# FRAMEWORK FOR THE VALIDATION, MONITORING, MODIFICATION AND ACCREDITATION OF RECOGNISED UNIVERSITY DEGREES (MVSMA)

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# 1. FOREWORD

Joining the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) implied various commitments on the part of the university system in Catalonia, one of which was the application of a robust internal and external quality assurance system for the provision of all higher education courses. The system set in place is based on the revised version of the ESG[1] (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area) adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area in May 2015.

In accordance with the context at European level together with the prevailing regulations, AQU Catalunya has been applying the VSMA Framework[2] (endorsed by the Agency's Board of Management in July 2010) in the validation of proposals for new degree programmes, the monitoring of programme introduction, the review and evaluation of any modifications they may undergo and cyclical programme accreditation.

This document sets out a proposal for a new improved VSMA Framework that is compatible with the prevailing regulatory framework that covers the quality assurance of university degree courses and awards, in particular the new revised version of the ESG.

# 2. INTRODUCTION

Admission to the EHEA has led to a transformation of courses at universities and other higher education institutions. The need to adapt and bring into line the structure of courses and qualifications with that of the EHEA has been a driving force behind this change. While leading to a higher level of autonomy for institutions in programme design, this change has also been affected by certain unforeseen dynamics.

One unexpected dynamic has been the noticeable pace in the appearance and cancellation of study programmes. This has led to a noticeable reduction in the life cycle of courses being offered by universities with respect to the past. Various factors account for the constant appearance of new courses and the modification and/or replacement of existing ones under new proposals:

- the increase in university autonomy and the corresponding freedom to design new courses,
- increased competition between universities, which incentivises different strategies to attract and retain students,
- the existence of a market where there is limited demand and a rapid tailing off of the ability of proposals for new highly specialised programmes to attract new students.
- the cancellation of programmes with little chance of receiving accreditation and their reappearance in the market in the form of new programmes,

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[1] < http://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_75679572_1.pdf>

[2] <http://www.aqu.cat/universities/mvsma/index_en.html>

■ the influence of a context in which technological development and accelerated knowledge generation require the constant upgrading of provision in line with new professional requirements.

Given this scenario the current VSMA Framework needs to be updated in order to better comply with the requirements of quality assurance for degree courses within the context of the abovementioned dynamics.

The expectation with the original (and current) VSMA Framework was that degree courses would be more stable over time, that they would undergo few modifications throughout their life span and that they would outlive various cycles of accreditation. Current national legislation in Spain does in a way penalise modification at considerable bureaucratic expense, which may have been designed to prevent deterioration in the quality of validated programmes through the introduction of ex-post modification. In Catalonia, however, the expectation that few modifications would occur would not seem to be the case, and this is probably positive in that it may be an indicator of the dynamism and commitment to improvement and enhancement in the university system in Catalonia.

On the other hand, accreditation is an investment and the expectation is that it will generate a series of benefits, one being to enhance the status of courses currently being offered. When frequent changes start to be made to courses that are being run or courses are withdrawn, however, the question arises of how best to structure this investment.

The new VSMA Framework is based on four main aspects:

■ **Certification of quality assurance systems:** Development of procedures for the certification of QA systems that are being implemented by institutions needs to become the cornerstone for streamlining procedures associated with the VSMA. This means on-going progress needs to be made towards quality assurance at institutional level, in line with developments at international level. The aim here is for all universities and higher education institutions in Catalonia to enter the category of self-accrediting institutions.

■ **Improvements in process-related document management:** In line with practice in other administration authorities and agencies, the intention is for the new VSMA Framework to make best use of currently available information systems to automatically generate all required reports for quality assurance. Participating stakeholders, such as the university and external experts, will thereby be able to formulate planning (discussion and analysis, enhancements, etc.) by validating or confirming the indicators included in these reports without the need to produce them themselves.

■ **Focus on accreditation:** A new model will undoubtedly need to underpin the role of accreditation within the VSMA framework as it is the procedure that gives most added value to institutions and, at international level, is one of the main tasks being developed by quality assurance agencies in higher education.

■ **Cluster benchmarking for use in the design of study programmes:** Benchmarks currently exist according to discipline and, at national and international level, they provide relevant information on the learning outcomes expected of higher education courses that form part of the same cluster. In spite of the fact that a great disparity of courses

complicates benchmarking, the use of benchmarks can help redefine the present map with coordinates that facilitate the design and position of higher education courses within a qualifications framework that is clear and well known to users.

## 3. THE KEY TO THE NEW VSMA: CLUSTER BENCHMARKING FOR USE IN THE DESIGN OF STUDY PROGRAMMES

Since the establishment of the VSMA Framework, analysis of the fitness for purpose of learning outcomes for new study programmes has been undertaken with the help of experts, whereas the use of benchmarks for different disciplines has been insufficiently systemised, aside from certain courses with very clear set guidelines. Although attempts have been made to minimise the ramifications stemming from this situation, it has been a source of possible divergence between the point of view of teams designing programmes and that of review panels when these benchmarks have not coincided. This situation represents a challenge in the VSMA Framework, and work is now needed to establish benchmarks that best facilitate the design of each new proposed course being submitted for validation. This will furthermore create greater consistency in the map of qualifications.

It is for this reason that, out of the abovementioned aspects needed to underpin the new VSMA Framework, the most innovative for the system of universities and higher education in Catalonia is the use of benchmarking in the design of programmes and programme clusters. This approach aligns with a model being developed in other European countries.

It is neither the wish nor the objective of AQU Catalunya to regulate the system of courses in higher education, which is subject to compliance with the guidelines laid down in the EHEA. A stable system of course clusters would however improve the design and redesign of new study programmes by streamlining the current QA processes connected with modification. It should also help in the case of programmes transitioning towards new structures, for example 3-year Bachelor degrees, without incurring excessive expense.

The quality assurance model for higher education in Europe is based on the "fitness for purpose" concept, which equates quality with the fulfilment of certain quality prerequisites (a specification or stated outcomes), in general by the service provider. The context is one in which institutions have wide-ranging autonomy to design study programmes, along with full responsibility, given that the term "recognised degree" is not referred to at all in applicable Spanish legislation.

The new development for degree courses in Catalonia, however, is the focus on benchmarking clusters for use in programme design and review. This will enable validation procedures (ex ante validation) to be generally carried out by the universities themselves, as they are in Europe, through external consultation with experts.

The possibility does exist of course that a programme may not wish to form part of a stable cluster.

The idea of linking a programme to a stable cluster should facilitate:

■ Quality assurance of the programme,
■ Its identification by prospective students and employers,

■ The possibility of programme modification without the need for complex external QA procedures.

Each cluster or benchmark should at the very least clearly identify the degrees that can be assigned to it, together with their key competences and expected learning outcomes. These will need to be defined by workgroups that incorporate a systemic view and by garnering the necessary consensus. International benchmarks[3] are available for the work of defining the clusters, together with extensive experience and information already obtained up until now from Bachelor and Master's programmes run at HEIs in Catalonia. Responsibility for endorsing each proposal in what will be a dynamically updated process will lie with AQU Catalunya's Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP).

In the short term, the clusters will be developed by AQU Catalunya and then endorsed by the Institutional and Programme Review Commission. Subsequently and in the medium term, AQU Catalunya will need to set up the regular review of the clusters, which will involve international reviewers and take into account two fundamental aspects:

■ Description: The fitness of purpose, quality and validity of the benchmarks used in relation to the international context.
■ The consistency of the programmes belonging to the cluster: Name, type of programmes included and trends in the basic indicators. The analysis of these data should allow for identification of the characteristics to be verified in greater detail during the site visits carried out in the programme accreditation stage.

All procedures included in the VSMA Framework (validation, monitoring, modification and accreditation) will conform to the provisions laid out in the following sections.

# 4. VALIDATION

The regulation of recognised higher education courses in Spain according to a three-cycle structure was laid down in Royal Decree 1393/2007, 29 October. Pursuant to the principles of earlier Spanish legislation (referred to as the acronym LOMLOU, which laid the foundations to bring the universities and study programmes in line with EHEA guidelines as part of the Bologna process), the Royal Decree extended the autonomy of higher education institutions to create and propose, in accordance with the prevailing rules and regulations, degree courses and awards free from the constraints of a set catalogue or list of degrees, as had previously been the case.

Any proposal for a new degree programme submitted for validation must be previously endorsed by the university, in accordance with the procedure laid down in its statutes and the specifications given in its internal quality assurance system (IQAS), one purpose of which is to facilitate the

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[3] Examples include the work undertaken by the QAA: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements; the World Federation for Medical Education's Global Standards; and the EUR-ACE® Framework Standards and Guidelines – ENAEE.

review and evaluation with evidence by the university itself of all information enclosed with the proposal on the programming (name, structure, etc.) of the degree, academic staff, infrastructure and indicators. All proposals must include all required information for the external quality assurance of the programme's contents and organisation. Special effort is required in specifying the information on the aspects relative to the study programme and its organisation as this will anticipate and be a precursor of the public information made available to students.

In order to validate proposals for new recognised degree programmes made by higher education institutions in Catalonia, AQU Catalunya constitutes the subject-specific committees (CEA) that come under the Agency's Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP) and are made up of recognised academics, EHEA experts, professionals and students.

These subject-specific committees issue a report that is referred to the university, and a period of dialogue between the committee and the institution is established in order for enhancements to be made to the proposal. Following the consideration of any supporting arguments put forward by the institution, the committees issue a final report that is then referred to the Council of Spanish Universities.

A validation report will be either:

- favourable or
- unfavourable

An unfavourable assessment of a proposal will be closely connected, among other things, with:

- the non-fitness for purpose of the proposal in relation to the established qualifications framework (number of credits, the degree to which the proposal matches the descriptors for Bachelor's and Master's degrees, student access to the programme)
- inconsistency of the proposed learning outcomes for the programme
- a mismatch between the learning outcomes and the proposed curriculum
- the profile and/or lack of suitable teaching staff
- a shortage or lack of the necessary resources to run the programme

These reports may include enhancement proposals, which will need to be included in the monitoring progress reports produced subsequently by the institution for the programme in question.

It is necessary in validation that the university itself ensures that programmes that are running comply with the prevailing regulations.

For the drafting of the validation report, the procedure provides for the following two independent pathways, although this framework envisages a third pathway, pending legislation, which will provide for greater autonomy in the validation of new degree programmes.

## 4.1. Validation: Pathway 1

The subject-specific committee draws up an assigned programme's validation report on the basis of the reports produced for each programme by the external experts.

If there is a considerable drop in the number of proposals using this pathway, and in cases where there are substantial doubts regarding the proposal, it would be possible to carry out in-depth focus groups with those responsible for each proposal. This would also progressively lead to the consolidation of a group of experts specialising in specific issues about the programme.

This pathway is the one used by AQU Catalunya up until the present time, although in the long term its use should become more exceptional and with a focus more on specific programmes.

## 4.2. Validation: Pathway 2

The original version of the VSMA Framework promoted the idea that, in exchange for an increase in university autonomy, proposals for new degree programmes have to undergo an ex-ante external review by AQU Catalunya. The new version of the framework goes one step further and incentivises the concept of mutual trust between institutions. This should lead to improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of quality assurance procedures.

The concept of mutual trust should help to:

a. Simplify the information required to implement the validation procedures for new proposals so that a natural confluence takes place between the documentation required for quality assurance and the information on programmes of study received by students both before and after registration.

b. Make it possible for a considerable part of the external quality assurance of proposals for new degree courses being formulated by the universities to be handled directly by the university itself, provided that a series of guidelines are followed for external review. These "good practices" will need to include the existence of a formal procedure established by the university for the institutional endorsement of any study programme applying for validation, whereby a report is generated and made available to AQU Catalunya with information on the institution's endorsement. This formal process must be specified in both the institution's statutes and its internal quality assurance system (IQAS).

The university itself must request implementation of these principles, following which the Institutional and Programme Review Commission (CAIP), having established the position of each proposal within the corresponding cluster, endorses the use of pathway 2. In order to make this decision, it will need the following information:

- The name to be given to the programme
- The cluster or benchmark it will be assigned to
- The workload in ECTS and courses
- The institution (faculty/school/institute, or "faculty") responsible for the proposal
- The rector's recommendation that, where appropriate, quality assurance of the programme can be managed directly by the university.

If the Institutional and Programme Review Commission advises against this, validation will be dealt with according to Pathway 1, as has been the case up until now.

In the long term, the majority of proposals should be dealt with according to this second pathway and would include all degrees that can easily be assigned to approved clusters. As a general rule, this pathway would apply to any institution with a certified internal quality assurance system and a minimum of 50% of its degree programmes accredited. In this case, a university would need to include consultation with external experts (preferably at international level) in the formal procedure of internally endorsing a proposal for a new degree programme, with the experts issuing an opinion regarding the consistency and quality of the proposal and its conformity with all of the requirements of the corresponding cluster. This opinion will take into account:

- external benchmarks that have been referred to,
- the participation of internal stakeholders in the design of the programme
- the strengths of the proposal,
- enhancement opportunities.

AQU Catalunya will produce a guidebook for this purpose.

These expert opinions, together with the university's formal document of approval, will be used by the Institutional and Programme Review Commission as the main evidence in programme validation. It is the Institutional and Programme Review Commission that issues the final validation report and assigns each degree to an approved cluster.

# 5. MONITORING

In accordance with Royal Decree 1393/2007, quality assurance agencies must "monitor registered degrees using the available public information until they undergo review for the purpose of accreditation renewal". In addition to the stipulations laid down in the regulations, the monitoring of recognised degree programmes must also enable the institution to evaluate programme delivery, using as evidence among other things the levels of academic performance and other necessary indicators (employment outcomes, resource availability, the satisfaction of students, teaching staff and employers, etc.) in their diagnosis and to draw up enhancement proposals in order to correct any deviations detected between the programme design and actual delivery.

Each university will therefore need to have its own system for monitoring each programme in accordance with the guidelines of AQU Catalunya and as stipulated in its own internal quality assurance system, which is the main evidence for the subsequent accreditation of the programme.

AQU Catalunya can also specify in the validation and accreditation reports that monitoring reports are to be submitted to the Agency as often as it sees fit in the case of programmes where different problem areas exist.

In parallel with this, AQU Catalunya will set up a system of automatic reports with quantitative information that will enable the universities to annually monitor the quality of validated programmes, provided that accreditation is not pending. These reports should ultimately replace the quantitative part of the current monitoring reports.

This system will incorporate a signalling system to be designed by AQU Catalunya, probably according to each subject area or cluster, which will alert the university to any possible weakness

in a programme. Should any weaknesses occur repeatedly, special attention will be paid to these situations in the accreditation procedure.

# 6. MODIFICATION

As explained elsewhere, proposals to modify degree programmes can only be made as a consequence of the monitoring process and are to be considered a natural result of this process.

Possible changes to higher education degree courses can be classified according to type:

- **Non-substantial modifications**: minor changes that are improvements to the degree that the university can make as a result of monitoring. Changes of this type are set out in the monitoring reports and are included in the programme specification when it undergoes any modification.
- **Substantial modifications**: changes to a validated degree that imply alterations to its structure, nature, general objectives or competences. These are classified according to two types:
  - **Authorised**: changes that affect the structure of the degree, but not its nature, general objectives or competences. Changes of this type can be requested by way of modification.
  - **Unauthorised**: substantial changes that affect the nature, general objectives or competences of a validated degree and cannot be requested through programme modification. Such changes can only be made by applying for the validation of a new degree course and discontinuation of the degree course that is running

For degree programmes that form part of a cluster or benchmark, and in a similar way to validation, encouragement will be given to institutions to manage the procedure themselves using an approach whereby the university itself is instrumental in externally reviewing and taking responsibility for modification. This will ensure that any modifications to a programme, provided that these do not prevent the programme from remaining in the cluster, are assured by the university and duly reported to the relevant bodies in accordance with the regulations so that the information in the official register of degree programmes offered at universities in Catalonia is kept up-to-date.

In this case, the involvement of AQU Catalunya would also be minimal and as such associated with the monitoring of information updates. AQU Catalunya will coordinate a process for this to ensure the necessary flow of information on modification between the university and the relevant bodies.

# 7. ACCREDITATION

As the corresponding external quality assurance body, AQU Catalunya is responsible for programme accreditation. Pursuant to prevailing legislation in Spain (Royal Decree 1393/2007), in order for a programme to maintain accreditation it must obtain a positive accreditation report

subsequent to verification of the fact that the corresponding curriculum is being followed according to the programme's initial project. This involves a QA review that will include a site visit to the institution.

Following this, the procedure for programme accreditation offers three possible pathways, the first two of which refer to the individual accreditation of each degree while the third involves the joint accreditation of all degree programmes being run in a faculty.

## 7.1. Accreditation: Pathway 1

The accreditation of each individual degree programme is to be carried in the same way as under the previous VSMA Framework. This pathway will be exclusively managed by AQU Catalunya, according to the following:

- In order to streamline and make viable the accreditation procedures, AQU Catalunya will, wherever possible, simultaneously carry out external reviews of all the degree programmes being run in a faculty, with the aim being to:
  - Integrate programme review with institutional review,
  - Promote coherence between degree programmes
  - Facilitate an overview and strengthen the strategic vision of each faculty,
  - Simplify the external QA process,
  - Bring about economies of scale that reduce the expense of external review.
- Programme review should be as closely aligned as possible with the review of each faculty's internal quality assurance system (IQAS). One should bear in mind that the faculty becomes the unit of assessment in the external review, with the IQAS linking together the drawing up and analysis of the monitoring reports on the individual degree programmes, which will be indispensable evidence in the external review.
- The external review panels may include international experts. The presence of international experts provides an essential point of reference for comparing programme delivery with experience in other universities in Europe and the rest of the world. This approach will call for all relevant information for external review to be in English.
- Wherever possible, a system for the periodic review and quality assurance of all programmes belonging to the same cluster is to be set up. Reviews will be based on the performance of the indicators for each course and operational aspects of the IQAS. This process of cluster review should facilitate cross-cluster analysis and the improvement and enhancement of all programmes in a given cluster.
- Reviews will be based on the same dimensions and criteria laid down in the current accreditation procedure, in accordance with the ESG, with a more in-depth evaluation and assessment of the design of programmes that have joined each cluster (current accreditation dimension 1: "Programme quality").
- Focus will be placed on programmes and/or dimensions that, during the prior analysis of the indicators associated with monitoring, show the need for particular attention (for example, courses with low indicator values)
- In the case of joint international programmes where the coordinator is from a university in Catalonia, priority will be given to external review managed by AQU Catalunya itself.

## 7.2. Accreditation: Pathway 2

This pathway enables an institution to accredit certain programmes through accreditation at international level managed by AQU Catalunya or another agency registered with EQAR.

A favourable review/accreditation will be recognised by AQU Catalunya provided that the programme's QA criteria are based on the ESG.

The expense of accreditation by either AQU Catalunya or another external QA agency registered with EQAR is high and funding for this will need to be accounted for. If an external QA agency is commissioned to do this, the procedure will be handled by the university, although AQU Catalunya shall be informed of this and receive all self-assessment reports and review reports produced by the corresponding agency.

In exceptional cases where accreditation is handled by a recognised international body that is not registered with EQAR, accreditation may be validated by AQU Catalunya. This third pathway will be analysed on a case-by-case basis to assure the reliability of the body managing the process and that it provides sufficient information according to the requirements of AQU Catalunya. In this case, the approach of pathway 1 is to be followed although prior to this AQU Catalunya will need to validate the authority of the body and confirm the validity of its methodology.

## 7.3. Institutional accreditation: Pathway 3

Pathway 3, which offers the possibility of accreditation provided for under the current regulations in Spain, is the pathway that in the medium term will probably be the most used. Its purpose is to reduce the extent of quality assurance through a focus on the IQAS and just several of the programmes run in the faculty.

A faculty can apply for institutional accreditation, which will be valid for 5 years, following the accreditation of at least 50% of its programmes through any of the abovementioned pathways and certification of its IQAS. From this point in time onwards, all of the faculty's courses will be automatically accredited for a period of 5 years.

The renewal of institutional accreditation will no longer be carried out on the basis of each degree, but at institutional level and in terms of the fitness for purpose of the QA procedures used with the programmes run in the faculty, together with the programme outcomes. AQU will develop the corresponding methodology for accreditation when the regulatory framework governing this has been definitively set in place (pending endorsement by the Spanish Ministry of Education of the QA protocol).