

AQU CATALUNYA: QUALITY, A GUARANTEE OF IMPROVEMENT

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The authors present the origin, structure and functions of the Agency for the Quality of the University System of Catalonia (AQU Catalunya) and describe its activities and future challenges.

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1. AQU Catalunya: from consortium to agency

What is now known as AQU Catalunya dates back to 1996, when the Catalan Government and the public universities of Catalonia set up, within the legal framework of a consortium, the Agency for the Quality of the University System in Catalonia. The aim of this consortium was to foster quality improvement in the Catalan university system (1996-2003).

The main functions of the consortium were focused on the quality assessment of the Catalan university system; methodological innovation and the launching of studies of interest to the university world (for example, on graduate employment); training and discussion on quality assurance with a view to implanting quality culture, through workshops for reflection and debate; promotion and dissemination of activities, through the web site and quarterly bulletins; and the exchange of experience with other agencies fulfilling a similar role throughout Spain, Europe and the rest of the world.

Thus, one of the most important activities carried out by consortium (or agency) was the quality assessment of the Catalan university system, through the application of the methodology developed by the consortium on the basis of the European assessment method. This methodology comprised three stages: the first, which gave rise to an internal report, consisted of an internal assessment carried out by the unit undergoing assessment. The second, which resulted in an external report, consisted of an external assessment, managed by the consortium, which assessed the unit concerned *in situ* and compared

its conclusions with those of the internal report. In the third stage the unit under assessment reflected on the conclusions of the two reports and drafted a plan of improvements to be implemented over the following years. Parallel to this, on the basis of all the reports, the Agency for the Quality of the University System in Catalonia prepared its annual report, in the interests of accountability to society.

The Agency for the Quality of the University System in Catalonia has evolved through four main stages, which can be summarised as follows:

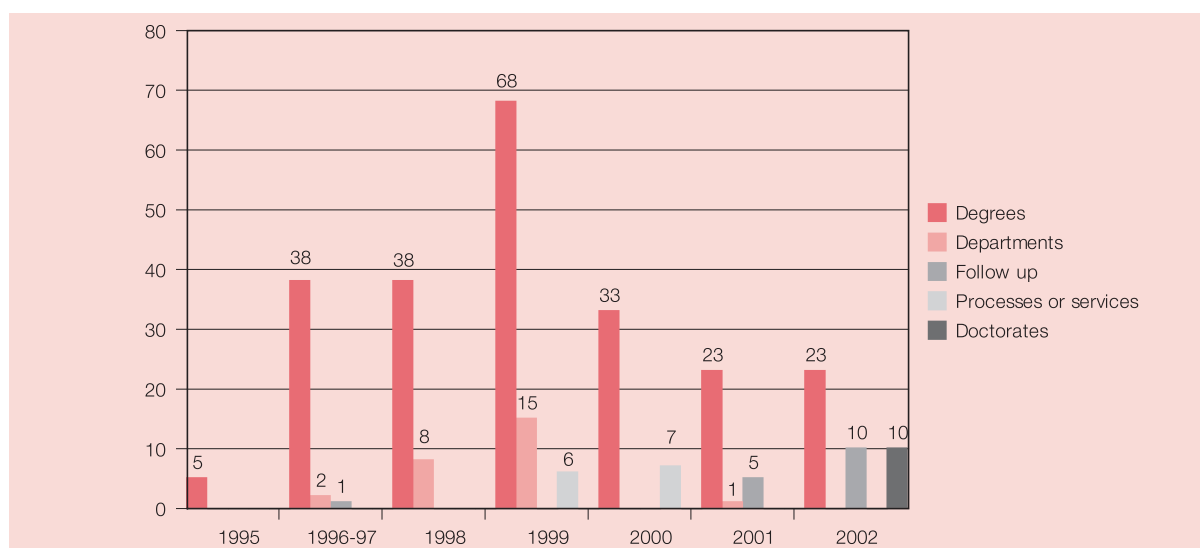
- **1996-1997:** constituted and set up as a consortium.
- **1998-1999:** consolidation of assessment activities; growth and development of internal organisation and beginning of external promotion, especially on a European scale.
- **2000-2001:** fully consolidated as an organisation; external recognition of activities carried out; priority given to methodological innovation and laying down foundations for future promotion with the approval of the 2001-2007 action plan for the improvement of the Catalan university system.
- **2002-2003:** Action plans development. Marked the beginning of a new body with increased powers.

Thanks to the climate of cooperation with the Government and the universities, during this period the consortium carried out nearly 300 assessments¹, mostly of university degrees², and to a lesser extent departments, services and processes, and also followed up the improvement plans generated by previous assessments. To this we can add the

¹ See Figure 1.

² Over two-thirds of the courses at most of the universities have been assessed (see Figure 2).

Figure 1
Assessments carried out by the consortium Agency for the Quality of the University System of Catalonia (1995-2002)



Source: own data.

publication of six annual assessment reports including the results of all the assessments carried out over each year, five books resulting from the workshops for reflection and debate, six general framework documents on basic aspects of university quality, a monograph on graduate employment, and fifteen quarterly bulletins with information about the Catalan university system. The consortium also set up its own web site and obtained the quality assurance certificate according to the ISO 9002:1994 standard.

The Universities Law of Catalonia (*Llei d'universitats de Catalunya* or LUC), passed on 19 February 2003 by the Catalan Parliament, transformed the consortium into the Agency for the Quality of the University System of Catalonia (AQU Catalunya), a public body

submitted to public law and which defines itself as the main instrument for the promotion and assessment of the quality of the Catalan university system.³

The purpose of AQU Catalunya is to carry out quality assessment, accreditation and certification in the field of Catalonia's universities and other institutions of higher education. The LUC thus maintains and extends the authority of the former agency, and AQU Catalunya is transformed into a new agency that acts on the basis of the values consolidated by the consortium that preceded it.

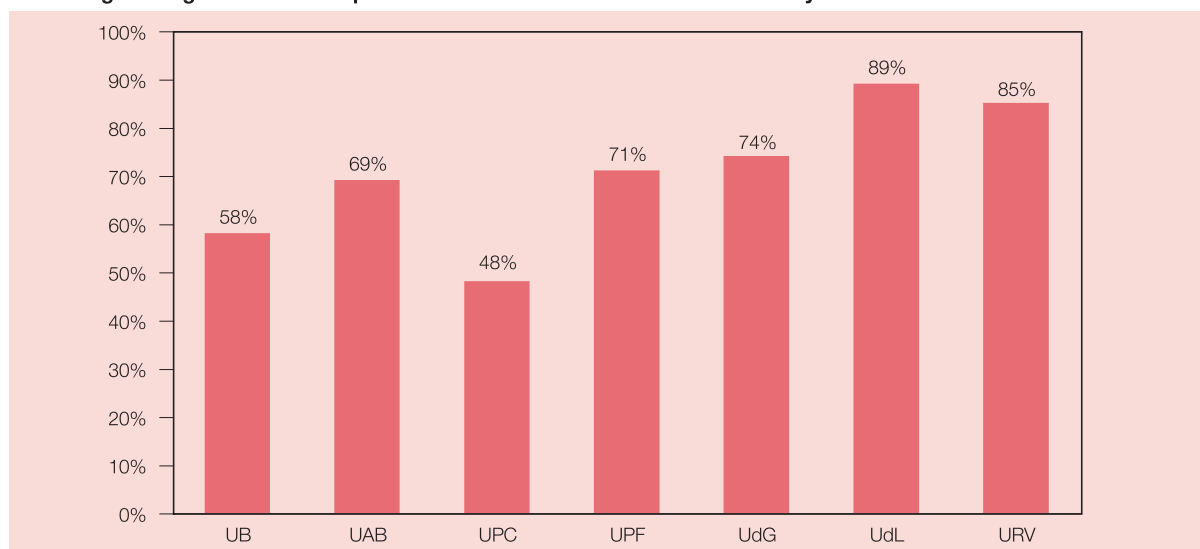
These values entail:

- Understanding quality as a *modus operandi* and a way of working better.⁴

³ Law 1/2003, of 19 February, on the Catalan Universities. Section VII, Articles 137 & ff.

⁴ AQU Catalunya was the first agency to be certified according to the ISO 9000 standard.

Figure 2
Percentage of degrees at Catalan public universities⁵ that had been assessed by 2003



Source: own data.

- Continuously innovating both methods and processes.
- Focusing its activities within a European framework, in such a way that they facilitate the integration of the Catalan university system into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).
- Ensuring maximum transparency, objectivity, impartiality and equanimity in the services it provides.⁶
- Fostering cooperation between the universities, the Administration and AQU Catalunya in order to generate the greatest possible added value.
- Encouraging cooperation with other national and international agencies and bodies that share the same aims.

- Working in conjunction with a network of experts in topics related to university quality with a view to the rapid development of knowledge and the dissemination of quality culture throughout the Catalan university system.

The move from the old consortium to the new AQU Catalunya involved shutting down the first body and setting up a new one, which had to take over the functions of its predecessor and furthermore take on fresh responsibilities, areas of authority and structure. Clearly, changes in form were necessary, but ultimately the approach remained unaltered. AQU Catalunya has the same firm will to continue working with the DURSÍ and the Catalan universities towards

⁵ UAB = Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona; UB = Universitat de Barcelona; UPC = Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya; UPF = Universitat Pompeu Fabra; UdG = Universitat de Girona; UdL = Universitat de Lleida; URV = Universitat Rovira i Virgili.

⁶ Users of AQU Catalunya's services are guaranteed the rights of information, direct and personalised attention and the making of claims, complaints and suggestions regarding the services provided. The approach adopted by AQU Catalunya is enshrined in its code of ethics, passed by the Board of Directors.

the improvement of the Catalan university system, understanding quality as a way forward towards improvement rather than red tape to be overcome.

2. Structure and functions

In compliance with the international standards of agencies in the same field of work, AQU Catalunya maintains its technical independence as regards both the methods it uses and its assessment work itself, it is accountable for the activities it carries out, and it provides for the publication of the results of institutional assessment. This independence, set forth in the Universities Law of Catalonia, is reflected in the organisational chart through the differentiation of the governing bodies (which include, among others, the Administration of the Catalan Government, the Catalan universities, and representatives of the academic community) from the assessment bodies (the decisions of which are not linked to the former in order to maintain their total independence).⁷

Governing bodies

The governing bodies defined by the DURSI are the president, the Board of Directors and the director.

It is the responsibility of the president to endeavour to achieve the objectives entrusted to AQU Catalunya. He or she is its institutional representative and is answerable for it to the Government and Parliament.

The Board of Directors is AQU Catalunya's highest organ and is responsible for fixing policies and strategic objectives, and for approving the economic management of the Agency. Its members are: the president of AQU Catalunya; the rectors of the

Catalan public universities and the Open University of Catalonia; a maximum of three rectors of private universities; the presidents of the social boards of the public universities; three academics of renown; two representatives of the Catalan Government department in charge of universities; the chairs of the assessment committees; and the director of AQU Catalunya. The Board of Directors may meet in plenary sessions or as a standing committee.

In addition to the directorship of AQU Catalunya, the director assumes full representation of the Board of Directors as regards the execution of the agreements reached by this body. He or she directs, organises, manages and inspects the services provided by AQU Catalunya in accordance with the guidelines of the Board of Directors.

The directorship receives the support of the standing advisory bodies of AQU Catalunya, which allows for improved interuniversity coordination of the activities carried out. The standing advisory bodies include the committees of vice-rectors (of quality, of the teaching staff, and of students), and meetings with representatives of the social boards and heads of universities' technical units for quality.

In order to carry out its activities, AQU Catalunya has set up two functional areas –the Quality Assessment Area and the Teaching and Research Area– and two cross-organisational areas: the Planning and Communication Area and the Administration Area.

Assessment bodies

The assessment committees of AQU Catalunya (The Quality Assessment Committee, the Tenure-

⁷ Law 1/2003, of 19 February, on the Catalan Universities. Section VII, Articles 141 to 148.

track Lecturers and Collaborating Lecturers Committee and the Research Assessment Committee) were created in compliance with the LUC. These committees evaluate the assessments made in their respective areas with technical independence, and are ultimately responsible for these assessments.

All the assessment committees, and the specific committees that are derived from them, act in accordance with their respective operational regulations, which have been approved by the committees themselves and ratified by the Board of Directors of AQU Catalunya.

Quality Assessment Committee

This committee is empowered to assess, accredit and certify in the field of degrees, activities and centres, and quality assessment systems and processes. In order to be able to perform its functions correctly, the Committee has set up three specific committees:

Specific Committee for the Assessment of Degree Standards and Programmes: responsible for assessing the courses leading to both official and non-official degrees awarded by universities and other institutions of higher education, and for certifying the quality of the degrees, accrediting the degrees in the framework of the European Higher Education Area, and issuing the resulting reports.

Specific Committee for the Quality Assessment of University Centres and Activities: responsible for, among other issues, the assessment of teaching centres based in Catalonia that offer courses leading to foreign higher education degrees; the accreditation of the quality assessment systems and procedures used by universities, with the exception of those referring to the teaching duties of the academic staff, and the assessment of the activities, processes,

services and management carried out by universities and other institutions of higher education.

Specific Committee for the Assessment of Individual Merits and Activities: responsible for assessing the individual teaching and management merits of the teaching and research staff, both those on contract and those that have sat public examination, with a view to allocating the bonuses stipulated in Articles 55 and 69 of the LOU (Organic Law on Universities), accrediting the quality assessment systems and procedures employed by universities regarding the teaching duties of the academic staff, and issuing reports evaluating and assessing individual merits and certifying the teaching activities of university academic staff.

All the assessment committees, and the specific committees that are derived from them, act in accordance with their respective operational regulations, which have been approved by the committees themselves and ratified by the Board of Directors of AQU Catalunya.

Tenure-track Lecturers and Collaborating Lecturers Committee

This committee is empowered to issue reports prior to the contracting of teaching staff in the categories of tenure-track lecturer (*professor lector*) and collaborating lecturer (*professor col·laborador*) by Catalan public universities. In order to be able to perform its functions, the Committee has set up six specific committees: one for each knowledge area (humanities, social sciences, medical and health sciences, experimental sciences, life sciences, and engineering and architecture).

Research Assessment Committee

This committee is empowered to issue research and advanced research accreditations (which in addition to serving as recognition for research work are necessary for the contracting of the categories of assistant professor (*professor agregat*) and professor (*catedràtic*) by Catalan public universities; to assess the activities of research staff; and to evaluate the individual research merits of research staff, both those on contract and those that have sat public examination. In order to be able to perform its functions, the Committee has set up six specific committees: one for each knowledge area (humanities, social sciences, medical and health sciences, experimental sciences, life sciences, and engineering and architecture).

AQU Catalunya issues an annual report containing the results of the assessments made over that year.

3. Main activities

The powers invested in AQU Catalunya by the LUC give rise to activities in four main areas:

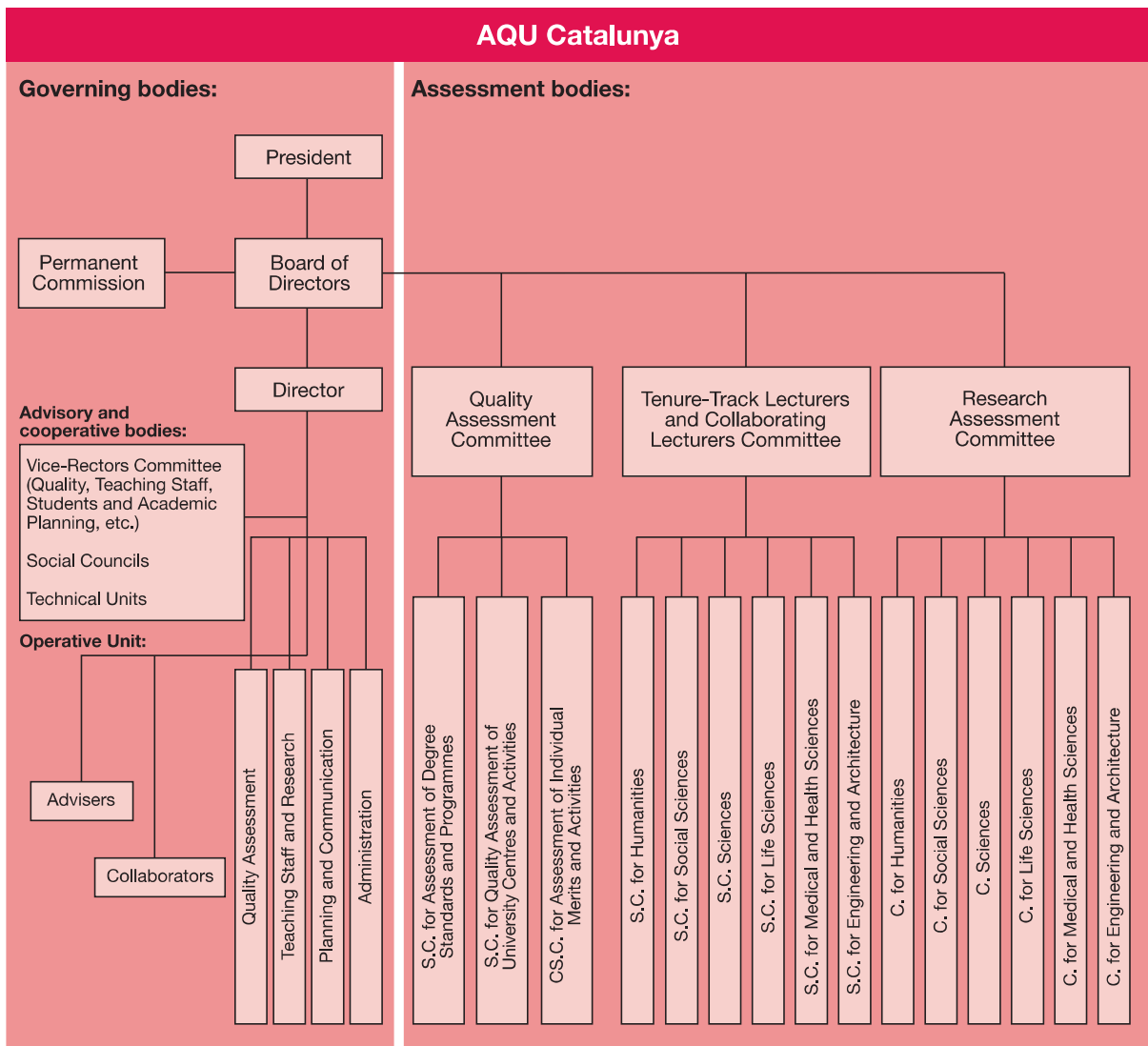
- Quality assessment.
- Teaching and research assessment.
- European and international promotion and exchange.
- Communication and dissemination of activities.

3.1. Quality assessment

The work done by AQU Catalunya in the area of quality assessment takes the form of four lines of action:

- **Quality of training programmes.** The aim of this line of action is to carry out quality assessment, follow up of plans for the improvement of education, and ensure the correct integration of this education into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). To these ends, AQU Catalunya is engaged in a series of programmes: PRO-QU (which gives continuity to the course assessments that have been carried out), DISSENY (intended to encourage the designing of new curricula, beyond mere formal changes, in a European framework), MASTERS (aimed at assessing and designing new European Master's Degrees), SEGUIMENT (focused on monitoring improvement plans and adapting courses to the EHEA), ACREDITACIO (for the accreditation of non-official degrees) and VIRTUAL (for the assessment of distance and Internet-based courses).
- **Quality in educational institutions and research centres.** AQU Catalunya has a method of assessment that simplifies authorisation to set up courses leading to degrees awarded by a foreign institution, and works in assessing the suitability of attached centres. A methodology is also being developed for the assessing of research centres, and the implementation of quality systems is being encouraged in such centres.
- **Annual assessment report.** AQU Catalunya issues an annual report containing the results of the assessments made over that year. This report includes the results of both internal reports, conducted by the university unit concerned, and external reports, conducted by the external assessment committees. The purpose of the report is to be accountable to the university community and society at large.
- **Impact of training.** In order to measure the impact of training, AQU Catalunya promotes studies and reports on issues such as the assessment of the insertion of university graduates in the working world or the assessment of training quality from the

Figure 3
Organisational chart of AQU Catalunya



standpoint of employers, conceived as the starting point for the improvement on the cooperation with economic and professional sectors in the field of the quality assessment of university training.

- **Studies and reports.** With the aim of improving instruments and procedures, AQU Catalunya develops a wide variety of studies addressed to the universities, the educational Administration, the social agents and society at large. In this regard, AQU Catalunya is likewise characterised by carrying out its activities through specific working committees formed by experts from the university world, resulting in studies, technical surveys and general framework documents. One of the priorities in this field is to encourage students to participate in the process of assessing university education, in accordance with the Berlin Communiqué regarding the European Higher Education Area.

3.2. Teaching and research assessment

The activities carried out by AQU Catalunya in the field of assessing teaching staff of the universities of Catalonia are structured according to five main blocks:

- **Assessment of tenure-tracks and collaborating lecturers.** The Agency establishes and plans the calls for preliminary reports for the contracting of tenure-track and collaborating lecturers by Catalan public universities. It also establishes and plans the resolution procedures for the appeals lodged in the various calls.
- **Research and advanced research accreditations.** Research and advanced research accreditations provide recognition and prestige for research activity, and is also an indispensable requirement for any lecturer wishing to enter the contractual category of tenured assistant professor or full professor at a public university. In this field, AQU Catalunya establishes and plans the calls for the issue of research and advanced re-

search accreditation, and also establishes and plans the resolution procedures for the appeals lodged in the various calls.

- **Assessment of teaching staff at private universities.** AQU Catalunya assesses, through agreements with the private universities, the assessment of teaching and research work of contracted teaching staff at these universities.
- **Assessment of teaching merits of academic staff.** AQU Catalunya certifies the mechanisms used by the universities to assess the quality of the teaching merits of university teaching staff. Together with the certification programme of the teaching staff assessment model, it has established the procedure for the issuing of certificates of teaching activity for those teachers who hold a research or advanced research accreditation issued by AQU Catalunya, in accordance with Article 47.3 of the LUC.
- **Methodological cooperation in research assessment.** In cooperation with those Catalan institutions that are already working in this area, AQU Catalunya strives to improve procedures and methods for research assessment.

3.3. European and international promotion and exchange

With the aim of ensuring the constant updating of its services and the integration of the Catalan university system into the EHEA, AQU Catalunya works with an European outlook. It gives priority to international promotion and the exchange of experience and knowledge with institutions that operate in the same area, according to the following lines of action:

- **International quality promotion and cooperation.** On the European and international scene, AQU Catalunya cooperates closely with the ENQA (European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), of which it is a founder member;

with the INQAAHE (International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education); and on specific projects funded mainly by the European Union (Tempus, Socrates, Leonardo). The fruits of this cooperation are shared with the Catalan universities and Administration in order to carry out a joint project and foster activities aimed at improving the quality of the Catalan university system and integrating it into the European Higher Education Area. The Agency also contributes to the meetings of the group of quality assessment agencies of the Spanish autonomous communities and to those of the Spanish ANECA (National Quality Assessment and Accreditation Agency).

- **Exchange.** With the aim of facilitating the exchange of experience and knowledge, AQU Catalunya promotes the holding of workshops for reflection and debate with the Catalan universities, the autonomous communities of Spain, the ENQA and other bodies. Guests from abroad are usually invited to these workshops in order to gain insight into other situations and also to make headway in the EHEA.

3.4. Communication and dissemination of activities

AQU Catalunya offers the university community and society at large all the information with respect to its activities, in order to foster the orientation towards quality, and with respect to other topics of such importance that they should be made known to all. To this end, it promotes communication and the free dissemination of its publications:

- **Communication.** For the purpose of furthering knowledge of the activities it carries out within the Catalan university system and keeping it permanently informed, AQU Catalunya maintains the web site <www.aqucatalunya.org>, publishes a quarterly bulletin on paper and in digital format,

and releases a monthly digital newsletter covering the main items of interest each month, called *AQU Notícies*.

- **Publications.** AQU Catalunya publishes and distributes several lines of publications: annual reports, the purpose of which is to be accountable to society regarding the results of the assessments conducted; general framework documents, which compile and systematise good practice in strategic areas and are distributed throughout the university community; specific monographs on topics of special interest in the area of university quality; publications from the workshops for reflection and debate organised by AQU Catalunya; annual reports accounting for activities carried out, human resources and the budget; and lastly, any other documents that might arise in connection with the work of AQU Catalunya.

4. Future challenges

AQU Catalunya is an agency that has, above all, a vocation to serve the public. Naturally, therefore, the challenges it faces are related to the necessity to respond to its context, with the ultimate objective of serving the Administration and the Catalan universities in order to promote and guarantee the quality of the latter. Within this framework, the main challenges that AQU Catalunya has defined and aims to achieve and consolidate over the coming years are as follows:

1) To maintain its position as a consolidated agency that safeguards the quality of the Catalan university system and strives to respond to its demands in a framework of co-operation

The work done over the years allows to state that AQU Catalunya is a consolidated agency in this area. This has been made possible thanks

to, among other factors, the important part played by the good climate of understanding and cooperation between the Catalan universities and the Agency to promote quality culture and continuous improvement in the framework of the Catalan university system.

A great deal of effort has been spent to reach this point, and it is essential to continue in the same vein in order to keep up the pace set up to now. For AQU Catalunya, it will be important to carry on developing and taking part in innovative projects with other bodies and institutions that can contribute added value to the Catalan agency and so to the Catalan university system as a whole.

2) To respond to the policies of the Catalan Administration, especially the demands created by the integration process of the Catalan universities into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

By its very nature as a public service, AQU Catalunya must respond with total technical independence to the policies implemented by the Catalan Administration, and more specifically the Department of Universities, Research and the Information Society (DURSI).

At present, high-priority policies in which the cooperation of AQU Catalunya is required include the process of adapting degrees to the EHEA and research assessment.

By way of example, in the former case (which at the time of writing is further advanced), AQU Catalunya has taken part in the necessary drafting of methodologies enabling the redesigning of university training from a new perspective that is capable of generating a code of good practice as regards both the teaching-learning process and

the constitution of quality assurance mechanisms.

AQU Catalunya also follows up and assesses the introduction of these degrees, which will culminate, if the established criteria are fulfilled, in their accreditation. The objective of this is to bring about a change in the Catalan university system such that its degrees meet the requirements set forth in the Bologna Declaration and subsequent complementary developments, in order to facilitate a comparable system of university degrees that will allow greater mobility both in academic circles and in the professional career of graduates, thus promoting European cohesion.

3) To consolidate itself as a European agency with an international dimension

Since its beginning, AQU Catalunya has set its sights on Europe, for the added value that this represents for the whole of the Catalan university system. It has been a member of the ENQA (European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), the European network of quality agencies, since 1998.

The presence of AQU Catalunya and the contributions it has made have led to its being acknowledged as one of the most consolidated agencies, with a high profile as regards university quality. This has facilitated its participation in European transnational assessment projects, which are intended as a way of establishing joint assessment methodologies for European degrees, and also in the ENQA work group that is dealing with the quality assurance of the European agencies and their external assessment.

The main challenges to be faced in this period are the following: to be one of the first Euro-

pean agencies to be successful in the external assessment, and given the desire to consolidate the Agency not only on a European scale but also internationally, to step up the translation of key documents and studies, for dissemination primarily on the AQU Catalunya web site.

4) To maintain a commitment to quality in its activities and to be effective in leading adaptation to change

AQU Catalunya must meet its own demands and needs and those of its milieu with maximum quality and in a suitable response time. That means continuing to show a commitment to the introduction of process-oriented quality management and continuous improvement systems and equipping the Agency with a shaped and flexible structure that is easily adaptable to any new requirements that might arise.

It is also essential to push internal information systems and new technologies allowing more agile process management, obtain process assessment indicators and establish control points, thus offering quality assurance and maximum guarantees in all the Agency's activities.

To sum up, the aim is to consolidate the Agency as a professional, flexible, modern body where it is possible to generate ideas and proposals for continuous improvement and develop innovative

projects that have a positive effect on the quality of the Catalan university system.

5) To build processes and channels of communication with society

The last challenge is to build processes and channels of communication with society, since AQU Catalunya is a public body, and as such must be accountable for its activities, and must be so publicly; but more than this, it must take into consideration the opinion of society in the activities it carries out.

It is therefore crucial to gain insight into the opinions of employers and university students, and also those of graduates regarding their time at university. These bridges of communication should lead to new initiatives for a better fit between university degrees and society's needs.

All these challenges are important for AQU Catalunya. To overcome them, the DURSI and the Catalan universities show cooperation and real commitment to safeguarding, promoting and guaranteeing the quality of the universities. At their service they have a solid agency with European interest and a European dimension, which strives to improve the Catalan university system, opts unhesitatingly for innovation and cooperation, seeks internal excellence, promotes the dissemination of quality and works according to a code of ethics. In short, with the firm conviction that quality is a guarantee of improvement.

References

AQU Catalunya web site: <<http://www.aqucatalunya.org/>>
