



AQU CATALUNYA

# INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM CERTIFICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS PROCEDURE

© Author: Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya, 2023  
C. d'Enric Granados, 33  
08007 Barcelona

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Procedure comes into effect: starting from the call for visits in 2024.

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## SUMMARY

<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1. Procedure scope.....	5
1.2. Procedure structure .....	6
<b>2. CERTIFICATION EFFECTS AND RESULT .....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1. Certification effects.....	6
2.2. Certification result.....	7
<b>3. ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE .....</b>	<b>9</b>
3.1. Planning.....	9
3.2. Request for certification and documentation to be submitted .....	9
3.3. Composition of the External Assessment Committee (CAE) .....	10
3.4. Assessment .....	11
3.5. Decision .....	13
3.6. Issuing reports and communicating certification.....	14
3.7. Appeals.....	15
3.8. Flowchart .....	15
<b>4. PUBLICATION AND SEALS .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>5. MONITORING AND CONTINUOUS ENHANCEMENT .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>ANNEX I. IQAS CROSS-CUTTING PROCESSES .....</b>	<b>19</b>
1. Overview of the assessment process for cross-disciplinary aspects at higher education institutions (HEIs)	19
2. Renewing the validity of the favourable assessment of the IQAS cross-disciplinary features .....	19
<b>ANNEX II. CHANGE LOG .....</b>	<b>22</b>



## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG),<sup>1</sup> higher education institutions must have a policy and associated procedures to ensure the quality and standards of their education programmes.

The external assessment body responsible for processing the quality assurance procedures in the Catalan Higher Education System is the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU Catalunya). This function is exercised by the Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP) (CAIP) and its specific assessment commissions.

Internal quality assurance systems (IQAS) are important and their influence on the higher education institutions is also reflected in the requirements set out in the various regulations governing university education. Thus, the regulatory framework for the implementation of new Bachelor's, Master's and Phd/doctoral degrees requires these degrees to have an IQAS in place, the design of which is assessed in the verification phase.

The IQAS implementation certification is one of the prerequisites for the centres to be eligible for institutional accreditation.

Moreover, in-house training, and especially lifelong learning Master's degrees, must also be managed by an IQAS, as a favourable report issued by this system is required for their implementation.

The purpose of the IQAS implementation certification assessment is to check that it is effectively implemented and deployed in the centre responsible for the provision of the study programmes included in its scope, and also that it is suitable for quality assurance.

### 1.1. Procedure scope

This procedure is applicable to the IQAS implementation certification of university higher education centres, such as faculties, university schools, doctoral schools, university departments, centres attached to public and private universities, and centres that offer lifelong learning Master's degrees.

The degrees included in this procedure scope are Bachelor's degrees, University Master's degrees, PhDs and Master's degrees in lifelong learning. Other study programmes can also

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<sup>1</sup> European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education et al., [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\)](#) (Brussels: ENQA, ESU, USA, EURASHE, 2015).

be included in the management system's scope, such as specialisation diplomas, expert diplomas and micro-credentials, among others.

This procedure does not apply to the higher artistic education IQAS certification.

Table 1 presents the details of the assessment guide where this procedure is applied.

Table 1. Applicable procedure assessment guide

Assessment guide	Centres	Study programmes
<a href="#">Guide to IQAS certification in higher education institutions</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Faculties</li> <li>- University schools</li> <li>- Phd/Doctoral schools</li> <li>- University departments</li> <li>- Centres attached to public and private universities</li> <li>- University centres that offer life-long Master's degrees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bachelor's degree</li> <li>- University Master's degree</li> <li>- Phd/doctoral programme</li> <li>- Life-long Master's degree</li> <li>- Specialisation diploma</li> <li>- Expert diploma</li> <li>- Micro-credentials</li> <li>- Others</li> </ul>

## 1.2. Procedure structure

This document is divided into the following sections: certification effects and result, the assessment procedure itself, the publication of assessment reports and seals, and finally, how monitoring and continuous enhancement will be carried out. In addition, the IQAS cross-cutting process certification and the change log of the assessment procedure can be found in the annexes of the document.

This guide to IQAS certification and the assessment procedure form an integrated assessment model aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG, 2015).

## 2. CERTIFICATION EFFECTS AND RESULT

### 2.1. Certification effects

IQAS certification in higher education centres is **valid for six years**. IQAS certification renewal forms part of the process of renewing the institutional accreditation. If during the period of validity of the certification the centre is not institutionally accredited, the centre must renew its IQAS certification.

Centres that have IQAS implementation certification and have accredited at least 50% of their Bachelor's degrees, 50% of their Master's and 50% of their Phd/doctoral programmes may opt for institutional accreditation.

Centres that have certified their IQAS and have not been institutionally accredited will be exempt from presenting the additional documentation relating to the quality assurance systems in the degree verification and accreditation processes.<sup>2</sup>

In the event that the institution implements any change in the nature of the study centre that may affect the scope or validity of the certificate, this change must be specified in the management system review report and must be notified to AQU Catalunya so that the Agency can assess the continued validity of the certificate.

The Specific Institutional Assessment Commission (CEAI) reserves the right to modify its scope, suspend or revoke certification when:

- > Changes occur that substantially and irreversibly alter the conditions under which the IQAS was certified.
- > The certificate is used inappropriately.

## 2.2. Certification result

The result of the certification will be expressed as **favourable** or **unfavourable**.

For **favourable** IQAS implementation certification, all elements assessed must have advanced or at least sufficient implementation. Elements with partial implementation, meaning that one or more standards have been assessed as insufficient, would lead to an **unfavourable** IQAS implementation certification.

Assessment elements results are structured in three levels (advanced implementation, sufficient implementation and partial implementation), which determine how well the processes and procedures of the element are implemented (see Table 2). The degree of element implementation will be assessed in its entirety once all the standards have been assessed.

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<sup>2</sup> Centres that do not comply with the percentage of accredited degrees to be institutionally accredited, according to Royal Decree 640/2021.

Table 2. Applicable criteria for defining the level of process and procedure implementation in certification elements

Level	Applicable criteria
<b>Advanced implementation</b>	The processes linked to the element have been implemented in the centre, they are complete and efficient and, in addition, there are examples of best practice. All or most of its standards have been rated as satisfactory, and no standard has been rated as insufficient.
<b>Sufficient implementation</b>	The processes linked to the element have been implemented in an appropriate manner and are, in general, complete and efficient. Most of its standards have been rated as sufficient, and no standard has been rated as insufficient.
<b>Partial implementation</b>	The processes linked to the element have been implemented in an inadequate manner and aspects that must be improved are detected. There are standards that have been assessed as insufficient.

Each element is implemented in a series of standards that consider relevant aspects and on the basis of which an assessment must be issued. Each standard can be rated at three levels: satisfactory, sufficient and insufficient (see Table 3).

Table 3. Applicable criteria to define the level of achievement for each standard

Level	Applicable criteria
<b>Satisfactory</b>	The standard is fully achieved and there may be examples of best practice.
<b>Sufficient</b>	Compliance with the standard is evidenced, at least in the basic aspects. Enhancement areas that need to be incorporated into the IQAS enhancement plans can be identified, as well as recommendations.
<b>Insufficient</b>	Partial compliance with the standard is evidenced and aspects that must be improved are detected. Enhancement requirements must be identified.



The *IQAS certification guide* (see Table 1) defines a system of rubrics that relates the criteria to be assessed with their level of achievement. The rubrics make it possible to determine the level of achievement of each element and standard.

## 3. ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

### 3.1. Planning

AQU Catalunya and Catalan universities draw up an annual proposal to plan external site visits to institutions that will be subject to external review the following year. The universities will have to validate compliance with the previous conditions for participation described in the *IQAS certification guide* to be included in the planning proposal.

This planning includes the centres to be assessed and the semester in which the external certification visit will take place. This planning is submitted to the AQU Catalunya Governing Board for approval.

### 3.2. Request for certification and documentation to be submitted

In accordance with the provisions of ruling EMC/1310/2016, of May 12, Catalan higher education institutions will request the IQAS implementation certification from AQU Catalunya of the corresponding centres, which is compulsory before the external visit. The official application submission process is specified on the [AQU Catalunya website](#). When AQU Catalunya receives the request, the Agency has a maximum period of six months to resolve it.

**Two months before the visit** of the external assessment committee (CAE) to the centre, the institution must provide the following documentation associated with the IQAS implementation:

- a. **Quality policies and objectives** of the centre or higher education institution, included in a strategic plan, master plan, annual management plan or similar, which has been presented, approved, published and made available to the institution's stakeholders.
- b. **Process management system in place.** This system must contain the process map implemented in the centre, with the description, the people in charge, the stakeholders affected in each process and the description of the set of procedures involved in each process.
- c. **The set of documentation necessary to carry out each process together with those generated in its performance, including the process review reports and the**

**documentation that may be generated by external or internal university agents (syllabus reports, accreditation self-reports, annual reports, etc.).**

- d. **The key and strategic indicators** linked to the processes of the management system and the strategic plan of the centre (or similar), the objectives or milestones established for each indicator and the results obtained.
- e. **The management system review report**, where all aspects related to each process are comprehensively analysed (persons in charge, regulations, documentation, records and results of the management carried out, etc.).
- f. **The enhancement action plan** to achieve established goals and correct deviations from internal and external review processes.

### 3.3. Composition of the External Assessment Committee (CAE)

Peer review is one of the factors that contribute to guaranteeing the validity, reliability and usefulness of external assessment processes. Assessments in certification processes are carried out by experts in committees, where the academic, institutional, professional and student viewpoints are represented.

AQU Catalunya has defined the [\*Profiles and requirements to participate in the degree, institutional, teaching and appeals assessment processes\*](#). This document sets out the requirements that peer reviewers must meet at AQU Catalunya, the selection criteria and the general criteria for the composition of the assessment committees, among others.

The task of conducting the external assessment rests with the external assessment committees (CAE). AQU Catalunya reports on the composition of the CAE at the institution to indicate whether there is any conflict of interest with any of the persons appointed. Only in this case would a change of composition be made. Once the assessment has been carried out and the External Assessment Report has been issued, the CAE terminates its activity.

The standard composition of a CAE is as follows:

- > A president who has experience in quality assurance system assessment processes and, where appropriate, degree programmes, institutions or lecturers.
- > A professional member with experience in quality assurance systems or in degree or institutional assessment processes.
- > A student, preferably with experience in quality assurance systems.
- > A secretary who is an expert methodology. The secretary should preferably be a technician from a quality agency or a technical quality unit with experience in quality assurance systems and quality assessment of degree programmes, institutions or lecturers. By way of exception, this role may also be assumed by some of the experts in quality assurance systems.

## 3.4. Assessment

The assessment includes the phases described below:

### 3.4.1. Preliminary analysis

The CAE will carry out a preliminary analysis of the documentation and the evidence provided, in order to assess whether the set of information that evidences the IQAS implementation is available. In the case of detecting deficiencies or weaknesses in the quality or completeness of the documentation and evidence, they must be resolved before the external assessment visit.

### 3.4.2. Pre-visit

The main objective of the pre-visit is to ascertain the level of implementation of IQAS key features. The pre-visit will be organised online. The CAE will draw up a proposed schedule for the visit, which will be based on the template provided by AQU Catalunya and will include meetings with the institution's management team, the individuals in charge of the IQAS and the university's technical quality unit. The pre-visit will last for half a day.

After the pre-visit, the CAE will issue a report (pre-visit report) within a maximum period of one month. Based on the documentary evidence analysed and the information gathered during the pre-visit, the CAE may decide to continue with the external assessment process as originally planned. Should the CAE consider it appropriate to postpone the process, AQU Catalunya shall contact the university to establish a new schedule to be followed.

No later than one month prior to the visit, the institution shall submit the final documentation, which shall include, where applicable, a document responding to the requirements or request for additional documentation included in the pre-visit report.

### 3.4.3. Individual assessment

The CAE members will carry out an individual assessment, which involves the analysis of all the documentation submitted. They will also consider the results of the IQAS processes, especially those associated with the VSMA Framework, i.e. they will examine whether the verification reports, modifications, monitoring reports and accreditation self-reports generated over the last few years show sufficient quality and whether they have been created as part of a management system aimed at continuous enhancement. They will also analyse the centre's management report and its enhancement plan. The institution's public information and the data or indicators included in AQU Catalunya's EUC website are also aspects that the CAE shall also bear in mind in its assessment.

The CAE members shall use the rubrics set out in the *IQAS certification guide* to assess each standard, providing justification for their use.

#### **3.4.4. Visit**

The main objective of the external assessment visit is to ascertain the degree of IQAS implementation and operation *in situ* of the centre as a whole, and its capacity to guarantee the quality of the study programmes within the scope of the IQAS.

The external assessment visit will be organised as a face-to-face visit. Most assessment visits last an average of two days. The CAE will draw up a suggested visit schedule based on the template provided by AQU Catalunya. The centre may suggest some adjustment to the proposed schedule, which must be validated by the CAE. The visit schedule must allow the necessary information to be collected so that the CAE can carry out its assessment tasks.

The centre shall organise attendance at the various hearings previously agreed with the CAE. Hearings will be held with the faculty's management team, the faculty's quality assurance committee or equivalent body, the HEI's technical quality unit and the individuals responsible for processes and degree coordination, if they do not form part of the faculty's quality assurance committee. In addition, hearings shall be held with other stakeholders such as teaching staff, departmental management, students, graduates, administrative and service staff, etc. The CAE will decide whether they wish to visit the facilities.

During the hearings, the evidence provided will be compared and, if necessary, new evidence will be obtained to assess aspects that are not present in the documentation provided. Aspects that can be assessed as best practices, strengths, enhancement areas, recommendations and/or requirements will also be validated.

#### **3.4.5. External assessment report drafting (visit report)**

AQU Catalunya provides a template visit report to the CAE that the committee must follow.

The report may contain, in addition to the corresponding motivation, the following aspects:

> **Best practices**

Noteworthy aspects of the IQAS that can be transferred to other centres.

These are extraordinary aspects based on results or other evidence.

> **Requirements**

Aspects that are not properly implemented and that represent an insufficient assessment of the element or standard.

They may be subject to an appeal by the University.

> **Enhancement areas**

Aspects that have not yet been well implemented or are partially implemented, which must be resolved within a maximum period of three years, but which do not imply an insufficient assessment of the element or standard.

They may be subject to an appeal by the University.

> **Recommendations**

Suggestions to promote IQAS enhancement. Implementation of the recommendations is not mandatory.

They are not the subject of an appeal by the university.

In the first instance, the members of the CAE must agree on the content of the visit report, and subsequently the president of the committee validates the report. The draft of the visit report is sent to AQU Catalunya within a maximum period of **four weeks** (not including holiday periods) after the visit.

AQU Catalunya carries out a technical review to analyse the internal consistency of the visit report and the justification of the proposed assessment result. If necessary, you can ask the CAE for clarifications on the content of the report or to reinforce the justification of the proposed result.

Subsequently, AQU Catalunya will send the visit report to the university for review. **The university has fifteen calendar days to report possible factual errors<sup>3</sup>** identified in the visit report. In the event that the university reports factual errors, AQU Catalunya will send this information to the CAE, which will analyse them and revise the visit report whenever necessary. Subsequently, the visit report will be considered as the final version. On the other hand, if in this period the university does not report any factual errors to AQU Catalunya, the visit report sent will be considered the final version.

### 3.5. Decision

The Specific Institutional Assessment Committee (CEAI), created by agreement of AQU Catalunya's Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP), is responsible, among

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<sup>3</sup> Factual errors are those aspects that improve the accuracy of the facts or that are formulated in the face of serious misunderstandings. Universities cannot submit additional documentation at this time.

others, for issuing the IQAS certification reports of higher education centres. More information on the functions and composition of the assessment bodies can be found on the [AQU Catalunya website](#).

The CEAI will prepare the corresponding certification report based on the external assessment visit report prepared by the CAE. This report will be issued as favourable or unfavourable, and taking into account the criteria identified in section 2.2 (Certification result) in this document. It can also include best practices, requirements and/or enhancement areas, depending on each case.

In the decision, the CEAI can disagree with the assessments included in the external assessment visit report, setting out the reasons for doing so. The CEAI can ask the CAE for additional information, clarifications, and so on, before making its decision.

The institution may submit remarks in the pre-certification report, within twenty working days following the report's issuance, for the CEAI to take them into consideration. Once the remarks submitted, if any, have been assessed, the CEAI shall draw up the final certification report and a report in response to the remarks. In the event that the institution does not submit any remarks, the pre-certification report shall be considered as the final report.

The deadline for submitting remarks as described above does not apply to **centres with unfavourable provisional certification**. In these cases, the centre has a maximum period of **six months** to submit the corrective action plan and the corresponding evidence to show that the non-compliances observed have been addressed. Once the centre has submitted the new documentation, the CAE will assess it and issue a new visit report.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of this new visit report, the CEAI will draw up the final certification report, which will be issued as favourable or unfavourable.

### 3.6. Issuing reports and communicating certification

AQU Catalunya will jointly issue the external assessment visit report and the certification report. The certification report will be issued within a maximum period of six months from the date of the certification request.

Should the deadline for issuing the report be postponed, in accordance with the applicable regulations (article 22*d* of Law 39/2015, of 1 October, on the common administrative procedure for public administrations), the Agency will notify the university. Postponement may not exceed three months.

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<sup>4</sup> A visit may be scheduled during the assessment process of the requirements, if the CEAI deems it necessary. This visit will be conducted online and will last for half a day.

If the postponement of the maximum period for issuing the report is applied, the period for issuing the certification report cannot exceed nine months.

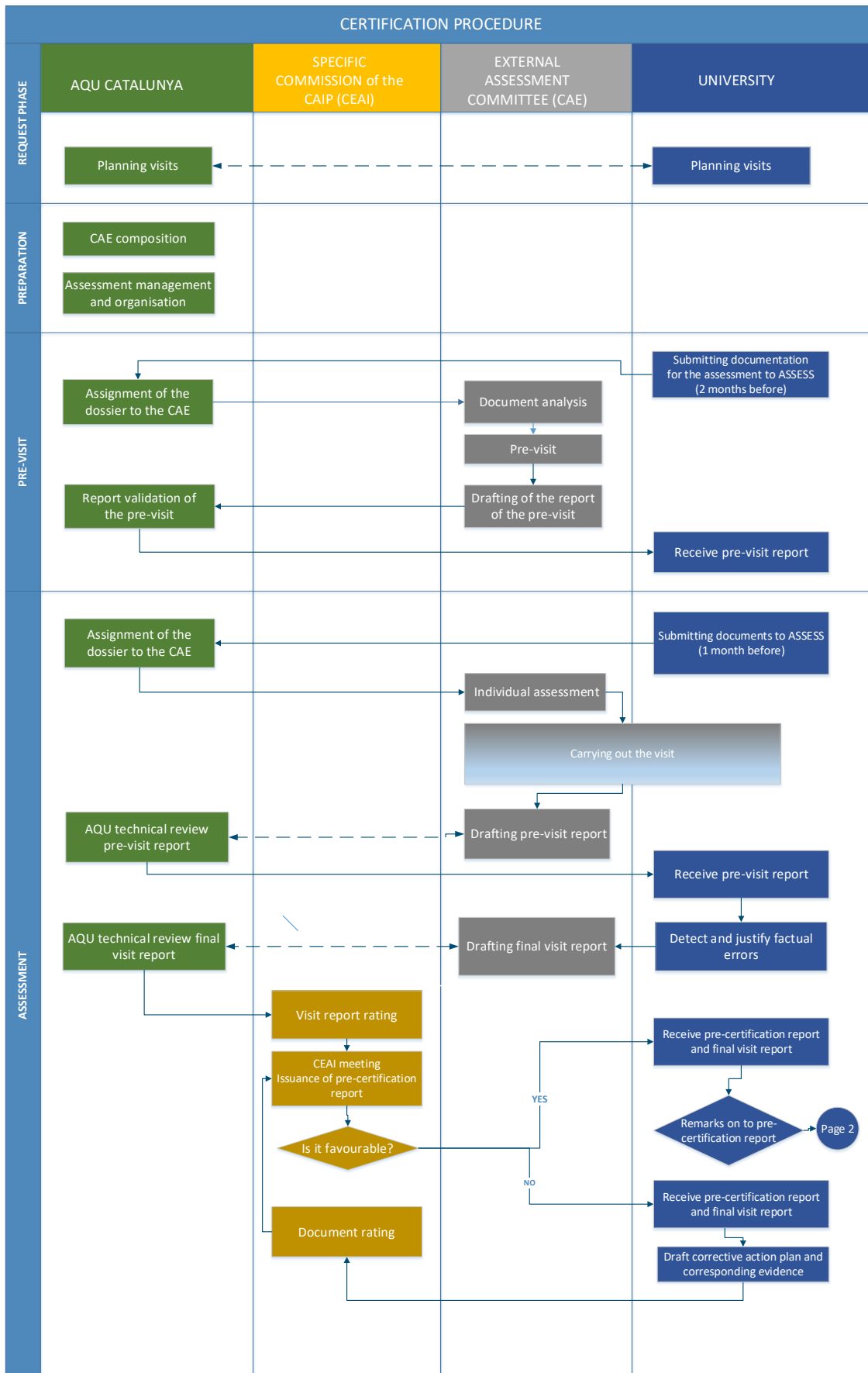
### 3.7. Appeals

The Appeals Commission is in charge of resolving appeals filed against the agreements of the Research Assessment Commission and the other evaluation, certification and accreditation commissions referred to in the article 11 of Law 15/2015, of 21 July 2015, of the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency. Its decisions exhaust administrative channels.

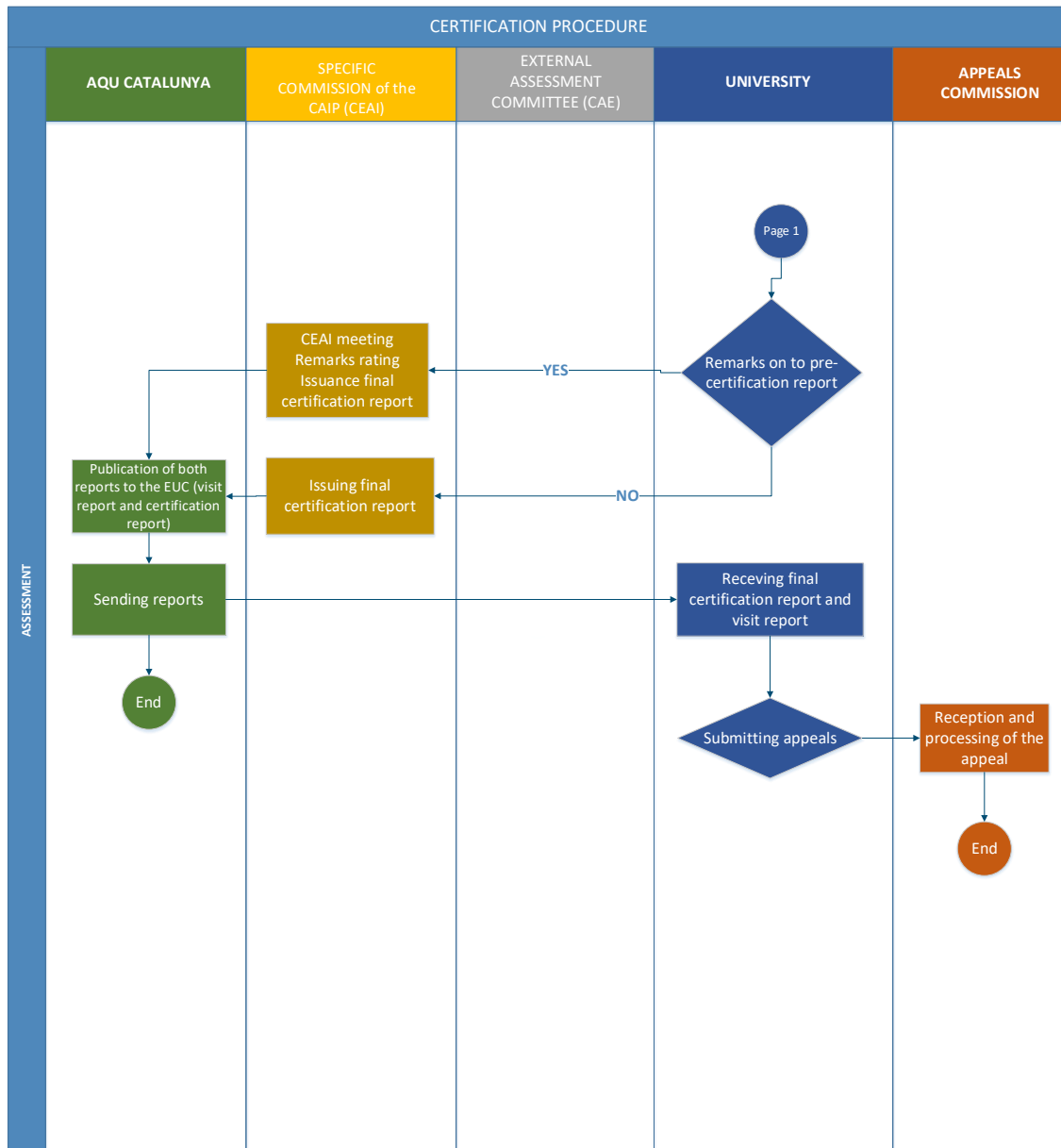
The [procedure](#) below is published on the AQU Catalunya website.

### 3.8. Flowchart

Below is the diagram of the assessment process for IQAS certification in higher education centres:







## 4. PUBLICATION AND SEALS

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

AQU Catalunya generates the [quality labels and certificates](#) for each assessment process, according to what was approved by the AQU Catalunya Governing Board. More information on seals and quality certificates can be consulted on the [University Studies of Catalonia website](#).

## 5. MONITORING AND CONTINUOUS ENHANCEMENT

As stated in the ENQA (2015) guideline for the standard associated with the application of assessment processes (ESG 2.3):

"External quality assurance does not end with the report by the experts. The report provides clear guidance for institutional action. Agencies have a consistent follow-up process for considering the action taken by the institution. The nature of the follow-up will depend on the design of the external quality assurance."

In keeping with this understanding and in view of the outcome of the IQAS certification, the objective of AQU Catalunya is to ensure that the institution addresses the areas that could be enhanced and that the capacity for enhancement is fostered.

During the certification validity period, the institute is responsible for the IQAS monitoring and continuous enhancement, in line with what is established in its internal management processes. To this end, the institute shall document the status of implemented enhancements by means of management system review reports. These reports shall also include the changes that have been introduced as a result of the enhancement actions established in the IQAS implementation certification report.

## ANNEX I. IQAS CROSS-CUTTING PROCESSES

### 1. Overview of the assessment process for cross-disciplinary aspects at higher education institutions (HEIs)

Where the HEI has cross-disciplinary processes in place in all its faculties and schools, AQU Catalunya will propose an ex-ante assessment of these processes.

The HEI shall define how far the cross-disciplinary nature of its processes, or parts thereof, that respond to each element of the guide should be taken into account.

In this way, if so agreed with the HEI, prior to the IQAS certification of the first institution that requests it, AQU Catalunya will appoint an external assessment committee (CAE) to assess the cross-disciplinary processes throughout the institution. The results of this assessment will subsequently be incorporated into the IQAS certification of each institution and the way in which the institution's IQAS and cross-disciplinary processes are interrelated will be assessed. Under no circumstances will the evaluation of the cross-disciplinary processes lead to a certification of the centre's management system.

The procedure to be followed will be broadly the same as for the IQAS certification of HEIs. The cross-disciplinary assessment shall be **valid for a maximum of six years**.

### 2. Renewing the validity of the favourable assessment of the IQAS cross-disciplinary features

Renewal of the favourable assessment of the IQAS cross-disciplinary features should help to reduce the evaluative pressure of the certification process of the centres' IQAS, to focus the institutional accreditation renewal process and, ultimately, to demonstrate full implementation and continuous improvement through an external evaluation process.

#### 2.1. Procedure scope and objective

This procedure only applies to renewing the validity of second and successive assessments of the IQAS cross-disciplinary features of HEIs that have a significant number of integrated institutions pending certification of the implementation of their IQAS and institutional accreditation.

This procedure aims to validate that the institution's IQAS cross-disciplinary features are still in place and comply with the requirements set out in the *IQAS certification guide*.

## 2.2. IQAS cross-disciplinary features renewal effects

Assessment renewal of the cross-disciplinary features shall be **valid for a maximum period of six years**.

## 2.3. Result

The result of the IQAS cross-disciplinary features will be expressed as **favourable** or **unfavourable**.

## 2.4. Evaluation procedure

The procedure to be followed will be broadly the same as for the IQAS certification of HEIs. The specifics that will need to be taken into account in this procedure are detailed below.

### 2.4.1. Documentation and evidence

**Two months before the visit of the external assessment committee (CAE)**, the institution must present the set of documentation and evidence that constitute the IQAS cross-disciplinary and that demonstrate that the system is still valid and complies with the provisions set out in the *IQAS certification guide*.

The set of documentation and evidence must refer to the period between the resolution of the initial approval of the cross-disciplinary features and the time of renewal. In general, the institution must deliver:

- a) The policies and quality objectives of the university, collected in a strategic plan, master plan, annual management plan or similar, which is approved and published.
- b) The process management system, which must contain the process map with its description, the people in charge, the stakeholders involved and the description of the set of procedures.
- c) The set of evidence and documentation generated in the implementation of the processes and procedures.
- d) The key and strategic indicators linked to the IQAS processes and the strategic plan (or similar), the objectives or goals established for each indicator and the results obtained.
- e) The IQAS review report, with a comprehensive analysis of all aspects related to each process.
- f) The enhancement action plan.

#### **2.4.2. External Assessment Committee (CAE)**

AQU Catalunya will ensure that the CAE includes at least one expert who participated in the last assessment process.

#### **2.4.3. Assessment**

In addition to validating that IQAS cross-disciplinary features of the institution are still in place and comply with what is established in the *IQAS certification guide*, the CAE will pay special attention to the following aspects:

- > Analysis of the actions that respond to the enhancement areas identified in the last external assessment process.
- > Analysis of the enhancement actions introduced by the institution as a result of the IQAS.

If during the assessment process the CAE detects shortcomings or weaknesses in the quality or completeness of the documentation, it may request additional information from the institution.

#### **2.4.4. Visit**

The specifics of the external assessment visit are described below:

- > No pre-visit is planned.
- > The external assessment visit will be organised as a face-to-face visit.
- > The external assessment visit will last a maximum of one day.
- > The CAE will interview the main stakeholder linked to the cross-disciplinary processes (involved vice-rectors, representatives of the university's quality committee, heads of the technical quality unit, etc.) and with a representation of managers of certified centre.

## ANNEX II. CHANGE LOG

The *Guide for Internal Quality Assurance System Implementation Certification* contained, until its sixth edition, the assessment procedure.

The *Guide for Internal Quality Assurance System Certification in Higher Education Institutions* (first edition 2023) does not include the assessment procedure, which is provided separately in this document.

The main changes that have been introduced in this edition are the following:

- > A section on the scope and structure of the procedure is included.
- > The sections are reordered.
- > The factual error review phase of the external assessment report (visit report) is separated from the remarks phase (degree report).
- > The concepts of *best practices*, *requirements*, *enhancement areas* and *recommendations* are redefined, standardising them with the rest of the degree and centre assessment processes.
- > 'And overview of the assessment process for cross-disciplinary aspects at higher education institutions (HEIs) is included.
- > A description of the renewal process of the cross-disciplinary features assessment of higher education institutions is included.

Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency

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