

ENQA AGENCY REVIEW

# QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN ANDORRA (AQUA)

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24 FEBRUARY 2025

# CONTENTS

<b>CONTENTS .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS .....</b>	<b>5</b>
BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW .....	5
SCOPE OF THE REVIEW .....	5
REVIEW PROCESS.....	6
<b>HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY .....</b>	<b>7</b>
HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM.....	7
QUALITY ASSURANCE.....	8
<b>QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN ANDORRA (AQUA) .....</b>	<b>8</b>
AQUA'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE.....	10
AQUA'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES .....	11
AQUA'S FUNDING.....	14
<b>FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF AQUA WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG) .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES .....</b>	<b>15</b>
ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE.....	15
ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS.....	19
ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE.....	20
ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS.....	25
ESG 3.5 RESOURCES .....	27
ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT .....	29
ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES .....	32
<b>ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE .....</b>	<b>33</b>
ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE.....	33
ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE .....	36
ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES .....	39
ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS .....	42
ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES .....	45

ESG 2.6 REPORTING .....	47
ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS.....	49
<b>ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>CHALLENGES OF EXPANSION OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT .....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>ANNEXES.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>ANNEX 1: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>68</b>
DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY AQUA.....	68
<b>ANNEX 5. PART I ESG MAPPING TABLES PROVIDED BY AQUA.....</b>	<b>69</b>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report evaluates the extent to which the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA) complies with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). AQUA has been an affiliate of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since 2012 and has initiated the present review as part of its applications for ENQA membership and inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). This is the agency's first review against the ESG. The review followed the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews and was conducted between March 2024 and February 2025. The site visit of the review panel to Andorra la Vella, Andorra, took place between 7 and 9 October 2024.

AQUA is the national body for quality assurance in higher education in Andorra. It was established in 2006 and has operated as an autonomous public law institution since 2016. Its mission is 'to ensure the quality of higher education in Andorra with a constant demand for quality and rigour derived from social and labour demands, through evaluation, accreditation, and certification in the field of teaching and research based on the standards defined in the European Higher Education Area'.

The agency's external quality assurance activities that fall within the scope of the ESG include ex-ante and ex-post programme accreditation, programme modification, programme follow-up and ex-ante institutional accreditation. Outwith the scope of the ESG, it also conducts teaching staff certification, provides information and advice on quality assurance to its stakeholders, carries out studies and projects and (co-)organises various events on quality assurance and higher education to promote a quality culture in higher education.

AQUA operates within a higher education system where the only public university was established in the late 1990s and five private universities have only been officially recognised in recent years. It has built a strong relationship with the universities and the Ministry responsible for higher education, and all stakeholder groups are represented on its governing body. However, it would now be important to ensure that it hears the views of all private universities via their representative on its governing body. In expanding its stakeholder engagement, the agency would need to involve students and social partners in its working groups, and in particular, in the development of its evaluation methodologies.

The national authorities recognise the value of the agency's work for the country and have provided the resources it needs to conduct its external quality assurance and other activities. However, while the agency enjoys full operational independence, the appointment of its Director being left in the hands of the Parliament recommended by the Ministry and the involvement of a Ministry official in its appeals body undermine its independence in organisational terms and with regard to formal outcomes of its evaluation processes.

Although small in size, the team working in AQUA is its greatest asset. The panel was impressed by their professionalism, commitment, teamwork spirit and eagerness to learn. The work is organised so as to ensure best use of the skills and competences of each team member, and efficient use of time, and the agency offers excellent staff development opportunities.

Despite the increasing workload related to external quality assurance activities in recent years, the agency and its partners have conducted a number of studies on quality assurance and higher education. One of the publications is a good example of thematic analysis that agencies are expected to do. In the coming years, the agency would need to schedule time and responsibility to ensure that such thematic studies are regularly published.

AQUA has a systematic approach to internal quality assurance. It regularly reviews its internal processes, gathers and analyses feedback from its stakeholders and takes action, amending guides for its evaluation processes and its internal procedures.

The agency's methodologies for the evaluation processes are overall fit for purpose and the evaluation criteria incorporate to a great extent the standards of Part I of the ESG. All of the processes include a self-assessment, an external evaluation and a report resulting from the external evaluation as three of the four stages recommended in the ESG, but a site visit would need to be the default approach, unless considered inappropriate as part of an external evaluation in all rather than only some of the processes. A follow-up as the fourth recommended stage is not yet properly designed nor consistently implemented.

The pool of experts conducting external evaluations is limited in size and in terms of the diversity in profiles; AQUA has been striving to address the issue, but this is not easy due to language considerations. Experts have a strong sense of civic commitment and feel very well supported. There is, however, some room for improvement in the training for experts as regards consistency in the application of the evaluation criteria, even though the agency has in place overall good mechanisms to ensure that inconsistencies only rarely occur.

Evaluation reports should provide more evidence and a more in-depth analysis of findings to support conclusions and outcomes of the processes. The legislation needs to be amended to allow the agency to publish all evaluation reports rather than only those ending with a favourable outcome.

The agency has a complaints process that works well. The process for appealing against outcomes of its evaluation process ensures impartiality but would need to be spelled out more clearly to demonstrate its transparency to stakeholders.

AQUA is aware of some issues identified by the panel (for example: independence; programme follow-up; diversity in expert profiles and training of experts; publication of reports; appeals process) and is taking action to tackle them. Proposed amendments to the legislation currently before Parliament will address most of them. The approach of the panel was to comment on the anticipated changes in its analysis but does not consider them in its judgments on the agency's compliance with the respective standards.

The panel found the agency to be:

- compliant with ESG 3.1 (Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance); 3.2 (Official status); 3.4 (Thematic analysis); 3.5 (Resources); 3.6 (Internal quality assurance and professional conduct); 3.7 (Cyclical external review of agencies); and 2.1 (Consideration of internal quality assurance); 2.2 (Designing methodologies fit for purpose); 2.4 (Peer-review experts); 2.5 (Criteria for outcomes) and 2.7 (Complaints and appeals); and
- partially compliant with ESG 3.3 (Independence); 2.3 (Implementing processes); and 2.6 (Reporting).

The agency has some challenges in complying fully with the ESG, although not all of these are in key areas. It has demonstrated a clear and committed approach to dealing with these, and has made significant progress in recent times. In addition, the proposed changes to the relevant legislation, due to be approved by the end of 2024, will resolve many of the remaining issues. Given that this is the agency's first review against the ESG, the panel considers that AQUA is in overall compliance with the ESG.

# INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (*Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra*), AQUA, with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted between March 2024 and February 2025. The review was conducted as part of AQUA's first application for ENQA membership and registration in EQAR.

## BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

### BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they act in compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

Registration on EQAR is the official instrument established by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for demonstrating an agency's ESG compliance. An external review is a prerequisite for initial registration and such registration must be renewed every five years.

AQUA has been an affiliate of ENQA since 2012. It is applying for ENQA membership and registration in EQAR for the first time.

As this is AQUA's first external review, the panel is expected to pay particular attention to the policies, procedures, and criteria in place, being aware that full evidence of concrete results in all areas may not be available at this stage.

### SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

The review addresses the following external quality assurance (EQA) activities of AQUA listed in the Terms of Reference (see Annex 2) as falling within the scope of the ESG:

- Ex-ante programme accreditation
- Ex-post programme accreditation
- Programme follow-up (monitoring)
- Programme modification
- Ex-ante institutional accreditation.

The ToR also refers to the following activities of the agency that fall outside the scope of the ESG:

- Teaching staff certification
- Conducting studies and projects
- Consultancy on QA
- Promoting a culture of quality in higher education.

As requested in the ToR, the panel considered whether AQUA makes a clear distinction between its activities falling within and outside the scope of the ESG, in particular, for the activity 'Consultancy on QA'.

At the time of the panel's site visit to AQUA, the Parliament of Andorra was debating a bill which proposes changes to the legal framework for the agency and is expected to be approved by the end of 2024. The changes may affect the agency's compliance with some of the ESG. The review report refers to the anticipated changes under the relevant ESG. However, the panel's judgments on compliance of the agency's activities with the ESG are based solely on the arrangements that were in place at the time of the site visit.

## REVIEW PROCESS

The 2024 external review of AQUA was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in accordance with the timeline set out in the ToR. The panel for the external review of AQUA was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Alastair Delaney (Chair, ENQA nominee), freelance consultant, former Executive Director of Operations and Deputy Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), United Kingdom;
- Ewa Kolanowska, (Secretary, ENQA nominee), freelance consultant, Poland;
- Jordi Villà i Freixa (Academic, EUA nominee), Full professor, Department of Biosciences, Universitat de Vic - Universitat Central de Catalunya, Spain;
- Lukas Jehlicka (ESU nominee, member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool), Student in a single-cycle Master's degree programme in Medicine and Surgery at the University of Turin, Italy.

Alexis Fàbregas Almirall, ENQA's Project and Reviews Officer, acted as the review coordinator.

The panel received AQUA's self-assessment report (SAR) on 22 July 2024. At its request, AQUA provided some additional data (income and expenditure; number of evaluations ending with an unfavourable outcome; number and reasons for complaints received and outcomes of the complaints processes), and a more detailed table mapping the agency's evaluation criteria for Part I of the ESG than the one included in the SAR. The review coordinator organised an online briefing for the panel on 27 August 2024; a representative of EQAR attended the briefing to discuss the areas of the review that the panel was expected to focus on. The panel's online kick-off meetings were held on 9 and 17 September 2024. The second meeting was preceded by an online clarification meeting with the AQUA Director on the national QA context and key characteristics of the agency's EQA activities. The onsite preparatory meeting of the panel was held on 6 October 2024. The site visit to AQUA, Andorra la Vella, Andorra, took place between 7 and 9 October 2024. The panel produced its draft review report in November 2024. The draft was verified by the ENQA coordinator for its compliance with the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* in November 2024, and checked by the agency for its factual accuracy in December 2024. The panel submitted the final review report to ENQA in December 2024.

The panel had access to all documents and stakeholders it wished to consult during the review process. All decisions of the panel were taken by consensus.

### Self-assessment report

AQUA initiated its self-assessment in November 2022 and prepared the first draft of its SAR in September 2023. The SAR working team consisted of the AQUA Director and staff, and an external adviser. In assessing its activities against the ESG, the agency considered, in particular, its Strategic Plan and annual activity reports, evaluation guides, evidence collected in its EQA processes, its internal QA (IQA) system, inputs from its stakeholders, and external review reports for other agencies published on the ENQA website. To gather stakeholder feedback, it conducted a survey of quality managers at universities and the Ministry responsible for higher education. The first draft of the SAR was discussed with the stakeholders and reviewed by the external adviser in a mock evaluation. Based on their feedback, the SAR was improved, finalised and approved by AQUA's governing body and distributed to all stakeholders.

The SAR followed the structure recommended by ENQA and included a description of the self-assessment process; descriptions of the higher education and QA systems, and AQUA's profile, history and EQA activities; sections addressing each of the ESG, with links to key documents; opinions of the

agency's stakeholders; a SWOT analysis; key challenges and areas for future development; and annexes (Andorran Qualifications Framework; AQUA's Code of Ethics, Internal Quality Policy and Process Map; flow charts for the evaluation processes; selection criteria for external experts; a list of events (co-)organised by the agency and collaboration agreements; links to the Strategic Plan, evaluation guides, Internal Quality Assurance System Manual, and the stakeholder survey on the agency's compliance with the ESG).

The SAR was clear, comprehensive and detailed. Its content was very well organised and professionally presented, with appropriate diagrams and graphs. It was a good opener to report stakeholder feedback and underpin the SWOT analysis in the SAR and the Strategic Plan of the agency. It served as a valuable source of evidence for the panel to define its lines of enquiry and frame its preliminary discussions on AQUA's compliance with the ESG. The panel also appreciated the agency's honesty in discussing issues that it did not feel comfortable with, such as the absence of a consistent follow-up stage in programme evaluations and non-publication of reports for evaluations ending with an unfavourable outcome. The SAR could have, however, been more explicit about the impact that the advice offered by the external expert had on the finalisation of the SAR, and, in particular, about whether or how this helped the agency to identify or address issues related to compliance with some of the ESG.

### **Site visit**

The site visit programme (see Annex I) was prepared jointly by the panel and the AQUA Director as the liaison person for the review. During the visit, the panel met with the agency's bodies responsible for governance and EQA decision-making, the SAR working team, staff and external experts, representatives of the national authorities, heads and quality managers of universities, students and social partners. At the end of the visit, the panel had a meeting to agree on the main findings from the review and a debriefing for the agency.

The review panel sincerely thanks the agency for superb arrangements for the visit and all of the participants for their exemplary engagement in discussions. Their frank and open approach made for a very productive visit.

## **HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY**

### **HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM**

The first Bachelor's degree programmes were implemented in Andorra in 1988 and the first and only public higher education institution (HEI), Universitat d'Andorra, was founded in 1997. Currently, the higher education system also comprises five officially recognised private universities: Universitat Europea (eUniv), Universitat Carlemany, UNIPRO Universitat Digital (formerly Humanium International University), Western Europe University, and Tech Global University. The six universities jointly have around 3,000 students. The public university provides mainly on-campus programmes, and the private universities offer online programmes to international students.

Andorra has been a full member of the Bologna Process, and subsequently, of the EHEA since 2003. Law 12/2008 on Higher Education of 12 June 2008 aligned the legal framework for higher education with the principles of the EHEA, introducing the three-cycle degree structure and the Diploma Supplement, and addressing quality of higher education, student and staff mobility, lifelong learning and the European dimension of higher education. Currently, the higher education system is governed by the following main legislative acts:



- Higher Education Law (Law 14/2018 of 21 June 2018), which sets an overall framework for higher education and research, including the aims and principles of higher education and research, and general arrangements for the pursuit of academic activities, the award of academic titles and the establishment and activities of HEIs, and for the academic community;
- Decree Approving the Regulation on State Higher Education Degrees (Decree of 8 July 2020), which specifies the types of official diplomas and degrees and lays down basic arrangements regarding, for example, the structure of programmes, curricula, allocation of credits based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), validation of study periods and recognition of ECTS credits, and evaluation and accreditation of programmes;
- Decree Regulating the Establishment of New Private Universities and Other Higher Education Institutions (Decree 183/2022 of 4 May 2022), as amended by Decree 209/2022 of 18 May 2022 and Decree 15/2023 of 11 January 2023, which describes the procedure for granting authorisations to establish private HEIs, the range of information to be provided in applications and the standards for institutional evaluation;
- Law on the National Qualifications Framework (Law 7/2023 of 19 January 2023), which established the Andorran Qualifications Framework and the National Directory of Qualifications.

The National Qualifications Framework (*Marc andorrà de qualificacions. MAQ*) includes the following five levels of study: Diploma of Higher Education or Advanced Vocational Diploma (Level 5, 120 ECTS), Bachelor's Degree (Level 6a, 180 ECTS) and Bachelor's Degree for Specialisation (Level 6b, 60 ECTS), Master's Degree (Level 7, 120 ECTS), and Doctorate (Level 8, 3 years). HEIs may offer official state diplomas and degrees, which are established by the Government of Andorra and comply with the requirements laid down by law, and non-state or own qualifications.

The universities award a total of 51 official state degrees, and the number of state degrees has been increasing in recent years. Currently, three of the six universities, including Universitat d'Andorra and two private universities, provide official degree programmes.

## QUALITY ASSURANCE

In pursuing the aims of the Bologna Process, Andorra began to build its QA system in 2006, when the Government created AQUA as the national body for evaluation and accreditation of higher education. The agency initially operated more like a unit within the Ministry responsible for higher education and became an autonomous institution in 2016. For details about the development of the QA system, see the section 'Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA)'.

Currently, the QA system is governed by the legislation on higher education (see above) and AQUA's Founding Law and decrees regulating its activities. It comprises teaching staff certification, ex-ante and ex-post programme evaluation and accreditation, programme modification and programme follow-up for official degrees, and ex-ante institutional evaluation and accreditation. All of the processes are conducted by AQUA, and all of them, except for programme follow-up, are mandatory for HEIs. Outcomes of the agency's programme and institutional evaluations are binding upon the Ministry responsible for higher education as the body that takes final decisions. For details, see the section 'AQUA's Functions, Activities, Procedures'.

## QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN ANDORRA (AQUA)

AQUA was established in 2006 by the Government Decree of 22 November 2006 Approving the Regulation on the Creation and Operation of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in

Andorra. Operating more like a unit within the Ministry in charge of higher education, it had limited responsibilities and resources, offered only some guidelines for ex-ante programme accreditation, conducted basic programme evaluations, and relied largely on Spanish agencies for the selection of external experts for evaluations and the management of evaluation panels.

Law 9/2016 of 28 June 2016 creating the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA) (AQUA's Founding Law) established the agency as an autonomous public law institution. Representatives of the Parliament, private universities, students and the professional sector and an international expert joined the Steering Committee, the agency's collective governing body, which had previously consisted of representatives of the Ministry responsible for higher education, the rector of the public university and the AQUA Director. The agency set up the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education to design the QA system and develop evaluation criteria and guidelines.

The Steering Committee and the Working Group proposed further improvements in the agency's structure and activities. Law 14/2020 of 12 November 2020 amending AQUA's Founding Law and Decree 63/2021 of 24 February 2021 Approving AQUA's Regulations provided the basis for the agency to establish the Evaluation Committee and the Appeals Committee – the bodies taking decisions in the EQA processes – within its structure, and appoint panels composed of external experts for evaluations. Thus, the agency could take on full responsibility for the conduct of EQA processes, without relying on Spanish agencies.

AQUA published its first formally adopted evaluation guides, including criteria, for ex-ante and ex-post programme accreditation in 2017 and 2018 respectively, programme modification in 2020, and for ex-ante institutional accreditation in 2023. It has conducted EQA processes based on its published guides and involving its external experts since 2020. The number of evaluations, and in particular, ex-ante programme evaluations, has increased steadily as new HEIs were established. In 2023, the agency adopted its first Strategic Plan (2023-2025) and implemented an IQA system.

By the time of this review, the Parliament of Andorra had received a bill where the Ministry responsible for higher education and AQUA proposed changes to the legal framework of the agency to enhance its independence and the transparency of its activities and to include in its evaluation processes all stages recommended in the ESG. The changes have cross-party support and are expected to be approved by the end of 2024.

The following changes are proposed:

- Structure and organisation of the agency:
  - A candidate for the AQUA Director will be recommended by the Legislative Commission of the Parliament in charge of higher education following a merit-based preselection process (currently, he/she is appointed by the Parliament upon the recommendation from the Minister responsible for higher education);
  - The AQUA Advisory Council will be established to support the agency in the implementation of recommendations from external reviews and the improvement of its external QA processes.
  - The composition of the Evaluation Committee (currently, the AQUA Director and two academics) will be expanded to include at least one student.
  - Evaluation guides will be approved by the Evaluation Committee (rather than by the Steering Committee as is currently the case).
  - The composition of the Appeals Committee (currently, a Ministry official, a student and an international expert who are all members of the Steering Committee) will be changed so as to include only the international expert sitting on the Steering Committee, two external academic experts and an external student).

- EQA processes:
  - The length of the programme accreditation cycle will be reduced from ten to six years.
  - Conditional accreditation will be introduced as one of the three possible outcomes of programme evaluation processes (currently, evaluations end with a favourable outcome / accreditation or an unfavourable outcome / refusal of accreditation).
  - AQUA's functions will be extended to include:
    - a follow-up (currently, a voluntary process which is not provided for in the legislation) as a mandatory process for programmes which will receive conditional accreditation and as a voluntary process for those which have received full accreditation; and
    - ex-post institutional evaluation.

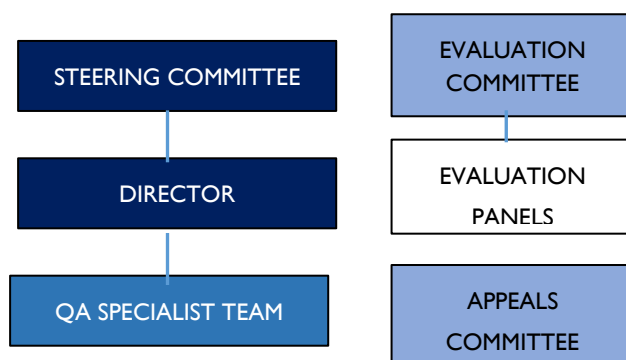
In its vision, AQUA 'aims to be an agile, approachable, and internationally recognised agency that accompanies higher education institutions towards the continuous improvement of their activities and generates and transfers knowledge in the field of quality assurance'. Its mission is 'to ensure the quality of higher education in Andorra with a constant demand for quality and rigour derived from social and labour demands, through evaluation, accreditation, and certification in the field of teaching and research based on the standards defined in the European Higher Education Area'.

EQA is the agency's main activity. Additionally, it provides advice and information to its stakeholders, referred to as consultancy on QA, and conducts studies and projects on QA in higher education and other activities promoting a quality culture in higher education (for details, see the sections 'AQUA's Functions, Activities, Procedures' and ESG 3.1).

AQUA has been an ENQA affiliate since 2012, and a member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and the *Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior* (SIACES) since 2020. It has participated as an observer in meetings of the Spanish Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (REACU), and has recently joined the Global Academic Integrity Network (GAIN), the Coalition for the Advancement of Research Assessment (CoARA) and the Copernicus Alliance.

## AQUA'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

The agency's structure includes the Steering Committee, the Director, the QA Specialist Team, and the Evaluation Committee, the Appeals Committee and evaluation panels.



The **Steering Committee** sets strategic priorities for the agency, approves activity plans and reports and budgets, authorises the agency to sign agreements, endorses evaluation guides, and performs any other tasks which are necessary for effective governance and development of the agency. It consists of 11 members: the President and the Vice-President of the Legislative Committee of the Parliament responsible for higher education, with the former acting as the President of the Steering Committee;

the Minister in charge of higher education and a high-ranking official from the Ministry; an international expert; the rector of Universitat d'Andorra, and the rector of a private university; a student of Universitat d'Andorra, and a student representative of private universities; the President of the Chamber of Trade, Industry and Services of Andorra; and the AQUA Director. (For the appointment procedure and the term of office of Steering Committee members, see the section on ESG 3.3).

The **Director** is appointed for a renewable four-year term by the Parliament (a qualified majority of two-thirds of its members) upon the recommendation from the Minister responsible for higher education. The Director is the head of the agency for technical and administrative matters, implements resolutions of the Steering Committee, and chairs the Evaluation Committee.

The **QA Specialist Team** includes four technical staff or QA specialists. This is a cross-functional team, with each member having their own responsibilities but not assigned to any specific areas. Technical staff act as secretaries of evaluation panels, advise them on the agency's procedures and criteria, and draft expert evaluation reports based on inputs from panel members, which are subsequently discussed and approved by panels.

The **Evaluation Committee** is composed of the Director and two international academic experts who hold the title of full professor, are recognised for their experience in higher education in the EHEA and are familiar with the Andorran context. Members are proposed by the Director and appointed by the Steering Committee for a renewable four-year term. The Committee approves expert evaluation reports, takes accreditation decisions and issues final evaluation reports.

**Evaluation panels**, which consist of external experts, conduct external evaluations. For details about their composition and responsibilities, see the section on ESG 2.4.

The **Appeals Committee** is composed of a high-ranking official of the Ministry responsible for higher education as the Chair, an international expert and a student representative of Universitat d'Andorra who are all members of the Steering Committee. The Committee considers appeals against outcomes of the evaluation processes and takes final decisions on appeals.

For details about the proposed changes in the structure, see general information about AQUA above.

## AQUA'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

### Activities falling within the scope of the ESG

AQUA conducts five types of EQA activities<sup>1</sup> that fall within the scope of the ESG:

- Ex-ante programme accreditation
- Ex-post programme accreditation
- Programme follow-up (monitoring)
- Programme modification
- Ex-ante institutional accreditation.

**Ex-ante programme evaluation** (an accreditation process) is a mandatory process for official degree programmes to be established and provided. Ongoing official degree programmes must undergo an **ex-post evaluation** every ten years to be reaccredited. Ex-post evaluation focuses on the implementation of a programme, with the initially accredited programme and any modifications

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<sup>1</sup> While the ToR for the review use the term 'accreditation' to describe the main EQA processes, the agency's SAR and other documents use the terms 'accreditation', 'evaluation' and 'evaluation and accreditation' as largely interchangeable and explain that 'accreditation' refers to the decision taken by the agency as an outcome of an evaluation process. The same approach was adopted in the review report.

made afterwards used as the basis for the process. The two processes end with a favourable or unfavourable outcome (accreditation or refusal of accreditation). AQUA's accreditation decision is binding on the Ministry responsible for higher education, which takes final decisions (pre-approval in ex-ante accreditation, and approval in ex-post accreditation).

**Programme modification** is a process evaluating changes in official degree programmes. The legislation makes a distinction between major and minor substantial and non-substantial modifications. Substantial modifications have a significant impact on the nature, objectives, structure or other aspects of an accredited programme. A major substantial modification affects more than 30% of a programme (e.g. modification of the learning and teaching methodology affecting all programme modules). A minor substantial modification affects less than 30% of teaching units in the structure of a programme but has no impact on their nature and objectives (e.g. learning outcomes of a module adapted to current knowledge in a discipline). Non-substantial modifications improve a programme without altering its nature, objectives or structure (e.g. the name of a module translated from Catalan into English).

AQUA conducts a full ex-ante programme evaluation for a major substantial modification and a targeted evaluation focusing on specific criteria for a minor substantial modification. Evaluations are based on the criteria for ex-ante programme evaluation, and end with a favourable or unfavourable outcome, which is binding on the Ministry responsible for higher education in taking final decisions (modification). Non-substantial modifications do not require prior accreditation by AQUA, but the agency may provide advice if requested by HEIs.

**Programme follow-up** was mandatory only for programmes which received 'partial accreditation' in the period of AQUA's activities when evaluations ended with a 'partially accredited', 'accredited' or 'non-accredited' outcome. In 2020, the AQUA Steering Committee eliminated 'partial accreditation' as a possible outcome of ex-ante and ex-post evaluations, and a follow-up became a voluntary process at that time.

Currently, the legislation does not provide for a programme follow-up to be conducted by AQUA. However, the agency may be instructed by the Ministry responsible for higher education to carry out a follow-up for a particular programme; there had been no such case until the time of the review. Otherwise, HEIs can voluntarily apply to the agency for a follow-up, which ends with non-binding recommendations for improvement. Such a follow-up focuses on the implementation of a programme, with the programme accredited at the previous stage and, if applicable, any modifications used as a point of reference. It can be conducted at any time, for one or several programmes, and against programme evaluation criteria selected by the HEI and the agency from the set defined in the respective evaluation guide. Since 2023 the agency has encouraged HEIs to undergo a follow-up, and three follow-ups are scheduled for 2025.

Public HEIs are established by law. All private HEIs to be established undergo, on a mandatory basis, an **ex-ante institutional evaluation** (an accreditation process). The process is also referred to as an evaluation of an institution's strategic plan as it reviews an HEI's strategic plan which covers key areas of activity, including QA. Like the other mandatory processes, an ex-ante institutional evaluation ends with a favourable or unfavourable outcome, which is binding on the Ministry responsible for higher education in taking its final decision (authorisation). Work is underway to develop an ex-post institutional accreditation process (see the proposed legal changes).

The table below provides the number of evaluations undertaken by the agency in each of the last five years.

TYPE OF ACTIVITY	YEAR				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Ex-ante programme accreditation	6	9	10	13	10
Ex-post programme accreditation	2	0	0	2	0
Programme modification	2	2	1	5	5
Programme follow-up	1	0	0	0	0
Ex-ante institutional accreditation	0	0	0	0	4

Between 2019 and 2023 AQUA issued five unfavourable decisions in ex-ante programme evaluations; one in ex-post programme evaluations; one in programme modification evaluations; and three in ex-ante institutional evaluations.

### Activities falling outside the scope of the ESG

AQUA's activities falling outside the scope of the ESG include teaching staff certification as an EQA activity; studies and projects to create and transfer knowledge on QA in higher education; consultancy on QA for the Government, HEIs and other institutions; and promotion of a culture of quality in higher education (organisation and participation in seminars and other events).

Based on the evidence collected (SAR; Evaluation Guide for Teaching Staff Certification), the panel confirms that teaching staff certification falls outside the scope of the ESG as it does not focus on 'QA related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation' (ESG 2015). This is a CV-based evaluation of professionals who wish to teach classes but do not meet the requirements for teaching staff set in the legislation.

The EQA activities listed in the legislation also include evaluation, accreditation and certification of basic and applied research conducted within HEIs. As the Director explained in the online clarification meeting, evaluation of research was included in the legislation as a responsibility which could be taken on by the agency. Currently, however, AQUA does not conduct any research evaluations. Since 2016, it has been involved in the selection of research grants under public calls as an external adviser and its role was limited to certifying that the criteria established for calls are met and the principles of objectivity and impartiality are followed in the evaluation of grant proposals. In each year, this was a one-off activity conducted on an ad-hoc basis. Thus, it is not considered in the review report.

As part of consultancy on QA, the agency provides advice on QA to the Ministry responsible for higher education, and advice and information to HEIs on higher education and QA. For further details, see the section on ESG 3.1.

In collaboration with its national and international partners, AQUA conducts studies on topics such as graduate employment, academic life from the students' perspective and their living conditions, and QA and the Sustainable Development Goals. These are considered by the agency as part of its thematic analysis and thus are discussed in the section on ESG 3.4.

In 2023 the agency initiated a research project which aims to identify good practices for microstate agencies and examine specific features of such agencies as compared to those in larger countries. QA agencies in 13 European countries have been invited to participate in the project. In 2024, AQUA joined the project 'Alignment of SIACES-ENQA Quality Guidelines in Higher Education for Strengthening Bi-Regional Trust' (ESG-PBP Alignment).

To promote a quality culture in higher education, since 2016 the agency has co-organised international seminars, workshops and forums on QA or quality and sustainability in higher education for stakeholders, in collaboration with the Aragon Agency for Quality Assurance and Strategic Foresight

in Higher Education (ACPUA) or the Copernicus Alliance and the Autonomous University of Madrid. Between 2019 and 2023, the agency actively participated in 13 international events on QA and sustainability, including, for example, the 2019 ENQA General Assembly, the 2024 ENQA QA-FIT Focus Group meeting, the 2019 European Quality Assurance Forum, INQAAHE member meetings and conferences, and conferences, seminars or courses organised by the Copernicus Alliance, UNESCO and UNECE or Spanish QA agencies.

AQUA has signed collaboration agreements with two Spanish agencies, ACPUA and the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU Catalunya), covering programme evaluation and / or employment surveys, and agreements on collaboration and studies with Xarxa Vives d'Universitats.

## AQUA'S FUNDING

The agency relies mainly on funding allocated annually by the Parliament of Andorra, but since 2021 it has also earned income from fees charged to HEIs for programme and ex-ante institutional evaluations, with the level of fees set in the national legislation. Pursuant to AQUA's Founding Law, other sources of its income may include, for example, returns on assets and subsidies and donations from public and private entities and natural and legal persons.

AQUA's income increased from €178,870 in 2020 to €464,339 in 2024, reflecting the expansion of its EQA activities. Each year, the income exceeded expenditure. The main expenditure items are staff salaries and EQA activities (representing, respectively, 60 to 65% and 23 to 32% of the total expenditure between 2020 and 2023).

# FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF AQUA WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG)

## ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

### ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

#### Standard:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

#### Evidence

##### *Activities*

AQUA's vision and mission (see the section 'Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA)') are published on its website. As explained in the SAR, the objectives pursued and activities conducted each year are guided by the 2023-2025 Strategic Plan, which is based on the agency's aims, mission, vision, values and annual budgets. The Strategic Plan sets the following strategic objectives: Improvement of the internal management system; Adaptation and optimisation of the agency's resources; Improvement of the agency's institutional visibility; International positioning; Update of the EQA system; Promotion of the culture of quality in higher education. The Plan includes a timetable for the implementation of activities. It is operationalised through annual action plans and budgets, and activities that have been carried out are described in annual activity reports.

Pursuant to the legislation, the Steering Committee sets strategic priorities for the agency and approves its annual action plans, reports and budgets. As the panel learned from the SAR and the meetings with the stakeholders, the Strategic Plan was drafted by the Director and staff, provided to the Parliament, the Ministry responsible for higher education and the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education (see Stakeholder involvement below) for feedback, and discussed and approved by the Steering Committee. The Committee members told the panel that they monitor the implementation of the Strategic Plan through ongoing communication and in regular meetings, and the Director emphasised the continued support from the Committee in moving forward with the agency's plans.

The legislation defines the range of AQUA's activities. These include EQA activities, studies and projects on QA and higher education, consultancy on QA for stakeholders, and promotion of a culture of quality in higher education. The SAR states that EQA is the main part of the agency's daily work.

The EQA activities that fall within the scope of the ESG include ex-ante and ex-post programme evaluations (accreditation processes), programme modification and programme follow-up for official degree programmes, and ex-ante institutional evaluation (accreditation) for private HEIs. Except for programme follow-up, all of the evaluation processes are mandatory for HEIs. The first guides for programme evaluations as the oldest processes were published in 2017 and 2018. However, in conducting its processes, AQUA largely relied on support from Spanish QA agencies until 2020, when the amended legislation allowed it to establish bodies that take accreditation decisions and its own



evaluation panels. Since then, the agency has expanded its EQA activities, with the number of evaluations growing from 11 in 2020 and 2021 to 19-20 in 2022 and 2023. For the description of the evaluation processes and detailed statistics, see 'AQUA's Functions, Activities, Procedures'.

The legislation setting the framework for the EQA activities falling within the scope of the ESG explicitly states that AQUA should conduct its evaluation processes in accordance with the principles of the EHEA and the ESG. Alongside the national legislative acts, the ESG are listed as a legal basis in the agency's evaluation guides for its processes. The evidence on the compliance of the agency's EQA activities with Part 2 of the ESG is provided in the sections on ESG 2.1 to 2.7.

Teaching staff certification is the only EQA activity falling outside the scope of the ESG. Projects on QA and higher education, and seminars and other events (co-)organised or attended by the agency as part of the promotion of a quality culture are described in the section "AQUA's Functions, Activities, Procedures'. Studies on QA and higher education are discussed in the section on ESG 3.4 as these are presented in the SAR as examples of thematic analysis.

The SAR describes consultancy on QA as advice and guidance offered to stakeholders to enhance the quality of higher education. The section on consultancy in the agency's 2022 and 2023 Annual Activity Reports includes advice for the Ministry in charge of higher education on draft legislation and QA, and advice and information provided in response to queries related to higher education, programmes and their quality. The Director explained in the online and onsite meetings with the panel that the agency understands 'consultancy' as advice on QA for the Ministry, the dissemination to all HEIs of information collected or recommendations based on discussions in international fora such as ENQA events, and information provided in response to queries from individual HEIs on matters which are not addressed in external evaluations (e.g. software which can be used; methods for gathering indicator data). The agency does not charge fees for such services. The heads of QA interviewed by the panel were not aware of any activities of the agency which might be described as consultancy on QA.

#### *Stakeholder involvement and perception*

Within AQUA's structure, all national stakeholder groups, including the Parliament, the Ministry responsible for higher education, rectors and students of public and private universities and employers, are represented on the Steering Committee (for details, see 'AQUA's Organisation/Structure'). The rector and a student of the public university sit on the Committee on a permanent basis, and the private universities nominate a representative on a rotating basis. International academic and student experts and local employers are members of panels conducting evaluation processes.

The three main bodies of the agency, the Steering Committee, and the Evaluation Committee and the Appeals Committee that take decisions in EQA processes, and evaluation panels (see ESG 2.4) involve international experts. Since Catalan as the national language is the agency's working language, all of the international experts currently sitting on the three Committees and most experts in evaluation panels come from Catalonia, Spain.

If the proposed amendments to the legislation are approved, AQUA will set up an Advisory Council to support it in the implementation of recommendations from external reviews and the improvement of its EQA processes. As the panel learned from the Director in the online clarification meeting, the Council would be composed of international experts who have experience of working with or for ENQA, EQAR and other international organisations.

As explained in the SAR, outside its structure, the agency established the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education, which brings together representatives of the Ministry responsible for higher education, heads of the QA of all six Andorran universities, and AQUA's Director and QA specialist. The Working Group meets regularly, serving as a forum for the dissemination of information by the agency, discussions on its evaluation methodologies and QA topics, and meta-evaluations of its

evaluation processes (for details, see ESG 3.4, 3.6 and 2.2). Smaller sub-groups were created within the Working Group to tackle different aspects (evaluation guides, indicators, academic integrity).

According to the Strategic Plan, students will be invited to join AQUA's working groups. The SAR explains that the agency also encourages all HEIs to involve students in their internal working groups, and their students to engage with the European Students' Union (ESU). The Director told the panel that in 2024, AQUA had meetings with students in each Andorran university to explain their central role in QA and involve them in the agency's Working Group, and a meeting with student representatives in Spain to benefit from their experience in planning its engagement with students. However, as explained by the staff, it is difficult to appoint students to the Working Group or its sub-groups in a fair and transparent way as there are no student organisations in Andorra.

The international student experts interviewed contributed to AQUA's Strategic Plan, and local students also collaborate with the agency as part of its studies based on student surveys. They see the agency as 'very close' to them and appreciate its responsiveness to their requests and suggestions.

The SAR states that the close relationship and collaboration with universities and the Ministry are of great importance for and a strength of AQUA, and a broad stakeholder representation in governing and evaluation bodies is highlighted as a strength in the SWOT analysis. In the survey of stakeholders conducted as part of the agency's self-assessment, its close relationship with universities was one of the aspects that were given the highest ratings. At the same time, difficulty in establishing full trust between the agency and HEIs is listed as a threat in the SWOT analysis. As the Director explained to the panel, this is because AQUA and universities sometimes differ in their interpretation of the ESG and thus it is not always clear to them why the agency acts in a certain way; it has not undergone an ENQA-managed external review yet and has no proof of its compliance with the ESG. Mutual trust is crucial for the Director so that the agency and HEIs move ahead together.

The six Andorran universities are a diverse group. The public university is a well-established institution with a long-standing relationship with the agency; the private universities have different profiles, most of them are part of bigger international consortia, have only recently been accredited and officially recognised (some in 2023 and 2024), and some have yet to apply for ex-ante accreditation of their first programmes. Most of the rectors and heads of QA whom the panel met felt that universities are well-represented on AQUA's governing body, established good communication and collaboration with the agency, participated in the development of its Strategic Plan, are kept updated on its activities, and are involved in the development of its evaluation methodologies. While they sometimes disagree with what the agency is proposing or doing, those who have collaborated with the agency for at least a few years trust it and follow its guidance. They also appreciate that AQUA is working to align its activities with the European standards as this is important for the reputation of higher education in Andorra. The rector and a representative of the QA body of one university expressed dissatisfaction about their non-involvement in or lack of information about some of the agency's activities. However, the agency provided evidence of its communication with the university and attendance of their representative at a meeting in 2024. It explained that the confusion might result from the fact that until 2024 the criteria for the involvement of universities in its activities had not allowed it to invite those where no programmes had been accredited yet.

The representatives of the national authorities and experts conducting evaluations praised the agency for its commitment and contribution to quality enhancement in higher education, and for its readiness to engage in meaningful discussions on various topics. The representatives of the national authorities also recognised the efforts of the agency to push forward with the legal changes that are expected to align its activities more closely with the ESG.

## Analysis

The panel confirms that AQUA has publicly available vision and mission statements which clearly define its purpose, goals and the core areas of its activity. In its published Strategic Plan, the agency sets specific objectives and clearly communicates to its stakeholders how and when they will be achieved.

AQUA engaged with the stakeholders to discuss its Strategic Plan, and the panel understands from its interviews that the agency's goals and plans gained acceptance among the stakeholder groups who were consulted. The panel also recognises that the support from the Steering Committee has been crucial for successful implementation of the Plan. However, the initiative to develop the Plan came from the agency rather than the Steering Committee and the Committee provided feedback on the draft plan prepared by the agency rather than putting forward ideas or setting priorities at the stage of its development. The panel believes that the Committee could reconsider its role and focus more on providing strategic leadership.

In its vision statement, AQUA aims to support HEIs in continuous improvement of their activities and create and transfer knowledge on QA. This vision is effectively pursued through the activities that combine EQA and studies, projects and organisation and participation in knowledge-sharing events.

The mission statement explains that AQUA seeks to reach its goals mainly through EQA activities, and the statistical data provided by the agency show that the evaluation processes falling within the scope of the ESG are conducted on a regular basis. Although a fully-fledged QA system in Andorra, with AQUA taking full responsibility for the management of its evaluation processes, is quite young, the processes and procedures are well-established, and the agency continuously improves them in partnership with universities via its Working Group on Quality in Higher Education (see also ESG 2.2). For the panel's comments on the compliance of the EQA activities with Part 2 of the ESG, see the sections on ESG 2.1 to 2.7.

ESG 3.1 and EQAR's Guidelines recommend that agencies make a clear distinction between EQA activities at institutional or programme level and other activities, and prevent a conflict of interest between their activities. In the panel's view, the information about the agency's EQA activities and the evaluation guides published on its website make it clear that programme and institutional evaluations fall within the scope of the ESG, whereas teaching staff certification is based only on the national legislation, and does not fall within the scope, nor is designed to comply with the ESG. The panel also considers that there is no conflict of interest between the EQA activities and those aimed at creating and transferring knowledge on QA and promoting a quality culture (projects, studies, seminars). It is clear from the evidence collected that the latter address topics extending beyond the agency's evaluation criteria and/or benefit all rather than individual Andorran universities, and are conducted together with institutions (e.g. QA agencies, ministry, research organisations) other than universities which undergo evaluations. AQUA uses the term 'consultancy on QA', but advice to the Ministry, dissemination of information or generic advice provided to individual universities on a fee-free basis are not consultancy services as these are understood in the context of the ESG. Such activities do not give rise to a conflict of interest as the agency does not advise individual universities on aspects that are covered by its external evaluations. The agency could, however, clarify in its documents what it means by consultancy.

All relevant stakeholder groups are involved in the agency's governance through their representatives on the Steering Committee. While only one of the five private universities is represented on the Committee at a time, none of their rectors voiced concerns about this in the meeting with the panel; the panel also believes that their involvement on a rotating basis is a fair arrangement and helps to maintain a delicate balance between the public and private universities. However, as each private university is different, AQUA could seek to ensure that the rector and a student coming from one university voice the views of all private institutions.

The Working Group on Quality in Higher Education gives the Ministry and the universities ample opportunities to contribute to the agency's plans and ongoing activities and annual meta-evaluations of its EQA activities. Since student experts on evaluation panels come from outside Andorra or are Andorran students studying abroad (see ESG 2.4), the agency can hear the needs and views of local students studying in the country only via their representatives on the Steering Committee, and otherwise they only occasionally work with the agency. Thus, the panel agrees with AQUA that students should join the Working Group and its sub-groups, even if, indeed, it is not easy to ensure fair student representation in the absence of student organisations at national or institutional level. To engage regularly with all stakeholder groups, the agency should also consider inviting social and business partners to the Working Group and/or some of its sub-groups. In its meeting with experts (see ESG 2.4), the panel was impressed by a sense of civic duty of professional experts, who are based in Andorra, and their genuine interest in how higher education and the agency will develop in the coming years.

Overall, AQUA has a strong relationship with the universities and the Ministry but has yet to expand its engagement with students and the world of work. It is perceived as a trusted partner by its stakeholders or is working hard to earn trust from the universities that have only recently been involved in its activities.

International experts are included in both the governing body and EQA activities of the agency, but due to language considerations, the range of QA perspectives that it can benefit from is rather limited. Although this is not considered in its judgement on compliance with this standard, the panel supports the idea to establish an Advisory Council with a broader range of international expertise when the amendments to the legislation are approved.

#### **Panel recommendations**

1. In pursuing its efforts to expand its stakeholder engagement, AQUA should continue seeking a way to involve students and consider involving social and business partners in its working groups or sub-groups.

#### **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

1. The panel suggests that AQUA find a way to support representatives of a private university sitting on its governing body to convey the views of all private universities that it works with.
2. The panel suggests that AQUA make clear in its documents what activities are conducted as part of 'consultancy on QA' to avoid a misunderstanding that these are consultancy services as defined in the context of the ESG.

#### **Panel conclusion: compliant**

### **ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS**

Standard:

Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

#### **Evidence**

AQUA was established as a public law institution by Law 9/2016 of 28 June 2016 creating the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA) (AQUA's Founding Law). Its operational

framework is set by Decree 63/2021 of 24 February 2021 Approving the Regulations of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA), as amended by Decree 68/2022 of 23 February 2022, and by the legislation on higher education (see the section ‘Higher Education and Quality Assurance System of the Agency’). Pursuant to AQUA’s founding law and decrees, it has legal identity, capacity to conclude legally binding agreements, its own assets and a budget allocated by the Parliament of Andorra.

The legislation identifies the agency as the national QA body responsible for evaluation, accreditation and certification in higher education, and states that HEIs take responsibility for the quality of higher education in coordination with AQUA. It lays down main arrangements for four mandatory EQA processes conducted by the agency: ex-ante and ex-post programme evaluations, programme modification and ex-ante institutional evaluation. The Ministry in charge of higher education approves official degree programmes and grants authorisations to establish new private HEIs upon prior accreditation awarded by AQUA.

### **Analysis**

Based on the legislative acts, to which links were provided in the SAR, the panel confirms that AQUA is formally recognised as the national QA body and has a clear legal basis for its mandatory EQA processes that serve regulatory purposes.

### **Panel conclusion: compliant**

## **ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE**

Standard:

Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

### **Evidence**

AQUA’s Founding Law of 2016 established the agency as an autonomous public law institution, with legal personality and its own assets. The organisational and operational arrangements for the agency are laid down in Decree 63/2021 of 24 February 2021 Approving the Regulations of AQUA, as subsequently amended.

The Steering Committee, the collective governing body, approves the agency’s strategic plans, annual plans, reports and budgets, and evaluation guides. It is composed of 11 members: members of the Parliament, officials of the Ministry in charge of higher education, rectors and students of the Andorran public and private universities, with each of the stakeholder groups having two representatives, an employer representative, an international expert and the AQUA Director (for details, see ‘AQUA’s Organisation/Structure’). The Committee takes decisions by a majority vote, with at least half of its members present and its Chair, who is a representative of the Parliament, having a casting vote.

Members representing the national authorities and employers, the rector of the public university and the Director are Committee members by virtue of their position and until their position is taken over by a successor. The rector of a private university and the two student representatives serve a two-year term. The rector and a student of a private university are nominated on a rotating basis, starting with the oldest university. The two student representatives are elected in accordance with the rules adopted by their home universities. An international expert is appointed by the Minister responsible

for higher education for a four-year term. The legislation states that a candidate should have experience and qualifications in QA. As the panel learned from the representatives of the Ministry, a candidate for an international expert is identified through recommendation by the agency Director. As regards the dismissal of its members, the Committee explained that it is governed by the legislation in this respect; see below for the provisions of the law applicable to persons involved in the agency's activities.

Three members of the Steering Committee (a Ministry official, a student and an international expert) form the Appeals Committee. The Committee is chaired by the Ministry official. (See also ESG 2.7)

The Director is responsible for day-to-day management and chairs the Evaluation Committee, which takes accreditation decisions. As the panel learned from the staff, although there is a formal hierarchy in the agency, the organisational structure is horizontal, and the Director discusses all matters with the staff and listens to their opinions.

The Director is appointed by the Parliament for a renewable four-year term upon the recommendation from the Minister responsible for higher education. The representatives of the Ministry told the panel that the job is not advertised; as the country is small, the Ministry has easy access to information about potential qualified candidates with a PhD. When a candidate is preselected, his/her name is published and there is a debate in the Ministry and the Parliament. So far candidates were approved by the Parliament unanimously, although only a majority is required by law.

In accordance with the legislation, the Director may be dismissed for failure to fulfil his/her obligations by a two-thirds majority of the Parliament upon a motion by the Steering Committee. Among the main possible reasons for dismissal, specified in the legislation, the Steering Committee mentioned failure to perform duties or act independently, incorrect use of financial resources and misconduct (e.g. harassment). Until now there has been no reason to submit a motion to dismiss the Director.

The legislation requires that members of the Steering Committee disclose any conflict of interest that may arise in performing their duties and abstain from voting in such cases. The same requirement applies to the Director with regard to his/her duties in the agency outside the Steering Committee.

As the panel learned from the SAR and in the meetings with the Director and the President of the Steering Committee and the national authorities, AQUA has its own budget, with a large portion of its funding allocated by the Parliament and additional income derived from fees for evaluation processes. The budget is drawn up by the agency, approved by the Steering Committee and submitted to the Parliament. Once approved by the Parliament, as has always been the case, the agency's budget is part of the overall budget of the Government rather than that of the Ministry responsible for higher education. Expenditure does not require prior authorisation from any external entity. The level of fees is set in the legislation. Agency staff are hired by the Director in accordance with the terms and conditions of employment set out in the labour law. The Parliament provides office space to the agency for a symbolic charge of 1 euro.

The legislation on higher education specifies the ESG-based areas to be addressed in programme evaluations and aspects to be described in strategic plans for new HEIs and reviewed in ex-ante institutional evaluations. AQUA's Founding Law states that the agency defines criteria and adopts guidelines for its evaluation processes. The SAR explains that evaluation guides, which set out criteria and procedures, are drafted by the agency, discussed within the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education (see ESG 3.1) and approved by the Steering Committee. As the Steering Committee explained to the panel, its approval is of a purely formal nature.

The legislation prescribes the procedure for the recruitment of external experts, the selection criteria, the composition and tasks of evaluation panels, and aims or aspects to be addressed in the training of experts. Evaluation panels are appointed by the Director. As stated in the SAR and confirmed by the

agency staff, to avoid a conflict of interest in the small country, all academic experts come from outside Andorra and student experts are either international students or Andorran students studying abroad. Practitioners are recruited from among those based in Andorra to ensure that evaluations take into consideration the national context.

The SAR explains that evaluation panels are assisted by technical staff acting as secretaries who draft expert reports based on contributions from panel members. Drafts are discussed and endorsed by panels, and submitted to the Evaluation Committee, which produces evaluation reports and takes accreditation decisions. The Committee told the panel that it does not make any significant changes in expert reports and its decisions are based on expert reports. The experts interviewed stated that they had never experienced any pressure from the agency, and adjustments made by the Committee in their reports are discussed by panels and do not affect the substance of their comments. For details about reporting, see ESG 2.6.

Pursuant to the legislation, the Evaluation Committee is appointed by the Steering Committee and consists of the Director and two international academic experts with recognised achievements in the field of higher education in the EHEA, knowledge of the Andorran context and no affiliation to Andorran HEIs. The Committee takes decisions by consensus or, failing that, by a majority vote, with the Director as the chair having a casting vote. As the panel learned from the Committee, academics are selected from among candidates put forward by universities at AQUA's request; the agency reviews their CVs, and the Director submits a list of recommended candidates to the Steering Committee.

The legislation requires that members of the Steering, Evaluation and Appeals Committees, evaluation panels, staff and any other collaborators act with independence and in accordance with the Code of Ethics that they sign, and recuse themselves from any discussion or vote in respect of which they would be in a conflict of interest. The Code of Ethics highlights the principles of independence, integrity and no-conflict-of-interest.

For most of the university rectors interviewed, AQUA is independent in its evaluation processes, and the proposed changes in the procedure for the appointment of the Director will further increase its organisational independence. The rector of one university disagreed as the agency's Steering Committee is and will continue to be chaired by a political party leader.

The representatives of the Parliament and the Ministry responsible for higher education whom the panel met consider that AQUA has full operational independence, but are aware that the procedure for the appointment of the Director and the composition of the Appeals Committee are now major issues in respect of the agency's organisational independence. The Ministry recognises the need to hand over the power to select the Director to the Parliament, and the Ministry official sitting on both the Steering and Appeals Committee finds 'wearing two hats' uncomfortable. The proposed legal changes are supported by the Ministry and the Parliament.

If the legal changes are approved, a candidate for the Director will be preselected in an open merit-based competition and proposed to the Parliament by its Legislative Committee responsible for higher education; the Evaluation Committee will additionally include at least one student; and the Appeals Committee will consist of an international expert sitting on the Steering Committee, two external academic experts and an external student.

## **Analysis**

### *Organisational independence*

The arrangements for the appointment of the Steering Committee ensure that no stakeholder can use their power in this respect to exert pressure on its members as most members sit on the Committee by virtue of their position or are nominated by their home institutions. There is also a balanced representation of the stakeholder groups on the Committee; combined with the rule that decisions are taken by a majority vote, this makes it unlikely that any stakeholder group would have a dominant position.

As an exception, an international expert sitting on the Steering Committee is appointed by the Minister, with the AQUA Director involved in the selection of a candidate, as the panel understands from the meeting with the national authorities. While this could be a sound arrangement, the selection criteria for a candidate set in the legislation are rather general and the involvement of the Director is an established practice rather than part of a formal procedure. A formal procedure whereby the Director recommends or appoints a candidate and clear selection criteria would be important considering that the selected expert also sits on the Appeals Committee as one of its three members (and will continue to do so when the anticipated legal changes are approved).

The panel did not find any provisions in the legislation which would explicitly refer to the dismissal of Steering Committee members while they hold their position or before the end of their term on the Committee. However, this is largely balanced by strict rules in the law and the agency's Code of Ethics regarding independence in the performance of duties, which apply to the Steering Committee.

The agency's organisational independence from the Ministry is undermined by a senior Ministry official sitting on and chairing the Appeals Committee. Aside from this, all members of the Appeals Committee are at the same time Steering Committee members; since an appeals process is an integral part of the evaluation and accreditation processes, ideally, the governing body would be clearly separated from the body taking appeals decisions in terms of their composition to prevent any possible undue influence of the former on the latter. Although the panel assesses what is currently in place, this would be largely addressed by the proposed legal changes as an international expert will be the only representative of the Steering Committee on the Appeals Committee.

The procedure for the appointment of the Director is a major issue, with a candidate recommended by the Minister and approved by the Parliament, and no published call for applications or specific selection criteria. The proposed legal changes go some way towards increasing the independence of the agency from the Ministry and ensuring transparency insofar as a candidate will be selected through an open merit-based competition and proposed and appointed by the Parliament. However, the panel considers that to ensure full independence of the agency, the power to select and appoint the Director should rest with the agency's governing body rather than any external body.

Like the Steering Committee, the Director is bound by the legislation and the Code of Ethics to adhere to the principles of independence and no-conflict-of-interest. There is practically no risk that any party will use possible dismissal to exert pressure on the Director as the law clearly spells out grounds for a motion from the Steering Committee to dismiss the Director, decisions in the Committee are taken by a majority vote and a two-thirds majority is required in the Parliament to approve it.

The Director has a quite powerful position as aside from being a member of the Steering Committee, he/she appoints evaluation panels, chairs the Evaluation Committee, which takes accreditation decisions, and recommends the two other members of the Evaluation Committee. However, it is clear to the panel from the meetings with the Director and the staff that the current Director has a democratic leadership style and consults the staff in decision-making; any possible undue influence of the Director on the membership of the Evaluation Committee is minimised by the universities



proposing candidates and the Steering Committee approving those who are recommended by the Director.

It is clear that the agency has full financial autonomy as its budget is drafted and endorsed internally, and approved by the Parliament, which is unlikely to use it as leverage, and no external authorisation for expenditure is required. The evidence collected also shows that no third party is involved in staff recruitment.

#### *Operational independence*

The legislation explicitly assigns the responsibility for the development of evaluation methodologies to AQUA, and the procedures in place ensure full independence of the agency in this respect. Although representatives of the Ministry and universities as members of the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education provide feedback on evaluation guides drafted by the agency, drafts are finalised by the agency and approved by its Steering Committee, which gives only formal approval. Ideally, the responsibilities of the Steering Committee would not include approval of evaluation methodologies as AQUA has only one representative on the Committee and its external stakeholders are in the majority. Thus, the panel supports the proposed amendment to the law to assign this responsibility to the Evaluation Committee. However, even currently, considering the balanced stakeholder representation on the Steering Committee and its decision-making procedure, it is unlikely that any stakeholder could successfully promote the interests of their institution through their involvement in the approval of evaluation guides.

The legislation makes it clear that the power to appoint experts to panels conducting evaluations rests entirely with the Director. As noted above, once the Director is appointed, there are appropriate safeguards for his/her independence in the performance of duties.

As a more general comment, the panel notes that the legislation lays down rules of procedure for AQUA's bodies (for example, how meetings are convened and decisions taken by the Steering, Evaluation and Appeals Committees) and arrangements for the recruitment, selection and training of experts conducting evaluations and the composition and tasks of evaluation panels. This undermines to some extent operational efficiency of the agency and could be reconsidered so that such operational arrangements are managed internally.

#### *Independence of formal outcomes*

Independence in accreditation decision-making is ensured, first of all, by the composition of evaluation panels, with academic and student experts coming from outside Andorran higher education, and of the Evaluation Committee, with two international experts and the Director. The legislation makes it clear that the Director has the exclusive power to appoint evaluation panels. Although universities put forward candidates for international experts for the Evaluation Committee, the final responsibility lies with the Director who recommends internally selected candidates and the Steering Committee who approves them. It is also clear to the panel from the meetings with experts and the Evaluation Committee that the Committee does not change the content of expert reports which provide the basis for its accreditation decisions.

The inclusion of a Ministry official in the Appeals Committee calls into question that the agency can independently make decisions in appeals processes, in particular, as the Committee consists of only three members. Having said that, the panel wishes to emphasise that nothing was indicated in the meetings that could raise concern about the Ministry representative seeking to exert undue influence on decisions of the Committee. It was also reassuring to hear about full support from the Ministry for the proposed legal change whereby no Ministry representative would sit on the Appeals Committee.

## Panel recommendations

1. To ensure full organisational independence, AQUA should revise the procedure for the appointment of its Director so that the exclusive power to appoint the Director rests with its Steering Committee and a candidate is selected through an open competition based on merit.
2. AQUA should reconsider the composition of its Appeals Committee to ensure that the Appeals Committee is separated in organisational terms from the Ministry responsible for higher education and the Steering Committee, and the Ministry has no influence on the agency's decisions in appeals processes.
3. AQUA should propose to the Ministry responsible for higher education clear criteria and a formal procedure for the appointment of an international expert who currently sits and – if the proposed legal changes are approved – will continue to sit on both the Steering Committee and the Appeals Committee.

## Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. AQUA could propose amendments to the legislation which would allow it greater autonomy in adopting operational arrangements.

## Panel conclusion: partially compliant

## ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

## Evidence

The SAR describes two regularly produced publications, *Labour insertion studies* and *University Pathway* reports, and a study on academic integrity, annual activity reports, meta-evaluations of the agency's EQA activities, and several publications inspired by seminars and workshops organised within the framework of the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education (see ESG 3.1). During the site visit, the panel also received the report *Language approach for the development of transversal competence I in state Bachelor's and Master's degrees*, which was prepared in September 2024 and will be published soon. The panel has read all of these studies, reports and papers, except meta-evaluations as no report has yet been published.

The *Labour Insertion Studies*, which the agency produces in collaboration with the Ministry responsible for higher education, are based on regular graduate surveys. Each study analyses a wide range of data on graduate employment; usefulness of the knowledge acquired in the degree programme completed; satisfaction with the programme and the HEI; quality of education and its usefulness for the job; and room for improvement in the programme.

AQUA contributes to the *University pathway* studies coordinated by the Xarxa Vives d'Universitats, a Spanish non-profit organisation working with Catalan-speaking HEIs from Catalonia, Valencia, the Balearic Islands, Sardinia and Andorra. Studies are based on regular student surveys and address aspects such as access to the university and academic trajectories; study and living conditions; teaching and learning; link with the university; and gender perspective. Each study includes proposals or recommendations for improvement which can be used by students, HEIs and educational authorities.

Seminars and workshops organised within the framework of the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education provided inputs to the following publications produced jointly by AQUA and its stakeholders and partners:

- The *Guidelines to embed sustainability in the HE quality assurance framework in Andorra* (2018) are based on literature and inputs from national and international experts. The work was coordinated by the agency and the document was prepared by the Complex Research Group of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. It provides an overview of the Andorran higher education system, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and European trends in QA, and a theoretical framework for the introduction of SDGs in higher education and external evaluations, with detailed guidelines and examples for each standard of Part I of the ESG.
- The *Guidelines for the definition of competencies in the Andorran higher education system* (2020), produced by the Working Group and based on literature and inputs from external experts, explain in detail how HEIs are expected to define competences based on the definition adopted in the EU. As competences are addressed in programme evaluations, the publication is used as a reference in AQUA's guide for ex-ante programme evaluation.
- The *Joint statement on the adaptations of higher education to the situation caused by COVID-19* (2020), issued by the Working Group, describes how HEIs and the agency agreed to adapt their approaches and practices to the challenges of the pandemic.

The report *Language approach for the development of transversal competence I in state Bachelor's and Master's degrees* (2024) is based on an analysis of self-assessment and evaluation reports on four programmes in different fields of study, accredited by the agency between 2021 and 2024, and focuses on the evaluation criterion concerning a language approach. It describes the approaches adopted by universities, with examples of good practice, and includes specific recommendations on how universities should develop their approaches to ensure that students achieve language competence.

As a member of GAIN (see 'AQUA'), the agency initiated in 2023 a study on academic integrity in Andorran HEIs, which, as described in the SAR, aims to analyse students' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs regarding academic integrity and propose measures for the promotion of integrity and prevention of fraud. The study is expected to be published in the first quarter of 2025.

AQUA's annual activity reports provide an overview of its activities, including detailed statistical data on the evaluations conducted. The Director explained to the panel that meta-evaluations focus on EQA and internal procedures rather than their outcomes; thus, they are discussed under ESG 3.6.

The SAR states that the agency recognises the importance of pursuing its efforts in the area of thematic analysis. To carry forward the objective of creating and transferring knowledge as part of the strategic line 'Promotion of a quality culture in higher education', it is planning to review the thematic studies produced so far to ensure their relevance and prepare new publications.

As the panel learned in the meetings with the Director and staff and the final clarification meeting, the team has weekly meetings where they discuss the implementation of the Strategic Plan, exchange ideas for thematic analysis and consider the human resources available as there are periods of peak and lighter workload related to evaluations. Some ideas for thematic studies also emerge in meetings of the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education. The agency has financial resources to do thematic analysis and is planning to produce one thematic report per year. Next year, the team will discuss topics, gather ideas from stakeholders via the Working Group or a survey and allocate the related work to a staff member. In this context, the agency pointed to the difficulty in collecting quantitative data from HEIs due to the restrictive data protection regulations.

## Analysis

The panel acknowledges the efforts that the agency and its partners invested to collect and analyse quantitative data and inputs from its stakeholders and experts and publish a number of studies and reports. The report *Language approach for the development of transversal competence I in state Bachelor's and Master's degrees* is a good example of thematic analysis as it presents findings of AQUA's evaluations, highlights good practice examples and provides recommendations which can be used by universities to improve their programmes, and by the agency in its EQA activities. However valuable, the other publications are not thematic analysis as it is defined in ESG 3.4 as they are not based on the material that the agency collects in its evaluations and do not analyse their outcomes. The panel recognises the difficulty in obtaining qualitative data, but the agency could now refocus its efforts on thematic studies based on qualitative analysis. The concept of thematic analysis was clarified in the discussions with the agency.

As topics for thematic studies have so far been chosen mainly by the agency, the panel is glad to note that the agency will now seek ideas from its stakeholders. The Working Group on Quality in Higher Education is a good forum for canvassing views to ensure that topics of future studies are relevant to the needs of the stakeholders.

The panel gathers from the Strategic Plan, the discussions with the agency team and the budget surplus in recent years (see ESG 3.5) that the agency intends to produce regularly thematic studies and resources to do that are available, but when exactly the work is undertaken is determined by the evaluation schedule. It believes that the agency should do more detailed human and financial resource planning to avoid the risk that thematic analysis gets lost under the pressure of daily tasks. In peak periods, the team could be supported by external experts.

### Panel recommendations

1. AQUA should formally include specific tasks and resources and a detailed schedule for thematic analysis in its work plans.

### Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. The panel suggests that AQUA focus on qualitative in addition to quantitative analysis to produce thematic studies.
2. The panel encourages AQUA to involve stakeholders in its discussions to define topics for thematic analysis to ensure that they are well suited to their needs.

### Panel conclusion: compliant

## ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

Standard:

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

## Evidence

AQUA has five staff members, including the Director and four technical staff, two of whom are junior staff hired in February 2024. The SAR explains that the technical staff manage evaluation panels and draft expert reports as panel secretaries; oversee the tasks related to the development and revision

of evaluation guides and those related to the development, monitoring and updates of the Process Map, workflows and procedures as part of IQA; and handle complaints filed with the agency. The small team works in a collaborative manner; the staff have specific primary responsibilities and additionally take on 'packages of responsibility', as this approach fosters professional development, innovation and performance improvement. As the panel learned from the staff, roughly 80% of the time of the senior staff is taken by their primary responsibilities related to EQA or IQA; the junior staff member is in charge of communication, events and supplies and devoted much time to training in their initial period at the agency.

The SAR states that while the human resources are currently sufficient for daily activities, AQUA will need to hire additional staff in view of the upcoming challenges. These are related to the growing interest in the establishment of new HEIs and programmes in Andorra and the changes in the legal framework of the agency to be approved soon. The Director and the President of the Steering Committee told the panel that the agency is planning to create seven new senior-, middle- and junior-level positions by 2027.

As explained in the SAR and the meeting with staff, new staff receive training on EQA and then training opportunities depend on the position of each staff member. The Director allocates a portion of the budget to training activities, based on individual meetings with the staff to identify their needs. Three staff members, including the Director, are currently taking a Master's degree programme on QA, and two junior staff members attend training in English communication skills. The staff told the panel that they appreciate flexible work arrangements, work and private life balance, teamwork, training opportunities, in particular, as they are now studying for their second degree, and opportunities to participate in interesting projects and conferences, and collaboration with other QA agencies. The experts involved in the agency's evaluations whom the panel met praised the staff for their commitment and excellent support.

As stated in the SAR, the agency hires external experts for tasks requiring specific expertise, such as reviewing evaluation guides and drafting self-assessment reports. Administrative and technical services (legal advice, accounting, web management and IT support) are outsourced.

The main source of income for AQUA is the budgetary allocation approved annually by the Parliament; additionally, the agency charges fees to HEIs for its programme and institutional evaluations. Except in 2021 when the budget was slightly reduced during the Covid-19 pandemic in line with the Government's cost-saving directives and in view of lower travel costs, the income has increased steadily from €177,870 in 2020 to € 237,913 in 2022 and € 464,339 in 2024, and the agency had a budget surplus of 10 to 18% in recent years. The agency explained in a written pre-visit note that the main expenditure items are staff salaries (from 60 to 65%, depending on the year between 2020 and 2023) and EQA activities (23 to 32%). It pays only a symbolic charge of €1 for the office space rented from the Parliament. The SAR states that the financial resources currently meet the agency's operational needs and are expected to ensure its financial sustainability in the coming years, but the budget will need to increase to match the expected workload.

The Director recognises that there is a limit to an increase in the funding allocated by the Parliament each year, but the budget increased by 23% compared to the previous year. The representatives of the national authorities, including the President of the AQUA Steering Committee, told the panel that they are well aware of the work done by the agency so far and to be done in the future, and that the agency's workload will increase and positions for new staff will be created. They stand behind the agency and this has been reflected in the resources allocated; no problems are expected in increasing the budget in the coming years.

## Analysis

The panel considers that AQUA currently has sufficient resources for the implementation of its activities. The agency had more funding than it needed in the last five years resulting in a budget surplus. As noted under ESG 3.4, understandably, it gives priority to the EQA activities, but a portion of staff time can be and is allocated to activities aimed at creating and disseminating knowledge to the stakeholders such as studies and projects (see ESG 3.4 and 'AQUA') and reflection on the evaluation processes (see ESG 3.6). The budget also allows the agency to hire external experts when needed. The agency's premises, which the panel visited, are fully adequate, with three well equipped offices for the team and a meeting room with video-conferencing equipment.

The small team is a good mix of experienced and new staff, and the staff time is used efficiently thanks to the horizontal structure, flexible work arrangements and the genuine teamwork spirit. The agency also offers excellent opportunities for staff development, which are truly appreciated by the team. The panel was impressed by the team's dedication to work, professionalism and eagerness to learn.

AQUA has a clear plan for the recruitment of new staff. The panel gathers from the meeting with the national authorities that they recognise the agency's human and financial resource needs and are keen to ensure that it is well provided for. The agency's resource needs are likely to evolve as the number of new accreditation applications is hardly predictable and is expected to increase and the proposed legal changes introduce a number of novelties in the agency's EQA activities, including ex-post institutional accreditation as a new process yet to be designed, a shorter accreditation cycle and a follow-up for accredited programmes. The agency will also need to take into account in its planning a strategy for the development of Andorran higher education to be developed soon (see 'Additional observations'). Thus, the panel is glad to note that the agency keeps its resource needs under review and clearly communicates them to the national authorities.

## Panel commendations

Flexible work arrangements appreciated by staff, efficient management of staff time and excellent development opportunities offered by AQUA and taken by staff.

## Panel conclusion: compliant

## ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Standard:

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

## Evidence

AQUA has an Internal Quality Policy and Code of Ethics, where it pledges to uphold the values of independence, rigour, integrity, transparency, collaboration, equity, innovation and sustainability, and affirms its commitment to quality and accountability. The Code of Ethics is signed by all individuals involved in the agency's activities, including members of the Steering, Evaluation and Appeals Committees, technical staff and external experts.

The IQA system (IQAS) was implemented in 2023. The main arrangements for IQA are detailed in the Quality Manual. The IQAS follows a process-based approach, with all activities grouped into strategic processes (e.g. strategic planning, budget management), operational processes (e.g. evaluation

and accreditation processes, appeals, studies) and support processes (e.g. management of evaluation panels resource management, internal quality management). Each process is assigned to its owner (the Director or a technical staff member). The Director reviews the implementation of the agency's strategic plan twice a year, the owner of a process evaluates it annually in a self-assessment report, and overall findings and follow-up action to be taken are summarised in an annual internal quality report and an improvement plan.

'Underdeveloped IQAS' is listed as a weakness in the SWOT analysis. However, as the staff explained to the panel, since the mock evaluation preceding the submission of the applications to ENQA and EQAR (see ESG 3.7) and of the SAR, the agency invested a great effort to turn various established practices into formal internal procedures, improved procedures and revised all key documents. Now the main procedures are in place, and the agency implements the IQAS on a cyclical basis. The staff emphasised that it was important for the small team to write down procedures as if one team member was absent or left, this would have a big impact on others, and each of them would need to know how IQAS processes should be carried out.

The SAR states that the first improvement plan will be adopted and published in December 2024, but the agency provided to the panel a draft of the 2024 Internal Quality Report and Improvement Plan. For each process of the Process Map, the document includes results achieved per monitoring indicator; non-compliance issues or areas for improvement; improvement actions where applicable (e.g. revision of guides to correct errors; creation of a harmonisation commission to ensure greater consistency in evaluation reports; a survey to be developed to measure satisfaction of HEIs with the appeals process; a new training plan for experts; a training plan for new staff to be recruited); and an improvement plan for the next year indicating the responsible person, priority level, evidence/indicator and timeframe (with the timeframe yet to be indicated in the final version of the document).

Each IQAS process has procedures for key individuals involved in all of the agency's EQA and other activities. They cover the selection, contracting and training of members of the Evaluation Committee and the management of its meetings, and the selection, contracting, training, management and performance appraisal of technical staff and external experts who are members of evaluation panels.

For the training of staff, see ESG 3.5. The SAR states that the performance of staff is evaluated twice a year by the Director and an external consulting firm. However, as the Director and staff explained to the panel, external services turned out to be costly, and now evaluation is conducted internally and covers the achievement of the objectives (except for junior staff) and competences; the first part is done by the Director for the staff and by the President of the Steering Committee for the Director; for specific competences, all of the team members evaluate one another. The staff can share their views and make suggestions in a feedback survey, and, informally, at any time as there is ongoing communication within the small team, aside from regular meetings. The Director listens to all of them, including the junior members, and is responsive to their 'major' and 'minor' suggestions and requests.

Experts conducting external evaluations are selected in accordance with specific criteria, receive training and evaluation guides, and their performance is evaluated by staff acting as panel secretaries and in surveys by evaluated universities; for details, see ESG 2.4.

As the panel learned from the SAR and the Quality Manual and in the meeting with the agency staff, AQUA's main tools to gather feedback from its stakeholders and identify their needs and expectations are regular meetings of the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education (see ESG 3.1); satisfaction surveys of evaluated HEIs and evaluation panel members conducted after each evaluation process; meta-evaluations of the EQA processes and internal processes and procedures; and the management of queries, suggestions and complaints received by the agency (see ESG 2.7).

Except in 2023 when AQUA was reorganised to implement the IQA system, meta-evaluations are conducted annually. They are based on surveys of HEI QA managers and experts; presentations on completed ex-ante programme evaluations given by the agency in meta-evaluation meetings of the Working Group; feedback sessions with the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education where stakeholders are divided into focus groups; and discussions with external experts. As a result of the meta-evaluations, the agency, for example, revised some evaluation criteria which were not clear to universities, and reduced the number of quality indicators; included additional experts in its evaluation panels; and piloted and introduced an additional step in the evaluation procedure where universities give a short presentation on programmes to be evaluated to evaluation panels before the submission of their SARs. The last three meta-evaluation reports will be published at the end of 2024, after the Working Group meeting scheduled for November; earlier ones were not published as some staff were on leave and the agency had IT problems which have now been resolved.

The representatives of most universities interviewed agreed that they have good opportunities to provide feedback on the agency's activities via the Working Group. The agency is keen to listen to their opinions and takes their suggestions on board when they are supported by the majority of the universities. For some representatives, it was still too early to provide meaningful feedback as their universities had only recently been accredited. The experts whom the panel met complimented the agency team for its responsiveness to their feedback and improvements it made in the evaluation procedures and criteria based on their suggestions.

While AQUA relied on the pool of experts available at other QA agencies until 2020 (see 'AQUA'), its EQA activities are no longer subcontracted to other parties. AQUA is aware that legislation in many European countries allows agencies to recognise outcomes of evaluations conducted by other agencies if they are registered in EQAR. However, as the Director explained in the online clarification meeting, in accordance with the legislation in Andorra, final evaluation reports can be issued only by AQUA.

## **Analysis**

The panel was impressed by the swift progress in the development and implementation of the IQAS in the last year and the agency team's commitment to ensure that the system works effectively. Now AQUA has an integrated and comprehensive IQAS, covering the full range of its activities, and the draft of the 2024 Internal Quality Report shows that the key strategic, operational and support processes and related procedures are already in place. The evidence collected also shows that the processes and procedures are regularly reviewed, both internally and in meta-evaluations involving stakeholders, and findings and outcomes are documented. The draft Internal Quality Report and Improvement Plan that the panel read is based on a detailed analysis of the processes and procedures, with even less significant 'non-compliance issues' (e.g. a minor error in a document) meticulously recorded. Some areas for improvement discussed in the panel's report (e.g. training for evaluation panels; the appeals process) are already identified in the agency's draft Report and related follow-up actions are included in the Improvement Plan. The evidence collected also shows that findings from the internal reviews and meta-evaluations are used for continuous improvement.

As the AQUA team is small and there is a simple horizontal organisational structure, a staff satisfaction survey as a formal mechanism for internal feedback collection, in addition to open ongoing communication and regular meetings, indicates that this aspect is taken seriously by the agency. The panel understands from its meetings with the staff that they are fully satisfied with both opportunities to provide feedback and the Director's responsiveness to their suggestions.

The external feedback collection mechanisms are, likewise, well established. While surveys of evaluated HEIs and experts are standard mechanisms that should be in place, annual meta-evaluations, which make use of both quantitative data from surveys and qualitative evidence collected in focus



groups, are well designed to thoroughly review the agency's processes and procedures. Leaving aside an isolated case of miscommunication between the agency and one of the universities (see ESG 3.1), the interviews with the stakeholders show that the mechanisms in place are perceived as fully adequate. At the same time, the panel notes that the agency cannot benefit yet from meaningful feedback from some of the universities as they have only recently been accredited and joined the Working Group.

With the work organisation facilitating peer learning and the staff development opportunities offered by the agency and taken by all of the team members (see ESG 3.5), formal and regular performance appraisal and the Code of Ethics signed by staff, AQUA has in place effective measures to ensure that the team acts professionally and ethically. As noted under ESG 3.5, the experts interviewed spoke highly of the staff who support them in evaluation processes.

While there is room for improvement in the training for experts (see ESG 2.4), the panel considers that the Code of Ethics they sign and the evaluation of their performance by staff and universities (see ESG 2.4) are sufficient to ensure that the agency involves in its EQA activities only those who demonstrate professionalism and integrity in doing their job.

### **Panel commendations**

Systematic approach to internal quality assurance and feedback collection mechanisms extending beyond the minimum set expected to be in place in an agency.

### **Panel conclusion: compliant**

## **ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES**

Standard:

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

### **Evidence**

AQUA has been an ENQA affiliate since 2012. The present review is the first ENQA-managed external review of the agency and is conducted as part of its applications for ENQA membership and registration in EQAR.

AQUA began to prepare for this review in the first years of its activity as an autonomous public law institution (2016-2020). Based on findings from an external pre-evaluation, AQUA's Founding Law was amended in 2020 to align its activities with the ESG (see 'AQUA'). In 2021, the Steering Committee approved a strategy for conducting the first external review of the agency, with an initial evaluation to be carried out by an external expert and followed by applications for ENQA membership and EQAR registration. The first phase lasted between November 2023 and January 2024, and subsequently the agency submitted its applications for ENQA membership and EQAR registration.

The revision of the legal framework for the agency (see 'AQUA'), which was underway at the time of this review, had been initiated to make further improvements in the agency's activities in line with the ESG. In its Strategic Plan, AQUA aims to gain international recognition and accreditation, achieve compliance with the ESG, become an ENQA member and be entered on EQAR. The AQUA Director told the panel in the online clarification meeting that the agency sees ENQA membership as a great opportunity to bolster its reputation in the country, learn from more experienced agencies and

enhance its EQA activities, and achieve international recognition. The agency undertakes in the SAR to undergo a cyclical external review as a priority.

### Analysis

The present review demonstrates AQUA's commitment to undergo an external review to verify whether it acts in compliance with the ESG. The agency's consistent efforts over the years to align its activities with the ESG and its strategic international engagement objectives also clearly indicate its high motivation to fulfil the requirements of ENQA membership and the EQAR registration.

**Panel conclusion: compliant**

## ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

### ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part I of the ESG.

### Evidence

The legislation on higher education states explicitly that HEIs take responsibility for assuring quality, and they do so in coordination with and with the support from AQUA. The SAR explains that the agency recognises the interrelationship between EQA and IQA, and reviews the implementation of IQA processes and their effectiveness and provides support for continuous improvement, while respecting university autonomy.

The legislation specifies the following aspects to be addressed in programme evaluations: internal quality and continuous improvement; curriculum; academic staff; resources and support processes; and public information. Strategic plans for new HEIs, which are evaluated for ex-ante institutional accreditation, must include a description of organisational and financial arrangements, programmes to be offered, research policy, teaching and research staff, learning resources, infrastructure, internal quality assurance, and an implementation schedule. As explained in the SAR, all programme evaluation processes consider the five dimensions listed in the legislation, and ex-ante institutional evaluations additionally address governance and management, and research and knowledge transfer.

AQUA has separate sets of evaluation criteria for ex-ante programme evaluation, ex-post programme evaluation, programme follow-up and ex-ante institutional evaluation. Ex-ante and ex-post programme evaluations and ex-ante institutional evaluations should address all of the criteria. The criteria for programme follow-up are chosen from the set included in the evaluation guide on a case-by-case basis by the applicant HEI and the agency. Programme modifications are evaluated against the criteria of ex-ante evaluation applicable to the particular modification(s).

The table mapping AQUA's criteria on Part I of the ESG included in the SAR links each ESG standard to the broad dimensions mentioned above. The table below is a shorter version of the detailed tables that were provided by the agency at the panel's request and are attached to this report as Annex 5.

ESG	Ex-Ante Programme Accreditation Key Aspects	Ex-Post Programme Accreditation Key Aspects	Programme Follow-up Key Aspects	Institutional Accreditation (Private HEIs) Key Aspects
I.1	I.1	I.1	I.1	I.2, II.1, II.2
I.2	II.1, II.2, II.3, II.4,	II.1, II.2, II.4	II.1, II.3	III.1, III.2, III.3, III.4
I.3	II.1, II.4	II.1, II.3, II.4	II.1, II.3	III.4
I.4	II.4, IV.1	II.4, IV.1	II.3, IV.1	I.2, IV.1
I.5	III.1, III.2	III.1	III.1	I.4, IV.1, V.1
I.6	II.4, IV.2	II.3, II.4, IV.2	II.2, II.3, IV.2	VI.2
I.7	I.1	I.1	I.1	I.3, II.1, II.2, V.1
I.8		V.1	V.1	VII.1
I.9	I.1	I.1	I.1	II.1
I.10	I.1	I.1	I.1	II.1

The panel analysed AQUA's criteria and read a sample of evaluation reports for all processes (two or three reports per mandatory process, and the only one available for programme follow-up) to review the alignment of the criteria with Part I of the ESG and see how the effectiveness of IQA is addressed in the processes.

## Analysis

Ex-ante programme evaluation (including programme modification as based on the ex-ante evaluation criteria), ex-post programme evaluation and follow-up are discussed jointly below as the criteria for ex-ante and ex-post evaluations and follow-up overlap to some extent. However, only ex-ante (and programme modification) and ex-post evaluations can be considered as complementary to each other as all of them are mandatory for HEIs, whereas follow-up is a voluntary process and is based on the criteria selected from the published set on a case-by-case basis.

ESG I.1 and I.9 are fully incorporated into AQUA's criteria for ex-ante and ex-post programme evaluations. In ex-ante evaluation, an HEI or its unit should demonstrate that its QA policy is coherent with the mission, vision and objectives of the HEI, and describe an effective indicator- and evidence-based process, which involves all stakeholders, for the monitoring, review and continuous improvement of the programme. Ex-post evaluation addresses a published QA system, including a structure involving all stakeholders, and effective processes for programme monitoring, review and continuous improvement. Follow-up focuses mainly on a periodic evidence- and indicator-based process for programme monitoring, which should be consistently carried out by a structure involving all stakeholders and lead to improvements.

Both ex-ante and ex-post evaluations, and follow-up, look at how a programme is designed and enables the achievement of its objectives, and intended learning outcomes and competences. Understandably, ex-ante evaluation addresses in greater depth the key aspects of the programme design highlighted in ESG I.2, and ex-post evaluation and follow-up focus on the implementation of the key aspects of the programme and mechanisms promoting graduate employability. However, ex-ante programme evaluation, in particular, could refer more explicitly to the involvement of stakeholders at the stage of programme design, and a formal process for the approval of a programme to be in place in an HEI.

The criteria for ex-ante and ex-post programme evaluations, and for follow-up, integrate key aspects of ESG 1.3, including attention to the diversity of students and their needs; flexible learning paths; teaching and learning methods promoting student autonomy, with teachers providing guidance and support; and assessment criteria and methods (to be) published allowing students to demonstrate their progress in learning and the achievement of learning outcomes.

In line with ESG 1.4, several criteria for ex-ante and ex-post evaluations, and follow-up, jointly cover the entire student life cycle, from entry profiles, access routes, admission procedures and requirements to the recognition of credits and mobility periods, and final theses or projects leading to graduation.

The criteria for both ex-ante and ex-post evaluations, as well as for follow-up, largely incorporate ESG 1.5 in that they require that teaching staff (to be recruited) have the profile, experience and skills necessary to carry out their activities, and the number of staff, student-teacher ratio and time allocation are adequate. Additionally, ex-post evaluation and follow-up address continuing professional development and the monitoring of the suitability of teaching staff. However, neither of the mandatory processes refers explicitly to a fair and transparent staff recruitment process.

ESG 1.6 is accurately translated into the criteria for all of the processes, which cover physical and technological resources and learning support services to be adequate for planned or ongoing academic activities, the number and needs of students, together with a suitable number of qualified administrative and technical staff. Ex-post evaluation and follow-up also look at the level of satisfaction of students and staff with the available facilities and support services.

Understandably, ex-ante evaluation covers ESG 1.7 only insofar as continuous improvement of new programmes should be based on evidence and indicators (see ESG 1.1 and 1.9 above). In line with this standard, specific indicators (e.g. programme performance, dropout and graduation rates; level of student and staff satisfaction) for analysis are listed in the ex-post evaluation criteria, and both ex-post evaluation and follow-up look at how the data collected is used for continuous improvement.

While a public information policy is not considered for new programmes, the criteria for ex-post evaluation, as well as for follow-up, require that programmes publish a full range of information, including characteristics, academic results, student satisfaction levels, internal QA processes and their outcomes, and results of monitoring and ex-post evaluations, as recommended under ESG 1.8.

In line with ESG 1.10, the ex-ante evaluation criteria explicitly refer to the requirement for programmes to undergo an external ex-post evaluation. Although ESG 1.10 is indicated in the table above as covered by the criteria for ex-post evaluation and follow-up, the respective criteria refer to periodic internal monitoring of programmes rather than a cyclical external evaluation. However, this is not an issue as the length of the mandatory accreditation cycle for ongoing programmes is prescribed by law.

Overall, AQUA's criteria for ex-ante (and programme modification) and ex-post evaluations jointly incorporate to a large extent the standards of Part I of the ESG; very few elements (stakeholder involvement in programme design; an institutional process for approval of programmes; a fair and transparent process for staff recruitment) could have been explicitly addressed. The panel believes that the three missing aspects are relevant, in particular, for ex-ante programme evaluations and would need to be incorporated into the agency's criteria. Follow-up currently has its own set of criteria, which largely overlap with those for the mandatory programme evaluations, whereas it should focus on areas for improvement identified in the original evaluation (for further comments on follow-up, see ESG 2.2 and 2.3). Then it would match the relevant standards of Part I of the ESG as addressed by the criteria for the mandatory processes.

The criteria for ex-post evaluation, as well as for follow-up, place a great emphasis on indicators and evidence for the effectiveness of internal QA. However, the evaluation reports that the panel read do

not provide sufficient evidence or sufficiently thorough analysis to demonstrate how the effectiveness of internal QA is addressed by evaluation panels; for further comments about reports, see ESG 2.6.

AQUA's criteria for ex-ante institutional evaluation comprehensively address ESG 1.1 and 1.9, including a quality policy coherent with the mission, vision and objectives of the new HEI; an internal QA system which should embrace processes for all areas of the HEI's activity, involve all stakeholders and outline a clear division of responsibilities, and cover all aspects highlighted in ESG 1.2 to 1.9.

The criteria refer in broad terms to the design of programmes, capture the main aspects of student-centred learning, teaching and assessment, and look at all stages of the student life cycle except for final projects leading to graduation. The aspects of ESG 1.2 and 1.4 that are only broadly or are not addressed for a new HEI are covered by the mandatory programme evaluation processes. ESG 1.5 is fully integrated in the agency's criteria, which refer to a policy for the recruitment, evaluation, professional development, promotion and management of staff, and an adequate number and qualifications of staff. ESG 1.6 is, likewise, accurately translated into the criteria that address material and technological resources and student support services, including mechanisms aimed at facilitating the adaptation of newly enrolled students and student progression until graduation.

Information management is tackled in line with ESG 1.7, with relevant evidence and data for quality indicators to be collected and analysed for all areas of the IQAS. ESG 1.8 is covered by the criteria for public information that address a public information strategy, with clear, objective, complete, relevant and up-to-date information to be easily available to all stakeholders and the public, and mechanisms for monitoring and reviewing the public information system.

ESG 1.10 is not applicable as the agency has yet to develop an ex-post institutional evaluation process (see the section 'AQUA').

### **Panel recommendations**

- I. AQUA should incorporate into its criteria the few aspects of Part I of the ESG, including stakeholder involvement in programme design, an institutional process for approval of programmes and a fair and transparent process for staff recruitment, which are not or are not explicitly addressed in programme evaluations, and in particular, ex-ante programme evaluation.

### **Panel conclusion: compliant**

## **ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE**

Standard:

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

### **Evidence**

The SAR states that AQUA designs its evaluation processes considering its mission and vision, the objectives of each process and the national and international frameworks. The national legislation specifies the broad dimensions, corresponding to Part I of the ESG (see ESG 2.1), to be addressed in AQUA's evaluations, the range of information to be provided in accreditation applications and the requirements to be fulfilled by strategic plans for new HEIs and official programmes. The methodology for each process is described in an evaluation guide, which includes the legal framework (national

legislation and the ESG), the objectives of a process, evaluation criteria (see ESG 2.1) and procedure (ESG 2.3), and possible outcomes (ESG 2.5).

As explained in the guides for ex-ante and ex-post programme and ex-ante institutional evaluations, the three processes aim to ensure compliance with the requirements of the national legislation and the ESG, and ex-ante programme evaluation is also geared towards the development of a quality culture. A programme modification evaluation addresses only the aspects that an HEI is planning to modify in a programme which has been accredited by the agency and approved by the Ministry in charge of higher education. Programme follow-up is described in the guide as 'the process of evaluating a study programme for its ex-post accreditation' in the context of the legislation and the ESG.

Ex-post programme evaluations are conducted every ten years. The Director, members of the Evaluation and Appeals Committees and the academic and professional experts interviewed consider that a ten-year accreditation period is too long as 'lots of things can go wrong'; a six-year period is the right duration; hence the proposed amendment to the legislation.

Programme follow-up is a separate process, and voluntary for HEIs unless AQUA is instructed to conduct it for a particular programme by the Ministry responsible for higher education (which had not been the case until the time of this review). A follow-up requested by an HEI can be undertaken at any time during the ten-year accreditation period and addresses criteria selected by the applicant HEI and the agency from the set published in the guide. The SAR emphasises that the agency does not feel comfortable about having no authority to conduct a follow-up.

Heads of QA of some universities interviewed by the panel consider that there should be no follow-up; others applied to the agency to undergo a follow-up; still others feel that universities are 'over-evaluated', but a follow-up could be useful to ensure that previous recommendations are properly implemented and to obtain subsequent accreditation.

The anticipated legal changes would introduce a mandatory follow-up for conditionally accredited programmes to be conducted three years after the award of conditional accreditation, and fully accredited programmes would be able to apply voluntarily for an enhancement-oriented follow-up. As the panel learned from the staff, mandatory follow-up will focus on 'problematic' criteria based on a set of requirements; the concept of voluntary follow-up is now being discussed with the universities, but is expected to focus more on strengths than weaknesses.

The SAR explains that support for HEIs in quality enhancement and the progress they make are focal points in evaluations, but acknowledges that programme evaluations focus more on accountability than enhancement. AQUA expects that 'conditional favourable' to be the third possible outcome of programme evaluations and a new ex-post institutional evaluation process to be introduced by the proposed amendments to the law will help it achieve a better balance between the two dimensions of its EQA. It will start developing the methodology for ex-post institutional evaluation at the end of 2024.

The SAR states that AQUA bears in mind the workload and costs that evaluations might place on HEIs, and thus seeks to balance the expectations of its stakeholders and the requirements set by the national and international frameworks. Ex-ante programme evaluations, in particular, create a burden on HEIs, which might be heavier for smaller HEIs with a limited number of staff. To reduce the workload related to ex-post evaluations, HEIs may submit for evaluation one or several programmes, preferably in the same disciplinary area, as stated in the respective evaluation guide. The agency expects that ex-post institutional evaluation will streamline the programme evaluation processes by eliminating cross-cutting aspects. As the panel learned from the staff, since 2022 the processes have been simplified insofar as the number of documents requested from HEIs, their length and the number of aspects to be addressed were gradually reduced, and documents are now submitted in an electronic format. The agency is also planning to reduce further the number of indicators verified.

In the survey conducted as part of the self-assessment for this review, AQUA's stakeholders indicated that evaluations 'often tend to become overly bureaucratic, with a greater emphasis on accountability rather than improvement'. The heads of QA of universities whom the panel met agreed that the processes focus on accountability rather than enhancement. While the public and oldest university has made quality improvements as a result of the agency's evaluations, it is still too early for the recently established private universities to see whether or how evaluations foster quality enhancement. Some heads of QA consider that the processes are 'not extremely' bureaucratic; for others, they are bureaucratic but to an acceptable extent; for still others, they require a lot of work as there are too many indicators. The academic and professional experts suggested that some indicators for programmes set in the relevant government decree are not really necessary.

The SAR states that each evaluation guide is drafted by the agency, discussed within the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education (see ESG 3.1 and 3.6), finalised by the agency and approved by the Steering Committee. The staff clarified that the ongoing evaluation processes were developed many years ago, and stakeholders were consulted when drafts were already prepared rather than contributing to their development; now the agency will involve them from the beginning in the development of the ex-post institutional accreditation process via the Working Group.

The published guides are regularly reviewed and updated, following the same steps as in designing the evaluation processes. Inputs for the improvement of the methodologies are gathered through the surveys of evaluated HEIs and evaluation panels and meta-evaluation and other meetings organised by AQUA within the framework of the Working Group (see ESG 3.6).

The heads of QA interviewed were not involved in the development of the first versions of the guides years ago as most of the universities or their staff are new. Except for one (for the communication issue, see ESG 3.1), they confirmed that they regularly give feedback on the ongoing evaluation processes via the Working Group, and the agency makes suggested revisions in the guides if they are agreed on by the majority of the universities (for example, the number of indicators to be reduced).

## **Analysis**

AQUA follows a clear procedure in the development and revision of its evaluation methodologies and involves stakeholders in the continuous improvement of the ongoing processes through post-evaluation surveys and the Working Group in Quality in Higher Education. As indicated under ESG 3.6 and above, there is also evidence that the agency refines its methodologies in response to the feedback collected. The panel is glad to note that the agency will now involve the Working Group in brainstorming to develop methodologies for new processes rather than only in reviewing draft evaluation guides. However, the Working Group currently brings together only representatives of the Ministry responsible for higher education, university QA managers and the agency staff; with no students and employers on board, it does not yet represent all of the relevant stakeholder groups. As explained under ESG 3.1, the agency is keen to involve students and is seeking a transparent way to do that in the absence of student organisations in the country.

The framework for the mandatory evaluation processes is largely regulated by the national legislation. The panel agrees with the agency and experts that the ten-year programme accreditation cycle set in the law, in particular, with no mandatory follow-up, is excessively long for the agency to effectively ensure that HEIs continue to meet quality standards and for HEIs to benefit from recommendations for quality enhancement at the mid-point of the cycle. The proposed six-year cycle will not necessarily increase the burden on HEIs if the introduction of ex-post institutional evaluation is combined with the streamlining of the ongoing evaluation processes, as planned by the agency.

The panel considers that the methodologies for the mandatory processes are overall fit for purpose. The processes serve regulatory purposes, and this is clearly reflected in the objectives set and the

methodologies for ex-ante programme and institutional evaluations in particular, which focus more on accountability than enhancement. Ex-post programme evaluation aims to combine the two dimensions and, indeed, recommendations made in the sample of reports that the panel read go beyond compliance with the minimum requirements and guide universities towards quality improvement. The heads of QA vary in their views about the burden that evaluations put on their universities. However, the panel gathers from the meetings with the heads of QA and experts that there still is some room for eliminating unnecessary quality indicators, and the agency has agreed to do that in response to suggestions from the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education.

The objective of voluntary programme follow-up could be more clearly defined as it might indicate that the process is a sort of pre-evaluation which aims mostly to ensure that a programme is reaccredited. Aside from that, the follow-up is not designed in line with the ESG. ESG 2.2 and 2.3 considered jointly recommend that it should be conducted as an integral part of evaluation processes rather than on a voluntary basis and should focus on action taken by HEIs based on guidance provided in evaluation reports rather than addressing criteria specifically developed for this process (which, as noted under ESG 2.1, largely overlap with those for ex-post evaluation). Although this is not considered in the context of the agency's compliance with ESG 2.2, it is not yet clear what a redesigned follow-up will focus on, but the main issue will not be fully addressed by the anticipated legal changes as the process will be mandatory only for conditionally accredited programmes.

### **Panel recommendations**

1. AQUA should redesign its programme follow-up process so that it is mandatory for all accredited programmes and focuses on action taken by universities to make improvements in areas identified in previous evaluations.
2. AQUA should further involve students and employers in the development and continuous improvement of its evaluation methodologies.

### **Panel conclusion: compliant**

## **ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES**

Standard:

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent
- an external assessment normally including a site visit
- a report resulting from the external assessment
- a consistent follow-up

### **Evidence**

The procedures for the evaluation processes are described in the evaluation guides, which are published on the AQUA website.

All of the four mandatory processes, ex-ante and ex-post programme evaluation, programme modification and ex-ante institutional evaluation, include a self-assessment conducted by an applicant HEI or a strategic plan for a new HEI, external assessment carried out by an evaluation panel and an external evaluation report, with site visits undertaken by evaluation panels only as part of ex-post



programme evaluations. For an overview, see the table below reproduced from the SAR. The SAR also explains that once an evaluation report is issued, AQUA has a meeting with the university concerned to ensure ‘thorough understanding of the report’, and this step is particularly important as guiding subsequent evaluations and improvement.

The table below also shows that a separate programme follow-up process comprises all stages recommended under ESG 2.3, but as noted under ESG 2.2, this is a voluntary process, unless the Ministry in charge of higher education instructs AQUA to conduct it, and addresses criteria selected from the predefined set by the agency and the applicant university. AQUA conducted only one follow-up between 2019 and 2023, and three follow-ups were scheduled for 2025 at the time of this review. The SAR states that the current arrangements put the agency in an uncomfortable position as it is not authorised to conduct a consistent follow-up; hence, the proposed legal changes; see ESG 2.2.

ESG 2.3 PROCESSES						
ACTIVITY	OBJECT	Self-assessment	External assessment	Site visit	Report	Follow-up
Ex-ante programme accreditation	Study Programmes	✓	✓		✓	✓
Ex-post programme accreditation		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Programme follow-up		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Programme modification		✓	✓		✓	
Ex-ante institutional evaluation	Institutions	✓	✓		✓	

As explained in the SAR, a SAR or a strategic plan for a new HEI submitted for evaluation must comply with the agency’s templates and guidelines in terms of its structure and content and, where applicable, with the requirements set in the Decrees on state higher education degrees or the establishment of new private HEIs. It should provide evidence to demonstrate how the outcomes (to be) achieved are linked to the stated objectives and how a programme or a strategic plan for a new HEI addresses the evaluation criteria, and where relevant, outlines any improvement action taken or planned.

Ex-ante programme evaluation, programme modification and ex-ante institutional evaluation do not include a site visit and are based on documentary evidence cross-checked against information available in other publicly available sources such as university websites. The SAR argues that there is no visit as facilities and academic staff may not yet have been assigned to a new programme, a modification in a programme is only proposed rather than implemented or there is no new HEI yet to be visited at the time when an application for an evaluation is submitted. The agency team further clarified that the law sets only minimum requirements for what should be in place for a new HEI (for example, an office and administrative staff); most HEIs are new and are only developing their campuses and hiring staff when they apply for accreditation of programmes; and one HEI requested an evaluation of a modification before a new programme was implemented. Although no visit is undertaken, HEIs are requested to describe digital infrastructure and other facilities for students.

AQUA's SAR explains that an evaluation panel reviews an HEI's SAR or the strategic plan for a new HEI and, only in an ex-post programme evaluation and programme follow-up, conducts a site visit to get familiar with the place where a programme is delivered, clarify any issues identified in the self-assessment report and gather new evidence. The duration and programme of a visit are agreed between AQUA and the evaluated HEI, but each visit includes a presentation of the evaluated programme(s), interviews with degree coordinators, teaching and administrative and support staff, students, graduates and employers, a public hearing for any interested member of the academic community to attend, and a tour of facilities. Interviews can be held in person or online; the online format has proved effective, in particular, during the Covid-19 pandemic and for interviewing students enrolled on online programmes.

At the end of each evaluation, panels prepare expert reports using the evaluation guide and a report template with assessment rubrics; reports are submitted to the Evaluation Committee. The Committee checks expert reports for consistency with the guidelines, issues final evaluation reports and takes accreditation decisions. For details about decision-making and reporting, see ESG 2.5 and 2.6.

To ensure consistency in the implementation of the evaluation processes, in addition to providing report templates and guides to HEIs and evaluation panels, AQUA organises training for experts (see ESG 2.4), and its staff act as secretaries who advise panels on the methodology and draft expert reports.

The experts interviewed told the panel that the training and the guides are jointly sufficient for them to have a good understanding of what they are expected to do (see ESG 2.4). The stakeholder survey conducted as part of AQUA's self-assessment for this review indicates that HEIs consider the evaluation guides to be very helpful as they provide clear rubrics and criteria.

## **Analysis**

The panel confirms that the evaluation processes are predefined and published.

All of the processes include a self-assessment, an external evaluation and an external evaluation report, as recommended under this standard, but there is no follow-up for accredited programmes as the process is voluntary, and, in practice, conducted for very few programmes. Follow-up has predefined stages that would be consistently followed by the agency in its implementation. However, since the criteria to be addressed are selected from the set on a case-by-case basis, each follow-up is fitted to the needs of a particular programme rather than based on a consistent approach in terms of its scope. As noted under ESG 2.2, it should focus on areas for improvement identified in the original evaluation.

Based on specific requirements for their content, SARs submitted by HEIs or strategic plans for new HEIs are well designed to provide panels with extensive evidence for analysis. Meetings with all relevant stakeholder groups and a tour of facilities as part of a site visit in ex-post programme evaluations and programme follows-up clearly allow panels to verify thoroughly the accuracy of documentary evidence and collect new evidence.

The panel recognises that such a 'proper' site visit could not be undertaken in all cases as part of ex-ante programme evaluation, programme modification or ex-ante institutional evaluation as basic conditions for a new programme to be launched or a new HEI to start operating may not be in place yet. However, the panel gathers from the details given by the agency team that circumstances or conditions that are in place may vary from one case to another. Thus, it believes that the agency would need to reflect on, and make it clear in its procedures when it would be realistic and important to conduct a site visit as part of these three processes.

Document templates, the detailed evaluation guides used by HEIs and experts, the training for experts and the support provided to evaluation panels by the agency staff are, in the panel's view, sufficient to

ensure consistent implementation of the processes, and the panel found no evidence in its meetings with the representatives of universities to suggest otherwise.

### **Panel recommendations**

1. AQUA should include a follow-up for accredited programmes which is consistently conducted not only in terms of the stages of the process but also its scope.
2. AQUA should revise its procedures for ex-ante programme evaluation, programme modification and ex-ante institutional evaluation to include a site visit and make it clear what criteria are being used to not undertake a site visit when that is considered the optimal approach.

### **Panel conclusion: partially compliant**

## **ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS**

Standard:

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

### **Evidence**

Decree 63/2021 Approving the Regulations of AQUA prescribes the recruitment procedure and selection criteria for external experts, the composition and tasks of evaluation panels, and the objectives of the training for experts. The Experts Pool section on the AQUA website provides information about the profile, recruitment and role of experts, and a link to the Decree.

In all evaluation processes, each panel is composed of at least one academic, one student and one professional, and the agency technical staff member acts as the secretary.

Academic staff must hold a doctoral degree, be active academic staff in an HEI other than the one to be evaluated, and have teaching, research or management experience in the relevant field. Students must be enrolled on a degree programme similar to the one under evaluation. Professionals must be engaged in an activity related to the evaluated field, preferably pursued in Andorra, and have a relevant professional career trajectory in the field. Additionally, as explained in the SAR, the agency considers previous experience in QA processes for all three categories of experts; experience in the design and management of academic programmes and innovation projects in the field concerned for academic experts; and experience in management roles, participation or representation for students and professionals. Experts should have the knowledge of Catalan, Spanish, French or English. They are selected by the Director, and the HEI to be evaluated has the opportunity to signal any conflict of interest. The heads of QA interviewed told the panel that they would like to receive experts' CVs to comment on their expertise, but this is not allowed by the data protection regulations.

Experts may not be in a situation of incompatibility or a conflict of interest in performing their tasks. Thus, academic experts come from outside Andorra and student experts are either international students or Andorran students studying abroad. All experts sign AQUA's Code of Ethics.

In accordance with the Decree, AQUA recruits experts via a registration form available on its website. As the panel learned from the SAR and the staff, the agency publishes calls for experts on its website and the social media and in official publications.

The academic and professional experts told the panel that while it is good to receive a fee and add an item to the CV, first of all they see the work they do for the agency as service to the country and their academic or civic duty. The student experts believe that with their new perspective, they can and do help the agency and universities improve the quality of education for students.

Although AQUA has recently expanded its pool of experts, 'limited diversification of the profile of external experts' is listed as a weakness in the SWOT analysis, and the Strategic Plan includes the objective of expanding the pool of experts and diversifying their profile. The SAR explains that since all evaluations are conducted in Catalan, language is the main barrier, and despite many discussions held, the Steering Committee has yet to resolve the issue. The agency usually recruits experts from Catalonia, Spain, but some Spanish and French speakers from non-Catalan speaking regions have been involved in evaluation panels. The staff told the panel that some experts understand but are not necessarily sufficiently fluent to write in Catalan. The academic, professional and student experts interviewed acknowledged that evaluation panels often include the same people.

The SAR states that HEIs may apply for an evaluation to be conducted by a panel of experts coming from outside the Catalan-speaking regions and submit their SAR in Catalan and English. Since no HEI has chosen this option, AQUA will continue to encourage them to do so, although it is aware that such a process is costly and extended in time.

As explained in the SAR, each panel receives the evaluation guide and training videos, with detailed guidelines on the assessment criteria, and training. Training is provided to new experts, and to experienced experts when the agency makes any changes in the evaluation process or guide, or an expert is selected for a new type of evaluation. During a training session, usually held online, technical staff present the legal framework and the context of an evaluation, the role of experts, the evaluation process and criteria, including evaluation reports, and a practical example of an evaluation. As the staff told the panel, they always discuss in detail the challenging criteria that often cause problems in consistent interpretation.

For the experts interviewed, the guides combined with the training and the support received from panel secretaries are sufficient to understand what they are expected to do; additionally, professional experts would appreciate more details on how the ex-ante programme evaluation criteria are linked to the legislation. The student experts also emphasised that the training is very useful for them to understand the national context, and AQUA swiftly answers any additional questions they may have.

As the panel learned from the SAR and the experts, after the review of an HEI's SAR or a site visit, if conducted as part of a given evaluation process (see ESG 2.3), all experts independently fill in individual assessment forms which provide the basis for an expert report, and discuss, revise where necessary and approve preliminary and final reports drafted by the panel secretary (for reports, see ESG 2.6). All panel members are equal, read all documents and comment on all criteria; student experts highlight in their individual reports the aspects that are particularly relevant to students. The academic and professional experts find student experts to be serious about their job and value their fresh insights.

The performance of experts is evaluated by HEIs in satisfaction surveys and by the staff acting as panel secretaries. The SAR states that experts' performance is evaluated by staff in an informal way, but it is 'graded' against the following criteria: attendance at and level of participation in meetings, quality of contributions, quality of independent assessment, and suitability for other evaluations. The staff also explained to the panel that outcomes are documented. Only experts who have been given a positive appraisal can be invited back to participate in evaluations. The experts whom the panel interviewed did not receive or received only informal feedback on their performance from the agency.

In the survey conducted as part of the self-assessment for this review, some stakeholders indicated that experts could be less subjective as areas for improvement identified in some evaluations impinged

upon university autonomy. AQUA's draft Improvement Plan (see ESG 3.6) includes a review and improvement of the training material for experts.

The heads of QA of universities interviewed agreed that, overall, experts have good academic knowledge and know how to do their job, even if some focus too much on their specialism or do not speak Catalan. However, some university rectors and heads of QA consider that the training of experts should be improved as some evaluation reports are not consistent in how they address the criteria (see also ESG 2.5 and 2.6). Aside from this, the expert pool is rather small and there is a feeling in the universities that they are evaluated by experts coming from the same HEIs.

## **Analysis**

Evaluation panels consist of academics, professionals and students, as recommended in this standard, and the panel understands from the meetings with experts that all panel members genuinely contribute to an evaluation and inputs from each of them are equally valued.

AQUA rightly acknowledges that the diversity of the pool from which it can select experts for evaluation panels is limited in terms of the size and the range of academic and QA expertise as most experts come from the Catalan-speaking regions. The panel encourages the agency to widen its search for experts beyond the regional context, but it recognises that this is not an easy task as members of evaluation panels should at least understand the language. Since universities perceive the small pool of experts as a drawback and, at the same time, are reluctant to apply for an evaluation conducted in English, the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education (see ESG 3.1 and 3.6) might perhaps be the right place to develop a realistic and acceptable solution to this problem.

The agency uses predefined, clear and published criteria to select experts for evaluation panels and ensures that they have no conflict of interest as only professionals come from Andorra, all panel members sign the Code of Ethics and universities are consulted about any potential issue in this respect. Although this extends beyond the criteria, the panel compliments the agency for selecting experts who are motivated to engage in evaluation by a strong sense of civic commitment.

Overall, experts feel well-prepared and are perceived as competent to do their job. The panel agrees with the experts that the evaluation guides clearly explain each step of the evaluation process and how experts should address each evaluation criterion (see also ESG 2.5). The training programme is comprehensive in scope, but the feedback from the experts and the heads of QA of universities indicates that the agency could address in greater depth some specific items such as the legislation and would need to give even more attention to the consistent interpretation of the criteria. The panel is glad to note that this issue is addressed in the agency's draft Improvement Plan. Training new experts and, additionally, experienced ones in specific cases mentioned above is sufficient, in the panel's view, considering, in particular, the small pool of experts who are often reinvited to conduct evaluations. Additionally, it might be useful for each panel to be briefed before an evaluation on any issues that may have arisen in the interpretation of the criteria or reporting since their previous involvement. For the comments about additional guidelines on reporting that would need to be provided to evaluation panels, see ESG 2.6.

AQUA has in place sound mechanisms for the evaluation of experts' performance by both universities and staff acting as panel secretaries. As the performance appraisal carried out by staff is based on clear criteria, and its outcomes are documented and considered in the appointment of evaluation panels, it is not a purely informal mechanism, but the agency could include a specific procedure as part of its process 'Management of evaluation panels' in the IQAS; this is already addressed in the draft Improvement Plan. Although those who did not perform well are not re-invited, the procedure could include feedback on performance provided by the agency to individual experts.

### **Panel recommendations**

1. AQUA should improve the training for experts to ensure greater consistency in how the criteria are addressed in evaluation reports.

### **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

1. AQUA could include a formal procedure for performance appraisal of external experts in its internal quality assurance system and formally provide feedback to experts on their performance in evaluation panels.
2. To increase the diversity of the expert pool, the panel encourages AQUA to continue widening its search for international experts beyond the regional context.

### **Panel conclusion: compliant**

## **ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES**

Standard:

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

### **Evidence**

All of the evaluation processes are based on the predefined criteria that are published in the evaluation guides on the AQUA website. Ex-ante and ex-post programme evaluations and ex-ante institutional evaluations should address all of the criteria described in the respective guides. Programme modifications are evaluated against the relevant criteria for ex-ante programme evaluation, depending on the particular modification(s) proposed by an HEI, and the evaluation guide provides detailed definitions of each type of modification (see 'AQUA's Functions, Activities, Procedures'). Programme follow-up is conducted against a number of criteria which are selected by the HEI and the agency from the set included in the evaluation guide.

Evaluation panels assess a programme or a strategic plan of a new HEI against the criteria using the following levels: 'very adequate', 'adequate', 'inadequate' and 'not applicable' for all processes, and 'insufficient information' for all processes except for ex-ante programme evaluation. The guides explain how a given criterion should be addressed for each level of compliance. As explained under ESG 2.4, panels receive the guides and training, and the staff acting as panel secretaries advise experts on the interpretation of the evaluation criteria. To do so, the staff read previous evaluation reports, as they explained to the panel. The Evaluation Committee reviews an expert report for consistency in the application of the criteria but does not change their substance (see ESG 3.3) and issues the final report (for details on reporting, see ESG 2.6).

All of the mandatory evaluation processes lead to a favourable or unfavourable outcome (accreditation or refusal of accreditation); AQUA's accreditation decisions are binding on the Ministry responsible for higher education. Voluntary programme follow-up ends with non-binding recommendations for HEIs. Accreditation decisions are taken by the Evaluation Committee based on expert reports. As stated in the SAR and the evaluation guides, in principle, the Committee awards accreditation if all evaluation criteria are met at the 'adequate' level, and levels of compliance are indicated by evaluation panels in expert reports. It may also award accreditation if this is not the case for some criteria, but

the issues identified do not have a significant impact on quality or can be addressed within a short time. The Committee told the panel that its decisions are based on expert reports, and it had never used its discretionary power; it could award accreditation if a transversal criterion was not met at the 'adequate' level provided that all the related specific criteria were adequately fulfilled.

In the stakeholder survey conducted as part of AQUA's self-assessment for this review, HEIs indicated that evaluation reports 'are consistent with shared guidelines and criteria'. Some of the university rectors and heads of QA interviewed by the panel pointed out that in several cases panels viewed the same or similar aspects in a different way and arrived at different conclusions in spite of the similarities in the SARs or programmes submitted for evaluation; some evaluation reports could also more clearly explain how panels arrived at their conclusions. For the representative of one university, the rules are not entirely clear as the criteria and, thus, shortcomings identified in evaluations, are not graded.

As the panel learned from the Evaluation Committee and the staff, AQUA would not want to infringe experts' autonomy, but it is aware of the consistency issue and is planning to set up a harmonisation committee to discuss discrepancies in reports with experts. The creation of such a committee is included in the agency's draft Improvement Plan provided to the panel, but details were not yet available at the time of the panel's site visit.

## **Analysis**

The panel confirms that the evaluation criteria are predefined and published. The evidence provided under ESG 3.6 and 2.2 shows that the agency refines the criteria in response to the feedback collected from universities and experts. The panel considers that the criteria are clear and found no evidence in its meetings with the representatives of universities that they would still need to be revised in terms of clarity, even if some suggested that they could be graded.

In principle, AQUA has put in place a sound system to ensure consistency in the application of the criteria and accreditation decision-making as it provides guides and training to evaluation panels, panels are assisted by the agency staff in the interpretation of the criteria and their reports are scrutinised by the Evaluation Committee. However, the feedback from the representatives of universities indicates that the system does not always work well in practice, even if such cases of inconsistency occur occasionally rather than frequently. In the panel's view, the evaluation guides used by panels make it clear what evidence should be collected and considered and is required for each level of compliance. The rules for the Evaluation Committee to take a favourable or unfavourable decision are, likewise, clear, and the panel understands that the concerns expressed by the universities refer to inconsistencies in panels' views presented in expert reports rather than in decisions taken by the Committee. It believes that potential discrepancies in the interpretation of the criteria and in experts' views as reflected in their reports can be to a large extent eliminated by improved training and guidelines on reporting, as recommended under ESG 2.4 and 2.6. Although the staff acting as panel secretaries read previous reports to support experts in the interpretation of the criteria, their role would need to be strengthened without limiting experts' autonomy in making judgments. Additionally, when scrutinising expert reports, the Evaluation Committee could ensure that reports provide sufficient evidence for consistent judgments; this is considered under ESG 2.6.

The panel is unable to comment on how the harmonisation committee to be set up may help to resolve the consistency issue as its role has yet to be precisely defined.

The expert and evaluation reports that the panel received from the agency as a sample do not provide sufficient evidence or analysis of findings to verify whether the criteria are consistently applied or that evaluation outcomes are evidence-based; this is discussed and considered in the panel's judgement under ESG 2.6.

## Panel recommendations

- I. AQUA should improve the measures in place to better ensure consistency in the application of the criteria by evaluation panels.

## Panel conclusion: compliant

## ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Standard:

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

## Evidence

The SAR describes several stages in reporting. Each panel member fills in an individual assessment form; based on their contributions, the staff member acting as the panel secretary compiles a preliminary expert report, which is discussed by the panel in an online meeting, revised where necessary, endorsed by the panel and submitted to the Evaluation Committee. The Committee reviews the expert report for consistency in the application of the evaluation criteria, without making any substantial changes, and issues a preliminary evaluation report. The preliminary evaluation report is sent to the evaluated university, which has ten days to make factual corrections, state objections or provide comments and additional information. The panel reviews the university's response, and the secretary drafts a final expert report, which is discussed in an online meeting, revised where necessary, endorsed by the panel and submitted to the Evaluation Committee. The Committee issues the final evaluation report.

The agency team further clarified during the site visit that reports are drafted by secretaries rather than experts as some experts do not speak or write in Catalan and thus could not necessarily use the terminology consistently. When the Evaluation Committee makes any changes in an expert report, all are listed in a protocol provided to the evaluation panel. The experts interviewed confirmed that all changes are discussed, and panels are free to disagree with any suggestions from the Committee; if the panels disagree, no changes are made in the report.

The panel read a sample of final expert reports and final evaluation reports for all processes, including those ending with favourable and unfavourable outcomes. The structure of each report includes identification data for the evaluated programme or HEI, a brief description of the evaluation process, an assessment per each criterion, with strengths and / or areas for improvement or recommendations, and the evaluation outcome in reports produced in the mandatory processes. The panel noted that levels of compliance are not indicated in the final reports prepared by panels or final evaluation reports issued by the agency in the mandatory evaluation processes; the Evaluation Committee clarified that the tables with compliance levels are removed before the final versions are produced.

Pursuant to AQUA's Founding Law and Decree 63/2021, the agency publishes on its website reports for evaluations ending with a favourable outcome, whereas reports for those ending with an unfavourable outcome should be accessible to individuals 'who can demonstrate a legitimate interest'. The SAR explains that this arrangement was adopted in the early stages of the development of the higher education system and aimed 'not to affect adversely' newly established HEIs. The agency would like to publish reports regardless of their outcome, and this is addressed in the anticipated changes in



its legal framework. The Evaluation and Appeals Committees and the representatives of universities whom the panel met agree that all reports should be published.

## **Analysis**

The structure of reports broadly follows this standard. It is not necessary to indicate levels of compliance achieved for each criterion in published reports, but the agency could include them in the template for final expert reports and final evaluation reports for the sake of clarity and transparency. If the levels of compliance indicated are clearly linked to evidence and analysis of findings, this could also help the agency to demonstrate consistency in the application of the evaluation criteria. Although agencies are not required to include names of experts conducting external evaluations in published reports, AQUA could do so to further increase the transparency of its evaluation processes.

The reports produced in the mandatory evaluation processes examined by the panel include clear recommendations and outcomes. However, in terms of their nature and style, reports would need to be improved to provide more benefit to the agency and society. While recommendations are well justified, the reports provide little or, in some cases, no evidence and analysis to support positive conclusions. Such conclusions are rather generic; not infrequently, they merely confirm that, for example, a model is suitable, a process is appropriate or mechanisms are adequate, and repeat the wording of the criterion, without any programme- or institution-specific substantiation. Thus, it is not entirely clear if all key aspects of a criterion have been considered to draw conclusions. The reports also tend to focus on areas for improvement; this may be justified by the focus on accountability in the evaluation processes (see ESG 2.2), but however generic, positive conclusions in the reports that the panel read suggest that more good practice examples could have been identified.

As AQUA conducted only one programme follow-up, the report available is not a representative example. It includes an in-depth analysis based on a good amount of evidence and clearly identifies both areas of good practice and those for improvement.

As indicated under ESG 2.5, the Evaluation Committee reviews expert reports for consistency in the application of the criteria. When AQUA develops more detailed guidelines for reporting as the panel recommends below, the Committee could also check expert reports to ensure that they provide sufficient evidence and analysis to substantiate conclusions and justify the levels of compliance indicated by panels.

Based on the sample received, the panel confirms that there are only minor differences in style or layout between final expert reports prepared by panels and final evaluation reports issued by the Evaluation Committee. Thus, it believes that there would be no added value in publishing both expert and evaluation reports. The evidence collected also shows that there is no risk that the Committee could make any substantial changes in an expert report without approval from the panel concerned.

The agency's practice of submitting a preliminary report to the evaluated HEI for a response even extends beyond what is recommended under this standard as the HEI can state objections and provide additional evidence and comments, aside from checking the factual accuracy of the report.

The panel confirms that AQUA publishes on its website reports for evaluations ending with a favourable outcome rather than all reports as recommended in this standard. As this constraint is imposed by the law, the panel is glad to note that the agency has proposed a necessary amendment, which is supported by universities, although this is not considered in the panel's judgement under this standard.

### **Panel recommendations**

1. AQUA should provide more detailed guidelines on reporting for experts and staff acting as panel secretaries and ensure that evaluation reports provide sufficient evidence and analysis to substantiate conclusions and outcomes.
2. AQUA should publish all evaluation reports regardless of their outcome.

### **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

1. The template for final expert reports and final evaluation reports could be revised to include levels of compliance for each criterion.
2. AQUA could consider including names of evaluation panel members in its final evaluation reports.
3. The Evaluation Committee could check expert reports not only in terms of consistency in the application of the criteria but also the range of evidence provided and the depth of analysis.

### **Panel conclusion: partially compliant**

## **ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS**

Standard:

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

### **Evidence**

AQUA established a complaints procedure as part of its IQAS in 2023. As the panel learned from the SAR and the Director, complaints can relate to any process covered by the Process Map and the IQAS (see ESG 3.6). A complaint can be lodged via email or a form available on the AQUA website. In accordance with the IQAS Manual, the staff register and review a complaint and inform the Director thereof. The agency has two days to inform the complainant whether any action will be taken. The SAR states that complaints filed during a year are analysed in an annual review of the IQAS, and any follow-up action to be taken is included in the annual improvement plan (see ESG 3.6). As AQUA explained in its written pre-visit clarifications, it has received five complaints since 2023. All of them concerned IT problems with the online registration in the expert pool and were resolved.

The heads of QA of universities interviewed had not heard of any channel for filing a formal complaint; they can make an informal complaint (for example, by phone) but have not done that yet. As the Director explained to the panel, the agency registers both formal and informal complaints and keeps track of how all of them are addressed.

The SAR states that in case an individual or an institution disagrees with the final outcome of, or has detected an error in the evaluation process, they may file a reasoned appeal with the agency's Appeals Committee within one month of the receipt of a challenged decision. The Committee and the Director further clarified that appeals may relate to both procedural aspects of the evaluation process and the substance or content of an evaluation when an HEI challenges an evaluation panel's views or judgement.

The appeals procedure and the composition of the Appeals Committee are set out in AQUA's Founding Law and Decree 63/2021 Approving the Regulations of AQUA. The guides for the mandatory evaluation processes, which end with a binding decision, include a statement that an HEI may file an

appeal. The Appeals section on the AQUA website describes the appeals procedure and includes links to the relevant legislative acts.

Members of the Appeals Committee may not serve on an evaluation panel or the Evaluation Committee. The Committee consists of the high-ranking official of the Ministry responsible for higher education as its chair, the international expert and the student representative of Universitat d'Andorra who are members of the Steering Committee (if an appeal is filed by Universitat d'Andorra, the student is replaced with the student representing private universities on the Steering Committee). An external lawyer acts as the secretary of the Appeals Committee to ensure legal integrity of the process. Committee members must abstain from participation in an appeals process that gives rise to a conflict of interest. The appellant may raise objections to the composition of the Committee, which are considered by the other members of the Appeals Committee, supported by up to three members of the Steering Committee who are not sitting on the Appeals Committee. If the proposed amendments to the legislation are approved, the Appeals Committee will include an international expert sitting on the Steering Committee, two external academic experts and an external student.

The SAR explains that if an appeal is formally eligible, the Appeals Committee does not conduct a re-evaluation; it analyses the reasons for filing an appeal and the supporting documentation submitted by the appellant to ascertain whether the agency has ensured integrity and fairness in the evaluation process. The legislation states that, if necessary, the Committee may also seek clarifications, hold a hearing involving the appellant and the Evaluation Committee or consult external experts. Where the Committee identifies a breach in the procedure, it may uphold the appeal and require that the agency conducts a repeat evaluation. Decisions are taken by consensus or, failing that, by a majority vote, with all members (or an alternate if one resigns or recuses himself/herself due to a conflict of interest) to be present. The chair of the Committee issues a reasoned resolution within two months, with the period being suspended if the documents submitted should be corrected or the composition of the Committee should be changed to address the objections from the appellant. A resolution of the Committee ends the administrative proceedings. The appellant may appeal against the decision of the Committee to a court of justice, as the Committee clarified for the panel.

The panel learned from the Appeals Committee and the Director that the Committee considers an appeal in three steps: it consults the legal expert about the integrity of the process; it analyses the documents using its 'common sense'; and since it does not have the academic expertise required, it asks experts for advice. In years past, the appeal documentation was re-examined by the original panel or reviewed by a third expert; currently, the original panel and a third expert (re-)examine the appeal documentation at the same time. As the legislation states only that the Committee may seek expert advice, and the appeals process is new to the agency, appeals cases have been handled differently by different chairs and this may have been confusing for HEIs. To improve the appeals process, AQUA is planning to discuss it with HEIs in the next meta-evaluation meeting, and as indicated in the draft Improvement Plan (see ESG 3.6), introduce a satisfaction survey on the process. If the proposed amendments to the legislation are adopted, the agency will establish the appeals procedure in its internal regulations.

Seven appeals have been filed until the time of the panel's site visit (ex-ante programme accreditation: 5, programme modification: 1, and ex-ante institutional accreditation: 1), as listed in the SAR and an update note from the agency. Most of them challenged the content of the evaluation or experts' views or judgements. Three were favourably considered and four were rejected, including one currently in court; in four cases, re-evaluation was conducted to issue the final decision.

For some heads of QA interviewed, the appeals processes involving their universities were conducted transparently, and the appellants accepted the Appeals Committee's decisions. The representative of one university was dissatisfied as those who filed the appeal did not receive any information during

the process and the appeal documentation was re-examined by the panel involved in the original evaluation; the university appealed against the agency's decision to court.

## **Analysis**

The panel confirms that AQUA has a formal complaints process that covers the full range of its activities, and there is evidence that it takes action to address complaints. Although the Complaints and Suggestions section through which a complaint can be filed is easily accessible on the agency's website, stakeholders do not use it and would rely on informal channels. The agency follows the adopted procedure for both formal and informal complaints, but for the sake of transparency it could encourage stakeholders to take a formal path to raise any issues they may have.

There is a formal appeals process, and the panel confirms that information about the possibility of lodging an appeal and the relevant legislation are published on the AQUA website. It is evident from the number of appeals filed that universities are well aware that they may question the outcome of an evaluation process. In the panel's view, possible grounds for an appeal could be more clearly described in the legislation, but the evidence collected shows that, in practice, universities know that an appeal can be lodged on a procedural basis or challenge the original findings and conclusions.

The composition of the Appeals Committee in the context of the agency's independence is discussed and considered in the panel's judgement under ESG 3.3. The appeals process ensures impartiality as the Evaluation Committee, which takes accreditation decisions, and the Appeals Committee are clearly separated in terms of their composition, there are strict rules for the exclusion of an Appeals Committee member in the case of a conflict of interest, and an appellant may challenge the composition of the Committee. Regardless of this, the panel believes that an appeals body would best be composed of at least one QA expert, academic and student as they would bring the range of expertise and perspectives needed to consider appeals. This may be addressed by the proposed legal changes, although details have yet to be worked out.

Favourable decisions taken in three of the seven appeals cases considered so far and re-evaluations conducted in four cases suggest that the Appeals Committee seeks to ensure fairness in the process. However, while the legislation is not sufficiently explicit about how the process should be conducted, AQUA does not have internal regulations with more precise arrangements. Thus, this seems to depend on the individual who manages the process as the chair of the Committee. Unlike the one that was in place earlier, the current procedure, with the Appeals Committee involving both the original evaluation panel and a third expert to (re-)examine the evaluation documents, is transparent and adds to the impartiality of the entire process but would need to be formalised. Since the procedure has recently changed, and as the panel found in the meetings with the agency and the heads of QA, there are some concerns and confusion over how appeals cases are handled, the procedure should be clearly communicated to universities.

## **Panel recommendations**

1. AQUA should clarify the appeals procedure beyond what is stipulated in the law and publish it.

## **Panel suggestions for further improvement**

1. For the sake of transparency, AQUA could encourage its stakeholders to use its formal complaints procedure rather than relying on informal communication with the agency.
2. The panel suggests that AQUA reflect carefully on what expertise and skills it needs in the Appeals Committee.

## **Panel conclusion: compliant**

## **ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS**

### **CHALLENGES OF EXPANSION OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM**

In the last two decades the national authorities in Andorra have pursued a policy to attract private universities. There are currently five private universities in addition to the public one, and there is growing interest in the establishment of new private institutions in Andorra, in particular, among international operators. In the meetings with all stakeholders, the panel heard that the country would now have to be careful to consider what institutions and courses are suitable for the future direction of higher education in Andorra. AQUA's role is to ensure that basic standards of quality are met by any incoming institution. All stakeholders agree that the agency should be independent in reviewing these new entrants against transparent criteria. It would, however, be the role of the Ministry responsible for higher education to ensure that what they offered fitted within the overall economic and education development strategy for Andorra. Thus, all stakeholders are looking to the Ministry to lay out a clear vision and the Ministry expects to work out a strategy for the development of higher education by the end of 2024.

# CONCLUSION

## SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

### ESG 3.5:

1. Flexible work arrangements appreciated by staff, efficient management of staff time and excellent development opportunities offered by AQUA and taken by staff.

### ESG 3.6:

2. Systematic approach to internal quality assurance and feedback collection mechanisms extending beyond the minimum set expected to be in place in an agency.

## OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, AQUA is in compliance with the ESG. The panel found the agency to be:

- compliant with ESG 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7 and 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.5 and 2.7, and
- partially compliant with ESG 3.3, 2.3 and 2.6.

The panel made the following recommendations:

### ESG 3.1:

1. In pursuing its efforts to expand its stakeholder engagement, AQUA should continue seeking a way to involve students and consider involving social and business partners in its working groups or sub-groups.

### ESG 3.3:

2. To ensure full organisational independence, AQUA should revise the procedure for the appointment of its Director so that the exclusive power to appoint the Director rests with its Steering Committee and a candidate is selected through an open competition based on merit.
3. AQUA should reconsider the composition of its Appeals Committee to ensure that the Appeals Committee is separated in organisational terms from the Ministry responsible for higher education and the Steering Committee, and the Ministry has no influence on the agency's decisions in appeals processes.
4. AQUA should propose to the Ministry responsible for higher education clear criteria and a formal procedure for the appointment of an international expert who currently sits and – if the proposed legal changes are approved – will continue to sit on both the Steering Committee and the Appeals Committee.

### ESG 3.4:

5. AQUA should formally include specific tasks and resources and a detailed schedule for thematic analysis in its work plans.

### ESG 2.1:

6. AQUA should incorporate into its criteria the few aspects of Part I of the ESG, including stakeholder involvement in programme design, an institutional process for approval of programmes and a fair and transparent process for staff recruitment, which are not or are not explicitly addressed in programme evaluations, and in particular, ex-ante programme evaluation.

**ESG 2.2:**

7. AQUA should redesign its programme follow-up process so that it is mandatory for all accredited programmes and focuses on action taken by universities to make improvements in areas identified in previous evaluations.
8. AQUA should further involve students and employers in the development and continuous improvement of its evaluation methodologies.

**ESG 2.3:**

9. AQUA should include a follow-up for accredited programmes which is consistently conducted not only in terms of the stages of the process but also its scope.
10. AQUA should revise its procedures for ex-ante programme evaluation, programme modification and ex-ante institutional evaluation to include a site visit and make it clear what criteria are being used to not undertake a site visit when that is considered the optimal approach.

**ESG 2.4:**

11. AQUA should improve the training for experts to ensure greater consistency in how the criteria are addressed in evaluation reports.

**ESG 2.5:**

12. AQUA should improve the measures in place to better ensure consistency in the application of the criteria by evaluation panels.

**ESG 2.6:**

13. AQUA should provide more detailed guidelines on reporting for experts and staff acting as panel secretaries and ensure that evaluation reports provide sufficient evidence and analysis to substantiate conclusions and outcomes.
14. AQUA should publish all evaluation reports regardless of their outcome.

**ESG 2.7:**

15. AQUA should clarify the appeals procedure beyond what is stipulated in the law and publish it.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT**

The panel made the following suggestions that can be considered by AQUA for further enhancement of its activities:

**ESG 3.1:**

1. The panel suggests that AQUA find a way to support representatives of a private university sitting on its governing body to convey the views of all private universities that it works with.
2. The panel suggests that AQUA make clear in its documents what activities are conducted as part of 'consultancy on QA' to avoid a misunderstanding that these are consultancy services as defined in the context of the ESG.

**ESG 3.3:**

3. AQUA could propose amendments to the legislation which would allow it greater autonomy in adopting operational arrangements.

**ESG 3.4:**

4. The panel suggests that AQUA focus on qualitative in addition to quantitative analysis to produce thematic studies.

5. The panel encourages AQUA to involve stakeholders in its discussions to define topics for thematic analysis to ensure that they are well suited to their needs.

**ESG 2.2:**

6. The panel suggests that AQUA involve students and employers in the development and continuous improvement of its evaluation methodologies.

**ESG 2.4:**

7. AQUA could include a formal procedure for performance appraisal of external experts in its internal quality assurance system and formally provide feedback to experts on their performance in evaluation panels.
8. To increase the diversity of the expert pool, the panel encourages AQUA to continue widening its search for international experts beyond the regional context.

**ESG 2.6:**

9. The template for final expert reports and final evaluation reports could be revised to include levels of compliance for each criterion.
10. AQUA could consider including names of evaluation panel members in its final evaluation reports.
11. The Evaluation Committee could check expert reports not only in terms of consistency in the application of the criteria but also the range of evidence provided and the depth of analysis.

**ESG 2.7:**

12. For the sake of transparency, AQUA could encourage its stakeholders to use its formal complaints procedure rather than relying on informal communication with the agency.
13. The panel suggests that AQUA reflect carefully on what expertise and skills it needs in the Appeals Committee.



# ANNEXES

## ANNEX I: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
<b>9.09.2024 – 1st part of the panel's kick-off meeting (panel and the review coordinator only)</b>				
I(a)	15.30-16.30	Review panel's kick-off meeting and preparations for site visit		ENQA panel members and coordinator
<b>17.09.2024 - Online clarification meeting with the agency's resource person and 2nd part of the panel's kick-off meeting</b>				
I(b)	16.30-17.30	An online clarifications meeting with the agency's resource person regarding the specific national/legal context in which an agency operates, specific quality assurance system to which it belongs and key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities	AQUA Director	Panel chair
2	17.30-18.00	Review panel's kick-off meeting and preparations for site visit		Panel chair
<b>6.10.2024 – Day 0 (pre-visit)</b>				
3	16.30-17.30	Review panel's pre-visit meeting and preparations for day I		
<b>7.10.2024 – Day I</b>				
	8.30-9.00	Review panel's private meeting		
4	9.00-10.00	Meeting with the AQUA Director and the President of the AQUA Steering Committee	Director President of the Steering Committee	Panel chair
	10.00-10.15	Review panel's private discussion		

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
5	10.15.-11.15	Meeting with the team responsible for preparation of the self-assessment report and internal QA processes	QA Technician / Internal QA Coordinator QA Technician / External QA Coordinator QA Technician	Panel chair
	11.15-11.30	Review panel's private discussion		
6	11.30-12.45	Meeting with representatives from the AQUA Steering Committee	President of the Steering Committee Ministry of Institutional Relations, Education and Universities, Director International expert, Universitat de Girona, Spain (attending online)	Panel chair
	12.45-13.45	Lunch (panel only)		
7	13.45-14.30	Meeting with key staff of the agency/technical staff in charge of external QA activities	QA Technician / External QA Coordinator QA Technician / Internal QA Coordinator QA Technician	Panel chair
	14.30-14.45	Review panel's private discussion		
8	14.45-15.45	Meeting with the Evaluation Committee and the Appeals Committee	AQUA Director / Chair of the Evaluation Committee Member of the AQUA Steering Committee / Chair of the Appeals Committee Vice-Chair of the Evaluation Committee Member of the Evaluation Committee Former member of the Evaluation	Panel chair

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
			Committee and future Chair of the Appeals Committee (attending online)	
9	15.45-16.45	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day 2		
		Dinner (panel only)		
<b>8.10.2024 – Day 2</b>				
	8.30-9.00	Review panel's private meeting		
10	9.00-9.45	Meeting with representatives of the Parliament and the Ministry of Institutional Relations, Education and Universities	Member of Parliament, Vice-President of Legislative Commission Member of Parliament Member of Parliament Minister of Institutional Relations, Education and Universities Secretary of State, Ministry of Institutional Relations, Education and Universities Technician, Ministry of Institutional Relations, Education and Universities	Panel chair
	9.45-10.00	Review panel's private discussion		
11	10.00-11.00	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs/ HEI representatives	Rectors of all six universities: Universitat d'Andorra (UdA) Universitat Europea (eUniv) Universitat Carlemany (UCMA) Universitat Digital (UNIPRO) Western Europe University (WEU) Tech Global University (TECH)	Panel chair
	11.00-11.15	Review panel's private discussion		

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
12	11.15-12.00	Meeting with quality assurance officers of HEIs	Heads / representatives of Heads of QA Service of all six universities: Universitat d'Andorra (UdA) Universitat Europea (eUniv) Universitat Carlemany (UCMA) Universitat Digital (UNIPRO) Western Europe University (WEU) Tech Global University (TECH)	Panel chair
	12.00-13.00	Lunch (panel only)		
13	13.00-14.00	Meeting with representatives of external experts (members of evaluation panels)	Two academic experts Four professional experts	Panel chair
	14.00-14.15	Review panel's private discussion		
14	14.15-15.00	Meeting with stakeholders: student experts (members of evaluation panels) and, if relevant, representatives of student organisations	Three student experts, Spanish universities Student representative, Universitat d'Andorra (UdA)	Panel chair
	15.00-15.15	Review panel's private discussion		
15	15.15-16.00	Meeting with stakeholders: employers / social and business partners	Two representatives of the National Research Centre: AR+i Member of the AQUA Steering Committee, representative of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry, and Services of Andorra	Panel chair
16	16.00-17.00	Wrap-up meeting among panel members: preparation for day 3 and provisional conclusions		
<b>9.10.2024 – Day 3</b>				

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
17	8.00-9.00	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify		
18	9.00-10.00	Meeting with the Director and key staff to clarify any pending issues	Director QA Technician / Internal QA Coordinator QA Technician / External QA Coordinator QA Technician	Panel chair
19	10.00-11.30	Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings		
	11.30-12.30	Lunch (panel only)		
20	12.30-13.00	Final de-briefing meeting with the Director, staff and Steering Committee members of the agency to inform about preliminary findings	President of the Steering Committee Director QA Technician / Internal QA Coordinator QA Technician / External QA Coordinator QA Technician	Panel chair

## ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

### External review of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA) by ENQA

#### Annex I:

#### TRIPARTITE TERMS OF REFERENCE BETWEEN AQUA, ENQA AND EQAR

April 2024

#### I. Background and context

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA) was established in 2006 through a government decree. In 2016, the agency attained recognition as an independent and autonomous official body by the National Law 9/2016, dated June 28<sup>th</sup>, as approved by the Andorran Parliament. Operating as a public law institution, AQUA is dedicated to enhancing the quality of higher education in Andorra by consistently adhering to the standards set by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). AQUA fulfills its mission through the evaluation, accreditation, and certification of learning, teaching, and research, aiming to foster improvement while adhering to international principles.

AQUA's activities include:

- Activities on the scope of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG):
  - Evaluating, accrediting, and certifying the quality of education at the program level leading to official national qualifications.
    - Ex-ante and ex-post programs accreditation, and program modification: AQUA ensures that all programs leading to a national official qualification are evaluated and accredited, monitoring their ability to implement or continue implementing the program to cover its learning outcomes.
    - Program follow-up: While not mandatory under Andorran legal framework, AQUA provides HEIs with the opportunity to undergo a program follow-up evaluation, with the goal of enhancing the programs
  - Evaluating, accrediting, and certifying the quality of education at the institutional level.
    - Ex-ante institutional accreditation: All higher education institutions (HEI) seeking establishment in Andorra must undergo an evaluation by AQUA ensuring that their policies and processes are adequate to offer quality studies.
- Activities outside the scope of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG):
  - Certifying the professional experience of teaching staff
    - This consists on a professional experience evaluation of professionals who wish to teach specific practical parts of subjects/modules but do not fulfil the prerequisites stipulated in the national Higher Education Law. This certification is solicited by HEI.
  - Other activities carried out by the agency:
    - Conducting studies and projects to create and transfer knowledge on quality assurance in higher education.
    - Providing consultancy on higher education and research, upon request from the Government of Andorra, HEI, and other relevant institutions.
    - Promoting a culture of quality in higher education, including organizing seminars, participating in QA events, and collaborating with other institutions.

AQUA has been an affiliate of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since 2012 and is applying for ENQA membership.

AQUA is applying for inclusion on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

## **2. Purpose and scope of the review**

This review will evaluate the extent to which AQUA (the agency) complies with each of the standards of Parts 2 and 3 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) and support the agency in its efforts to continually review and enhance its work. Such an external review is a requirement for agencies wishing to apply for ENQA membership and/or for EQAR registration.

### **2.1 Activities of the agency within the scope of the ESG**

To apply for ENQA membership and EQAR registration, this review will analyse all of the agency's activities that fall within the scope of the ESG, e.g., reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditations of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). All activities are reviewed irrespective of geographic scope (within or outside the EHEA) or whether they are obligatory or voluntary in nature.

The following activities of the agency must be addressed in the external review:

- Ex-ante program accreditation.
- Ex-post program accreditation.
- Program follow-up (monitoring).
- Program modification.
- Ex-ante institutional accreditation.

### **2.2 Activities outside the scope of the ESG**

The following activities of the agency are outside of the scope of the ESG and are not relevant for the application for inclusion on EQAR:

- Teaching Staff Certification
- Conducting studies and projects
- Consultancy on QA
- Promoting a culture of quality in higher education

While these activities are not relevant to the application for renewal on EQAR, the clear distinction between AQUA activities within and outside the scope of the ESG is one focus area of this review, especially for 'Consultancy on QA' activity (under ESG 3.1).

Should any substantive changes occur in AQUA between now and the review (e.g., organisational changes, the introduction or changes of activities within or outside of the scope of the ESG), the agency should inform EQAR at its earliest convenience.

## **3. The review process**

The review will be conducted following the methodology of ENQA Agency Reviews. The process is designed in line with the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and the requirements of the *EQAR Procedures for Applications*.

The review procedure consists of the following steps:

- Formulation of, and agreement on the Terms of Reference for the review between AQUA, ENQA and EQAR (including publishing of the Terms of Reference on ENQA's website<sup>2</sup>);
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by ENQA;
- Notification of EQAR about the appointed panel;
- Self-assessment by the agency, including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit of the agency by the review panel;
- Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee;
- Publication of the final review report;
- A decision from the EQAR Register Committee on the agency's registration on EQAR;
- A decision from the ENQA Board on ENQA membership;
- Follow-up on the panel's recommendations to the agency, including a voluntary progress visit.

### **3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review panel**

The review panel consists of four members: one or two quality assurance experts (at least one of which is currently employed by an ENQA member agency), an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member, and potentially a labour market representative (if requested). One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. For ENQA Agency Reviews at least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. An additional panel member may be included in the panel at the request of the agency. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator (an ENQA staff member) who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The Review Coordinator will not be the secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide the agency with the proposed panel composition and the *curricula vitarum* of the panel members to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The reviewers will have to agree to a non-conflict of interest statement that is incorporated in their contract for the review of this agency.

### **3.2 Self-assessment by the agency, including the preparation of a self-assessment report**

The agency is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and must adhere to the following guidance:

- Self-assessment is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-assessment report is expected to contain:
  - a brief description of the HE and QA system;
  - the history, profile, and activities of the agency;

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<sup>2</sup> The agency is encouraged to publish the ToR on its website as well.



- a presentation of how the agency addresses each individual standard of Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG for each of the agency's external QA activities, with a brief, critical reflection on the presented facts;
- opinions of stakeholders;
- the instances of partial compliance noted in the most recent EQAR Register Committee decision of inclusion/renewal and any other aspects that may have been raised by the EQAR Register Committee in subsequent change report decisions (if relevant);
- reference to the recommendations provided in the previous review and actions taken to meet those recommendations;
- a SWOT analysis;
- reflections on the agency's key challenges and areas for future development.
- All the agency's external QA activities (as defined under section 2.1) are described and their compliance with the ESG is analysed in the SAR.
- The report is well-structured, concise, and comprehensive. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which the agency performs its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ESG.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat, which has two weeks to carry out a screening. The purpose of a screening is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews*, is present. If the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to ask for a revised version within two weeks.

The final version of the agency's self-assessment report is then submitted to the review panel a minimum of eight weeks prior to the site visit. The agency publishes the completed SAR on its website and sends the link to ENQA. ENQA will publish this link on its website as well.

### **3.3 A site visit by the review panel**

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule which must be submitted to the agency at least six weeks before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule is to include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is usually 2,5 days. The approved schedule must be given to the agency at least one month before the site visit to properly organise the requested interviews.

In advance of the site visit (ideally at least two weeks before the site visit), the panel will organise an obligatory online meeting with the agency. This meeting is held to ensure that the panel reaches a sufficient understanding of:

- The specific national/legal context in which the agency operates;
- The specific quality assurance system to which the agency belongs;
- The key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities.

The review panel will be assisted by the ENQA Review Coordinator during the site visit. The review coordinator will act as the panel's chief liaison with the agency, monitor the integrity of the review process and its consistency, and ensure that ENQA's overall expectations of the review are considered and met.

The site visit will close with a final debriefing meeting in which the panel outlines its general impressions and provides an overview of the judgement on the agency's ESG compliance. The panel will not comment on whether or not the agency would be granted/reconfirmed membership with ENQA or registration on EQAR.

### 3.4 Preparation and completion of the final review report

Based on the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will follow the purpose and scope of the review as defined under sections 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for the panel's findings concerning each standard of Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should also bear in mind EQAR's *Policy on Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies*<sup>3</sup> to ensure that the report contains sufficient information for the Register Committee to consider the agency's application for registration on EQAR.

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language, and it will then be submitted to the agency – usually within 10 weeks of the site visit – for comment on factual accuracy and grave misunderstandings only. The agency will be given two weeks to do this and should not submit any additional material or documentation at this stage. Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the agency's feedback on possible factual errors and finalise and submit the review report to ENQA.

The report should be finalised within three months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 40-50 pages in length.

### 3.5. Publication of the report and a follow-up process

The agency will receive the review panel's report and publish it on its website once the Agency Review Committee has validated the report. The report will also be published on the ENQA website together with the statement of the Agency Review Committee validating external review reports by assessing the integrity of the review process and checking the quality and consistency of the reports. Importantly, during this process, and prior to final validation of the report, the Agency Review Committee has the option to request additional (documentary) evidence or clarification from the review panel, review coordinator or the agency if needed. The review report will be published on ENQA website regardless of the review outcome.

As part of the review's follow-up activities, the agency commits to react on the review recommendations and submit a follow-up report to ENQA within two years of the validation of the final external review report. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website.

The follow-up report may be complemented by an optional progress visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). The visit, which normally takes place 2-3 years after the verification of the final external review report (and after submission of the follow-up report), aims to offer an enhancement-oriented and strategically driven dialogue that ordinarily might be difficult to truly integrate in the compliance-focused site visit. The progress visit thus does not have the objective of checking the agency's ESG compliance or how the agency has followed up on the recommendations, but rather provides an arena for strategic conversations that allow the agency to reflect on its key challenges, opportunities, and priorities. Should the agency not wish to take advantage of this opportunity, it may opt out by informing the ENQA Review Coordinator about this.

## 4. Use of the report

ENQA will retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the review panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, will be vested in ENQA.

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://www.eqar.eu/about/official-documents/#use-and-interpretation-of-the-esg>

The report is used as a basis for the Register Committee's decision on the agency's registration on EQAR. In the case of an unsuccessful application to EQAR, the report may also be used by the ENQA Board to reach a conclusion on whether the agency can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA. The review process is thus designed to serve two purposes. In any case, the review report should only be considered final after validation by the Agency Review Committee. After submission to ENQA but before validation by the ARC, the report may not be used or relied upon by the agency, the panel, or any third party and may not be disclosed without ENQA's prior written consent. The approval of the report is independent of the decision on EQAR registration or ENQA membership.

For the purposes of EQAR registration, the agency will submit the review report (once validated by the Agency Review Committee) to EQAR via email. The agency should also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), a Declaration of Honour, and any other documents that may be relevant for the application (i.e., annexes, statement to the review report, updates). EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting as stipulated in the indicative review schedule below and before the decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which the agency expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be considered by the Board together with the confirmation of EQAR listing when deciding on the agency's membership. Should the agency not be granted the registration in EQAR or the registration is not renewed, the decision on ENQA membership will be taken based on the final review report, the application letter, and the statement from the Agency Review Committee. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

## 5. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	March 2024
Appointment of review panel members	April 2024
Self-assessment completed	21 June 2024
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	June 2024
Preparation of the site visit schedule and indicative timetable	July 2024
Briefing of review panel members	September 2024
Review panel site visit	October 2024
Draft of review report and its submission to ENQA Review Coordinator for verification of its compliance with the Guidelines	November 2024
Draft of review report to be sent for a factual check to the agency	December 2024
Agency statement on the draft report to the review panel (if necessary)	December 2024
Submission of the final report to ENQA	January 2025
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	February 2025
Publication of report	March 2025
EQAR Register Committee meeting and initial consideration	June 2025
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	June/September 2025

## ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

ACPUA	Aragon Agency for Quality Assurance and Strategic Foresight in Higher Education
AQU Catalunya	Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency
AQUA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra
CoARA	Coalition for the Advancement of Research Assessment
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	external quality assurance
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ESG	<i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015</i>
ESU	European Students' Union
EUA	European University Association
GAIN	Global Academic Integrity Network
HEI	higher education institution
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IQA	internal quality assurance
IQAS	internal quality assurance system
QA	quality assurance
SAR	self-assessment report
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIACES	<i>Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior</i>

## ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

### DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY AQUA

Self-assessment report

Written pre-visit clarifications

Documents to which links were provided in the SAR and documents published on the AQUA website:

#### *Legislation:*

Law 14/2018 on Higher Education of 21 June 2018

Decree of 8 July 2020 approving the regulation on state higher education degrees

Decree 183/2022 of 4 May 2022 regulating the establishment of new private universities and other higher education institutions, as amended by Decree 209/2022 of 18 May 2022 and Decree 15/2023 of 11 January 2023;

Law 9/2016 of 28 June 2016 creating the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA) (AQUA's Founding Law), as amended by Law 14/2020 of 12 November 2020

Decree 63/2021 of 24 February 2021 approving the regulations of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA), as amended by Decree 68/2022 of 23 February 2022

Law 23/2021 of 14 October 2021 on the fees for the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA), as amended by Law 1/2023 of 19 January 2023

#### *AQUA's documents:*

2023-2025 Strategic Plan

2022 and 2023 Annual Activity Reports

Code of Ethics

Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS) Manual

Draft of the 2024 Internal Quality Report and Improvement Plan

Regulation on expert panels for AQUA's evaluations

Guides for all evaluation processes, incl. ex-ante programme evaluation, programme modification, ex-post programme evaluation, programme follow-up and ex-ante institutional evaluation

A sample of evaluation reports

Reports / studies listed in the SAR as examples of thematic analysis: *Labour insertion studies*; *University pathway* (2020-2022 edition); *Guidelines to embed sustainability in the HE quality assurance framework in Andorra*; *Guidelines for the definition of competencies in the Andorran higher education system*; *Joint statement on the adaptations of higher education to the situation caused by COVID-19*; *Language approach for the development of transversal competence I in state Bachelor's and Master's degrees*.

## ANNEX 5. PART I ESG MAPPING TABLES PROVIDED BY AQUA

### EVALUATION GUIDE FOR EX-ANTE PROGRAMME ACCREDITATIONS (DECEMBER 2023)

DIMENSIONS, KEY ASPECTS AND CRITERIA		ESG – Part I									
		I.1	I.2	I.3	I.4	I.5	I.6	I.7	I.8	I.9	I.10
<b>DIMENSION I. INTERNAL QUALITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT</b>		✓						✓		✓	✓
<b>Key aspect I.1. Internal quality and continuous improvement</b>		✓						✓		✓	✓
	Criterion I.1.a. The HEI presents a policy and quality objectives aimed at establishing a quality culture.	✓									
	Criterion I.1.b. The HEI outlines appropriate processes for the periodic monitoring and ex-post accreditation of the study programme with the aim of ensuring its continuous improvement.							✓		✓	✓
<b>DIMENSION II. THE STUDY PROGRAMME</b>			✓	✓	✓		✓				
<b>Key aspect II.1. Description</b>			✓	✓							
	Criterion II.1.a. The teaching modality is specified clearly, correctly and completely.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.1.b. The linguistic approach is appropriate and coherent.		✓								
	Criterion II.1.c. The specializations and/or the training pathways are suitable and coherent.		✓								
	Criterion II.1.d. The study programme is coherent with the strategic objectives, the curriculum options and, if applicable, the research lines of the HEI.		✓								
<b>Key aspect II.2. Career opportunities and professional outcomes</b>			✓								
	Criterion II.2.a. The career opportunities and professional outcomes are clearly defined and coherent with the characteristics of the study programme.		✓								

<b>Key aspect II.3. Competency profile</b>			✓								
	Criterion II.3.a. The competencies proposed by the HEI in addition to those outlined in the decree that created the official degree are clearly and precisely drafted and coherent with the characteristics of the study programme.		✓								
<b>Key aspect II.4. Design, planning and organization of the study programme</b>			✓	✓	✓		✓				
	Criterion II.4.a. The study programme outlines the use of teaching and assessment methods that promote student-centred learning.			✓							
	Criterion II.4.b. The timing is coherent and balanced, and the workload is consistent with the definition of the European credit system.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.4.c. The alignment of competencies with teaching units and their learning outcomes is coherent.		✓								
	Criterion II.4.d. The description, teaching methods and assessment activities of the teaching units are appropriate and coherent with the characteristics of the study programme.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.4.e. The external internships are coherent with the characteristics of the study programme, provide educational value and are effectively managed.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.4.f. The final project is coherent with the characteristics of the study programme, provides educational value and is effectively managed.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.4.g. Mobility provides educational value and is effectively managed.		✓	✓	✓		✓				
	Criterion II.4.h. The regulations for credit validation and recognition are appropriate to the characteristics of the study programme.				✓						
	Criterion II.4.i. The study programme outlines effective mechanisms for teaching coordination.		✓								

DIMENSION III. ACADEMIC STAFF						✓					
Key aspect III.1. Profile of the teaching staff						✓					
	Criterion III.1.a. The expected education profile, professional experience and/or research experience of the teaching staff guarantees that they are competent to carry out the teaching and management activities of the study programme.					✓					
Key aspect III.2. Sufficiency of the teaching staff						✓					
	Criterion III.2.a. The teaching staff and their allocated time commitment are sufficient to carry out the planned activities.					✓					
DIMENSION IV. RESOURCES AND SUPPORT PROCESSES					✓		✓				
Key aspect IV.1. Access and admission of students					✓						
	Criterion IV.1.a. The access requirements and the admission process and tests are coherent with the scope and characteristics of the study programme.				✓						
	Criterion IV.1.b. The additional coursework is well-managed and coherent with the scope and characteristics of the study programme.				✓						
Key aspect IV.2. Infrastructure, resources and learning support services.							✓				
	Criterion IV.2.a. The physical infrastructure and resources are adequate and coherent with the characteristics of the study programme.						✓				
	Criterion IV.2.b. Digital infrastructure and resources are adequate and coherent with the characteristics of the study programme.						✓				
	Criterion IV.2.c. The mechanisms of tutorial support and other learning support services are adequate and well-managed.						✓				
	Criterion IV.2.d. The mechanisms to promote employment integration are adequate and well-managed.						✓				



## EVALUATION GUIDE FOR EX-POST PROGRAMME ACCREDITATIONS (JUNE 2022)

DIMENSIONS, KEY ASPECTS AND CRITERIA		ESG – Part I									
		I.1	I.2	I.3	I.4	I.5	I.6	I.7	I.8	I.9	I.10
<b>DIMENSION I. QUALITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT</b>		✓						✓		✓	✓
<b>Key aspect I.1. Monitoring and continuous improvement</b>		✓						✓		✓	✓
	Criterion I.1.a. The structure in charge of internal quality is public, involves the participation of all stakeholders and has fit-for-purpose processes to enable periodic monitoring of the study programme which leads to improvement actions.	✓								✓	✓
	Criterion I.1.b. Improvements are proposed for the study programme that add value and are consistent with the analysis of strong and weak points.	✓									
	Criterion I.1.c. The main academic indicators of the study programme are fit for purpose.							✓			
<b>DIMENSION II. ACTIVITIES – STUDY PROGRAMMES</b>			✓	✓	✓		✓				
<b>Key aspect II.1. Study programme description and definition</b>			✓	✓							
	Criterion II.1.a. The teaching mode is specified and the approach is suitable and consistent with the type of education presented.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.1.b. The linguistic approach is consistent with the characteristics of the study programme.		✓								
<b>Key aspect II.2. Study programme relevance and interest</b>			✓								
	Criterion II.2.a. The study programme is still relevant and up-to-date within its academic and/or professional field.		✓								
<b>Key aspect II.3. Professional opportunities and purposes of the qualification</b>				✓			✓				
	Criterion II.3.a. The mechanisms for fostering graduate employability are fit for purpose.			✓			✓				

<b>Key aspect II.4. Study programme design, planning and organisation</b>			✓	✓	✓		✓				
	Criterion II.4.a. All the teaching units and their design and assessment enable achievement of the competences and learning outcomes.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.4.b. The placements are consistent with the study programme characteristics, add educational value and are organised and managed so that all students can complete them properly.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.4.c. Mobility, if envisaged, is properly organised and managed.		✓	✓	✓		✓				
	Criterion II.4.d. Student-centred learning is fostered.			✓							
	Criterion II.4.e. In the case of a doctorate, the following procedures are considered appropriate: assignment of a thesis supervisor and/or tutor and tutoring, the monitoring process of each doctoral student and the quality of the doctoral theses presented.		✓	✓							
<b>DIMENSION III. ACADEMIC STAFF</b>						✓					
<b>Key aspect III.1. Training, professional and research experience and sufficiency of the teaching staff</b>						✓					
	Criterion III.1.a. The training, professional and/or research experience and language skills of the teaching staff guarantee that they are competent to carry out their teaching activities.					✓					
	Criterion III.1.b. The teaching staff knows the educational model of the teaching, does continuous training, does research and is also competent in the various teaching methodologies.					✓					
	Criterion III.1.c. The commitment model and sufficiency of the teaching staff are appropriate to the number of student places to guarantee teaching, attend the students and coordinate and manage the study programme.					✓					

DIMENSION IV. RESOURCES AND SUPPORT PROCESSES					✓		✓				
Key aspect IV.1. Student access and admission					✓						
	Criterion IV.1.a. The entry profile, access routes and requirements, number of places, complementary studies and admission tests, where applicable, are consistent with the theme and characteristics of the study programme.				✓						
	Criterion IV.1.b. The study programme validations and recognitions are fit for purpose.				✓						
Key aspect IV.2. Learning support resources							✓				
	Criterion IV.2.a. The material resources and services allocated to the study programme are appropriate to the teaching mode, the number of registered students and the competences to be acquired.						✓				
DIMENSION V. PUBLIC INFORMATION									✓		
Key aspect V. I. Public information									✓		
	Criterion V.I.a. The HEI suitably informs all stakeholder groups about the characteristics of the study plan.								✓		

# EVALUATION GUIDE FOR THE MONITORING OF STUDY PROGRAMMES (DECEMBER 2023)

DIMENSIONS, KEY ASPECTS AND CRITERIA		ESG – Part I									
		1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.7	1.8	1.9	1.10
<b>DIMENSION I. INTERNAL QUALITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT</b>		✓						✓		✓	✓
<b>Key aspect I.1. Monitoring and continuous improvement</b>		✓						✓		✓	✓
	Criterion I.1.a. The HEI conducts periodic monitoring of the study programme in a consistent manner, which results in improvement actions.	✓						✓		✓	✓
<b>DIMENSION II. THE STUDY PROGRAMME</b>			✓	✓	✓		✓				
<b>Key aspect II.1. Description and definition of the study programme</b>			✓	✓							
	Criterion II.1.a. The method is suitable and coherent with the scope of the study programme.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.1.b. The linguistic approach is coherent with the characteristics of the study programme.		✓								
<b>Key aspect II.2. Career opportunities and professional outcomes of the study programme</b>							✓				
	Criterion II.2.a. The HEI has adequate resources to promote the employment of the students.						✓				
<b>Key aspect II.3. Design, planning and organization of the study programme</b>			✓	✓	✓		✓				
	Criterion II.3.a. The teaching units promote the achievement of competencies and learning outcomes.		✓								
	Criterion II.3.b. The timing is balanced throughout the academic year and the workload is consistent with the definition of the European credit system.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.3.c. The mechanisms of teaching coordination are effective.		✓								

	Criterion II.3.d. Internships are consistent with the characteristics of the study programme, contribute educational value and are organized and managed to ensure that all students, regardless of the teaching method, can carry them out correctly.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.3.e. The final project is consistent with the approach of the study programme and is organized and managed correctly.		✓	✓							
	Criterion II.3.f. Mobility is organized and managed properly.		✓	✓	✓		✓				
	Criterion II.3.g. The HEI promotes the use of teaching methods that favour student-centred learning.			✓							
<b>DIMENSION III. ACADEMIC STAFF</b>						✓					
<b>Key aspect III.1. Teaching staff</b>						✓					
	Criterion III.1.a. The training, professional experience and/or research experience and the language proficiency of the teaching staff ensure that they are competent to carry out their teaching activities.					✓					
	Criterion III.1.b. The teaching staff is sufficient according to the number of student places to guarantee the teaching process and to coordinate and manage the study programme.					✓					
<b>DIMENSION IV. RESOURCES AND SUPPORT PROCESSES</b>					✓		✓				
<b>Key aspect IV.1. Access and admission of students</b>					✓						
	Criterion IV.1.a. Access requirements, additional coursework and admission tests are consistent with the characteristics of the study programme.				✓						
<b>Key aspect IV.2. Learning support resources</b>							✓				
	Criterion IV.2.a. The resources, infrastructure and student support services are adequate.						✓				
<b>DIMENSION V. PUBLIC INFORMATION.</b>									✓		
<b>Key aspect V.1. Public information.</b>									✓		
	Criterion V.1.a. The HEI effectively informs about the characteristics of the study programme to all stakeholder groups.								✓		

# EVALUATION GUIDE FOR NEW PRIVATE HEIs (OCTOBER 2023)

DIMENSIONS, KEY ASPECTS AND CRITERIA		ESG – Part I									
		I.1	I.2	I.3	I.4	I.5	I.6	I.7	I.8	I.9	I.10
<b>DIMENSION I. GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT</b>		✓			✓	✓		✓			
<b>Key aspect I.1. Vision, mission and objectives</b>											
	Criterion I.1.a. The vision, mission and objectives of the HEI are well defined, consistent and appropriate.										
<b>Key aspect I.2. Structure, management and policies</b>		✓			✓						
	Criterion I.2.a. The HEI presents regulations and mandates that define its organizational structure and governing bodies, which will enable the achievement of its vision, mission and objectives.	✓									
	Criterion I.2.b. The HEI presents a cross-cutting policy for effective gender equality and prevention of discrimination.										
	Criterion I.2.c. The HEI presents a policy aimed at ensuring that students with special educational needs can take degrees and participate in the academic life of the institution on an equal opportunities basis.				✓						
<b>Key aspect I.3. Strategic development, planning and implementation</b>								✓			
	Criterion I.3.a. The HEI presents an effective action plan to achieve its strategic objectives.							✓			
<b>Key aspect I.4. Human resources</b>						✓					
	Criterion I.4.a. The HEI presents an effective human resources policy for the recruitment and management of teaching and research staff, as well as administrative and technical staff.					✓					
<b>DIMENSION II. INTERNAL QUALITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT</b>		✓						✓		✓	✓
<b>Key aspect II.1. Internal quality assurance system (IQAS)</b>		✓						✓		✓	✓
	Criterion II.1.a. The HEI presents a policy and quality objectives aimed at establishing a quality culture.	✓									

	Criterion II.1.b. The HEI outlines an internal quality assurance system with processes that cover all its activities and foresees the participation of stakeholders.	✓						✓		✓	✓
<b>Key aspect II.2. Continuous quality improvement</b>											
	Criterion II.2.a. The HEI outlines processes for monitoring, reviewing and continuously improving the internal quality assurance system.	✓						✓			
<b>DIMENSION III. STUDY PROGRAMMES</b>			✓	✓							
<b>Key aspect III.1. Modification of study programmes</b>			✓								
	Criterion III.1.a. The HEI includes the minimum curriculum options established in the Regulation of Authorization of Universities and other Private Higher Education Institutions of the Andorran Higher Education System.										
	Criterion III.1.b. The HEI outlines an appropriate process for the implementation of study programmes.		✓								
<b>Key aspect III.2. Termination of study programmes</b>			✓								
	Criterion III.2.a. The HEI outlines an appropriate process for the termination of study programmes.		✓								
<b>Key aspect III.3. Teaching coordination mechanisms</b>			✓								
	Criterion III.3.a. The HEI outlines appropriate teaching coordination mechanisms.		✓								
<b>Key aspect III.4. Teaching, learning and student evaluation processes</b>			✓	✓							
	Criterion III.4.a. The HEI presents a cross-cutting policy suitable for the assignment, monitoring and evaluation of internships and the supervision of the suitability and quality of the centres where they are carried out.		✓	✓							
	Criterion III.4.b. The HEI plans to implement teaching and assessment methods that promote student-centred learning.		✓	✓							
<b>DIMENSION IV. TEACHING AND RESEARCH STAFF</b>						✓					
<b>Key aspect IV.1. Suitability and sufficiency of teaching and</b>						✓					

<b>research staff</b>											
	Criterion IV.I.a. The teaching and research staff planned is sufficient and has the academic and professional merits that make them suitable for the development of the teaching and research activities.					✓					
	Criterion IV.I.b. The teaching and research staff planned have adequate working hours for the development of teaching and research activities.					✓					
<b>DIMENSION V. RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER</b>						✓		✓			
<b>Key aspect V.I. Research policy</b>						✓		✓			
	Criterion V.I.a. The HEI presents objectives, lines, groups and research projects to produce impactful and significant research in the Andorran and international context and outlines its funding sources.										
	Criterion V.I.b. The HEI outlines adequate management of its research activity.					✓		✓			
	Criterion V.I.c. The HEI outlines mechanisms to ensure ethics and integrity in its research activities.										
<b>DIMENSION VI. LEARNING RESOURCES AND STUDENT SUPPORT</b>					✓		✓				
<b>Key aspect VI.I. Admission, progression and recognition of students</b>					✓						
	Criterion VI.I.a. The HEI presents an adequate structure and process to manage student admission and enrolment.				✓						
<b>Key aspect VII.I. Admission, progression and recognition of students</b>					✓		✓				
	Criterion VI.I.b. The HEI presents adequate regulations for student retention and progression.				✓						
	Criterion VI.I.c. The HEI presents a tutorial action plan or other adequate student support mechanisms.						✓				
	Criterion VI.I.d. The HEI presents regulations for credit recognition and transfer in accordance with current legislation.				✓						



<b>Key aspect VI.2. Infrastructure, services and learning support resources.</b>							✓				
	Criterion VI.2.a. The HEI presents a set of material resources and physical infrastructure that are adequate for the development of its educational and research activities.						✓				
	Criterion VI.2.b. The HEI presents a set of adequate technological infrastructure for the development of its educational and research activities.						✓				
	Criterion VI.2.c. The HEI presents a set of adequate services and learning support resources for the development of its curriculum options.						✓				
<b>DIMENSION VII. PUBLIC INFORMATION.</b>									✓		
<b>Key aspect VII.1. Public information system</b>									✓		
	Criterion VII.1.a. The HEI presents a public information strategy on its activity to ensure it is clear, rigorous, objective, complete, updated and relevant to the public and all stakeholders.								✓		

## ENQA AGENCY REVIEW 2025

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Agency  
Review of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher  
Education in Andorra (AQUA), undertaken in 2024.