



FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCING THE INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY OF THE CATALAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM QUALINS FRAMEWORK



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INTRODUCTION

Background

AQU Catalunya is committed to defining the frameworks that set out the principles for assuring the quality and continuous improvement of higher education in the Catalan Higher Education System (HES). Until now, the VSMA Framework (specifically, the 2010 and 2016 versions¹) has been used to validate new teaching proposals, monitor their deployment, assess any modifications, and accredit study programmes on a cyclical basis.

During this period, universities have designed and implemented internal quality assurance systems that have contributed to the deployment of institutional accreditation and ultimately entail greater responsibility in terms of assuring the quality and continuous improvement of the training programmes they offer.

The introduction of institutional accreditation at universities appeared in an incipient form in the 2016 VSMA Framework, in the hope that the Catalan HES would move forward with the certification of internal quality assurance system (IQAS).

To date, the Catalan HES has made significant progress in the certification of IQAS and, consequently, in the institutional accreditation of its centres. Institutional accreditation represents a paradigm shift in external quality assurance, and in view of the willingness of both AQU Catalunya and the Catalan HES to progress from the accreditation of programmes to the institutional accreditation of centres, a comprehensive review of the previous framework is required. As a result, and with the aim of giving universities increased autonomy in designing, implementing and assuring the quality of their training programmes, the new framework prioritises institutional quality assurance processes.

The need to update

There are various reasons that justify the need to create this new framework:

Adaptation to the latest regulatory changes.^{2, 3, 4}

¹ Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency. [Framework for the validation, monitoring, modification and accreditation of recognised university degrees \(MVSMA\)](#). Barcelona, 2016.

² Prefecture. [Organic Law 2/2023, of 22 March, on the Higher Education System](#). *Spanish Official State Gazette*, no. 70, 23/03/2023, p. 43267-43339. BOE-A-2023-7500.

³ Ministry of Universities. [Royal Decree 822/2021 of 28 September, which establishes the organisation of university studies and the procedure for quality assurance](#). *Spanish Official State Gazette*, no. 233, 29/09/2021, p. 119537-119578. BOE-A-2021-15781.

⁴ Ministry of Universities. [Royal Decree 640/2021 of 27 July, on the creation, recognition and authorisation of universities and university centres and the institutional accreditation of university centres](#). *Spanish Official State Gazette*, no. 179, 28/07/2021, p. 90776-90800. BOE-A-2021-12613.

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Alignment with international trends⁵ that demonstrate the drive towards external quality assurance at the institutional level⁶ (building on a base of solid internal quality assurance), and the use of quality-related risk analysis.^{7, 8}

Coherence between external quality assurance processes that focus on training programmes and those that focus on institutions, in order to establish a sequence and ensure that the processes remain relevant in all cases.

Key elements of the QUALINS Framework

The Framework for Enhancing the Institutional Quality of the Catalan Higher Education System (QUALINS Framework, which takes its name from the Catalan acronym) is aligned with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*,⁹ promotes a quality culture and respects universities' diversity and autonomy. Taken as a whole, the external quality assurance processes aim to protect students' interests and help to maintain the SUC's reputation with regard to the quality of the provision it offers.

External quality assurance is currently undergoing a process of transition; although institutional accreditation is playing a greater role, there is still a great deal of review activity taking place at programme level. The coexistence of two review levels (programme level and institutional level) could generate confusion among students, families, employers and society in general. Promoting institutional accreditation will bring the twin benefits of simplifying processes for universities and providing clarity for society.

The QUALINS Framework updates the approach of the previous frameworks and introduces new international trends, particularly those referred to in the Tirana Communiqué⁵ and the proposal for a Council recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education.⁶ This has been done while taking into account the current legal framework and the experience gained during the period of application of the VSMA Framework.¹⁰

The deployment of the QUALINS Framework is chiefly characterised by three unique aspects. Firstly, the establishment of cycles for institutional accreditation, with the aim of establishing a sequence for and maintaining the relevance of quality assurance processes in the SUC. Secondly, the alignment of the external quality assurance processes for training programmes with the cycles

⁵ [Tirana Communiqué](#). EHEA (2024).

⁶ [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education](#). COM (2024) 147 final.

⁷ Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). [Risk Assessment Framework](#).

⁸ Office for Students (OfS). [Equality of Opportunity Risk Register](#).

⁹ [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\)](#). Brussels, 2015.

¹⁰ The opinion of the Catalan HES was taken into account when creating the QUALINS Framework. Specifically, work sessions were held with the vice-rectors for quality and the technical quality assurance units, who shared their vision on how the new QUALINS Framework should be organised.

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for institutional accreditation; and thirdly, the introduction of the concept of self-accredited centres, for those centres that have renewed their institutional accreditation.

In the long term, all of these elements will enable the Catalan HES to move towards a scenario in which its universities can be considered self-accredited institutions.

OBJECTIVE

The QUALINS Framework establishes a benchmark for the Catalan HES regarding quality assurance, fosters autonomy on the part of universities and represents a commitment to external quality assurance processes at the institutional level, in line with the new developments taking place in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The objective of the newly formulated QUALINS Framework is to improve the accuracy, flexibility and efficiency of the resources assigned to quality assurance, as well as to make the review processes more relevant and reduce the associated workload. Since the incorporation of the Catalan HES into the EHEA, universities have demonstrated the quality of the programmes they offer and are ready to increase their autonomy by implementing a new strategy for external quality assurance based on institutional processes.

USES OF THE QUALINS FRAMEWORK

The QUALINS Framework can be applied to any type of higher education institution,¹¹ as well as to all levels and all forms of provision.

Specifically, the anticipated uses are as follows:

Report on the strategy followed by the Catalan HES to assure and improve the quality of higher education, protect students' interests and help to maintain the SUC's reputation.

Provide an internationally recognised framework that can be used to demonstrate the quality of the training programmes offered by the SUC, in accordance with the qualification levels established and the criteria set out in the existing regulations.

Assess the policies and strategies for assuring quality, defining the provision offered and the implementation, deployment and review of IQAS on the part of universities, among many others.

Act as a guide to the external review processes.

Act as a tool for review committees, as it sets out AQU Catalunya's general principles of review.

¹¹ Throughout the document, reference is made to the universities that form part of the Catalan HES, as the main recipients of the external review activity carried out by AQU Catalunya. However, the provisions of the QUALINS Framework can also be applied to the external review needs of non-university higher education institutions and centres that lie outside of the Catalan HES.

THE ROLE OF THE MAIN STAKEHOLDERS

- > The universities have a strategic approach¹² that ensures compliance with academic standards and assures and improves the quality of their training activities.

The universities bear most of the responsibility for assuring the quality of the provision they offer and their academic activities.

The universities have developed a quality culture which ensures that the range of provision and related activities they offer are of high quality. In order to be able to develop a quality culture, they have policies and a quality assurance strategy that is focused on continuous improvement, and for which the IQAS is the main tool.

Additionally, when developing their policies and strategies, the universities must take into account factors related to internationalisation, social impact, and the ethical, trustworthy and responsible use of technology in the teaching and learning process.

- > Students are at the centre of training activities, and therefore play an important role in assuring and enhancing the quality of their learning experience.

Students receive the necessary support during the different stages of their training (access and admission, the teaching-learning process, and graduation) through policies that take diversity, accessibility, equity and inclusion into account.

The universities respond to the needs of diverse student population and create inclusive learning environments.

Students actively participate in governance and the improvement of their learning experience.

The universities carry out improvement actions (and inform the entire university community accordingly) based on the opportunities for improvement identified by the students and in the complaints and suggestions they receive.

¹² The various guidelines, planned actions, etc. that are implemented by the universities in order to assure and continuously improve the quality of their activities.

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- > The role played by teaching staff is vital to offering a teaching and learning process that is high quality, innovative and student-oriented.

The universities have technical, managerial, administrative and service staff who help to ensure that their services and infrastructure function correctly.

The universities have sufficient numbers of teaching staff who are suitably qualified to undertake the teaching, research and/or knowledge-transfer activity they carry out, thereby allowing the universities to provide students with a high-quality experience.

The universities provide training to new teaching staff and offer ongoing training regarding the latest developments in teaching, learning and review.

The training helps the teaching staff to carry out their activities professionally¹³ and equitably, while taking the diversity of the students into account.

The universities have sufficient technical, managerial, administrative and service staff who are qualified to perform their functions.

The universities offer ongoing training to their technical, managerial, administrative and service staff, so that they can carry out their activities professionally and equitably within a diverse environment.

- > AQU Catalunya plays a central role as a tool for assessing and promoting quality in the Catalan HES.¹⁴

AQU Catalunya fosters a quality culture (continuous improvement) in universities through the external review processes and promotes the deployment of the QUALINS Framework in order to facilitate the transition of the Catalan HES towards institutional accreditation.

Additionally, AQU Catalunya drafts and provides the Catalan HES with a series of documents that contribute to the continuous improvement of the provision that the Catalan HES offers, such as benchmarks and tools for university quality (focus). It also organises training and information sessions in which the main new developments concerning quality assurance are shared.

¹³ The professional activities of the teaching staff incorporate a variety of functions and responsibilities, such as teaching, research, knowledge transfer, improvement and innovation in teaching, student guidance and tutoring, management, training and keeping their skills up to date, among other aspects.

¹⁴ Ministry of the Presidency. [Act 15/2015](#) of 21 July on the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency. *Official Gazette of the Government of Catalonia* no. 6919, 23/07/2015.

Article 2 of Act 15/2015 establishes the following: “The purpose of Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya is to promote and assure the quality of higher education in line with European and international academic and social quality standards and pursuant to current regulations. Its aim is also to provide higher education agents with criteria and benchmarks in order to attain the utmost standards of quality in the fulfilment of their duties, taking into consideration society’s interest in benefitting from higher education of excellence.”

THE EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES

- > The external quality assurance processes take respect for the universities' diversity and autonomy into account.

The external review processes take into account the diversity of the universities, the training programmes and the students.

- > The external quality assurance processes offer society confidence and transparency.

The processes are relevant and provide added value to the universities.

The external review responds to the needs of the legal framework in force, ensures its compatibility with international standards and is oriented towards continuous improvement.

Transparency and accountability mean that the methodological documents, along with the review results, are published and disseminated in a clear and systematic manner.

The universities subject their activities to external review processes in order to assure and improve the quality of the provision they offer. The review process produces information that can be used to improve their quality strategy and training programmes.

The quality assurance processes are simple and flexible. This flexibility means that the processes can be adapted in line with the universities' diversity and new trends, while their simplicity makes the review processes more efficient and enables a focus on the key aspects that add value to the institution.

The focus on improvement helps to simplify the review processes and promotes a more efficient and effective use of resources, while maintaining sufficient levels to ensure accountability. It also benefits the development of a quality culture and adds value.

- > The external quality assurance processes promote the application of quality-related risk analysis.

The universities conduct a risk analysis within the context of their IQAS, in order to minimise said risks and help to ensure quality for their students.

- > The external quality assurance processes promote academic integrity.

In all of its actions, the academic community ensures and promotes compliance with ethical and professional principles and standards in learning. By doing so, the Catalan HES helps to prevent fraud, plagiarism and any other form of deceit or misconduct.

The external quality assurance processes take into account how the universities have incorporated academic integrity into their policies and strategies.

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- > The external quality assurance processes promote the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Catalan HES contributes to the sustainable development of its social and economic surroundings and has a strategy that respects the diversity of its students. At the same time, it ensures effective equality between men and women through various regulations, plans and processes.

The external quality assurance processes take into account how the universities have implemented the Sustainable Development Goals in their policies and strategies.

- > The external quality assurance processes help to stimulate the internationalisation of higher education and protect the interests of students who undertake international study.

The review activity is open to the new initiatives, standards and processes that emerge in the field of higher education at both the European and international level.

The external review processes are designed and implemented in accordance with the international standards for quality review at both institutional and programme level, and in particular with the ESG. They are also committed to the application of the European Approach to assuring and enhancing the quality of international joint programmes,¹⁵ and take the initiatives of European university alliances into account.

¹⁵ [European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.](#)

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE REVIEW BODIES

- > The review committees apply the approved review standards and criteria, and act with objectivity, technical independence and professional rigour.

They undertake to exercise their powers in an autonomous manner and without regard to pressure or influence.

The committees operate efficiently, using the minimum of resources and working as quickly as possible while ensuring that the aim of the review is achieved in line with the required social, academic and international standards and quality.

The experts who take part in the review processes are renowned experts external to the Agency, have no conflicts of interest and act collaboratively, while rigorously applying the review criteria.

AQU Catalunya provides the experts with training on the characteristics of the Catalan HES and the review criteria. This training helps to make the review processes more consistent and provides contextualisation.

- > The review committees comply with all of the regulations and policies governing the review of the universities' activities, as well as AQU Catalunya's rules of internal procedure and Code of Ethics.¹⁶

The review committees are responsible for applying and complying with all of the applicable regulations and policies in force, and for ensuring they are applied and complied with.

The experts who form part of the review committees adhere to the fundamental values and commitments set out in AQU Catalunya's Code of Ethics.

¹⁶ AQU Catalunya. [Code of Ethics](#) (2019).

DEPLOYMENT OF THE QUALINS FRAMEWORK (2025–2030)

Institutional accreditation was introduced for the first time in 2015 with Royal Decree 420/2015, which was subsequently modified by means of Royal Decree 640/2021.¹⁷ The first centre in Catalonia to obtain institutional accreditation did so in 2018, although it was not until 2021 that the system made significant advances, with an average of 15 centres accredited each year. However, given that it is an optional process, institutional accreditation for universities still coexists alongside the accreditation of programmes. Although the former replaces the latter once a centre has been accredited, these two quality assurance processes remain insufficiently integrated with each other. The incorporation of institutional accreditation into external quality assurance processes in the SUC, and AQU Catalunya’s commitment to move forward with its implementation, requires a rethinking of the quality assurance strategy at a system-wide level. Below we outline the main aspects of the deployment of the QUALINS Framework, focusing on the 2025-2030 period.

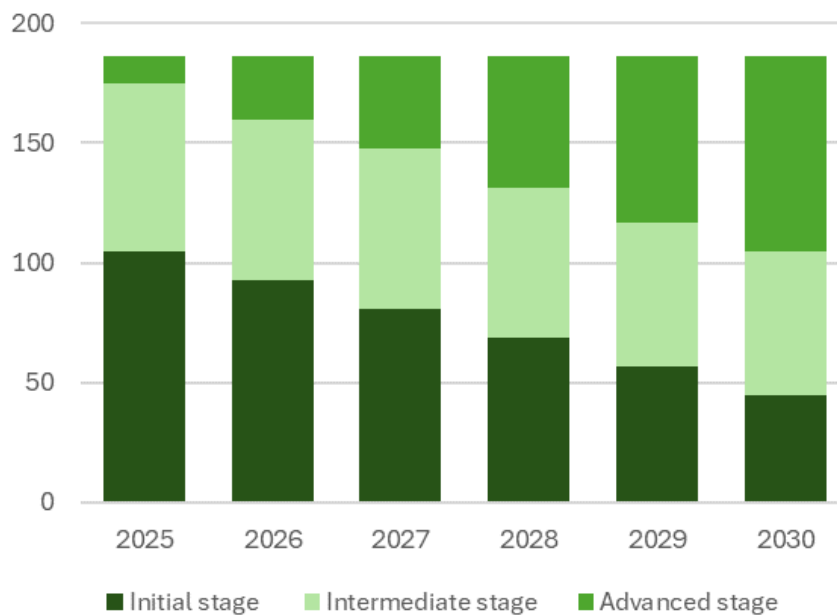
The evolution of institutional accreditation in the Catalan Higher Education System

The QUALINS Framework strategy must enable the Catalan HES to strengthen the institutional focus. During the 2025-2030 period, it is expected that the institutional accreditation¹⁸ of some 80 centres will be renewed, while another 60 will obtain their first institutional accreditation and a further 45 will be in a position to obtain it. Figure 1 shows the expected evolution of the Catalan HES in relation to institutional accreditation for the 2025-2030 period.

¹⁷ Ministry of Universities. [Royal Decree 640/2021](#) of 27 July on the creation, recognition and authorisation of universities and university centres and the institutional accreditation of university centres. *Spanish Official State Gazette (BOE)* no. 179, 28/07/2021.

¹⁸ According to Royal Decree 640/2021 of 27 July, in order to obtain institutional accreditation centres will need to have renewed the accreditation of at least half of their recognised bachelor’s degree, master’s degree and doctoral degree programmes, and have certified the implementation of their IQAS.

Figure 1. Evolution of institutional accreditation in the Catalan HES (2025-2030), by stage



The deployment of the QUALINS Framework during the 2025-2030 period will encourage the Catalan HES move towards institutional accreditation. This vision fosters qualitative change on the part of higher education centres and their transition from the initial stages through to the intermediate and advanced stages, with the aim of ensuring that this evolution occurs in an orderly manner and with all due guarantees.

Below we outline the main characteristics of each stage:

Initial stage

Non-institutionally accredited centres. The centre has begun to take the steps required to certify the implementation of its IQAS.

Intermediate stage

Centres that have obtained institutional accreditation for the first time. The centre has a certified IQAS that contributes to continuous improvement.

The centre is committed to the quality and continuous improvement of its programmes from an institutional perspective, and takes on responsibility from an internal quality assurance perspective.

Advanced stage

Centres that have renewed their institutional accreditation. The centre has a robust IQAS that acts as the cornerstone of continuous improvement.

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The centre is committed to the quality and continuous improvement of its programmes from an institutional perspective, and takes on a great deal of responsibility from a quality assurance perspective. The centre demonstrates its effectiveness in the external review processes.

Centres that are at this stage are those that are considered self-accredited. Self-accreditation implies the maximum level of autonomy in decision-making with regard to the provision offered.¹⁹ Through self-accreditation, centres are able to adhere to high quality standards and demonstrate their commitment to continuous improvement.

Establishing cycles for institutional accreditation

The external review processes are organised in the form of review cycles, with the aim of establishing a sequence for and maintaining the relevance of these processes in the SUC. Institutional accreditation plays a central role in the organisation of the review processes.

The establishment of institutional accreditation cycles must enable higher education centres to transition from the initial stages (non-institutionally accredited centres) to the most advanced stages (institutionally accredited centres with a strong quality culture).²⁰ This gives rise to the concept of transformation,²¹ which implies a qualitative change on the part of higher education centres as they move from stage to another; in turn, this enables the Catalan HES as a whole to move forward in relation to quality assurance.

This document describes the key aspects that characterise the first review cycle; however, it would also be useful to provide an outline of future working approaches for the subsequent review cycles, as follows:

The second review cycle (2031-2036) would imply the consolidation of institutional accreditation in the Catalan HES. The efficiency of the quality assurance processes (internal and external) would be a key aspect of this second cycle, and the analysis of quality-related risks would play a central role.

In the third review cycle (2037-2042), which corresponds to the most advanced stage, the aim is for the Catalan HES to have consolidated experience of institutional accreditation. At this stage, centres would need to have renewed their institutional accreditation at least once, and the impact assessment for the quality assurance processes (internal and external) and the analysis of quality-related risks would be essential tools for assuring and enhancing quality.

¹⁹ Harvey, L. (2004-2024). [Analytic Quality Glossary, Quality Research International](#).

²⁰ Quality culture is a set of group values that guide how improvements are made to everyday working practices and consequent outputs. Harvey, L. (2004-2024). [Analytic Quality Glossary, Quality Research International](#).

²¹ Harvey, L.; Green, D. (1993). Defining Quality: [Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education](#), 18(1), 9-34.

Aligning the external quality assurance processes for programmes with the renewal cycles for institutional accreditation

The Catalan HES has gained extensive experience in the design, validation, modification, monitoring and accreditation of recognised degrees. The deployment of the QUALINS Framework aims to make the external review processes more flexible at programme level and bolster their relevance.

Royal Decree 822/2021 of 28 September, which establishes the organisation of university studies and the procedure for quality assurance,²² has introduced significant changes to the design and validation of recognised degrees. Since the approval of this legislation, the Catalan HES has made efforts to adapt its degrees and processes in line with the new legal framework.

During the first institutional accreditation cycle, which begins in 2025, it is anticipated that the universities will consolidate their learning activities and complete the adaptation of their degrees in line with the changes introduced by Royal Decree 822/2021. This cycle must not only enable the universities to adapt the processes related to the validation and modification of degrees in line with the current legal framework, but also enable the Catalan HES as a whole to work towards achieving review processes that are as efficient as possible. The accreditation of degrees, for its part, must be kept as a residual activity reserved for specific and/or exceptional cases, which will need to be suitably justified.

Below, we detail the actions that will be taken for each of the review processes for recognised degrees, depending on whether or not they pertain to institutionally accredited centres.

I. Institutionally accredited centres

Validation and modification processes

Institutionally accredited centres are characterised by having greater autonomy and responsibility in relation to the provision they offer and its quality, which – importantly – ensures an optimum learning experience for students. As a result, it is the university itself which strives to make sure that the programmes it offers comply with the legal framework in force, and that the reports for the various degrees include the minimum information required and have been updated in line with their deployment.

With regard to validation, the review will focus on the learning outcomes and curriculum. The other aspects are assured by the centre itself, as it is institutionally accredited, which means that it has an IQAS that assures the quality and continuous improvement of the provision it offers. In particular, AQU Catalunya reserves the right to carry out a full review of the design of degrees that it considers unique.

²² Ministry of Universities. [Royal Decree 822/2021](#) of 28 September, which establishes the organisation of university studies and the procedure for quality assurance. *Spanish Official State Gazette (BOE)* no. 233, 29/09/2021.

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With regard to modification, AQU Catalunya's intervention will also be minimal, and will focus on the adjustments applied to the learning outcomes and curriculum.

The monitoring process

The monitoring process is key to institutional accreditation, as it makes it possible to show how the centre is progressing regarding the continuous improvement of the provision it offers. The focus of the review process is on continuous improvement.

Monitoring institutional accreditation involves monitoring both the degrees and the certification of the IQAS. This process is carried out three years after the centre obtained its first institutional accreditation or renewed it.

The monitoring report for the centre in question is the foundation that underpins the monitoring of the improvement actions identified during the various review processes that the centre has taken part in, whether they relate to the degree or to the centre itself. It may also include aspects linked to continuous improvement derived from the centre's own internal processes.

The accreditation process for recognised degrees

AQU Catalunya will not initiate the process of accrediting recognised degrees at institutionally accredited centres.²³ However, in certain cases, whether at the request of the university itself or AQU Catalunya, some degrees may be accredited.

If a centre loses its institutional accreditation, it must renew the accreditation of the degrees it offers and carry out the corresponding coordination measures in accordance with the conditions stipulated in the legislation in force.¹⁷

II. Non-institutionally accredited centres

Validation and modification processes

As stated above, the validation and modification processes always establish that it is the university itself which ensures that the programmes offered comply with the legal framework in force and have been developed in accordance with the initial plan, or where applicable with the approved modifications.

AQU Catalunya will carry out a complete review of the design of the degrees and any substantial modifications that degrees from non-institutionally accredited centres may undergo.

²³ Ministry of Universities. Royal Decree 640/2021 of 27 July on the creation, recognition and authorisation of universities and university centres and the institutional accreditation of university centres. *Spanish Official State Gazette (BOE)* no. 179, 28/07/2021: "Article 14.10. In the event that the Council of Universities issues a resolution rejecting the institutional accreditation or the renewal thereof, the university centre in question must request renewal of the accreditation corresponding to each of the recognised degree programmes it offers, within the specified time period in relation to the commencement of the programmes' activity or the most recent renewal of the accreditation."

The monitoring process

The monitoring process for recognised degrees is essential, as it makes it possible to show how they are progressing with regard to their continuous improvement. The university is responsible for internally monitoring the training programmes it offers. AQU Catalunya, for its part, will monitor the critical enhancement areas (e.g. aspects related to the curriculum, the learning outcomes achieved, the teaching staff, etc.) that were identified during the review processes and whose aim is to ensure a positive learning experience for students. This process is carried out three years after the validation or degree accreditation report is issued.

AQU Catalunya will not assess enhancement areas related to descriptions, formulations or the university's own administrative or regulatory matters. However, this does not exempt the university from incorporating these improvements into their improvement plan.

AQU Catalunya's review process does not envisage the review of evaluations related to standards, scopes or levels of accreditation, as the approach adopted is that of review for continuous improvement.

In specific cases, a monitoring visit for the degree may be incorporated in order to validate *in situ* the state of the enhancement areas identified in the review processes and/or reduce the frequency with which the enhancement areas are assessed.

The accreditation process for recognised degrees

AQU Catalunya will continue to accredit degrees at non-institutionally accredited centres.

The accreditation level of "progress towards excellence" is eliminated, in order to prevent imprecise comparisons of results for degrees taught at institutionally accredited centres – where all degrees are institutionally accredited – with those taught at non-institutionally accredited centres (where the accreditation enables identification of the level of excellence). The rest of the levels ("accredited", "accredited with conditions" and "not accredited") are retained.

Implementation of the European Approach for quality assurance of international joint programmes

AQU Catalunya acts in accordance with the international standards for the quality review of institutions and programmes, and in particular with the ESG; it is committed to the application of the European Approach to assuring and enhancing the quality of international joint programmes,²⁴ and supports the initiatives of European university alliances.

International joint programmes²⁵ are assessed in line with the European Approach, as stipulated in the agreement signed by the ministers for higher education in May 2015,²⁶ whether in terms of the review of the design or the accreditation of the degree. In the case of international joint

²⁴ [European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes](#).

²⁵ Taught by institutionally accredited centres and non-institutionally accredited centres.

²⁶ [Yerevan Communiqué](#) (2015).

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programmes coordinated by a university that forms part of the SUC, priority will be given to ensuring that AQU Catalunya leads the review process.

AQU Catalunya will recognise reviews carried out by other agencies registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) that have followed the European Approach for quality assurance of international joint programmes.

Recognition of international reviews carried out by other EQAR agencies

AQU Catalunya may establish processes for recognising the results obtained by other international quality agencies registered in the EQAR, provided the review criteria for determining the quality of the programme in question are based on the ESG.

Review processes that are to be carried out by other EQAR-registered agencies will be managed by the university, although AQU Catalunya must be informed of such and provided with copies of the self-review reports and review reports drafted by the agency in question.

In exceptional cases involving an accreditation managed by a recognised international body that is not registered in the EQAR, this accreditation may be validated by AQU Catalunya. Such cases will be analysed on an individual basis in order to ensure that the body managing the accreditation process is solvent and provides sufficient information in accordance with the Agency's requirements; in particular, it will be necessary to ensure the validity of the review methodology employed.

Drafting and publication of reference materials, data and studies that contribute to the continuous improvement of the provision offered

AQU Catalunya has made available to the Catalan HES a set of documents and data that aim to contribute to the continuous improvement of the provision offered by the Catalan HES.

> Benchmarks for the design of new programmes²⁷

The benchmarks, organised by subject, provide relevant information on the training objectives and expected learning outcomes. AQU Catalunya will continue with its efforts to make benchmarks available to the Catalan HES. The benchmarks are not prescriptive documents, as it is neither the wish nor the objective of AQU Catalunya to regulate the system of courses, which must be tailored in line with the stipulations of the EHEA. However, a stable system of course benchmarks may help to improve the design and redesign of new training programmes by streamlining the current review processes.

The act of linking a programme to a stable benchmark serves to facilitate the following:

²⁷ [Link to the website](#) of the validation methodology via Benchmarks.

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- The quality assurance process for the programme.
- Identification of the programme by potential students and employers.
- The possibility of validating and/or modifying programmes without the need for complex external quality assurance processes.

> Tools for university quality (“Focus”)²⁸

AQU Catalunya has created a toolkit for university quality, consisting of a set of documents named “Focus” that are designed to support the quality assurance of the degrees offered. These tools address different issues that are of interest to the Catalan HES (e.g. degree profiles, review of learning outcomes or degrees that are taught in distance and blended teaching formats).

> Data and studies for the continuous improvement of university quality

Data are essential for making evidence-based decisions and promoting continuous improvement in university quality.

AQU Catalunya carries out surveys within the Catalan HES that enable it to identify issues of interest (e.g. student satisfaction and employment outcomes, etc.). These data are shared with the universities in order to complement the information they already have regarding the operation of their degrees and/or centres, and enable them to make their review processes more efficient and relevant. Additionally, the data are published in order to provide accountability to society.

AQU Catalunya also produces studies that present a structured analysis of diverse sources of information, oriented towards building a narrative through the identification of strengths and weaknesses that, in turn, make it possible to identify improvement actions for the Catalan HES as a whole.

²⁸ [Link to the website](#) of *Focus: tools for university quality*.

Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya

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