



Agència
per a la Qualitat
del Sistema Universitari
de Catalunya

POSITIONING OF AQU CATALUNYA REGARDING SUBJECT-SPECIFIC QUALITY LABELS



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Table of Contents

1. Preliminary definitions	4
2. Current situation	5
3. The context of quality labels	5
4. The position of AQU Catalunya on quality labels	6
ANNEX: Certificates that may be covered by the integrated system	9

1. PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONS

The terminology used in the field of quality assurance, and more specifically in higher education, encompasses a wide range of specialised words. It is therefore appropriate to start this document with the definition of several concepts:

- Accreditation: a process whereby, when recognized criteria and standards have been met, a body grants an organisation the right to issue certificates to third parties (for example, university degrees and awards to graduates), provided that they comply with certain conditions.
- Certification: a process whereby an authorised certification body verifies that a process or unit complies with a certain standard of quality and formally acknowledges this in a document (certificate).
- Authorised accreditation body¹: in the sector of higher education in Europe, these bodies are in general private entities that are recognised by both government and the academic community. They are responsible for developing evaluation criteria and standards, assessing whether or not the criteria and standards are met by universities and, where appropriate, to publicise this, with any legal consequences that may stem from such recognition.
- Authorised certification body: these are generally speaking private entities² that receive joint support (either from university institutions, professional associations, employers and/or other stakeholders/interested groups) to verify compliance with standards of quality and award certificates for processes and/or units that are in compliance.
- Subject-specific quality labels: the word *label* is used in a standard way and refers to a certificate awarded by an authorised certification body to a higher education institution in accordance with a series of established principles, on the understanding that it is a distinction or mark of quality that may complement accreditation conferred by the corresponding authorities. A quality label may also refer to the organisational system that, in addition to the certificate, includes other elements such as the organisation facilitating the certificate, the objectives of certification, the criteria for putting certification into practice and/or the conditions that authorised bodies should comply with in order to issue certificates.

At the present time, authorised certification bodies for quality labels can be classified as follows:

¹ The concept of *authorised* has a broad meaning, ranging from being recognised by the public authorities to carry out certain functions to an association that is legally established in a particular country.

² For example, the Engineering Council UK, Ordem dos Engenheiros (Portugal) and the Association for Engineering Education in Russia

- a) Agencies linked to professional associations at either national or international level, such as ABET³ and ASIIN⁴.
- b) National and/or international university association networks, such as AACSB⁵.
- c) Agencies promoted by government authorities, such as ANECA⁶, FINHEEC⁷ and ARACIS⁸.

2. CURRENT SITUATION

Following evaluation strategies employed for university study programmes in the United States, there is a trend towards opening up quality assurance in Europe in a similar way for it to be of continental scope. Such an option is developed through so-called quality labels, which fundamentally and solely preconfigure two aspects in any given university degree course:

- The minimum learning outcomes.
- The basic elements required to facilitate achievement of the learning outcomes.

There has recently been an increase in the number of quality labels and, to some extent, there are those in each disciplinary sector who attempt to organise this, for different purposes. In certain fields, quality labels are also used to apply to the quality of education institutions.

3. THE CONTEXT OF QUALITY LABELS

Higher education is a public good that has always had components of the nature of a private good.⁹ With the growing internationalisation of society, the mobility of professionals increases. This may mean that the investment made by society in an individual who is educated at university does not always revert back to the same society that made the investment.

Although there are numerous ways that university education is funded, the norm in Europe is for it to be a mix of both public and private, with variations according to each country.

Both of these issues have an **influence on the way in which the definition of the concept of quality is applied**. Moreover, the interests of the different stakeholders, both national and international, do not always coincide in this regard. At all events, globalisation in the higher

³ Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (www.abet.org).

⁴ Akkreditierungsagentur für Studiengänge der Ingenieurwissenschaften, der Informatik, der Naturwissenschaften und der Mathematik (www.asiin-ev.de).

⁵ Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (www.aacsb.edu).

⁶ Spanish Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education (www.aneca.es).

⁷ Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council.

⁸ Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

⁹ It is a good that produces specific and direct benefits for the individuals who possess it; it provides exclusive rights for those who possess it, and its scarcity may involve social and economic competition to acquire it.

education sector is connected with a **willingness of demonstrate quality at international level**, either by competing or cooperating with other universities.

The establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) aims at placing Europe at the head of higher education in the world. The EHEA is built on the basis of ministerial agreements that lay down recommendations. Each European state however continues to have full competence over university affairs, although the EHEA does presuppose the incorporation of dynamics of an international nature in national regulations.

As a matter of fact, in countries where university funding is important, the government is less likely to hand over the power of quality assurance to external bodies.¹⁰

The government is perceived to represent national stakeholders, in particular the population as a whole, that, through taxation, make the funding of state-run or national universities possible. In this case, **national accreditation takes place in a scenario in which priority is given to quality assurance, in addition to the principles of equity and equal opportunity**. The fact remains, however, that the universities are free to apply for other extra certifications of international recognition.

When education is funded mainly from private sources, new dynamics appear, such as the search for exclusivity (positioning in a market) and corporatisation, which are logical dynamics in globalised contexts where there is free competition and where individuals strive to stand out.

4. THE POSITION OF AQU CATALUNYA ON QUALITY LABELS

Learning outcomes have become a priority in quality assurance in the EHEA. These outcomes are set by the universities, according to three ways that are non-exclusive:

1. In accordance with the principle of **university autonomy** and **academic freedom** and on the basis of the **principles of quality assurance** that recommend listening to and **taking into account the needs and requirements of the different stakeholders**.
2. In accordance with objectives laid down in **public guidelines** (either national or international).
3. In accordance with objectives laid down in standards associated with a particular **quality label**.

AQU Catalunya believes that the first of these should be defended wherever possible; hence it is **a priority at AQU Catalunya to maintain and develop the Catalan model for quality assurance and for this to be positioned as an international model of reference, given that the other two ways are complementary in nature**.

This means enhancing the value of quality assurance (reviews and evaluations) by AQU Catalunya, bearing in mind that the Agency has been reviewed at international level in accordance

¹⁰ Nevertheless, there is considerable international pressure in favour of opening up national markets to international competition. This is happening in certain countries in eastern Europe.

with the ESG.¹¹ Moreover, as an agency listed with EQAR,¹² AQU Catalunya can operate in other European countries and, in certain cases, accredit degree courses.

Given that the stakeholders also pay attention to international benchmarks, AQU Catalunya is to promote ways for mutual recognition with other agencies. Its presence in the ECA¹³ facilitates the mutual recognition of joint programmes.¹⁴

In view of the above, and in reference to the third way (labels), AQU Catalunya agrees to:

- Not specifically promote quality labels. AQU Catalunya shall thereby not act as a certification body for specific labels, but rather shall enter into the necessary agreements to provide this service together with other agencies recognised by ENQA that offer subject-specific quality labels.
- Provide support to all universities in the university system in Catalonia that wish to obtain a quality label, and to integrate this as much as possible in the framework of accreditation by AQU Catalunya, provided they comply with certain characteristics. AQU Catalunya will therefore not accept responsibility for the additional costs of obtaining a label,¹⁵ aside from the coordination of the integrated process.
- Recognise the external site visit and achievements associated with quality labels awarded, provided they comply with criteria that are equivalent to those laid down in the AQU Catalunya framework for programme accreditation.

On the basis of these objectives, AQU Catalunya will arbitrate two processes:

- a) **An open process:** identification of quality labels that universities obtain on their own account and that may be recognised by AQU Catalunya, given the standing of the accreditation body, the quality criteria used and appropriate information between the university and the Agency.

In this case, AQU Catalunya's Quality Assessment Commission, in accordance with its spheres of competence, shall be responsible for managing this process. To this end, it shall draw up and endorse the document, ***Criteria for dealing with quality labels obtained directly by universities***, which is to set out the criteria and procedure for the recognition of quality labels obtained in the accreditation of degree courses. The objective is recognition of those parts of the procedure that comply with the same guidelines as

¹¹ Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA.

¹² The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) is the register for quality assurance agencies that carry out external reviews of higher education institutions and study programmes that comply with the ESG.

¹³ The European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) is the consortium of quality assurance agencies in higher education that cooperate in the field of accreditation and promote the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

¹⁴ Joint Programmes and Erasmus Mundus, for example.

¹⁵ These costs include the reviewers' fees, the management and preparation of the site visit by the certification body, transport and accommodation for the reviewers during the stage of the site visit to the HEI, and the rights obtained by the organisation issuing the certificate.

those established by AQU Catalunya, and for them to be included in the external site visit where appropriate.

- b) **An integrated process:** the processes for obtaining quality labels form part of the regular accreditation procedure carried out by AQU Catalunya. This approach is to be put into practice through agreements with international agencies that award quality label certificates and will therefore need to be developed preferably in English.

AQU Catalunya's Quality Assessment Commission is to draw up and endorse the document ***Guide to obtaining a quality label for First and Second Cycle programmes, as part of accreditation by AQU Catalunya***, which is to set out the procedure and timetable for obtaining the quality label together with programme accreditation.

In this case, the additional costs associated with obtaining the quality label shall be the sole responsibility of the applicant university.

The document is to be updated with the quality labels that, at any given time, AQU Catalunya, in accordance with the certifying bodies with which it enters into agreement, includes as part of its accreditation procedures. AQU Catalunya is to maintain an up-to-date web page with this information.

ANNEX: CERTIFICATES THAT MAY BE COVERED BY THE INTEGRATED SYSTEM

AQU Catalunya, together with the certifying bodies below, is in a position to facilitate, as part of its accreditation procedures, the issuance of the following quality labels:

Certificate	Issuer	Scope/objectives	Introduction	AQU includes the following certification bodies
Eur-Ace	European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (www.enaee.eu)	First cycle (Bachelor's) and Second cycle (Master's) programmes in Engineering	Widely introduced in Germany (427 programmes certified), France (313), Turkey (156) and Ireland (140)	CTI (France) Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur, ASIIS and ANECA
Euro-Inf	European Quality Assurance Network for Informatics Education (www.eqanie.eu)	First cycle (Bachelor's) and Second cycle (Master's) programmes in Informatics	This certificate has recently been set up, although it is still not very widely introduced. In Germany, 69 study programmes have been certified, the majority in Fachhochschulen	ASIIN
Eurobachelor, Euromaster and Eurodoctorate	European Chemistry thematic network association (www.ectn-assoc.cpe.fr)	First cycle (Bachelor's), Second cycle (Master's) and Third cycle (doctorate) programmes in Chemistry	Introduced in various countries, particularly in Italy (26 programmes) and Germany (15 programmes)	ASIIN