, ECA (2009).

1.2 First external review: recommendations by ENQA and actions by AQU Catalunya

Following the first external review of AQU Catalunya in accordance with the ESG in 2007, the Agency's professionalism and credibility in the quality assurance of programmes and teaching received the recognition of ENQA.

¹¹ Translator's note: The corresponding government department in Catalonia has changed names several times in recent years.

¹² A minor change was also made to the Agency's name: *Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya*.

As a result of the external review, a series of recommendations were made by ENQA that AQU Catalunya has subsequently taken into account in its activities. In 2009 the Agency drew up the progress report based on the enhancement measures recommended by ENQA and the actions carried out by AQU Catalunya.

Independence of the Agency. AQU produced a draft proposal for new and specific legislation (a bill) for the Agency which is currently pending parliamentary procedure. Under the new law the AQU Board is rearranged as follows:

- The AQU Board has the powers to directly appoint the members of the Agency's commissions.
- The presence of different stakeholders on the AQU Board is enhanced with the participation of students and members of Catalan society.

The Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia passed the bill dealing with AQU Catalunya (hereafter, the AQU Catalunya Bill) in May 2010. Six months later, however, elections to the Parliament of Catalonia were brought forward and there was a change in government that resulted in the suspension of parliamentary proceedings regarding the final stage of the procedure. The new government has explicitly stated its intention to conclude the parliamentary procedure and definitively pass the AQU Catalunya Bill. According to the Director General for Universities, who, as a member of the AQU Board of Management, was present at the Board meeting held on 28 March 2012, the decision has been made by the government to resume the parliamentary proceedings concerning the AQU Catalunya Bill by the end of the year.

The need for consistency and regularity in external QA processes. The endorsement by the Spanish Council of Ministers of Royal Decree 1393/2007, 29 October, on the academic governance of recognised academic degrees and awards, designated the Spanish national QA agency, ANECA, as the sole QA agency responsible for validation. Royal Decree 861/2010, 2 July, which amended Royal Decree 1393/2007, 29 October, established the competency of AQU Catalunya to implement the national model of quality assurance for programmes of study based on a cyclical process of validation (verification), monitoring, modification and accreditation.

The need for a systematic, long-term approach to the Agency's goals and objectives. Documentation that shows how the mission statement is translated into a clear policy and management plan is also required. A Strategic Plan was drawn up and approved for the period 2009-2012, which has given greater consistency to all of the Agency's activities. The purpose of the Strategic Plan has to enhance the Agency's fitness for purpose with regard to the objectives set out in the prevailing legislation (Catalan Universities Act) and the European standards and recommendations, in addition to the following objectives:

- To reinforce core activities across the entire higher education system regarding quality assurance and to carry out studies.
- To develop monitoring and follow-up processes for quality assurance in higher education.

- To intensify institutional review processes and ensure a more consistent approach to both the internal and external quality assurance of programmes of study and services offered by universities.
- To develop more integrated models for the quality assurance of teaching.

The Strategic Plan defines the Agency's mission as follows:

AQU Catalunya is a public entity of internationally recognised status. Its mission is the quality assurance of higher education through compliance with the European standards for quality assurance and to uphold the interests of society in good quality higher education. Its activities are conducted through:

- *Analysis, review and accreditation*
- *International benchmarking and an innovation-based approach to quality assurance*
- *Mechanisms that ensure transparency and publicity*
- *Involvement of the educational community and labour market representatives*
- *Individuals who are competent, motivated and satisfied with the work of AQU Catalunya*

In the Strategic Plan, the Agency formerly identifies with the following series of values:

- *The fostering of cooperation*
- *Respect for the diversity and autonomy of the universities*
- *User orientation*
- *Proactivity*
- *Quality assurance*
- *Integrity and independence*
- *Efficacy and efficiency*
- *Accountability*

The Strategic Plan also defines eight strategic areas of priority:

- *Priority 1: Management and organisation*
- *Priority 2: Quality assurance of teaching*
- *Priority 3: Institutional and programme review*
- *Priority 4: Analysis of the higher education system*
- *Priority 5: Communication*
- *Priority 6: People*
- *Priority 7: External relations*
- *Priority 8: Students*

The need to develop an appeals procedure, as well as formal follow-up procedures. The AQU Catalunya Bill, which is pending parliamentary approval, provides for the setting up of an Appeals Commission, the purpose of which is to guarantee the legal certainty and objectivity of the review panels. The commission will consist of five members (one member of the AQU Board of Management and four external examiners). Formal follow-up procedures are currently managed by the Agency's QA Commissions.

1.3 Activities 2008-2012

In 2010, when AQU Catalunya assumed responsibility for the entire process involving the quality assurance of recognised programmes of study, the Agency's activities were grouped into six strategic categories, which include the eight areas of priority defined in the Plan: Quality assurance of institutions and programmes (Institutional and programme review; Students), Quality assurance of teaching, Knowledge generation (Analysis of the higher education system), Internationalisation (External relations), Strategic management and communication (Management; Communication) and Internal organisation (Organisation; People). The main actions carried out during this period are summarised below.

Quality assurance of institutions and programmes

With the passing of Royal Decree 861/2010, 2 July, which amended Royal Decree 1393/2007, 29 October, AQU Catalunya reacquired authority to issue the mandatory review reports for the validation of recognised programmes and awards in Catalonia. The Agency made best use of the ensuing regulatory impasse that lasted two years to comply with EHEA requirements and develop and put into practice the review methodology that is currently applied in the validation, modification, monitoring and accreditation of recognised degree programmes through the fostering of three programmes: AUDIT, the review of affiliated institutions and an experimental monitoring programme for the review of programmes of study.

To assist the universities and their schools and faculties in the design of internal QA systems for their programmes of study, AQU Catalunya, in conjunction with ANECA (National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain) and ACSUG (Agency for Quality Assurance in the Galician University System),¹³ developed the voluntary institutional review programme known as **AUDIT (2007-present day)**. To date, 75% of all faculties at Catalan universities have participated in the programme. Particular mention is made of the fact that one of the required dimensions in the validation of all new degree courses is that they incorporate an internal quality assurance system (IQAS). AUDIT is integrated into the VSMA Framework, as this ensures that faculties comply with a working IQAS.

With the **affiliated institutions review programme¹⁴ (2008-2010)**, and for the quality assurance of proposals for programmes adapted to EHEA guidelines, the Agency reviewed all university-affiliated institutions in Catalonia (38). This programme served to enhance the Agency's processes of institutional review in which the site visit to faculties and schools, as required under the VSMA Framework, is an essential aspect of the accreditation process.

The objectives of the **experimental monitoring programme (2009-2010)** were to contribute to the ways in which university programmes of study are monitored and define the structure and contents of the reports produced on an annual basis by the universities. All of the Catalan

¹³ ANECA and ACSUG are full members of ENQA.

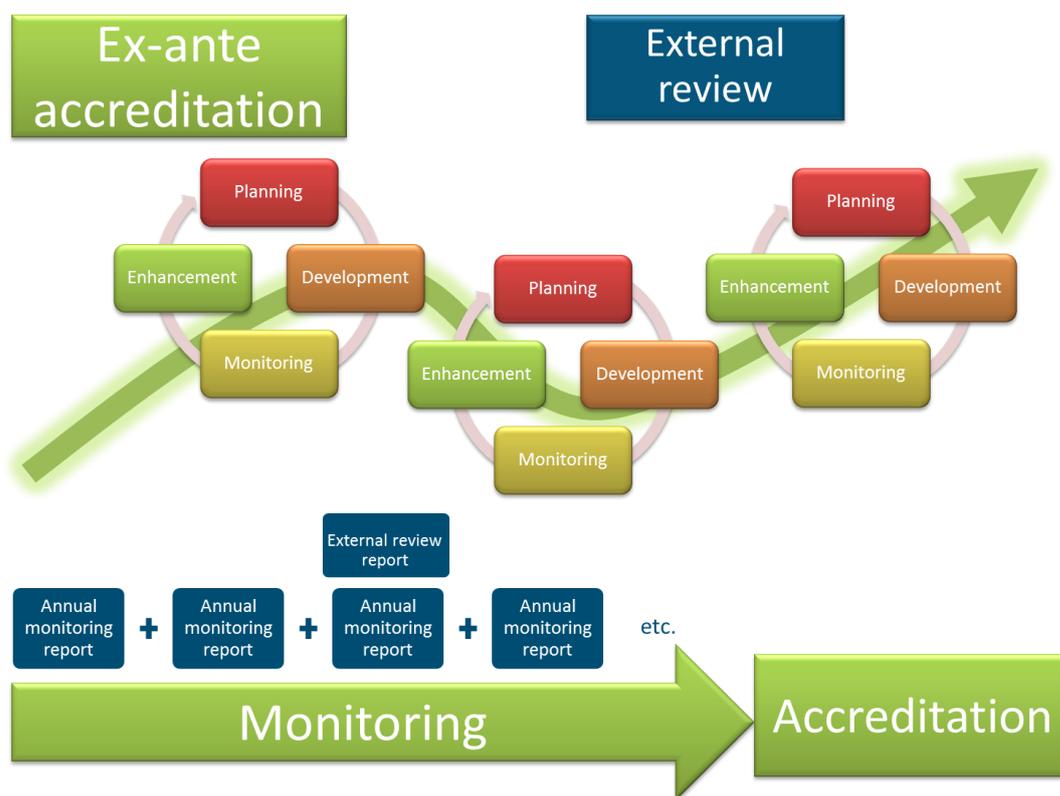
¹⁴ Article 11, Organic Law 6/2001, 21 December, on universities in Spain lays down that higher education institutions can affiliate with a public or private university by agreement to offer programmes of study leading to the award of nationally recognised degrees and awards, if so approved by the regional authorities (Autonomous Community).

universities participated with a maximum of two programmes of study, one Bachelor's and one Master's.

The results of this programme were integrated into the **VSMA Framework for the validation, monitoring, modification and accreditation of university programmes and awards (2010-present day)**. The purposes of the VSMA Framework, which was agreed with the Catalan university authorities, are as follows:

- To ensure continuous quality assurance of the running of degree courses.
- To promote a culture which recognises the importance of quality and accountability
- To provide support to the university authorities in building a strategic vision for degree courses.
- To reinforce transparency, leadership and the social recognition of the universities.

Diagram 2. Quality assurance procedures for recognised programmes of study



The VSMA Framework is the Agency's main review programme and core process in the external quality assurance of programmes of study being offered and taught at Catalan universities. It combines both programme and institutional review and gives a structured and integrated overview of the four QA processes that take place on a cyclical basis (validation, monitoring, modification and accreditation):

- **Validation.** Before a new degree programme can be introduced, a curriculum proposal for the programme must undergo validation by a Spanish QA agency that is a member of ENQA and EQAR. AQU Catalunya has both the statutory powers and technical competence to issue evaluation reports for the validation of recognised degree courses in Catalonia. Once a course has undergone validation, it receives authorisation from the Catalan government to be introduced, in accordance with established programme criteria and funding availability. Authorised programmes of study are entered in the Spanish Register of Higher Education Institutions and Programmes (RUCT), and they can then be introduced. The purpose of validation is to ensure that new degree courses are formulated in accordance with EHEA requirements, with the qualifications framework, and that there is consistency between the contents and outcomes from the particular approach to each discipline.
- **Monitoring.** The prevailing legal framework establishes that QA agencies must carry out monitoring of recognised awards, on the basis of the available public information, up until the time when they must undergo review for accreditation renewal. The VSMA Framework stipulates that it is the university that is primarily responsible for the process of monitoring its programmes, while AQU Catalunya acts as an external QA agent. The directors of each programme have to draw up a progress report once a year with the following content: a summary of the curriculum development, in addition to all modifications subsequently introduced; the quantitative indicators and other written information (internal and/or public) on the delivery of the programme; the qualitative assessment of the indicators and other information by those responsible as specified in the university's IQAS or, in the case of an external review, a panel of experts; any enhancement proposals stemming from the assessment made of the programme monitoring, including all modification proposals.
Every year AQU Catalunya carries out an individual evaluation of reports received from the universities in the following cases: reports on recognised programmes that contain proposals for substantial modification; a representative sample of other progress reports on recognised programmes, with particular attention being paid to those with proposals for non-substantial modification; and reports on programmes where a site visit is included in the external review.
In addition, each university draws up an overall report that includes an assessment of the delivery of its programmes. AQU Catalunya issues a monitoring assessment report for each university, which may propose enhancement or corrective actions to be implemented across all programmes.
- **Modification.** The universities can make modifications to their programmes of study. If such modifications affect aspects such as the administrative definition or the essential academic characteristics of a degree programme or award, it must undergo a new validation process. For any other modifications, the universities' proposals are evaluated using the methodology developed for validation as reference. If the modifications are assessed as being favourable, they can be implemented directly by the universities.
- **Accreditation.** AQU Catalunya is responsible for programme accreditation, which, in the case of Bachelor's and doctorate degrees, must take place within six years of the

initial (or most recent) validation and, in the case of Masters, within four years. In order for programme accreditation to be maintained, confirmation that the corresponding curriculum is being followed according to the initial project must be obtained in the form of a report following an evaluation that includes a site visit to the institution. The Agency organises a series of site visits in faculties and schools every year to carry out a simultaneous review of all recognised programmes being offered in each faculty or school, the overall objective being to ensure that all university courses in all faculties and schools have undergone an external review, at least once, within the period laid down by the prevailing regulations.

In accordance with the existing legal framework, AQU Catalunya has consequently started the first phase in the cycle of accreditation of new programmes, a cycle that includes the validation of new programme proposals, the evaluation of modifications to degree courses previously accredited and the monitoring of programmes adapted according to EHEA guidelines.

Table 2. Institutional and programme review activities

1996-2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
							VSMA Framework	
						Experimental monitoring programme		
					Review of affiliated institutions			
				AUDIT programme				
		Review of recognised postgraduate degree programmes						
	Pilot plan for the adaptation of degree programmes in line with EHEA guidelines (review)				Pilot plan for the adaptation of degree programmes in line with EHEA guidelines (certification)			
PRO-QU programme				Virtual programme				

In order to notify and provide access to the reports that the Agency issues within the context of the different programme review processes, the search engine in the corresponding section of the Agency's website can be used to quickly and directly access any review report produced by AQU Catalunya by entering either the degree qualification, programme of study or university.

Quality assurance of teaching staff

With regard to the quality assurance of teaching staff, AQU Catalunya develops the following processes:

Pre-selection assessment for the recruitment of academic staff by public universities in Catalonia (2003-present day). The objective of this programme is to assess on request an individual's scientific and academic curriculum as proof that the person is eligible for a particular staff category (collaborating staff, tenure-track lecturer, tenured assistant professor or full professor) that is being applied for.

Quality assurance of teaching at private universities (2003-present day). Between 2003-2007, AQU Catalunya carried out the assessment of teaching staff at the private universities in Catalonia under the terms laid down in agreements signed with each faculty and school. In 2008, the assessment of teaching staff at private universities was integrated into the broader processes dealing with the quality assurance of the various university staff categories (collaborating staff, tenure-track lecturer, tenured assistant professor and full professor).

Assessment of individual merits in teaching, research and management of public service and contract teaching and research staff at public universities in Catalonia in connection with additional merit-based salary increases for teaching staff (2006-present day). Merits in research are assessed directly by the Agency, and it notifies the persons concerned of the outcome of the assessment according to an established procedure, as well as informing each university of the favourable assessment of respective staff members so that the institution's governing body can formulate the allocation proposal to the Board of Trustees. With regard to merits in teaching and management, the Agency certifies an evaluation made by the universities. In the case of teaching, the public universities apply the models set out in the respective teaching assessment handbooks, which are AQU-accredited.

The Agency publishes the reports on the universities' teaching assessment handbooks. As a safeguard to protect personal data, the outcomes of the various teacher assessment programmes are published in aggregate form.

Knowledge generation

AQU Catalunya produces and promotes analytical studies on higher education in Catalonia, the aim being to provide information that can be used in decision-making by the universities and the stakeholders. The main areas of study are as follows:

Graduate labour market outcomes (2001, 2005, 2008 and 2011). Since 2001, AQU Catalunya and the Catalan universities have carried out a joint survey once every three years (2001, 2005, 2008 and 2011) on the labour market outcomes of graduates from Catalan universities in order to establish, amongst other things, the quality and pathways of their entry into the world of work and also their degree of satisfaction with undergraduate studies.

For the first time, all of the universities, both public and private, in Catalonia participated in the 2011 survey, together with the majority of affiliated institutions. More than 55% of the population of graduates who completed their studies at the end of the 2006-2007 academic year was covered by the survey, the aim of which was to provide the universities with specific and

comparable data on all degree courses in Catalonia. The results have been integrated into the indicators project for the monitoring of recognised degree programmes in Catalonia.

AQU Catalunya also promotes studies and surveys on specific aspects of the career outcomes of the graduate population in Catalonia, which have increased the corpus of knowledge on this subject. Issues dealt with in these studies and surveys, various of which have been funded by other bodies, include gender, the factor of equity and professional mobility offered by the universities, and the match between university education and graduate labour market outcomes (education-job match).

Programme development indicators (2010-present day). In order to have all of the necessary indicators available to exercise competence in matters concerning the universities and higher education, the Catalan government, the Catalan universities and the Agency jointly set up the UNEIX inter-university information system, which gathers data and provides homogeneous, comparable and reliable information for the monitoring of university programmes of study. AQU Catalunya has developed a public website where data are displayed on demand, including the entrance grade, the number of places offered, student achievement rate, etc., on the basis of which university authorities can produce their own progress reports and compare the data for their programmes with others offered in Catalonia. Indicators are one of the key elements used in the annual monitoring of programmes by the universities.

Studies and surveys (1998-present day). AQU Catalunya promotes studies on specific areas of higher education in Catalonia to obtain a more objective picture of the higher education system. In particular, studies have been carried out on academic achievement, the student drop-out rate, and the perceptions and point of view of students. It has also carried out QA analyses of the higher education system as a whole and university teaching staff. One of the more recent studies in this field was the analysis of the curriculum pathways of university teaching staff based on curricula submitted for the various teaching staff assessment programmes undertaken by AQU Catalunya. The study revealed the need for the revision of policies that deal with the quality assurance of university teaching staff, and a project is to be developed through a specific framework linked to the VSMA Framework.

Methodology materials (1998-present day). AQU Catalunya designs the methodology materials used for university QA processes in Catalonia. It has so far produced more than thirty QA handbooks, as well as instruments to assist Catalan universities in ways to approach the review of specific areas of higher education, such as general frameworks, guides to designing programmes of study and the competence (skills) assessment guides.

Workshops and seminars (1998-present day). In addition to specific seminars, AQU Catalunya, together with the Catalan universities, organises a workshop once every year to promote and disseminate an understanding of the different quality enhancement processes in the universities and to work in a coordinated way with university QA staff.

Digital library (2010-present day). The AQU digital library, which was launched in 2010, is a free access repository of on-line documents specialising in university quality assurance that forms part of the Agency's website. It is a useful tool in the design of new activities, training and knowledge creation in this field. The digital library consists of more than 600 electronic documents produced by the Agency and other QA agencies, the majority in Europe.

Government authorities, other bodies and universities also provide material for the digital library. The AQU digital library has been presented in various different Spanish and European forums.

All materials produced by AQU Catalunya within the context of knowledge management are available from the Agency's website.

Internationalisation

AQU Catalunya participates in international projects in order to keep its QA processes in line with the best practices in Europe; it also maintains its international presence with the intention of contributing to the development of new frameworks for the EHEA. The Agency's international dimension is developed through different types of activity undertaken in the following areas:

Institutional relations (1998-present day). AQU Catalunya cooperates, at the European level mainly, with agencies and entities with common objectives in developing projects that are relevant and provide added value to the higher education system in Catalonia. AQU Catalunya has been a full member of ENQA since the European association was founded in 2000. The Catalan Agency currently has one representative on the ENQA Board, the executive body that coordinates the European Association of QA agencies, who, on behalf of ENQA, also sits on the Steering Committee of the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQUAF). INQAHE is a worldwide association of over 200 organisations, most of them QA agencies, which is active in the theory and practice of quality assurance in higher education. AQU Catalunya has been a member since 1998. In 2010 AQU Catalunya joined the ECA, which aims for the mutual recognition of accreditation and QA decisions. The activities of the ECA are developed in working groups, each one of which is made up of representatives from the consortium's member agencies.

International projects (1998-present day): AQU Catalunya cooperates with other bodies on request to carry out projects, the aim of which is to provide added value to the activities developed by the Agency and support to countries that are in the stage of developing these activities. There are four areas in which it is involved in international projects: internationalisation (integration of quality assurance into the internationalisation activities implemented by universities), cooperation (dissemination and international outreach of the Catalan and European model of quality assurance outside of the European Union), innovation (of QA processes in conjunction with other agencies) and benchmarking (identification of international benchmarks for quality assurance in Catalonia).

- **Internationalisation**

ERANET-MUNDUS (2011 onwards). Erasmus Mundus ERANET-MUNDUS. A project coordinated by the Universitat de Barcelona, the aim of which is to promote mobility and establish links between universities in Russia and the European Union. AQU has been commissioned to develop a specific methodology for the external review of the Study Abroad programmes at Catalan universities. The Agency is working with the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in connection with this project.

- Cooperation

DIES ASEAN-QA (2011 onwards). Joint capacity building project in Southeast Asia. This project promotes the regional development of QA systems, the main objectives being the quality assurance and enhancement of programmes of study, the recognition of credits and qualifications on the basis of a series of principles of quality assurance and standards, and to improve university management, all through the sharing of experience. AQU participates on behalf of ENQA, with other participants being the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the German Rectors Conference (HRK), the ASEAN University Network (AUN), the Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development in Southeast Asia (SEAMEO RIHED) and the Asean Quality Assurance Network (AQAN), together with the University of Potsdam.

JISER-MED (2011 onwards). Joint innovation and synergies in education and research. A project coordinated by the Universitat de Barcelona that seeks to promote the Erasmus Mundus objectives within the context of countries in the Mediterranean and contribute to the development of a Euro-Mediterranean area of higher education and research.

TEMPUS B&H (2007 onwards). TEMPUS in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A European Community programme designed to provide support to non-member countries for the development of higher education. The main objective of the project is to develop a university QA system for Bosnia and Herzegovina based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. AQU participates in this project as a trainer of reviewers and university QA management and coordinates the external review of seven university programmes of study. Academic staff from the UB, UPC, UdL and URV participate as external examiners in this project. In addition to AQU, VLOHRA (the Flemish Agency), the universities of Heidelberg, Kent, Leuven-Louvain and Brasov and the Porto University Polytechnic all participate in the project.

- Innovation

Life Long Learning (2010 onwards). FLLLEX. The Impact of LifeLong Learning Strategies on Professional Higher Education. A project promoted by EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education), the consortium consists of 24 partners from ten different countries. AQU participates in this project on behalf of ENQA. The project focuses on the review of policies that deal with lifelong learning in higher education institutions. AQU Catalunya has been in charge of preparing the methodology for the self-evaluation of these policies and strategies by universities.

JOQAR (2010 onwards). Joint programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded. A European project coordinated by the ECA that aims at promoting multilateral recognition between agencies and the integration of external QA and accreditation of joint programmes by quality assurance/accreditation agencies (QA/A agencies) with international recognition by recognition bodies (ENIC-NARIC). Inter-university study programmes offered in Europe are to be reviewed in this project, one of which is coordinated by the Universitat de Barcelona.

ETRAIN (2010 onwards). European Training of QA Experts. An ECA project with the overall aim of facilitating the sharing of trained, knowledgeable, and internationally experienced experts who will be better equipped to participate in QA procedures.

- Benchmarking

QPP (2011 onwards). Quality procedures in European higher education: Visions for the future. A third survey conducted by ENQA of quality procedures in European higher education. Coordinated by AQU Catalunya, the survey focuses on good practices in external quality review processes, user orientation and exploring the priorities in this field at European level. AQU Catalunya also previously participated in the second programme (2007).

International reviews and certifications. The Agency reviewed six degree programmes in the fields of Social Sciences and Technology offered by the Universidad de Guadalajara, the second largest HEI in Mexico in terms of student numbers. At the Universidad de San Martín de Porres (USMP) in Lima, Peru, it carried out a review of the Faculty of Law. It also collaborated in the design and carrying out of the external review of the International Relations service at the UAB (Barcelona, Spain).

Strategic management and communication

Particular mention is made in this area of the implementation of the **Strategic Plan for AQU Catalunya, 2009-2012**, which was drawn up with the collaboration of the universities and the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia and endorsed by the Agency's Board of Management. The purpose of the Strategic Plan for AQU Catalunya, 2009-2012 is to better align the running of the Agency with the objectives set out in the prevailing legislation (Catalan Universities Act) and the European standards and recommendations.

The finer details of the Strategic Plan are set out in the Agency's annual Activities Plan, which is endorsed by the Board of Management, and this in turn is implemented through projects and activities, with key financial and schedule performance aspects (timetable, number of hours, indicators) being monitored with different applications and management systems.

With the strategic aims of the current Plan substantially on target to be achieved, an analysis of the Plan's development is to be made during 2012 and a new Strategic Plan drawn up for 2013-2016.

In the area of communication, AQU Catalunya attaches great importance to the website, which is trilingual (Catalan, Spanish and English) and the main instrument used to disseminate its activities. With an average annual number of visits of around 100,000, the website was redesigned in 2008, with new functions, a new design and content architecture added to enable users to access the Agency's documents and information. The Agency also produces a bimonthly on-line trilingual newsletter, *eButlletí* (1999-present day), with information on quality assurance and higher education in Catalonia, which has more than 5,700 subscribers.

1.4 Structure and operation of AQU Catalunya¹⁵

The structure of AQU Catalunya consists of the governing bodies (President, Director and the Board of Management) and the main QA bodies (three commissions, the Quality Assessment Commission/CAQ, the Collaborating and Tenure-Track Teaching Staff Commission/CLiC and the Research Assessment Commission/CAR), the composition of which is stipulated in the prevailing legislation (Catalan Universities Act). The activities of the Agency's main QA bodies are carried out through specific review panels, which are ultimately responsible for reviews and whose work is performed with technical independence. The experts who sit on these review panels are selected according to formal procedure and are appointed by the chairs of the main QA bodies.

The **President**, who is also the chairperson of the Agency's Board of Management and its Standing Committee, is selected from among prominent individuals in higher education and appointed by the Executive Council of the Government of Catalonia at the proposal of the competent government department with jurisdiction over the universities for a period of four years, which is renewable. His/her duties include:

- To ensure that set objectives are complied with.
- To act as the institutional representative of AQU Catalunya.
- To inform the Government of Catalonia's Executive Council and Parliament of Catalonia of the Agency's activities.

The **Board of Management**, which is the Agency's main governing body, consists of the President of the Agency; the rectors of the public universities and the rector of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya; a maximum of three rectors from private universities; the chairs of the boards of trustees of the public universities; three prominent individuals from the academic community; two members from the competent government department with jurisdiction over universities; the chairs of the Research Assessment Commission/CAR and Collaborating and Tenure-Track Teaching Staff Commission/CLiC, and the director of AQU Catalunya. The Board of Management is responsible, amongst other things, for:

- Approving the Agency's programme of activities.
- Establishing strategic policies and objectives.
- Approving the state of the Agency's accounts (balance sheet, results account and financial statement).

The Board of Management can convene and act either in a Plenary Session or as a Standing Committee.

The **Director**, or Chief Executive Officer, is responsible for the direction and management of the Agency and has full responsibility for the Board of Management regarding execution of agreements endorsed by the Board. The Director is designated by the competent government department with jurisdiction over universities, heeding advice from the Board of Management

¹⁵ Strategic area of priority: internal organisation.

and at the proposal of the Agency's President, for a period of four years, which may be extended twice. The duties of the Director are as follows:

- To direct, organise, manage and inspect the services of the Agency, according to the instructions of the Board of Management.
- To execute and enforce the agreements of the Board of Management and its Standing Committee.
- To act as the legal representative of AQU Catalunya.

The Agency's main QA bodies are as follows:

The **Quality Assessment Commission (CAQ¹⁶)** ensures that the series of QA instruments and processes carried out at institutional level by AQU Catalunya are correctly applied. The work of the CAQ covers three main areas:

- Programmes of study.
- Institutions and services.
- Institutional systems implemented by the universities for the quality assurance of teaching, which also include aspects associated with the assessment of merits in teaching for staff management purposes.

The CAQ is structured around six specific review panels, one for each of the main branches of knowledge, with a total of five that are in charge of reviewing validation, monitoring, modification and accreditation processes at Catalan universities, and one that assesses staff teaching merits. The chairs of the review committees are also members of the CAQ, which includes international academics and experts.

The **Collaborating and Tenure-Track Teaching Staff Commission (CLiC)** has the authority to issue reports for the recruitment of tenure-track (junior) lecturers and collaborating staff by Catalan universities and to establish the general review criteria for issuing reports and how they are made public. The commission, which is made up leading academics, acts through specific review panels that cover the different subject areas.

The **Research Assessment Commission (CAR)** is responsible for issuing accreditations for research and advanced research; evaluating the work of researchers, and assessing the individual merits in research of public service (civil servant) and contract teaching and research staff; and evaluating the research work of teaching and research staff at private universities. The commission, which is made up leading academics, acts through specific review panels that cover the different subject areas.

In addition to its governing and QA bodies, and for policy coordination purposes and to heighten the activities carried out by the Agency, the management calls periodic meetings with advisory bodies and advisors, such as the chairs and secretaries of the boards of trustees of Catalan universities; the various committees of vice-rectors (deputies to the rector, responsible for quality, academic staff, research and academic governance); committees with the heads of university quality units; and, since 2010 also the **AQU Student Commission**, whose work is to

¹⁶ Translator's note: This and the other acronyms for these commissions are from the names in Catalan.

broaden and systematise participation of the student body in AQU Catalunya's QA activities, advise the Agency on projects that have a direct impact on the students and participate in studies that are of interest to the student body.

In order to ensure that the activities of AQU Catalunya comply with prevailing legislation (Catalan Universities Act) and that it is on target to achieve its strategic aims, the Agency has an organisational structure comprised of experienced in-house staff in the following sections and units:

Quality Assurance is responsible for the management and coordination of all activities ascribed under prevailing legislation (Catalan Universities Act) to the Quality Assessment Commission/CAQ and its specific review panels. These activities deal with the review, accreditation and certification of study programmes, activities, faculties and schools, and QA systems and processes, in addition to the carrying out and coordination of studies in connection with these functions.

Teaching Staff and Research is responsible for the management and coordination of all activities ascribed under prevailing legislation (Catalan Universities Act) to the Collaborating and Tenure-Track Teaching Staff Commission/CLiC and the Research Assessment Commission/CAR and their respective review panels. These activities deal with the issuance of reports for the recruitment of collaborating and tenure-track teaching staff by public universities and the accreditation of research and advanced research, in addition to the carrying out and coordination of studies in connection with these functions.

Planning and Communication is responsible for the management and coordination of all activities associated with communication, the Agency's corporate image, the organising of workshops and events, and the annual activities plan.

Administration is responsible for the management and coordination of all economic and financial aspects, human resource management, the main office reception and the register, procurement and the maintenance of all premises used by AQU Catalunya.

The **IT** department is responsible for the management and coordination of all activities associated with information technologies, including applications software, hardware and infrastructure.

Support to the Board is in charge of advising the directorship on legal aspects, internal quality assurance and project coordination. It also includes personal assistance to the Director.

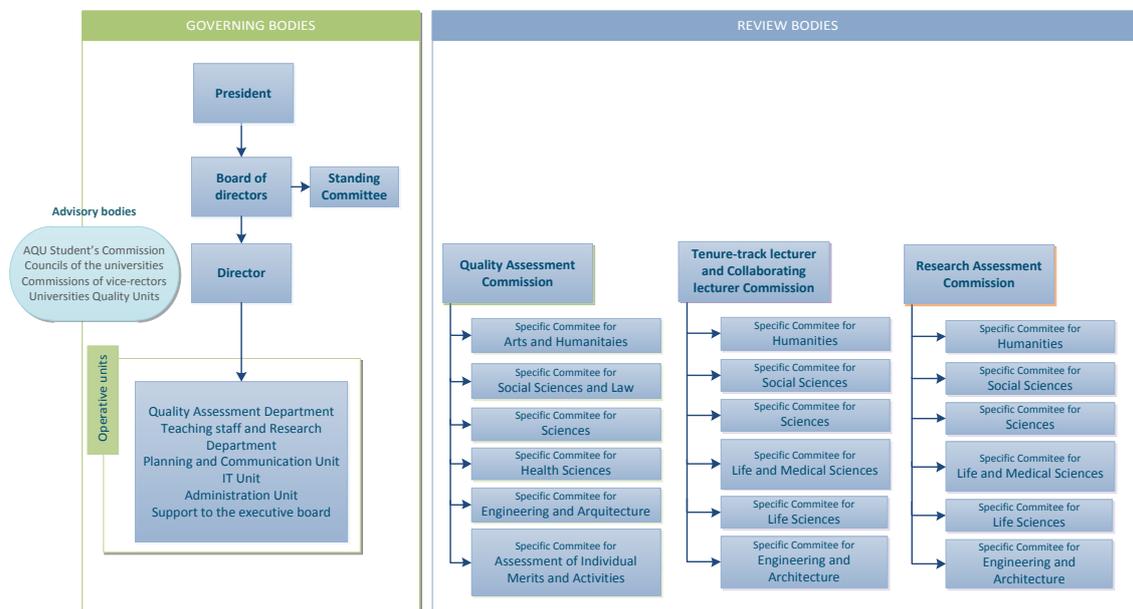
The Agency's directorship also receives the support of the Secretary to the Agency's Board of Management, coordinators and advisers (see below).

The **Agency's Secretary** is appointed to the Board of Management at the proposal of the President of the Agency and attends the meetings of the Board of Management and the Standing Committee in an advisory capacity. The functions of the Secretary are those typical of a collegial body.

Coordinators and advisers. Several of the Agency's activities receive support from people with a position as either coordinator or adviser. AQU Catalunya currently has the support of an

innovation and methodology development coordinator and an adviser in programme, research centre and institutional review.

Diagram 3. Organisation chart of AQU Catalunya



The Agency's operational structure operates through strategic direction meetings, coordination meetings and project meetings:

- **Strategic direction meetings.** Held monthly, these serve to focus on and orientate the activities undertaken by the Agency. Those attending include the heads of section/unit, the people responsible for internal quality and legal matters, and the Agency's directorship.
- **Coordination meetings.** Held once every fortnight, their purpose is to enhance in-house efficiency and interrelationship between all of the various sections and units. Those attending include the heads of section/unit, the people responsible for internal quality and legal matters, and the Agency's directorship.
- **Project meetings.** These are held from the time that a project is launched through monitoring to closure of the project. They serve to concentrate on the different stages and activities for each project, and everybody involved in developing the project attends.

In order to foster project-based management in the Agency, and also to improve internal communication, AQU Catalunya uses a web platform for collaborating on documents and document management, which has also made it possible to:

- Define the circles of knowledge creation and management.
- Facilitate access to information.
- Standardise and improve internal processes.
- More efficient use and saving of resources.
- Integrate IT tools.

This type of tool breaks with the established culture according to which electronic documentation is created, modified and stored according to whoever is responsible for it. With regard to the way in which documentation on projects approved by the Agency is organised, there has been a shift from a structure that was more organic (sections/units) to one that is more functional. This means that, when participating in the different projects, all staff in the Agency have access to a common work space.

2. COMPLIANCE WITH THE ESG FOR THE EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 Use of internal QA procedures

STANDARD

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

GUIDELINES

The standards for internal quality assurance contained in Part 1 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. It is important that the institutions' own internal policies and procedures are carefully evaluated in the course of external procedures, to determine the extent to which the standards are being met.

If higher education institutions are to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards, then external processes might be less intensive than otherwise.

AQU compliance

The external QA review processes organised by the Agency are EHEA inspired, they reflect national and international recommendations and they take into account the effectiveness of the internal QA processes described in section 1 of the ESG. More recent and relevant examples are the VSMA Framework (2010-present day), the affiliated institutions review programme (2008-2010), the AUDIT programme (2007-present day), the assessment of merits in teaching (2003-present day) and the assessment of university teaching staff prior to recruitment (2003-present day) programmes, and the programme delivery indicators project (2010-present day).

With regard to the VSMA Framework, in the validation stage of programmes, the report submitted by the university must include the following:

- The name and description of the degree.
- The justification for the degree.
- The competences.
- Student access and admission.
- The programme content.
- The academic staff.

- The physical resources and services.
- The intended outcomes.
- The internal QA system.
- The timetable for introduction.

In the monitoring process, emphasis is put on both the public information on programmes and the indicator values, which amongst others include data on student and teaching staff satisfaction. The universities have to make an assessment of the curriculum development and indicators, and make a proposal for corrective or enhancement measures to be applied, if necessary, for the next academic year.

In the case of the affiliated institutions review programme, the following dimensions have been reviewed:

- The programmes of study (basic level).
- The governing body of the faculty/school (basic level).
- The human resources (basic level).
- The physical resources (basic level).
- Research and knowledge transfer (advanced level).
- Community involvement (advanced level).

In the AUDIT institutional review programme the following is analysed:

- The definition of the quality policy and objectives for studies in the faculty/school.
- Quality assurance of the programmes of study.
- The development of programmes of study that encourage student-centred learning.
- Quality assurance of academic staff and administrative and service staff.
- Quality assurance of the faculty/school's physical resources and services.
- The collection and analysis of data on outcomes for programme enhancement.
- The publication of information on and the accountability of the programmes of study.

The merits in teaching programme, together with the assessment of teaching staff prior to recruitment to Catalan universities, underpin the quality assurance of university teaching staff. Particular mention is made of the merits in teaching programme, which is a support programme in which each university configures an internal QA process for its teaching staff that is reviewed and accredited by the Agency.

Lastly, following on from the programme delivery indicators project, a web application has been developed as support for the information systems used by the universities for efficient management of their degrees.

Evidence

- ▶ [Affiliated institutions review programme \(2008-2010\)](#)
- ▶ [Assessment of merits in teaching programme \(2003-present day\)](#)
- ▶ [AUDIT programme \(2007-present day\)](#)
- ▶ [Quality assurance of university teaching staff \(2003-present day\)](#)
- ▶ [VSMA Framework for the ex-ante assessment, monitoring, modification and accreditation of degree programmes \(2010-present day\)](#)
- ▶ [Website with teaching indicators for programme development and analysis](#)

2.2 Development of external quality assurance processes

STANDARD

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

GUIDELINES

In order to ensure clarity of purpose and transparency of procedures, external quality assurance methods should be designed and developed through a process involving key stakeholders, including higher education institutions. The procedures that are finally agreed should be published and should contain explicit statements of the aims and objectives of the processes as well as a description of the procedures to be used.

As external quality assurance makes demands on the institutions involved, a preliminary impact assessment should be undertaken to ensure that the procedures to be adopted are appropriate and do not interfere more than necessary with the normal work of higher education institutions.

AQU compliance

AQU Catalunya designs, produces and applies the methodology for its QA programmes on the basis of both national and international benchmarks, and with the involvement of the institutions being reviewed and the stakeholder groups. Ways used to ensure the participation of the different stakeholders are:

- Periodic coordination between the heads of quality in Catalan universities, the faculties/schools and programmes being reviewed and the competent government department with jurisdiction over universities, in meetings where issues of methodology and procedure are presented and discussed. Meetings are held with the heads (vice-rectors) of quality assurance and also academic governance, teaching staff, research and/or doctoral programmes; the heads of the universities' quality units; and the Catalan authorities, in particular the Directorate General for Universities.
- Consultation with the AQU Student Commission, which advises the Agency on projects that have a direct impact on the student body, regarding the methodology, objectives and aims of QA.
- Validation of the consistency of the methodology and approval of the procedures, criteria and methodologies by the CAQ. For the quality assurance of teaching staff, the procedures and criteria are endorsed by the CLiC and CAR commissions.
- The setting up of voluntary pilot and experimental programmes to test the consistency of new proposed methodologies, for example the Experimental monitoring programme (2010).
- Supervision of the activities undertaken by the Agency by the Board of Management.

Where appropriate, the Agency also organises informative events and briefings on how QA programmes work for stakeholders to explain what has to be done and get feedback. One example is the dissemination of the VSMA Framework in a series of a dozen work sessions between October to December 2010 to more than 900 people with academic positions in Catalan universities.

Once QA processes have been approved, they are publicised via the Agency's website, where the review procedures and methodology are posted. The bimonthly e-newsletter (*eButlletí*) also provides information on all new developments concerning QA programmes.

At the end of each process or review period, the Agency carries out a meta-evaluation to analyse the way in which it operated, which also takes into account the satisfaction of those who participated in the QA process (obtained via meetings and satisfaction surveys), the outcomes and enhancement measures for subsequent reviews. AQU Catalunya has developed meta-evaluation processes for almost all of its QA programmes, the most recent being one carried out in the first quarter of 2012 on the validation, monitoring and modification of recognised degree programmes.

Through all of these actions AQU Catalunya seeks to ensure consistency between the objectives and purpose of quality assurance and the methodologies used; the participation of all those involved in defining and subsequently reviewing the process; and the dissemination of the procedure, criteria and methodology prior to the actual QA process taking place.

Evidence

- ▶ [Bimonthly online newsletter \(eButlletí\)](#)
- ▶ [Experimental monitoring programme \(2009-2010\)](#)
- ▶ [Meta-evaluation of the ex-ante assessment, monitoring and modification processes](#)
- ▶ [Organisational structure](#)
- ▶ [University informative sessions and briefings on the VSMA Framework for the ex-ante assessment, monitoring, modification and accreditation of degree programmes](#)

2.3 Criteria for decisions

STANDARD

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

GUIDELINES

Formal decisions made by quality assurance agencies have a significant impact on the institutions and programmes that are judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, decisions should be based on published criteria and interpreted in a consistent manner. Conclusions should be based on recorded evidence and agencies should have in place ways of moderating conclusions, if necessary.

AQU compliance

All of AQU Catalunya's QA procedures, whether they include the possibility of formal decisions being made on the basis of the external QA process, have a corresponding evaluation guidebook that describes the QA procedures and criteria. It is important to point out that the guides are designed to cover all requirements of the internal and external review teams regarding methodology in one single document.

The guidebooks are approved by the Agency's QA commissions and published on the website in the section on the relevant project, as well as the Publications/Methodology Guidelines section.

For teaching staff assessment, the QA criteria and procedures are drawn up and, once approved, published in the Official Journal of the Autonomous Government of Catalonia (DOGC), as well as on the Agency's website.

QA processes consequently contain mechanisms whereby conclusions are reached with consideration being taken of the opinion of units being reviewed, as they have the opportunity to address the review panels.

Once a programme or evaluation period has come to an end, set meta-evaluation mechanisms are used to analyse the way in which it operated and to detect any deviations.

AQU Catalunya organises training sessions for experts who form part of the review panels in order for them all to understand the objectives and purpose of the review from the same angle, and also to give consistent guidelines regarding the application of the methodology and QA criteria.

Each of the Agency's review panels has a secretary who, in addition to carrying out the duties of secretary, is responsible for standardising and communicating the application of the criteria between the various review panels in order to ensure maximum coherency and consistency in decision-making. The post of secretary is filled by a technical expert from within the Agency. The secretaries of the various review panels use on-line resources so they can share the use and application, for example, of the QA criteria.

Evidence

-  [Appeals procedure in the quality assurance of university teaching staff \(p. 3\)](#)
-  [Guidelines for the development of the VSMA Framework \(ex-ante accreditation, monitoring, modification and accreditation of recognised qualifications\)](#)
-  [Meta-evaluation of the ex-ante assessment, monitoring and modification processes](#)
-  [Pool of reviewers](#)
-  [Review methodologies](#)
-  [Structure of the review panels](#)

2.4 Processes fit for purpose

STANDARD

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

GUIDELINES

Quality assurance agencies within the EHEA undertake different external processes for different purposes and in different ways. It is of the first importance that agencies should operate procedures which are fit for their own defined and published purposes.

Experience has shown, however, that there are some widely-used elements of external review processes which not only help to ensure their validity, reliability and usefulness, but also provide a basis for the European dimension to quality assurance.

Amongst these elements the following are particularly noteworthy:

- a) insistence that the experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;
- b) the exercise of care in the selection of experts;
- c) the provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts;
- d) the use of international experts;
- e) participation of students;
- f) ensuring that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached;
- g) the use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review;
- h) recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality.

AQU compliance

QA methodology at AQU Catalunya is based on the criteria established in the ESG, the official regulatory frameworks and objectives set by AQU Catalunya, in agreement with the representatives of the higher education system in Catalonia.

The European model of quality assurance in higher education (self-evaluation, site visits, review and follow-up reports) applies in all external QA processes carried out by AQU Catalunya. The most recent example of the application of this model is the implementation of the VSMA Framework, which includes the validation of new designs for programmes, annual monitoring after they are introduced, the evaluation of modifications (with enhancements or corrective measures) and lastly accreditation (with a site visit to the institution), following on from which a new review cycle starts. There is also a fitness of purpose between the review procedures proposed by the Agency in the programme and the objectives, which enables results and conclusions that are drawn to be based on objective evidence.

AQU Catalunya disseminates the reports on each QA process via the Agency's website.

Members of the external review panels are selected by the Agency's main QA bodies on the basis of pre-defined profiles that comply with the nature and objectives of the review processes. Panels that review programmes of study and institutions are usually made up of five experts,

two of whom are leading academics, preferably from outside the higher education system in Catalonia, there is one member with a professional or industry background, one student and one expert in quality assurance, who is usually an Agency staff member and carries out the duties of the secretary of the review panel. Given the idiosyncrasies of activities concerning the quality assurance and assessment of teaching staff, the profile of review panel members is laid down by legislation (Catalan Universities Act).

In accordance with the ESG, AQU Catalunya includes external experts in its QA processes. These experts are individuals of renowned standing in academic and/or professional circles and students, and are selected on the basis of independence, objectivity and no-conflict-of-interest.

Given the availability of ICT, the restricted availability of reviewers and their different levels of experience in the type of processes carried out by AQU Catalunya can now be dealt with easily and effectively online as reviewers no longer always need to be physically present.

AQU Catalunya uses a blended training model, the first part of which is distance learning-based whereas attendance is necessary in the second part, with training revolving around practical cases based on reports to be examined.

This is all dealt with in the Training section of the AQU Catalunya website. Reviewers who participate in QA processes are assessed by the Agency both before and afterwards in order to verify their competence.

Evidence

-  [Guidelines for the development of the VSMA Framework \(ex-ante accreditation, monitoring, modification and accreditation of recognised qualifications\)](#)
-  [Pool of reviewers](#)
-  [Training of experts](#)

2.5 Reporting

STANDARD

Reports should be published and written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

GUIDELINES

In order to ensure maximum benefit from external quality assurance processes, it is important that reports should meet the identified needs of the intended readership.

Reports are sometimes intended for different readership groups and this will require careful attention to structure, content, style and tone.

In general, reports should be structured to cover description, analysis (including relevant evidence), conclusions, commendations, and recommendations. There should be sufficient preliminary explanation to enable a lay reader to understand the purposes of the review, its form, and the criteria used in making decisions. Key findings, conclusions and recommendations should be easily locatable by readers.

Reports should be published in a readily accessible form and there should be opportunities for readers and users of the reports (both within the relevant institution and outside it) to comment on their usefulness.

AQU compliance

External reports on programmes of study and institutions following review by AQU Catalunya are published on the Agency's website:

- Pre-2008 reports on pre-Bologna programmes (prior to adaptation in accordance with EHEA guidelines).
- Post-Bologna reports (i.e. following the adaptation of programmes in compliance with EHEA guidelines), from 2008 onwards. All of these reports can be consulted via the search engine in the section of the website by entering either the name of the degree/qualification, branch of knowledge or university, and details are provided on each programme of study. A description of each programme is also available. Reports drawn up by faculties, schools and universities are also available.

Concerning reports on the validation, monitoring, modification and accreditation of degree programmes, the level of visibility of issued reports is specified in a CAR white paper, and they all are public in principle with the reasoned exception of two cases. The first exception refers to negative validation reports, which only affect proposals for programmes that are unsuccessful and do not go on to be introduced or taught. The second refers to evaluations by the Agency of the programme monitoring reports drawn up every year by the universities for each study programme. This process only began in 2011 and the reports were not made public because only a limited number of reports (300 out of the 1,000 that were running) were drawn up, using a limited series of quantitative indicators with a lack of homogeneity in the data. A second reason is that the procedures set out in the VSMA do not envisage the assessment of each and every monitoring report (approximately 1,000 every year), but only a significant sample that is sufficient for an assessment to be made of how this process is developed in each university (just over 100 reports out of the 300 issued have been evaluated this current academic year, and a similar or larger number is envisaged for next year). All university reports are public. As

described in the Guide to the monitoring of recognised Bachelor and Master's programmes, these reports set out a comprehensive picture of the monitoring of university study programmes, taking into account the different sources of information used for monitoring, which include the available public information, reports on programme and institutional monitoring and in particular the evaluation reports issued by the Agency's specific review panels.

Reports on QA processes involving university teaching staff are not made public as teaching staff are natural persons and, as such, the Agency is required to comply with the regulations on personal data protection. The Agency does however publish the aggregate outcomes of these processes.

Reports published by AQU Catalunya are concise and include preliminary references to the process, assessment of the outcomes according to the review criteria, and enhancement recommendations. Reports are written in a style that is clear and readily accessible to the intended readership. The language and style used in the reports on all programmes are made consistent by the review panel secretaries through the use of online resources and specific meetings.

Evidence

- ▶ [Outcomes of teaching staff QA processes](#)
- ▶ [Pre-Bologna review activities](#)
- ▶ [Review reports on the higher education system in Catalonia](#)

2.6 Follow-up procedures

STANDARD

Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

GUIDELINES

Quality assurance is not principally about individual external scrutiny events: It should be about continuously trying to do a better job. External quality assurance does not end with the publication of the report and should include a structured follow-up procedure to ensure that recommendations are dealt with appropriately and any required action plans drawn up and implemented. This may involve further meetings with institutional or programme representatives. The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged.

AQU compliance

Although the Agency has carried out follow-up procedure in some of the programmes it has developed, it was not until the implementation of the VSMA Framework that follow-up procedures began to be addressed in a continuous and extensive way for all programmes of study at Catalan universities.

The VSMA Framework has established a cyclical cycle whereby review processes, including internal review by the universities and external review by the Agency, ensure the implementation of a continuous process of improvement and enhancement in Catalan universities in the following way:

- During the validation of new programme proposals, AQU Catalunya draws up reports that include recommendations to be taken into account by both internal and external review panels. AQU Catalunya's review panels may make positive assessment conditional on the university making changes to the new programme proposal on the basis of recommendations that have been made.
- All enhancement proposals or corrective measures called for by AQU Catalunya must have been incorporated by the time of monitoring. In addition, and following on from the monitoring of how the course is running, the academic managers of the programme must have made an analysis and, as a result, proposed improvements and/or enhancements to the programme. The resulting reports, together with those issued by the Agency, are considered by the external review panels in the following stages.
- In the modification process, any changes that may affect the official registration of the qualification (with the RUCT register) and that require a favourable report from the Agency in order to be introduced are submitted. Any changes to a degree or qualification are taken into account in the programme accreditation process.
- In the accreditation process, any changes in the programme from the time of its introduction are verified, bearing in mind the improvements and enhancements made as a result of validation, monitoring, modification and accreditation. The outcome of the site visit is another factor to be taken into account in the accreditation process.

The four stages of the VSMA Framework, which take place cyclically (every four years in the case of Master's programmes, and every six years for Bachelor's and doctoral programmes), ensure that recommendations are reviewed and also implemented.

Evidence

- ▶ [Accreditation programme](#)
- ▶ [Assessment of merits in teaching programme \(2003-present day\)](#)
- ▶ [Ex-ante assessment programme](#)
- ▶ [Modification programme](#)
- ▶ [Monitoring programme](#)
- ▶ [VSMA Framework for the ex-ante assessment, monitoring, modification and accreditation of degree programmes \(2010-present day\)](#)

2.7 Periodic reviews

STANDARD

External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

GUIDELINES

Quality assurance is not a static but a dynamic process. It should be continuous and not “once in a lifetime”. It does not end with the first review or with the completion of the formal follow-up procedure. It has to be periodically renewed. Subsequent external reviews should take into account progress that has been made since the previous event. The process to be used in all external reviews should be clearly defined by the external quality assurance agency and its demands on institutions should not be greater than are necessary for the achievement of its objectives.

AQU compliance

To reiterate the description given on the previous standard, AQU Catalunya has established a cyclical cycle of continuous review in which programmes of study are accredited for a period of six years, for Bachelor's and doctoral programmes, and four years in the case of Master's programmes. Both the duration of these cycles, which are laid down by legal regulations, and the review procedures are public and take into account advances made in previous reviews.

In order to make it easier for higher education institutions to provide the necessary information in the processes involving programme monitoring and accreditation, procedural simplifications were made to:

- The annual programme monitoring reports that universities are required to issue.
- The site visit, which is now grouped according to faculties and schools.
- The accreditation processes (the methodology is in process of being designed).

Given the particular characteristics of the quality assurance of teaching staff, the assessment of merits in teaching complies with this standard through the three-yearly cyclical accreditation of the teaching assessment handbooks.

Evidence

- ▶ [Assessment of merits in teaching programme \(2003-present day\)](#)
- ▶ [Ex-ante assessment programme](#)
- ▶ [Monitoring programme](#)
- ▶ [VSMA Framework for the ex-ante assessment, monitoring, modification and accreditation of degree programmes \(2010-present day\)](#)

2.8 System-wide analyses

STANDARD

Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments, etc.

GUIDELINES

All external quality assurance agencies collect a wealth of information about individual programmes and/or institutions and this provides material for structured analyses across whole higher education systems. Such analyses can provide very useful information about developments, trends, emerging good practice and areas of persistent difficulty or weakness and can become useful tools for policy development and quality enhancement. Agencies should consider including a research and development function within their activities, to help them extract maximum benefit from their work.

AQU compliance

AQU Catalunya periodically publishes reports with a description and analysis of the outcomes of its review activities, as well as studies and surveys dealing with specific aspects of the higher education system in Catalonia. All studies, surveys and reports by the Agency are available on the website.

The largest projects that the Agency is involved in are the graduate labour market outcomes (careers outcomes/graduate destination) survey and the follow-up indicators project:

- The purpose of the **labour market outcomes survey** is to establish, on the basis of objective data, the job situation of graduates from universities in Catalonia three years after having completed their studies. The main objective of the survey, which has so far been carried out four times, in 2001, 2005, 2008 and 2011, is to provide course leaders with data that are objective and comparable with data from other Catalan universities for use in analysing the running of programmes of study (monitoring indicators). Following on from the results of these surveys, the Agency has commissioned more in-depth studies on the subject, including the impact of gender on graduate labour market outcomes, the education-job match (the match between undergraduate studies and the requirements of the labour market), the demographic profile of the graduate population, etc.
- In order to promote a better understanding of the higher education system in Catalonia, the Agency is working on setting up a system of **monitoring indicators** that can be used by the universities to develop enhancement strategies and integrated in programme monitoring. This ambitious project, which is being carried out in collaboration with the universities and the Government of Catalonia, uses data on the higher education system in Catalonia from the UNEIX university information system, together with the data from graduate labour market outcomes survey. As the VSMA Framework is implemented, comprehensive reports on the system are also drawn up, in which analysis can be made of the overall and relative situation of each university using the follow-up indicators from the 2011-2012 academic year.

AQU Catalunya is also in the process of drafting reports on other matters, including:

- **System reports:** for a more in-depth study of a particular issue. These have included pre-Bologna review processes (prior to the adaptation of programmes in accordance with EHEA guidelines) and the quality assurance of university teaching staff. Particular mention is made here of the study currently under way on the curriculum pathways of university teaching staff in the Social Sciences and Humanities, which is based on the curricula submitted by teachers for assessment by the Agency. With more than 1,500 CVs analysed, the aim of the study is to establish QA benchmarks, to orientate the research careers of evaluatees and also guide future policies for the quality assurance of teaching staff in Catalan universities.
- **Studies:** support has been given for studies to be carried out on specific aspects of higher education in Catalonia, such as academic achievement and the university student drop-out rate, for the purpose of guiding public policy.

Evidence

- ▶ [Curriculum pathways of university teaching staff](#)
- ▶ [Graduate labour market outcomes in Catalonia](#)
- ▶ [Pre-Bologna review reports](#)
- ▶ [Publications](#)
- ▶ [Review reports on the higher education system in Catalonia](#)
- ▶ [Studies](#)
- ▶  [The public higher education system in Catalonia 2000-2005: from the perspective of quality assurance - AQU Catalunya \(2007\)](#)
- ▶  [University teaching staff in Catalonia: data for accreditation and recruitment policies, 2003-2006 \(2008\)](#)
- ▶ [Website with teaching indicators for programme development and analysis](#)

3. COMPLIANCE WITH THE ESG FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education

STANDARD

The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

GUIDELINES

The standards for external quality assurance contained in Part 2 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. The standards reflect best practices and experiences gained through the development of external quality assurance in Europe since the early 1990s. It is therefore important that these standards are integrated into the processes applied by external quality assurance agencies towards the higher education institutions.

The standards for external quality assurance should together with the standards for external quality assurance agencies constitute the basis for professional and credible external quality assurance of higher education institutions.

AQU compliance

The previous section describes how the standards in Part 2 of the ESG are implemented by AQU Catalunya and consequently how the Agency also takes them into account with regard to Part 3.

It should be noted that AQU Catalunya has an accumulated experience of over fifteen years of service in the quality assurance of higher education in Catalonia. It currently operates in accordance with a Strategic Plan, the details of which are set out in the Agency's annual Activities Plan that includes:

- Work coordinated with higher education institutions, which are consulted periodically through committees that deal with policy and technical aspects.
- The development of activities to disseminate a culture which recognises the importance and accountability of quality in higher education, such as specific workshops dealing with aspects connected with quality assurance, training sessions for people involved in internal and external review processes, etc.

- International action by the Agency in the form of participation and involvement in international networks such as ENQA and the ECA, methodology development and cooperation projects with other higher education systems.
- Constant development of AQU-specific methodologies and the publication of support materials on the website.
- Active participation on the part of the student body, not just as members of review panels, but also through specific training programmes and the setting up of a Student Commission.
- Advice to the universities and Catalan authorities, and
- Addressing the need for information on processes that promote the assurance and enhancement of quality. One example of this is the setting up of the Digital Library.

Evidence

- ▶ [Annual activities plan](#)
- ▶ [Annual Activities Report](#)
- ▶ [Experimental monitoring programme \(2009-2010\)](#)
- ▶ [Strategic Plan 2009-2012](#)
- ▶ [VSMA Framework for the ex-ante assessment, monitoring, modification and accreditation of degree programmes \(2010-present day\)](#)

3.2 Official status

STANDARD

Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

AQU compliance

AQU Catalunya is the main instrument for the promotion of quality assurance and the development of external review activities in the higher education system in Catalonia. Its primary objective is the assurance, accreditation and certification of quality in universities and higher education institutions in Catalonia (programmes of study, teaching staff, faculties and services).

AQU Catalunya is formally recognised as a QA agency and is a separate legal entity with a legal personality and patrimony of its own. It is a government-run public agency¹⁷ subject to private law that comes under the competent government department with jurisdiction over universities.

There is an existing legal framework that lays down the activities that AQU Catalunya can carry out, and the Agency complies with the requirements of the jurisdiction in which it operates. Its activities of quality assurance, accreditation and certification are considered to be administrative acts subject to public law and its safeguards.

The Government of Catalonia's Executive Council endorsed the draft bill dealing with AQU Catalunya in May 2010, the objective of which, amongst other things, is to give the Agency greater independency and flexibility. Six months later, the elections to the Parliament of Catalonia were brought forward and there was a change in government that resulted in the suspension of parliamentary proceedings dealing with the final passing of the bill. The new government has explicitly stated its intention to conclude the parliamentary procedure and definitively pass the AQU Catalunya Bill. According to the Director General for Universities, who, as a member of the AQU Board of Management, was present at the Board meeting held on 28 March 2012, the decision has been made by the government to resume the parliamentary proceedings concerning the AQU Catalunya Bill by the end of the year.

Evidence

-  [Current status of the parliamentary process dealing with the AQU Catalunya Bill \(p. 17, 135.c\)](#)
-  [Organisational chart of the competent department of the Government of Catalonia with jurisdiction over universities](#)
-  [The AQU Catalunya Bill](#)
-  [Law 1/2003, 19 February, on Universities in Catalonia \(Catalan Universities Act/LUC\) \(article 139\)](#)
-  [Law 4/1985, 29 March, on the Statute of Public Enterprise in Catalonia \[es\]](#)

¹⁷ It is a public agency run by the Government of Catalonia.

-  [Decree 93/2003, 1 April, on the Statutes of AQU Catalunya \(article 1\)](#)
-  [Decree 310/2011, 12 April, concerning the restructuring of the Ministry of Economy and Knowledge \(article 1.3.3\)](#)

3.3 Activities

STANDARD

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

GUIDELINES

These may involve evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities and should be part of the core functions of the agency.

AQU compliance

Since its inception, AQU Catalunya has regularly developed activities connected with external quality assurance at both institutional and programme level. More specifically, it has carried out the following:

In the case of institutional review, the following programmes: **Library services (1999 and 2007)**, **Assessment of merits in teaching (2003-present day)**, **AUDIT (2007-present day)** and **Affiliated institutions (2008-2010)**.

In the case of programme review, with regard to pre-Bologna qualifications, the **PRO-QU (1996-2006)** and **VIRTUAL (2007-2008)** programmes, and to test the conformity of qualifications adapted and aligned to comply with EHEA guidelines, the **Pilot Plan (review 2004-2006 and certification 2008-2009)**.

Lastly, in the case of qualifications (post-Bologna) fully aligned with the EHEA, the **Recognised Postgraduate Programmes (2006-2008)** and the **VSMA Framework (2010-present day)**.

The VSMA programme links together the various institutional and programme review processes in a coherent way. Following its implementation it has become the cornerstone of all of the Agency's external review activities. A cyclical approach to all review processes is used in the VSMA Framework, the basis of which is the continuous improvement and enhancement of programmes of study.

Evidence

- ▶ [Accreditation programme](#)
- ▶ [Affiliated institutions review programme \(2008-2010\)](#)
- ▶ [Annual activities plan](#)
- ▶ [Assessment of merits in teaching programme \(2003-present day\)](#)
- ▶ [AUDIT programme \(2007-present day\)](#)
- ▶ [Ex-ante assessment programme](#)
- ▶ [Experimental monitoring programme \(2009-2010\)](#)
- ▶ [Library services review programme \(1999 and 2007\)](#)
- ▶ [Modification programme](#)
- ▶ [Monitoring programme](#)
- ▶ [Pilot plan for the adaptation of degree programmes in line with EHEA guidelines \(review 2004-2006 and certification 2008-2009\)](#)
- ▶ [PRO-QU programme \(1996-2006\)](#)

- ▶ [Quality and security policy](#)
- ▶ [Recognised postgraduate degree review programme \(2006-2008\)](#)
- ▶ [Virtual programme \(2007-2008\)](#)
- ▶ [VSMA Framework for the ex-ante assessment, monitoring, modification and accreditation of degree programmes \(2010-present day\)](#)

3.4 Resources

STANDARD

Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.

AQU compliance

AQU Catalunya vouches for the technical expertise of both its in-house staff and external reviewers and the availability of economic resources to satisfactorily carry out its processes of external quality assurance.

The Agency's budget, which in 2011 was EUR 3.1 million, comes mostly from the budget of the Government of Catalonia. AQU Catalunya also receives revenue from national and international projects and assessment fees from the quality assurance of university teaching staff. In comparison with the start of 2010, its budget has been reduced by 10% to adjust to the context of economic and financial austerity that has affected the entire Catalan Administration. This reduction in funding has meant that greater efforts have been and continue to be required to optimise expenditure and focus resources on the Agency's QA activities. An approximate budget of EUR 3 million has been requested for 2012, bearing in mind the instructions of the Government of Catalonia's Executive Council.

The staff of AQU Catalunya is in-house trained, is qualified and has extensive experience. There are currently (2012) forty-three members of staff, nine more than in 2007. Most new recruitment since 2007 has been in the area of quality assurance. The Agency annually outlines and implements a training programme to upgrade the staff's skills and knowledge in relation to their assigned duties. In order to cover the Agency's short and medium-term requirements, in 2011 a training scheme was designed and organised with a specific policy and series of rules that will run for a period of four years (2011-2015). The policy is closely linked to the Agency's strategic vision and defines the main aspects of training. The series of rules also sets out the scope of training, together with a list of training actions envisaged for the current (calendar) year.

In addition to its in-house staff, forty-eight (48) experts also regularly collaborate with the Agency in the specific review panels that deal with the various subject areas according to which the CAQ is organised, together with ninety-three (93) experts who participate in the teaching staff assessment panels (CAR and CLiC). The Agency also has the support of a network of around two hundred (200) other experts. In 2011, AQU Catalunya produced approximately five hundred (500) review reports.

The Agency's QA activities are carried out through standing committees (CAQ, CAR and CLiC, which are permanent, and referred to as commissions) with their corresponding specific review panels, and *ad hoc* review panels specifically appointed for each QA project.

Reduced funding and limitations on recruiting new staff in 2012, as laid down in Law 1/2012, 22 February, (Finance Act) on the budgets of the Government of Catalonia for 2012, may affect implementation of the VSMA Framework. New formulae are thus needed to either increase the

revenue of AQU Catalunya or ultimately design a more gradual implementation of the VSMA Framework.

AQU Catalunya has sufficient technological infrastructure and materials to ensure the correct development of its processes and procedures.

Evidence

- ▶ [Annual Activities Report](#)
- ▶ [AQU Catalunya budget, 2011](#)
- ▶ [AQU Catalunya budget, 2012](#)
- ▶ [Economic audit, 2010](#)
- ▶ [Human resource management](#)
- ▶ [Staff organisational structure](#)
- ▶ [Training scheme. Training policy 2011-2015](#)
- ▶ [Training scheme. Training rules 2011-2015](#)

3.5 Mission statement

STANDARD

Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

GUIDELINES

These statements should describe the goals and objectives of agencies' quality assurance processes, the division of labour with relevant stakeholders in higher education, especially the higher education institutions, and the cultural and historical context of their work. The statements should make clear that the external quality assurance process is a major activity of the agency and that there exists a systematic approach to achieving its goals and objectives. There should also be documentation to demonstrate how the statements are translated into a clear policy and management plan.

AQU compliance

The legal framework establishes the objectives and functions of AQU Catalunya within the context of the higher education system in Catalonia. The Agency's Strategic Plan 2009-2012, which was endorsed by the Board of Management, defines the Agency's mission, the values according to which it operates, together with the strategic areas of priority. The Agency's vision of what it ultimately wants to achieve in each of these areas of priority is defined. The details of the Strategic Plan are set out in the annual Activities Plan, which is also endorsed by the Agency's Board of Management and is the instrument on which the projects and activities carried out by AQU Catalunya are based. There are six sections to the Activities Plan: 1. Quality assurance of programmes of study; 2. Quality assurance of teaching staff; 3. Knowledge generation; 4. Internationalisation; 5. Strategic management and communication; and 6. Internal organisation. At the end of the year, AQU Catalunya produces an Annual Activities Report in which the development of the Activities Plan is accounted for. This Annual Activities Report is also endorsed by the Board of Management.

With regard to the external quality assurance of programmes of study, as explained above, the Agency developed the VSMA Framework, which was then endorsed by the AQU Board of Management. The objectives and purpose of QA processes are set out more specifically in the Framework, together with the division of work between those involved in the processes.

With regard to the external quality assurance of university teaching staff, AQU Catalunya is leading the development of a Framework for the quality assurance of university staff policies. This framework will need to include the regulated pre-recruitment accreditation of teaching staff within a series of QA activities dealing with the different university activities that affect teaching staff, including doctoral and post-doctoral studies; the identification of specific teaching and research profiles; publication and announcement of vacant posts; selection criteria used by the recruitment panels; training for teaching, knowledge transfer and research; opportunities for professional advancement and enhancement; and retirement policies. This Framework will be joined with the VSMA Framework to underpin one of the main aspects to be taken into account in the quality assurance of a degree, i.e. teacher qualification.

With the approval and implementation of the Strategic Plan 2009-2012 and the VSMA Framework, AQU Catalunya has complied with the requirements of the external panel that reviewed the Agency in 2007.

Evidence

- ▶ [Annual activities plan](#)
- ▶ [Annual Activities Report](#)
- ▶ [!\[\]\(302e678fa8fdea8d71958ab3239fec82_img.jpg\) Decree 93/2003, 1 April, on the Statutes of AQU Catalunya \(articles 3, 4 and 5\)](#)
- ▶ [!\[\]\(535f1f007bc28a46ffad5268c31ad445_img.jpg\) Law 1/2003, 19 February, on Universities in Catalonia \(Catalan Universities Act/LUC\) \(article 140\)](#)
- ▶ [Strategic Plan 2009-2012](#)
- ▶ [VSMA Framework for the ex-ante assessment, monitoring, modification and accreditation of degree programmes \(2010-present day\)](#)

3.6 Independence

STANDARD

Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

GUIDELINES

An agency will need to demonstrate its independence through measures, such as:

- a) its operational independence from higher education institutions and governments is guaranteed in official documentation (e.g. instruments of governance or legislative acts);
- b) the definition and operation of its procedures and methods, the nomination and appointment of external experts and the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence;
- c) while relevant stakeholders in higher education, particularly students/learners, are consulted in the course of quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agency.

AQU compliance

The technical independence of the QA commissions and panels that carry out the reviews made by the Agency in their respective fields and are responsible for approving AQU reports on external QA processes, is recognised under the Catalan Universities Act. This operational independence is also incorporated into the statutes, the internal QA system and the Code of Ethics, which applies to all staff who work in and for the Agency. The QA commissions therefore have the ultimate responsibility for the outcomes of the reviews that they carry out. AQU Catalunya has the authority to plan, organise and establish QA criteria and procedures and issue value judgments, in accordance with the regulations, with total independence from the universities and policy makers.

In order to comply with the recommendations made as a result of the previous external review of AQU Catalunya by ENQA at the end of 2008, the Agency, within the framework of a technical committee made up of academics from different universities, analysed the challenges for the future and studied the running and structure of other leading agencies in Europe, with the aim of revising certain aspects that needed to be modified. A proposal was submitted to the competent government department with jurisdiction over universities, which decided to initiate the drawing up of a draft bill for the reform of AQU Catalunya. New developments in the draft bill are as follows:

- Total integration of the QA bodies into the structure of the Agency to avoid any potential dysfunctions.
- Greater independence and autonomy relative to the universities and Catalan authorities, in that constitution of the QA bodies lies with the Agency, thereby enhancing the assurance of solvency, transparency and rigour in their activities.
- A reduction in the number of members on the Board of Management, from twenty-eight (28) to sixteen (16), with greater diversity that, in addition to the presence of rectors and the chairpersons of the Boards of Trustees, includes students, scientists, academics and individuals from Catalan society.

Although the parliamentary proceedings regarding this legislation were blocked by the last elections to the Parliament of Catalonia in 2010, which resulted in a change of government, this legislative initiative led the way to the Agency focusing more on change in terms of dealing with the international recommendations that had been made to it. The present government has explicitly stated its commitment to review as soon as possible the modifications to AQU Catalunya along the lines explained above. According to the Director General for Universities, who, as a member of the AQU Board of Management, was present at the Board meeting held on 28 March 2012, the decision has been made by the government to resume the parliamentary proceedings concerning the AQU Catalunya Bill by the end of the year.

Evidence

-  [Code of ethics \(2008\)](#)
-  [Current status of the parliamentary process dealing with the AQU Catalunya Bill \(p. 17, 135.c\)](#)
-  [The AQU Catalunya Bill](#)
-  [Law 1/2003, 19 February, on Universities in Catalonia \(Catalan Universities Act/LUC\) \(Preamble and article 148\)](#)
-  [Decree 93/2003, 1 April, on the Statutes of AQU Catalunya \(articles 5.3 and 17.5\)](#)

3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies

STANDARD

The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:

- a) a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;
- b) an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;
- c) publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;
- d) a 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.

GUIDELINES

Agencies may develop and use other processes and procedures for particular purposes.

Agencies should pay careful attention to their declared principles at all times, and ensure both that their requirements and processes are managed professionally and that their conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even though the decisions are formed by groups of different people.

Agencies that make formal quality assurance decisions or conclusions which have formal consequences should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of each agency.

AQU compliance

As described above, the QA processes that are designed by AQU Catalunya uphold the spirit of the EHEA and are based on processes involving self-evaluation, a subsequent external review by a panel of experts, publication of a final report and a follow-up procedure to evaluate proposed enhancement measures.

The methodologies designed by the Agency are aligned with the purpose and objectives of reviews, at the same time that they serve as professional orientation for the people who participate in internal and external review processes, so that ensuing conclusions and decisions are the result of a coherent and consistent method of work. There has been a gradual increase over the last five years in the number of experts from the higher education system in Catalonia who have participated in the Agency's external review processes.

As has been made clear above, AQU Catalunya publishes the corresponding specific methodology for each review programme in due time, together with the procedures, criteria and members of the review panels. Once the process has been completed, it publishes the outcomes and review reports.

The Agency's review processes provide for an appeals procedure to facilitate inter-relationship between the review panels and units being evaluated. In the case of the processes set out in the VSMA Framework, interaction between the units being evaluated and the Agency takes place in an established way in each stage.

Given the particular characteristics of the quality assurance of teaching staff, self-evaluation is only provided for in the assessment of merits in teaching programme. The Agency has published the procedures, review criteria and the reviewers for all teaching staff-related review programmes. With regard to the dissemination of the outcomes of these processes, all review reports are subject to legislation regarding personal data protection, and only the publishing of aggregate results according to subject area and year is permitted.

Evidence

-  [Appeals procedure in the quality assurance of university teaching staff \(p. 3\)](#)
-  [Guidelines for the development of the VSMA Framework \(ex-ante accreditation, monitoring, modification and accreditation of recognised qualifications\) \(p. 11\)](#)
-  [Institutional and study programme review activities](#)
-  [Project-based work system](#)
-  [Quality assurance of university teaching staff \(2003-present day\)](#)
-  [Quality management and information security system](#)

3.8 Accountability procedures

STANDARD

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

GUIDELINES

These procedures are expected to include the following:

1. A published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself, made available on its website;
2. Documentation which demonstrates that:
 - a) the agency's processes and results reflect its mission and goals of quality assurance;
 - b) the agency has in place, and enforces, a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts;
 - c) the agency has reliable mechanisms that ensure the quality of any activities and material produced by subcontractors, if some or all of the elements in its quality assurance procedure are subcontracted to other parties;
 - d) the agency has in place internal quality assurance procedures which include an internal feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from its own staff and council/board); an internal reflection mechanism (i.e. means to react to internal and external recommendations for improvement); and an external feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from experts and reviewed institutions for future development) in order to inform and underpin its own development and improvement.
3. A mandatory cyclical external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years.

AQU compliance

AQU Catalunya was the first European QA agency to implement an ISO 9001-based internal QA system in 2000. Since then, a cyclical review of the system has been made every year, including both an internal and external audit. The external audit is carried out by a duly certified audit firm from outside the Agency once every three years in which an analysis is made of the enhancements that have been introduced in order to maintain ISO certification validity. No nonconformities were detected in the last two external audits of the system, which attests to the robustness of the quality management system deployed in the Agency.

Information quality and security are strategic aspects of the continuous enhancement of the activities developed by the Agency. In 2011, the Board of Management accordingly revised and supplemented the Agency's quality policy with information security; AQU Catalunya accordingly now has a quality and information security policy.

The commitments of AQU Catalunya to quality comprise:

- The external review of the Agency in accordance with the European standards for quality assurance, with the objectives of accountability regarding development of the ESG in Catalonia and the enhanced development of the Agency's functions.
- The internal quality management system based on ISO 9001, the internationally recognised standard for quality management.

The Agency's commitments to information security comprise:

- Adoption of the necessary measures to ensure the security of information, aimed at protecting the interests and rights of users of the Agency's services.
- Compliance with the prevailing legislation concerning personal data protection, copyright (both intellectual and industrial) and other rights applicable to the Agency's activities.
- Establishing conditions of trust in the use of electronic media and provision on a continuous basis of services through information systems that comply with prevailing legislation and current security standards.

The internal management system consists of a handbook and a series of procedures that is regularly updated by the Quality and Information Security Committee and the Agency's QA unit. The management carries out an annual review of the system's operation, with account being taken of the internal satisfaction of:

- Staff.
- Governing bodies (Board of Management).
- QA bodies (CAQ, CLiC and CAR commissions and *ad hoc* review panels).

Account is also taken of the external satisfaction of people, institutions and users in general:

- Higher education institutions: vice-rectories (subject areas), heads of university quality units, secretaries to the boards of trustees, etc.
- Faculty and programme managers.
- Teachers.
- Participants in workshops and sessions.
- Students and others.
- Users in general.

The instruments for measuring user satisfaction include:

- **Meetings:** AQU Catalunya uses the minutes of meeting as the main instrument for measuring user satisfaction.
- **Satisfaction surveys,** carried out at specific times according to the requirements of each group or project.
- **Users' complaints,** which can be sent either to the special mail-box on the website or by e-mail.
- **Direct communication with the users,** in person or by telephone.

The statutes of AQU Catalunya lay down that the Agency must act with rigorously and objectively in its processes and in accordance with quality and the principles of effectiveness and efficacy in management. The statutes also establish that the activities of the Agency shall be governed by the principle of transparency with regard to methods, criteria and findings in its accountability to society, with a communication and information policy that is objective and responsible. AQU Catalunya is accountable to the Parliament of Catalonia through its Annual Report and the annual economic and financial audit.

The conduct of people who work at and for the Agency must conform to the Code of Ethics, which is endorsed by the Board of Management, and the no-conflict-of-interests mechanism.

The AQU Catalunya website is the platform where the Agency describes the activities that it carries out, the QA and review criteria and procedures, reviewers, timetables and review outcomes.

For the more important external QA programmes, AQU Catalunya carries out meta-evaluation processes to analyse how they are running, detect weak and strong points and propose enhancement or corrective measures for future reviews. The most recent meta-evaluation dealt with the development of the validation, modification and monitoring processes carried out in 2011. In the area of university teaching staff, AQU has been carrying out applicant satisfaction surveys since 2009.

AQU Catalunya has upgraded internal communication on all levels regarding the development of its activities by setting in place the following coordination structure: monthly strategic management meetings, fortnightly coordination meetings, and meetings for the launching, monitoring and closure of projects. These instruments, which are all interrelated, make the Agency more flexible as information can be shared and analysed much faster. The use of a web platform for collaborating on documents and document management further enhances this process.

In order to demonstrate its accountability regarding development of the ESG in Catalonia and for the development and improvement of the Agency itself and its functions, AQU Catalunya undergoes a cyclical external review once every five years, which is coordinated by ENQA.

Evidence

- ▶ [Annual Activities Report](#)
- ▶ [Code of ethics \(2008\)](#)
- ▶ [Compliance with the ESG](#)
- ▶ [Decree 93/2003, 1 April, on the Statutes of AQU Catalunya \(articles 5.4, 5.6, 9.1 b\), 7.1 c\) and 27\)](#)
- ▶ [Internal meta-evaluations](#)
- ▶ [Outcomes of the university teaching staff surveys](#)
- ▶ [Project-based work system](#)
- ▶ [Quality and information security handbook](#)
- ▶ [Quality and security policy](#)
- ▶ [Quality management and information security system](#)
- ▶ [Workshop: Meta-evaluation of the ex-ante assessment, monitoring and modification processes](#)

4. ANNEX 1. EVIDENCES

Links to the AQU Catalunya website

- ▶ [Accreditation programme](#)
- ▶ [Affiliated institutions review programme \(2008-2010\)](#)
- ▶ [Annual activities plan](#)
- ▶ [Annual Activities Report](#)
- ▶ [Assessment of merits in teaching programme \(2003-present day\)](#)
- ▶ [AUDIT programme \(2007-present day\)](#)
- ▶ [Bimonthly online newsletter \(elButlletí\)](#)
- ▶ [Code of ethics \(2008\)](#)
- ▶ [Compliance with the ESG](#)
- ▶ [Curriculum pathways of university teaching staff](#)
- ▶ [Decree 93/2003, 1 April, on the Statutes of AQU Catalunya](#)
- ▶ [Ex-ante assessment programme](#)
- ▶ [Experimental monitoring programme \(2009-2010\)](#)
- ▶ [Graduate labour market outcomes in Catalonia](#)
- ▶ [Guidelines for the development of the VSMA Framework \(ex-ante accreditation, monitoring, modification and accreditation of recognised qualifications\) \[ca\]](#)
- ▶ [Institutional and study programme review activities](#)
- ▶ [Law 1/2003, 19 February, on Universities in Catalonia \(Catalan Universities Act/LUC\)](#)
- ▶ [Library services review programme \(1999 and 2007\)](#)
- ▶ [Modification programme](#)
- ▶ [Monitoring programme](#)
- ▶ [Organisational structure](#)
- ▶ [Outcomes of teaching staff QA processes](#)
- ▶ [Pilot plan for the adaptation of degree programmes in line with EHEA guidelines \(review 2004-2006 and certification 2008-2009\)](#)
- ▶ [Pool of reviewers](#)
- ▶ [Pre-Bologna review activities](#)
- ▶ [Pre-Bologna review reports](#)
- ▶ [PRO-QU programme \(1996-2006\)](#)
- ▶ [Publications](#)
- ▶ [Quality and security policy](#)
- ▶ [Quality assurance of university teaching staff \(2003-present day\)](#)

- ▶ [Recognised postgraduate degree review programme \(2006-2008\)](#)
- ▶ [Review methodologies](#)
- ▶ [Review reports on the higher education system in Catalonia](#)
- ▶ [Staff organisational structure](#)
- ▶ [Strategic Plan 2009-2012](#)
- ▶ [Structure of the review panels](#)
- ▶ [Studies](#)
- 📄 [The public higher education system in Catalonia 2000-2005: from the perspective of quality assurance - AQU Catalunya \(2007\) \[ca\]](#)
- ▶ [Training of experts](#)
- ▶ [University informative sessions and briefings on the VSMA Framework for the ex-ante assessment, monitoring, modification and accreditation of degree programmes](#)
- 📄 [University teaching staff in Catalonia: data for accreditation and recruitment policies, 2003-2006 \(2008\) \[ca\]](#)
- ▶ [Virtual programme \(2007-2008\)](#)
- ▶ [VSMA Framework for the ex-ante assessment, monitoring, modification and accreditation of degree programmes \(2010-present day\)](#)
- ▶ [Website with teaching indicators for programme development and analysis \[ca\]](#)
- ▶ [Workshop: Meta-evaluation of the ex-ante assessment, monitoring and modification processes](#)

Links to the [AQU Catalunya intranet \[ca\]](#)

- 📄 [Appeals procedure in the quality assurance of university teaching staff \(p. 3\)](#)
- ▶ [AQU Catalunya budget, 2011](#)
- ▶ [AQU Catalunya budget, 2012](#)
- 📄 [Current status of the parliamentary process dealing with the AQU Catalunya Bill \(p. 17, 135.c\)](#)
- ▶ [Economic audit, 2010](#)
- 📄 [Human resource management](#)
- ▶ [Internal meta-evaluations](#)
- ▶ [Meta-evaluation of the ex-ante assessment, monitoring and modification processes](#)
- ▶ [Outcomes of the university teaching staff surveys](#)
- ▶ [Project-based work system](#)
- 📄 [Quality and information security handbook](#)
- ▶ [Quality management and information security system](#)
- 📄 [The AQU Catalunya Bill](#)
- 📄 [Training scheme. Training policy 2011-2015](#)
- 📄 [Training scheme. Training rules 2011-2015](#)

External links [ca, es]

- ↔ [Decree 310/2011, 12 April, concerning the restructuring of the Ministry of Economy and Knowledge \(article 1.3.3\)](#)
- ↔ [Law 1/2012, 22 February, \(Finance Act\) on the budget of the Government of Catalonia for 2012](#)
- ↔ [Law 4/1985, 29 March, on the Statute of Public Enterprise in Catalonia](#)
- ↔ [Organisational chart of the competent department of the Government of Catalonia with jurisdiction over universities](#)

5. ANNEX 2. ACRONYMS

ACSUG	Agency for Quality Assurance in the Galician University System
ANECA	National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain
AQU	Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency
CAQ	Quality Assurance Commission, AQU Catalunya
CAR	Research Assessment Commission, AQU Catalunya
CLiC	Comission that deals with junior lecturer and auxiliary teaching staff, AQU
ECA	European Consortium for Accreditation
EHEA	European Area of Higher Education
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
IQAS	Internal quality assurance system
LOMLOU	Organic Law 4/2007, 12 April, which amended Organic Law 6/2001, 21 December, on universities in Spain
LOU	Organic Law 6/2001, 21 December, on universities in Spain
LUC	Law 1/2003, 19 February, on universities in Catalonia (Catalan Universities Act)
REACU	Spanish Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
RUCT	Spanish Register of Higher Education Institutions and Programmes
VSMA	Validation, monitoring, modification and accreditation



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