AQUA

AGÈNCIA DE QUALITAT
DE L'ENSENYAMENT SUPERIOR
D'ANDORRA

SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

FOR THE EXTERNAL REVIEW OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN ANDORRA

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ACRONYMS

Acronyms used frequently within the self-assessment report are:

ACPUA: Aragon Agency for Quality Assurance and Strategic Foresight in Higher Education (*Agencia de Calidad y Prospectiva Universitaria de Aragón*)

ANECA: National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (*Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación*)

AQUA: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (*Agència de Qualiltat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra*)

AQU Catalunya: Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (*Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya*)

EHEA: European Higher Education Area

ENQA: European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education, formerly European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

EQA: External Quality Assurance

EQAR: European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education

ESG: Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

HCÈRES: High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (*Haut Conseil de l'Évaluation de la Recherche et de l'Enseignement Supérieur*)

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institution

INQAAHE: International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

QA: Quality Assurance

REACU: Spanish Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (*Red Española de Agencias de Calidad Universitaria*)

SAR: Self-assessment report

SIACES: Ibero-American System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (*Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior*)

1 INTRODUCTION

The external review of AQUA aims to demonstrate its compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). This demonstration follows the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews[1] and the interpretation of the ESG by EQAR[2], to foster trust in quality assurance and the quality of higher education on an international scale. Additionally, this process aims to provide support and further legitimise the agency at the national level, seeking both ENQA's membership and EQAR's registration.

The preparation of the self-assessment report (SAR) has offered an opportunity to reflect on AQUA's alignment with the ESG and gather essential documentation to substantiate this alignment. Furthermore, the SAR provides a platform to initiate discussions regarding the agency's current challenges. The SAR's purpose is to offer clear and comprehensive information, inclusive reflections, critique, and analysis. Its contents are supported by documentary evidence demonstrating how AQUA adheres to the ESG.

The SAR's content encompasses a description and evaluation of the external quality assurance activities under review. These evaluations cover each of the standards in ESG parts 2 and 3, providing individual and explicit coverage of each activity type. Additionally, the report includes a concise depiction of the higher education system in which AQUA operates. Furthermore, it incorporates a SWOT analysis detailing the present state of the agency.

The scope of this self-assessment report encompasses the external quality assurance (QA) activities conducted by AQUA between June 2016 (the publication date of the Law founding AQUA: *Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*) to the present day.

In the drafting of this SAR, the following points should be taken into account:

- A non-official translation of the legal framework is provided in several sections.
- Evidence is offered in the form of accessible links that can be consulted online, or alternatively, providing supporting documents in the annexes.
- AQUA remains open to supplying additional evidence if required.

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[1] ENQA (2021). *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews*. Downloaded from: *https://www.enqa.eu/the-review-process*
[2] EQAR (2020). *Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies*. Downloaded from: *Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies (eqar.eu)*

2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

To prepare the Self-Assessment Report (SAR), a working team comprising the AQUA Director, AQUA's technical staff (quality assurance specialists), and an external advisor was established. This team's primary mission was to facilitate, contribute to, and oversee the first draft of the SAR.

In this preliminary stage, the SAR was formulated with reference to the following documents:

- AQUA's Strategic Plan for 2023-2025.
- AQUA's internal quality assurance system.
- AQUA's evaluation guides outlining external QA processes.
- AQUA's annual activity reports.
- Evidence generated from the execution of external QA activities.
- Inputs provided by stakeholders.
- ENQA review reports from other agencies, accessible through the ENQA website.
- Information about the Andorran higher education system, provided by the Ministry responsible for higher education.
- Other specific evidence of AQUA's activities.

The work plan devised to prepare the first draft of the SAR encompassed the subsequent stages:

- November 2022: Launch of the external evaluation. Preparation of the SAR index and work plan.
- May to September 2023: Compilation of the SAR.
- July-August 2023: Solicitation of stakeholder opinions regarding AQUA's adherence to the ESG.
- September 2023: Engagement with stakeholders to discuss their perceptions of the SAR and identify strengths and weaknesses before generating the final version of the SAR.

AQUA tested the first draft of its SAR via a mock evaluation carried out by an external adviser. Following the advisor's comments on this exercise, the SAR was improved, finalised and approved by AQUA's Steering Committee, and shared to all stakeholders.

3 HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM AND QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ANDORRA

3.1 Andorran higher education system

Andorra possesses a distinct higher education system, which is relatively young. The inaugural bachelor's degree programmes were first implemented in 1988, and the country's first and only public higher education institution (HEI), the Universitat d'Andorra, was established in 1997. Currently, Andorra accommodates six HEIs. The Universitat d'Andorra, a public institution, predominantly offers on-campus education. Five privately managed and funded HEIs provide online educational programmes, catering to an international student demographic. Despite its modest size, the Andorran higher education system is expanding, currently offering a total of 51 official state degrees. The list of these official degrees can be found in this *link* from the website of the Ministry responsible for higher education. This array accommodates approximately 3,000 students.

Since 2003, Andorra has adhered to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Consequently, it has incorporated the Bologna Process, instituting measures to ensure standards comparability and higher education degree quality. To achieve this, Law 14/2018, ratified on June 21, 2018, concerning Higher Education, was endorsed (*Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior*). This legislation governs academic pursuits, HEIs, research, and the educational community, all aligned with European benchmarks. Moreover, Andorra has devised its own education qualifications framework, labelled MAQ (*Marc andorrà de qualificacions*) (*Llei 7/2023, del 19 de gener, de text consolidat de creació del Marc andorrà de qualificacions*). This framework encompasses five tiers within higher education: advanced vocational diploma, bachelor's degree, specialised bachelor's degree, master's degree, and doctorate. For a visual representation of the national qualification framework, refer to Annex 1.

3.1.1 Higher education institutions

Andorra is home to a total of six officially recognised HEIs. Among these, three are presently engaged in providing official degree programmes. The Andorran HEIs are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 - Andorran higher education institutions (HEI)

HEI	TYPE	FOUNDING LAW
UNIVERSITAT D'ANDORRA	Public	*Llei 15/2018, del 21 de juny, de la Universitat d'Andorra*
UNIVERSITAT EUROPEA UNIVERSIDAD EUROPEA EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY Principat d'Andorra	Private	*Avís del 10 d'abril del 2019 sobre l'obertura de la Universitas Europaea IMF*
UNIVERSITAT Carlemany	Private	*Avís del 4-3-2020 sobre la creació i l'obertura de la Universitat Carlemany*
humanium International University	Private	*Avís del 20-1-2021 sobre la creació i l'obertura de la Humanium International University*
WESTERN EUROPE UNIVERSITY	Private	*Avís del 19-4-2023 sobre la creació i l'obertura de la 'Western Europe University'*
tech	Private	*Avís del 31-1-2024 sobre la creació de la universitat 'Tech Global University'*

It is important to note that Andorra used to have two additional private HEIs, the Universitat de les Valls and the Open University la Salle. These institutions were established and subsequently closed within the period under evaluation in the SAR. Furthermore, Humanium International University, established in 2021, changed its name

to UNIPRO Universitat Digital in 2024 (*Avís del 13-3-2024 relatiu al canvi de denominació de la Universitat privada virtual i semipresencial Humanium International University*).

3.1.2 Quality assurance

In 2006, the Government of Andorra created AQUA through a Decree as part of an effort to align the higher education system with the commitments undertaken during the integration of Andorra into the Bologna Process. This decree, known as *Decret del 22-11-2006 d'aprovació del Reglament pel qual es regula la creació i el funcionament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra*, reflects Andorra's dedication to establishing its own public quality assurance agency. This agency was created to assess and accredit the quality of the nation's higher education system, highlighting Andorra's commitment to international guidelines and standards despite its status as a smaller country. It is important to highlight that AQUA was more like a division within the ministry responsible for higher education in that initial period. It was not until 2016 with the publication of AQUA´s Founding Law (*Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*), that the agency was formally established as an independent and autonomous entity.

3.2 Legal framework

3.2.1 Higher education system

Higher education in Andorra is governed by Law 14/2018, enacted on June 21, on Higher Education (*Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior*), alongside the regulations that operationalise it. Law 14/2018 replaced Law 12/2008 (*Llei 12/2008, del 12 de juny, d'ordenació de l'ensenyament superior*), which was promulgated on June 12, 2008, to regulate the higher education system.

Law 12/2008 aimed to establish a legal framework for higher education in alignment with the principles of the EHEA. It was formulated to address significant EHEA challenges such as ensuring higher education quality, fostering student and faculty mobility, implementing a flexible qualification system based on three university cycles (leading to bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees respectively), adopting the EHEA's Diploma Supplement, and advancing lifelong learning and the European dimension in higher education.

Law 14/2018, dated June 21, updates the Andorran higher education system to accommodate the evolving landscape of European higher education while retaining Andorra's unique approach. This law promotes labour market development and growth while ensuring educational quality.

Further information can be accessed at: <www.ensenyamentsuperior.ad>

The primary legal framework for higher education is outlined below:

- Higher Education Law (in Catalan): *Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior*.
- Decree Approving the Higher Education State Degrees' Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret del 8-7-2020 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'ordenació de les titulacions d'ensenyament superior estatals*.
- Decree Regulating the Establishment of New Private Universities and Other Higher Education Institutions (in Catalan): *Decret 183/2022, del 4-5-2022, pel qual s'aprova el reglament d'autorització d'universitats i altres institucions d'ensenyament superior privades del sistema andorrà d'ensenyament superior*.
- Modifications of the former decree (in Catalan): This decree has been updated with the following decrees: *Decret 209/2022, del 18-5-2022, de modificació del Decret 183/2022, del 4-5-2022, pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'autorització d'universitats i altres institucions d'ensenyament superior privades del sistema*

andorrà d'ensenyament superior and *Decret 15/2023, de l'11-1-2023, de modificació del Decret 183/2022, del 4-5-2022, pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'autorització d'universitats i altres institucions d'ensenyament superior privades del sistema andorrà d'ensenyament superior.*

- National Qualification Framework (in Catalan): *Llei 7/2023, del 19 de gener, de text consolidat de creació del Marc andorrà de qualificacions*.

3.2.2 Quality Assurance in higher education

The Law *Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)* repealed the decree that previously approved the establishment and operation of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (*Decret del 22-11-2006 d'aprovació del Reglament pel qual es regula la creació i el funcionament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra*). Through this Law, AQUA underwent structural changes, transitioning into an independent institution under public law. Additionally, the composition of its governing body underwent significant modifications to align with the standards of the EHEA (see section 4.2, Figure 1).

Presently, AQUA operates in accordance with the following regulations:

- AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Modification to AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 14/2020, del 12 de novembre, de modificació de la Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Decree approving AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Decree modifying AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 68/2022, del 23-2-2022, pel qual s'aprova la modificació del Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- AQUA's Fees Law: *Llei 23/2021, del 14 d'octubre, de taxes de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra.*
- Modification to AQUA's Fees Law (in Catalan): *Llei 1/2023, del 19 de gener, de modificació de la Llei 23/2021, del 14 d'octubre, de taxes de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra.*

4 PROFILE AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AGENCY

4.1 Profile and history

4.1.1 Profile

AQUA operates as a public law institution with the objective of enduring the quality of higher education in Andorra. As an autonomous and independent entity, AQUA holds its own legal identity, assets, and the authority to act in pursuit of its objectives.

The central **mission** of AQUA is to uphold the quality of higher education in Andorra by consistently adhering to the standards set by the EHEA. This mission is driven by a commitment to quality and rigour, aligned with societal and labour demands. AQUA accomplishes its mission through the evaluation, accreditation, and certification of teaching and research, promoting continuous improvement and adhering to the principles established in the EHEA.

In accordance with its **vision**, AQUA strives to be agile, accessible, and internationally renowned. It stands as a pillar of support for HEIs, assisting them in their continuous enhancement endeavours. Additionally, AQUA aims to contribute to knowledge creation and dissemination in the area of QA.

The **ethical framework** guiding AQUA's conduct is outlined in its Code of Ethics (Annex 2), embodying the values to be upheld by AQUA's staff and collaborators, including independence, rigour, integrity, transparency, collaboration, equity, innovation and sustainability.

AQUA's **responsibilities and functions** include the following:

- Evaluating, accrediting, and certifying the quality of education leading to official qualifications, as well as the processes within higher education institutions, in alignment with the ESG. These activities are described in both the Decree Approving the Higher Education State Degrees' Regulation (*Decret del 8-7-2020 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'ordenació de les titulacions d'ensenyament superior estatals)* and the Decree Regulating the Establishment of New Private Universities and Other Higher Education Institutions (*Decret 183/2022, del 4-5-2022, pel qual s'aprova el reglament d'autorització d'universitats i altres institucions d'ensenyament superior privades del sistema andorrà d'ensenyament superior*). These are summarised below and more information is provided in section 5.1.
    - **Ex-ante programme evaluation and accreditation**: All programmes leading to a national official degree must be evaluated and accredited by AQUA. The ex-ante programme accreditation evaluates the programme on paper (before it is offered) and ensures all criteria based on the ESG established by AQUA are fulfilled. The agency's accreditation is binding for the final decision (pre-approval) of the Ministry responsible for higher education.
    - **Ex-post programme evaluation and accreditation**: All programmes leading to a national official degree need to be evaluated and accredited by AQUA. The ex-post programme accreditation evaluates the programme based on the SAR presented by the HEI, evidence and indicators, a site visit and interviews with stakeholders. The agency's accreditation is binding for the final decision (approval) of the Ministry responsible for higher education.
    - **Programme follow-up**: Follow-up is not mandatory based on the Andorran legal framework. However, AQUA offers the HEIs the opportunity to undergo a programme follow-up evaluation aiming at the

enhancement of the programmes (see section 5 for more information). During these evaluations, a new SAR presented by the HEI explaining and showing evidence, indicators and reflections on their activities, a new site visit and interviews with stakeholders are considered.

- o **Programme modification**: All programmes leading to a national official degree that are substantially modified need to be evaluated by AQUA. The agency's evaluation result is binding for the final decision (modification) of the Ministry responsible for higher education.
- o **Ex-ante institutional evaluation**: All HEIs that wish to be legally established in Andorra must undergo an evaluation carried out by AQUA. The HEIs present a strategic plan, which is evaluated by AQUA on paper (before its implementation). The result of the agency's evaluation is binding for the final decision (authorisation) of the Ministry responsible for higher education.
- Evaluating, accrediting, and certifying both basic and applied research conducted within HEIs.
- Establishing guidelines, criteria, and indicators for quality evaluation within the domains of higher education and research, in accordance with European and international norms.
- Conducting studies to enhance and innovate evaluation, certification, and accreditation models.
- Producing evaluation reports targeting HEIs, educational administrations, stakeholders, and society at large.
- Advising educational administrations, higher education institutions, and other relevant entities within its operational scope.
- Building cooperative partnerships and collaborative protocols.

4.1.2 History

The history of AQUA can be summarised in the following phases:

Before 2016: Initial period.

The Government of Andorra created AQUA in 2006 through a Decree, in order to align the higher education system with commitments made during Andorra's integration into the Bologna Process (*Decret del 22-11-2006 d'aprovació del Reglament pel qual es regula la creació i el funcionament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra*). However, AQUA was more similar to a division within the Ministry responsible for higher education than a proper independent agency. AQUA had limited resources and functions, mainly focusing on agreements with ANECA or other Spanish regional agencies, basic study programme accreditations, and curriculum design input. It did not publish comprehensive evaluation guidelines, only offering some guidelines for pre-approval programme accreditation. During this period, AQUA was affiliated with ENQA.

From June 2016 to November 2020: The founding of the independent agency.

In 2016, AQUA´s Founding Law (*Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*), was published aiming to enhance AQUA's independence, transparency, professionalism, and international recognition. This step marked the formal establishment of AQUA as an autonomous agency. With this change, AQUA secured its own budget that is approved by the Parliament and underwent audits by the Court of Accounts. The agency also acquired its dedicated office space within the Parliament building.

The Steering Committee underwent a substantial transformation, becoming more diverse with representatives from Parliament, the professional sector, students, other university rectors, and international experts. This restructured Steering Committee replaced the

previous composition, which included representatives from the Ministry responsible for higher education, senior ministry officials, the rector of the Universitat d'Andorra, and AQUA's Director.

During this period, AQUA initiated discussions through the Working Group in Quality in Higher Education (discussed in section 7.2.3) to construct its quality assurance system and draft assessment criteria and guidelines. A website was launched, and AQUA renewed its affiliation with ENQA while also becoming a member of INQAAHE and SIACES (Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior).

From November 2020 until today: Adaptation to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Through sustained collaboration with the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education and the Steering Committee, necessary enhancements to AQUA's structure and operations were identified. In an effort to align more effectively with EHEA standards, the founding law of AQUA was modified (*Llei 14/2020, del 12 de novembre, de modificació de la Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*). The Decree approving AQUA's Regulation (*Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*) was also published. Consequently, the Evaluation Committee and the Appeals Committee were established, and formal regulation of the Evaluation Panels was introduced. These changes enabled AQUA to manage its own external experts and control the evaluation processes autonomously, without relying on other agencies such as AQU Catalunya or ACPUA.

The external quality assurance processes were systematically organised, with assessment criteria and guidelines formally developed and published. As the Andorran higher education system expanded to include new higher education institutions, AQUA's activities significantly increased, especially in terms of ex-ante programme evaluation and accreditation (pre-approval). Ex-ante institutional evaluation and accreditation were also conducted, evaluating HEI's strategic plans. AQUA's funding increased, and the Steering Committee approved the implementation of assessment fees.

In July 2023, the first Strategic Plan for the period 2023-2025 was approved by AQUA's Steering Committee (Annex 3). This document aimed to highlight the strategic lines and objectives to determine the focus and goals of the agency. Furthermore, an internal quality assurance system was prepared and implemented, considering all processes in the agency: strategic processes, support processes and functional processes. The implementation of this system ensures and maintains the quality and integrity of all procedures in AQUA. In 2023, AQUA renewed its status as an affiliate of ENQA and became a member of the Global Academic Integrity Network (GAIN) and the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA).

Currently, AQUA is working together with the Legislative Commission (Parliament) and the Ministry responsible for higher education to improve the legal framework related to external quality assurance. AQUA's law and its decree are undergoing revision to enhance transparency and independence. Furthermore, the external quality assurance framework is being enhanced to consider all phases defined in the ESG. In that regard, the following points summarise the main aspects, scattered in the different sections of the SAR, of the legal framework revision:

- Introducing new functions for AQUA not currently included:
  - Evaluation of higher education institutions.
  - Follow-ups.
- Change in the appointment of the Director of AQUA:

- The Director of AQUA is currently appointed by the Parliament and recommended by the Minister responsible for higher education. To increase independence, the recommendation will come from the Legislative Commission in charge of higher education after a meritocratic process.
- Introduction of the AQUA Advisory Council.
- Change in the composition of the Evaluations Committee to include a minimum of one student.
- Change in the composition of the Appeals Committee to avoid having a president related to the Ministry in charge of higher education.
- Publication of all reports (favourable, conditional and unfavourable).
- New external quality assessment framework:
  - Reducing the time between ex-ante and ex-post evaluations (from 10 to 6 years).
  - Introducing the 'conditional' result in AQUA's resolutions.
  - Making follow-ups mandatory in case of conditional results.

Note that AQUA's law, its regulatory decree, and the external quality assurance framework are estimated to be fully revised and approved by the corresponding legislative bodies by the last trimester of 2024.

4.2 Structure and organisation

Before 2018, AQUA operated as a modest and compact agency, consisting solely of the Steering Committee and the Director. In 2018, a technical staff member (Quality Assurance Specialist) joined AQUA's team. Subsequently, in 2020, AQUA's structure underwent further expansion, encompassing several key components: the Steering Committee, the Director, the technical staff, distinct evaluation bodies (both permanent and non-permanent), and an appeals body (see Figure 1). Note that due to AQUA being a small agency, the staff works in a highly cross-functional and collaborative manner. The technical staff is not formally divided into areas. however, each person has distinct responsibilities. The technical team considers this as a **strength** of the agency.
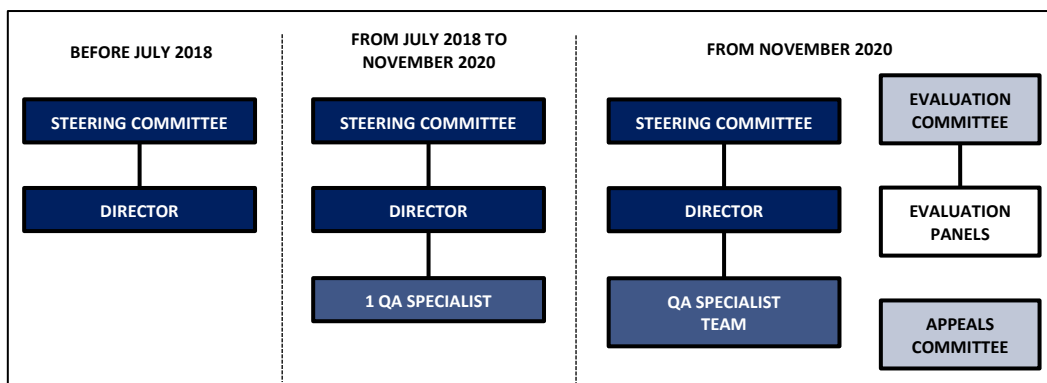
Figure 1- *Evolution of the structure of AQUA*

The composition and the main functions of the Steering Committee, the Evaluation Committee, the Appeals Committee and the Evaluation Panels are established by the legal framework. Table 2 summarises this information.

Note that, as mentioned at the end of section 4.1.2, the current changes in the legal framework sought by the agency will allow for the following changes once established:

- Creation of a new Committee named Advisory Council whose role will be helping AQUA implement the recommendations of the external evaluation and improving the external quality assurance processes of the agency.

- Approval of the evaluation guidelines will be the responsibility of the Evaluation Committee, instead of the Steering Committee.
- Changing the composition of the Appeals Committee to enhance its independence.
- Adding a student to the composition of the Evaluation Committee.

Table 2 - Composition and functions of the Steering Committee, the Appeals Committee, the Evaluation Committee and the Evaluation Panels

BODY	COMPOSITION	MAIN FUNCTIONS
Steering Committee	- The president and the vice-president of the Legislative Committee of the Parliament responsible for HE. - The minister in charge of HE. - A high-ranking official from the Ministry responsible for HE. - An international expert appointed by the Minister responsible for HE. - The rector of the Universitat d'Andorra. - A representative rector from the other private HEI. - Two representatives of the students from the universities in the country, one representing Universitat d'Andorra and the other representing the students of the private HEI. - The President of the Chamber of Trade, Industry, and Services of Andorra, or a delegate. - AQUA's Director.	Collective governing body of AQUA. It is responsible for establishing strategic priorities, approving activities and budgets, authorising the signing of agreements, approving evaluation guides, and performing other functions necessary for the proper management and development of the activity.
Appeals Committee	- The high-ranking official from the Ministry responsible for HE from the Steering Committee. - The international expert from the Steering Committee. - The person representing the students of the Universitat d'Andorra from the Steering Committee.	It is the committee responsible for resolving administrative appeals filed against the resolutions of AQUA.
Evaluation Committee	- AQUA´s Director, who holds the presidency of the Committee. - A minimum of two vocal members[*]	It is responsible for issuing evaluation reports.
Evaluation Panels	All panels are composed by a minimum of: - One academic staff - One student - One professional - AQUA staff member, who acts as the panel secretary	They are responsible for providing knowledge and expertise in a specific to assess the achievement of evaluation criteria.

Notes:
[*] *Evaluation Committee members should be academic staff (Full Professors) with recognized expertise and experience. They are international experts in order to avoid conflicts of interest.*

4.3 Agency's engagement in international activities

Internationalisation has been a priority for AQUA since its creation, with the goal of avoiding isolation and ensuring the competitiveness of Andorra's higher education system. This commitment is evident in the Law founding AQUA (*Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*), which outlines the following points:

- Involvement of international experts in the Steering Committee.
- Article 5 specifies AQUA's functions, including the establishment of cooperation links and collaborative protocols with foreign agencies that have responsibilities related to evaluation, accreditation, and certification.
- Article 16 sets forth criteria for external collaborations, prioritising agencies that are members of ENQA and are listed in EQAR.
- Article 17 mandates the Director and the Steering Committee to assess the feasibility of AQUA joining EQAR and becoming a member of ENQA, aiming to align AQUA with the recommendations of the EHEA.

AQUA's commitment to international engagement is evident in its daily operations, manifested through affiliations, participation in international projects, organisation and attendance of seminars, conferences, and workshops, as well as collaboration agreements. Looking ahead to 2025, AQUA is committed to enhancing its international presence through two key strategic objectives as highlighted in the Strategic Plan (see Annex 3): 1) achieve international recognition and accreditation, and 2) increase participation in international events and projects.

Membership of ENQA and registration in EQAR would be a huge opportunity for the agency in terms of international engagement since it would allow our participation in international projects.

To demonstrate AQUA's willingness to fulfil our strategic goals related to internationalisation, it is worth mentioning that recently one of our technical staff spent two weeks in HCÈRES in April 2024, and another was present in the QA-FIT Focus Group organised by ENQA in May 2024.

4.3.1 Affiliations

While AQUA was affiliated with ENQA in 2006, its formal engagement in international activities can be considered significant from 2016 onwards. Since then, AQUA has consistently participated in key international events focused on quality assurance in Europe, such as ENQA's forums, assemblies, training seminars, and other relevant gatherings.

In 2018, AQUA renewed its affiliation with ENQA under a new application protocol, and in 2020, it became a full member of INQAAHE. In 2019, AQUA played a significant role in the establishment of SIACES (Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior) during Andorra's presidency of the XXVII Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government in 2020. Additionally, AQUA has been actively participating as an observer in the meetings of REACU, the Spanish Network of Quality Assurance Agencies.

Recently, AQUA became a member of the Global Academic Integrity Network (GAIN) and a member of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA). GAIN is a consortium of education quality and integrity agencies worldwide, working together to fight the rise of commercial academic cheating services targeting students. CoARA is a global coalition of research funding organisations, research performing organisations, national/regional assessment authorities and agencies, as well as associations of the above organisations, learned societies and other relevant organisations. Together, they aim to enable systemic reform based on common principles to improve research assessment practices.

4.3.2 International projects

In 2017, AQUA initiated the development of projects in the area of sustainability and quality, establishing it as an independent project line to enhance the quality of HE. As a part of this effort, AQUA joined the Copernicus Alliance. The inaugural *study* was conducted in collaboration with the Complex Research Group of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. This study received the Enric Renau Permanyer Mention Award for applied research in education, training, and work, presented by Educaweb-Spain (*Mención Enric Renau i Permanyer - 7ª edición - Premios Educaweb - <educaweb.com>*).

In 2019, AQUA and ACPUA embarked on the project '*Making Connections between Institutional Evaluation and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*.' This initiative empowered stakeholders for quality enhancement and received recognition and funding from INQAAHE. Within the framework of this project, AQUA and ACPUA organised

two international forums and an international presentation (see reference in paragraph 6.4 ESG 3.4).

In 2020, as a progression of their ongoing efforts, AQUA, together with the Copernicus Alliance and the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, organised the workshop titled '*Quality & Sustainability in Higher Education: from Purpose to Practice*'.

In 2023, AQUA started a new line of research focused on analysing the weaknesses, threats, strengths and opportunities (SWOT) of quality agencies in Europe, taking into account the size of the countries (in population and expansion). Agencies from the following countries in the EHEA were considered and contacted: the Holy See, Iceland, Malta, Cyprus, Montenegro, Latvia, Slovenia, Ireland, Switzerland, Portugal, Romania, France and the United Kingdom. The SWOT analysis aims to draw conclusions regarding good practices for microstate agencies and to study the singularities of these agencies compared to countries of larger dimensions. This line of research will be carried out with the support of the Icelandic agency (Quality Board for Higher Education in Iceland).

It is worth mentioning that AQUA regularly participates in the Via Universitaria (University Pathway) project organised by Xarxa Vives, which aims to analyse students' living conditions, study habits, relationships with the university, cultural habits and economic conditions, as well as their expectations, values and beliefs regarding higher education. All agencies and universities from Catalan-speaking regions are participants in this project. The three participations of AQUA in this project resulted in two publications that can be accessed through the following *link*.

Finally, in May 2024, AQUA was invited to participate in the project entitled 'Alignment of SIACES-ENQA Quality Guidelines in Higher Education for Strengthening Bi-regional Trust (ESG-PBP Alignment).'

4.3.3 Seminars, conferences and workshops

Since 2016, AQUA has actively engaged in numerous international seminars, conferences, and workshops. In many of these events, AQUA presented the outcomes of their projects centred around sustainability and quality. These participation endeavours, along with regular involvement in prominent quality forums, are comprehensively outlined in the Annual Activity Reports available on the website: *Activities*.

From 2019 to 2023, AQUA successfully organised and participated in 13 international workshops, seminars, communications, and round table discussions. For further specifics, please refer to Annex 4.

4.3.4 Collaboration agreements

To fulfil its functions, particularly before the 2020 modifications made to the Law governing AQUA, the agency entered into several collaboration agreements with various agencies, primarily for external quality assurance activities (for more details, consult the annually-published Activity Reports on the website and refer to the list of collaboration agreements in Annex 4).

5 EXTERNAL QA ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY THE AGENCY

AQUA's activities in the scope of the ESG are focused on quality evaluations and accreditations of study programmes and institutions. These are outlined in Table 3 and described below.

Table 3 - *Description of activities within the scope of the ESG*

ACTIVITY	SUBJECT	OBJECT	NATURE
Ex-ante programme accreditation	Teaching & learning in HE	Study programme	Evaluation guide: predefined standards and process based on the ESG and Andorran legal framework.
Ex-post programme accreditation			
Programme follow-up			
Programme modification			
Ex-ante institutional accreditation		Potential HEIs' Strategic Plan	

Ex-ante programme accreditation

All programmes that lead to an official degree must be evaluated and accredited by AQUA. The ex-ante programme evaluation and accreditation process evaluates the programme on paper (before it is implemented and offered). All the criteria based on the ESG established by AQUA in its evaluation guide must be fulfilled.

The result of the evaluation process is either favourable or unfavourable. If the evaluation's result is favourable, the programme is then accredited by AQUA.

The agency's accreditation is binding for the final decision (pre-approval) of the Ministry responsible for higher education.

Ex-ante programme evaluation and accreditation is AQUA's oldest activity. The agency prepared and released the initial ex-ante programme evaluation and accreditation guidelines in 2017. Since then, 54 programmes have received accreditation. The guide has been periodically updated in 2019, 2021, 2022 and 2023. Please find the current guide in Annex 5.

Note that the current review of the legal framework on quality assurance will improve the ex-ante programme evaluation and accreditation process through the recognition of a 'conditional favourable' resolution. AQUA believes that introducing conditional resolutions will shift from a heavily accountability-based framework to one that balances enhancement and accountability.

Ex-post programme accreditation

All programmes that lead to an official degree must be evaluated and accredited by AQUA. The ex-post programme evaluation and accreditation process evaluates the programme based on the HEI's self-assessment report (SAR), relevant evidence and indicators, a site visit and interviews. For in-person programmes, the panel visits the HEI in person, whereas for online programmes the visit is conducted online. During the visit, the panel reviews the physical and online infrastructures and resources used for the programme's delivery and interviews relevant stakeholders, including students, recent graduates, teaching staff, managerial and services staff, external placement tutors, etc.

Ex-post programme evaluation and accreditation processes are carried out 10 years after the ex-ante programme evaluation and subsequently every decade. The result of the evaluation is either favourable or unfavourable. If the evaluation's result is favourable, the programme is then accredited.

The agency's accreditation is binding for the final decision (approval) of the Ministry responsible for higher education.

The first ex-post programme evaluation and accreditation guidelines were published in 2018, with periodic updates since then. Its last version can be found in Annex 5. To date, a total of 14 programmes have received accreditation under this category.

Note that the current review of the legal framework on quality assurance will reduce the period between ex-ante and ex-post evaluations from 10 to 6 years.

Programme follow-up

Currently, follow-up is not a mandatory activity based on the Andorran legal framework. However, AQUA offers the opportunity for HEIs to undergo a programme follow-up evaluation process aimed at programme enhancement. The follow-up evaluation process is conducted based on a new SAR explaining and showing evidence, indicators and reflections on their activities presented by the HEI, a site visit and interviews with stakeholders.

Originally, programme follow-ups were mandatory when an ex-ante evaluation received partial accreditation. However, in 2020, the Steering Committee simplified the ex-ante and ex-post evaluation and accreditation processes, reducing the results to 'favourable' and 'unfavourable'. Consequently, programme follow-ups became voluntary activities for HEIs.

The first programme follow-up process and guidelines were drafted in 2019, tailored to the higher education landscape of Andorra at the time, comprising the Universitat d'Andorra and the Universitat Oberta la Salle. New evaluation guidelines, applicable to the present context, were approved by the Steering Committee in July 2023 (Annex 5). AQUA conducted a follow-up for the Universitat d'Andorra's Bachelor of Science in Education in 2019. From 2023, AQUA encouraged higher education institutions to perform follow-ups. The next follow-up is scheduled for September 2024, in which the Bachelor in Environmental Science of Universitat Carlemany will be evaluated, and two more for the same institution will be scheduled at the end of the year.

Note that the current review of the legal framework on quality assurance will introduce a mandatory follow-up for the programmes that received a conditional resolution during the previous evaluation. HEIs will be required to request the mandatory follow-up for the applicable programme during the 3 immediate years after receiving the ex-ante conditional accreditation. Programmes that are evaluated favourably and receive full accreditation will be able to request a voluntary enhancement-based follow-up evaluation.

Programme modification

The Regulation for the Organisation of State Higher Education Degrees (*Decret del 8-7-2020 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'ordenació de les titulacions d'ensenyament superior estatals*) considers three types of modification: non-substantial, minor substantial and major substantial. A modification is considered substantial when it significantly impacts the nature, objectives, structure, or other aspects of the accredited study programmes. If a modification affects more than 30% of the study programme, it is considered a modification major substantial. As an example, a major substantial modification could be the modification of the learning and teaching methodology that would affect all programme's modules, and therefore, more than 30% of the study

programme. On the other hand, a non-substantial modification could be the translation of the name of a programme's module from Catalan to English, whereas a minor substantial modification could be changing the learning outcomes of a programme's module due to an actualization in the discipline.

As mentioned above, all study programmes that have undergone an ex-ante evaluation and require a substantial modification need to go through an external evaluation conducted by AQUA. The result of the agency's evaluation is binding for the final decision (modification) of the Ministry responsible for higher education.

This activity is carried out on demand. The result of the accreditation can be favourable or unfavourable and cannot be conditioned by law.

The different types of modifications are outlined in the above-mentioned regulation, and the scope of the external evaluation varies based on the type of modification requested. This regulation specifies very clearly that if a modification affects over 30% of the study programme (i.e. if it is a modification substantial major), a full ex-ante evaluation is conducted. However, in most cases, modifications are substantial minor and involve changes in subjects or curriculum planning, affecting thus, only the criteria in the 'Design, Planning, and Organisation of the Programme' quality dimension. In such cases, the external evaluation conducted is similar to a targeted review. For all modification, the criteria defined in the ex-ante accreditation guide serve as foundational reference for the evaluation.

The first programme modification guide was introduced in 2020 and updated in 2022 (Annex 5). A total of 18 modifications have been accredited since November 2020. Before this date, minor modifications were accommodated under the existing legal framework without a specific guide.

Ex-ante institutional evaluation

All HEIs that wish to be established in Andorra must undergo an evaluation conducted by AQUA. The HEIs present a strategic plan with a main chapter dedicated to QA. This chapter is evaluated on paper (before the HEI is established). The result of the agency's evaluation is binding for the final decision (authorisation) of the Ministry responsible for higher education.

This activity is carried out on demand. The result of the accreditation can be favourable or unfavourable and cannot be conditioned by law.

While the ex-post institutional accreditation is a priority for AQUA, it is still under development, closely linked to updates in the legal framework. As of now, only the ex-ante institutional evaluation, also known as the 'Institution's Strategic Plan Evaluation', has been established. This assessment adheres to the regulations outlined in Decree 183/2022, dated 4-5-2022, governing the authorisation of private universities and other higher education institutions in the Andorran higher education system (*Decret 183/2022, del 4-5-2022, pel qual s'aprova el reglament d'autorització d'universitats i altres institucions d'ensenyament superior privades del sistema andorrà d'ensenyament superior*) and its modifications. The first ex-ante institutional evaluation guide was released in January 2023 and its modification was made in October of the same year (Annex 5). A total of 4 evaluations have been conducted up to date.

Figure 2 presents the number of evaluations in progress from 2016 to 2023, excluding 2024. The Figure illustrates a significant increase in agency workload due to the rapid growth of the higher education system.
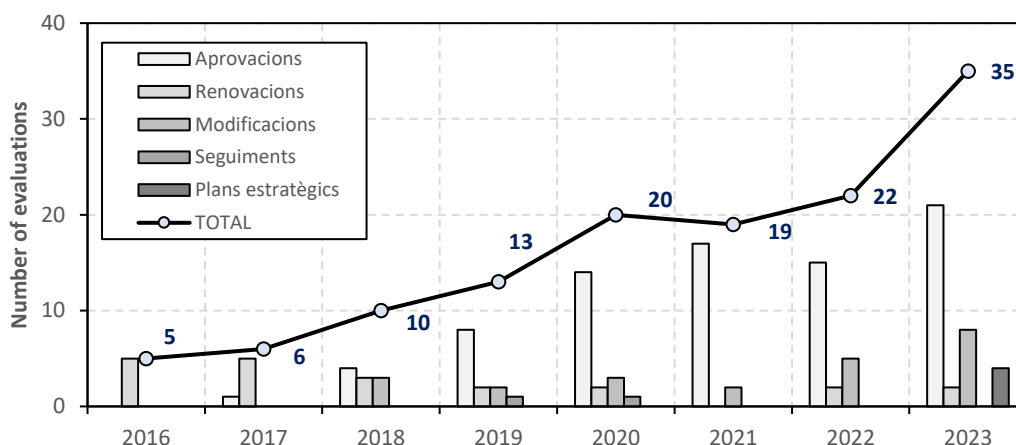
Figure 2 - Number of external QA processes performed

On the other hand, Table 4 presents the number of evaluations started each year for each one of the EQA activities. The values present a steady increase in work load related to evaluations.

Table 4 – Number of evaluations started each year

TYPE OF ACTIVITY	YEAR							
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Ex-ante programme	0	1	4	6	9	10	13	10
Ex-post programme	2	3	3	2	0	0	2	0
Modification	0	0	3	2	2	1	5	5
Follow-up	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Ex-ante institutional	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4

AQUA carries out other activities that are not within the scope of the ESG and, therefore, are not included in the Terms of Reference for this review. These activities include teaching staff certification, providing consultancy on QA, conducting studies and projects on QA in higher education, and promoting a culture of quality in higher education. Regarding the first and the second, it is worth justifying that the activities are not within the scope of the ESG; therefore, the following definitions are presented:

Teaching Staff Certification: This certification consists of a simple professional performance evaluation (based on the CV) of professionals who wish to teach but do not fulfil the prerequisites stipulated in Article 22 of the Higher Education Law (*Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior*). It considers years of experience in the field of the module they will deliver. Note that this certification only allows to teach specific applied parts of the module and does not allow the teaching staff to be module leaders.

Consultancy on QA: AQUA offers consultancy to various stakeholders of the higher education system in Andorra with the aim of enhancing quality, learning, teaching, and research. This is because AQUA recognizes the critical role that these elements play in shaping a robust and effective higher education system. By providing expert advice and guidance, AQUA helps institutions identify areas of improvement, implement best practices, and foster an environment of continuous improvement.

6 COMPLIANCE WITH PART 3 OF ESG

6.1 ESG 3.1. Activities, policies and processes for quality assurance

The legal framework related to HE, as well as the laws and formal regulations governing AQUA, explicitly mandate that external quality assurance (QA) activities must adhere to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG):

- Article 12 of Law 14/2018, dated 21 June, on Higher Education (*Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior*).
- Article 22 of the Decree dated 8-7-2020, which approves the Regulation for the Organisation of State Higher Education Degrees (*Decret del 8-7-2020 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'ordenació de les titulacions d'ensenyament superior estatals*).
- Articles 3 and 4 of Law 9/2016, dated 28 June, founding the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA) (*Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*).
- Article 1 of Decree 63/2021, dated 24 February 2021, which approves the Regulation of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (*Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*).

To fulfil its objectives, Article 2 of the modified AQUA's Founding Law specifies that AQUA is assigned nine distinct functions, including two functions explicitly related to external QA activities in accordance with the ESG:

- The evaluation, accreditation, and certification of the quality of programmes leading to official degrees, along with various processes affecting higher education institutions, with specific emphasis on the European quality framework.
- The formulation of guidelines, criteria, and indicators for evaluating quality in higher education and research, aligning with European and international standards.

Note that, in AQUA's law, the agency's functions do not include institutional evaluation and accreditation, even though Decree 63/2021, dated 24 February 2021, which approves the Regulation of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra, mandates AQUA to perform these activities. Currently, AQUA's law is being modified to include this aspect.

In alignment with these functions, a significant portion of AQUA's daily activities revolves around QA tasks, as its mission states: 'The central **mission** of AQUA is to uphold the quality of higher education in Andorra by consistently adhering to the standards set by the EHEA. This mission is driven by a commitment to quality and rigour aligned with societal and labour demands. AQUA accomplishes its mission through the evaluation, accreditation, and certification of teaching and research, fostering improvement and adhering to the principles established in the EHEA'. All daily tasks are meticulously planned and executed in accordance with the ESG to harmonise with AQUA's supplementary mission to cultivate a culture of quality through strategic foresight.

6.1.1 Objectives translated to daily activities

Currently, the objectives established each year for the agency are based on the Strategic Plan, which considers the mission, vision, values, and objectives of the entity, approved by the Steering Committee in 2013, and the annual budget. The first document outlines the objectives and necessary resources for its operation, and actions are defined for each objective. These objectives are developed annually through the annual action plan, in line with the annual budget.

Based on AQUA's regulations, both the Strategic Plan and the Annual Budget are approved by the Steering Committee. It is worth mentioning that the Strategic Plan was prepared using a participatory process that considered all stakeholders. AQUA's activities are documented in the Annual Activity Report, which is made public for general knowledge, in accordance with its Regulations.

Regarding the evaluation processes and main activities of the agency, the details of how these are aligned with the ESG are explained in Section 7.2 of this SAR. These methodologies are tailored to fit the mission, vision, values, and objectives of the entity, as outlined in its Statutes. The involvement of stakeholders is achieved through various bodies and regular meetings with higher education institutions.

Finally, it is important to mention that the agency maintains an open Complaints and Suggestions mailbox for all stakeholders and the general public that can be found on AQUA's website.

6.1.2 Involvement of stakeholders

Engaging stakeholders is important for AQUA. According to the 2015 ESG, stakeholders encompass all entities within an institution, including internal actors like students and academic staff, as well as external entities like employers/professionals and external partners. These stakeholders play an active role in AQUA's governing and technical bodies, including the Steering Committee, Evaluation Committee, Appeals Committee, and Evaluation Panels. The composition of these bodies, in accordance with the legal framework, is provided in Table 2 (section 4.2, page 10).

Moreover, the participation of students, academic staff and administrative staff in external quality assessment activities is mandated as a responsibility by Andorra's Higher Education Law/Regulations. To succinctly encapsulate this, Table 5 offers a concise overview of stakeholders' participation within AQUA's governing and technical bodies.

Table 5 - *Involvement of stakeholders in strategic and technical bodies*

BODIES	Students	Academic staff	University rectors	Ministers or representatives of the Government	Members of parliament	Employers	International experts
Steering committee	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Evaluation committee		✓					✓
Panels	✓	✓				✓	✓
Appeals committee	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓

It is worth highlighting the notable presence of **students** in AQUA's most significant bodies, including the Steering Committee, which approves strategic plans and budgets, the Appeals Committee, and all panels responsible for evaluating programmes and the institution's strategic plans. This emphasis on student involvement is a priority for AQUA, reflecting our recognition of students as pivotal agents within higher education. Notably, the recent modification to AQUA's founding Law (*Llei 14/2020, del 12 de novembre, de modificació de la Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*) has doubled student participation within the Steering Committee. AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3), under goal O5.2, is dedicated to further enhancing student participation and engagement, with the objective of continued improvement of this aspect. With that aim, AQUA is promoting the involvement of students in a focal working group within all HEIs to explain the quality culture to students and engage them with the European Student Union. In this regard, AQUA contacted the ESU in May 2024.

International experts actively contribute to all bodies associated with external quality assurance, encompassing the Steering Committee, Evaluation Committee, Evaluation Panels, and Appeals Committee (see section 6.3). Regarding the experts on the Evaluation panels, they are selected considering certain criteria (see Annex 6) from AQUA's *pool of experts*. In order to prevent conflicts of interest the two vocal members of the Evaluation Committee (academic staff with established expertise and experience) and the academic staff, and usually the students, of the Evaluation Panels are normally international experts as well (please refer to Chapter 7.4, ESG 2.4).

Note: Due to the language used in the agency's processes, reports and internal documents are in Catalan (the national language), and the international experts mainly come from Catalonia (Spain). This is considered a limitation and a threat to the agency. Therefore, AQUA is working on expanding the location of international experts since it considers this matter a limitation in its external evaluation processes. In that regard, AQUA is seeking Catalan speakers outside of the Catalan-speaking territories and has already included Spanish and French speakers in its Evaluation Panels. This is an ongoing effort, as is reflected in the strategic objective *O5.1. Expand the network of external experts and diversify their profile* in AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3).

Through these measures, the agency is continually fostering greater stakeholder involvement in both the technical and strategic aspects of AQUA's operations, as well as its daily functioning. This heightened engagement carries particular significance for a smaller agency where the technical team is compact, making collaboration and close interaction with stakeholders even more valuable. The close relationship with HEIs and the Ministry, and the organisation of working groups with members of all these entities, illustrates this fact and facilitates the daily operations of the agency. AQUA considers this close engagement with stakeholders a **strength** of the agency.

6.1.3 Evidence

- AQUA's Founding Law: *Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Modification of AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 14/2020, del 12 de novembre, de modificació de la Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*.
- Decree approving AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Decree modifying AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 68/2022, del 23-2-2022, pel qual s'aprova la modificació del Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*

- Higher Education Law: *[Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior.](#)*
- Decree approving the Higher Education State Degrees' Regulation (in Catalan): *[Decret del 8-7-2020 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'ordenació de les titulacions d'ensenyament superior estatals.](#)*
- AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3).

6.2 ESG 3.2. Official status

6.2.1 Legal status of the agency

Article 2 of AQUA's Founding Law (*[Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)](#)*) establishes AQUA as a public law institution with the principal objective of ensuring the quality of higher education provided in Andorra. As an entity, AQUA possesses its distinct legal identity, assets, and the complete ability to operate in accordance with its objectives. Its activities and processes are governed by public law, as stipulated by the Law. AQUA is empowered to enter into legally enforceable agreements with governments, institutions, agencies, and entities in foreign countries.

6.2.2 Agency formal recognition

AQUA stands as the officially designated higher education quality assessment agency in Andorra, a status acknowledged by the competent authorities. The national scope of AQUA's role is explicitly outlined in Articles 12.3 and 12.4 of the Higher Education Law (*[Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior](#)*), excerpted below:

Article 12. Inspection and Evaluation Competencies[3]

(…)

3. Each higher education institution bears the responsibility of ensuring internal quality, in coordination with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA).

4. As prescribed by the regulating law, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA) is a public law institution tasked with overseeing external assurance of higher education quality.

Further clarification emerges regarding the evaluation of study programmes (Article 9), where the formal legal framework for HE explicitly designates AQUA as the entity responsible for external quality management:

Article 9. Study Programmes[4]

(…)

State degree programmes receive approval from the Government, contingent upon prior accreditation by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA).

Finally, Article 22 of the Decree approving the HE State Degree's Regulation (*[Decret del 8-7-2020 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'ordenació de les titulacions d'ensenyament superior estatals](#)*) states:

Article 22. Quality and Continuous Improvement[5]

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[3] Non-certified translation of Law 14/2018, of 21 June, on Higher Education (*[Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior](#)*)
[4] Non-certified translation of Law 14/2018, of 21 June, on Higher Education (*[Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior](#)*).
[5] Non-certified translation of the Decree approving the Regulation of the Organisation of State Higher Education Degrees of 8 July 2020 (*[Decret del 8-7-2020 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'ordenació de les titulacions d'ensenyament superior estatals](#)*)

Higher education institutions assume the responsibility for maintaining the quality of higher education. This entails conducting internal quality assessment in coordination with and support from AQUA, which concurrently administers external quality assessment.

6.2.3 Evidence

- AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Higher Education Law (in Catalan): *Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior.*
- Decree approving the Higher Education State Degrees' Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret del 8-7-2020 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'ordenació de les titulacions d'ensenyament superior estatals.*

6.3 ESG 3.3. Independence

6.3.1 Organisational independence

As stated in Article 2 of its Founding Law (*Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*), AQUA possesses its distinct legal identity and assets, thereby enjoying complete autonomy to function in alignment with its objectives. This empowerment signifies that, within its designated sphere of authority, AQUA holds full independence to execute the administrative responsibilities necessary for the realisation of its objectives.

6.3.2 Operational independence

AQUA's daily operations and decision-making processes are conducted devoid of any internal or external interference or undue influence. AQUA maintains the liberty to establish operational choices guided by its expertise, discernment, and internal protocols. This freedom prevails without notable constraints or directives emanating from higher authorities. Operational autonomy serves as a critical component for ensuring the efficiency, efficacy, and agility of AQUA's endeavours.

Technical and operational independence are outlined in Article 37 of the Decree approving AQUA's Regulations (*Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*). This article stipulates that all staff, both employees and collaborators associated with AQUA, as well as members of the Steering Committee, Evaluation and Appeals Committees, and Evaluation Panels, are mandated to operate with technical and professional autonomy and avoid conflicts of interest. This conduct is governed by the AQUA Code of Ethics (Annex 2), which has been approved by the Steering Committee.

Any member of committees, working groups, or expert panels who finds themselves confronted with a conflict of interest is obliged to recuse themselves from participating in the deliberations. Additionally, the Director, technical staff, members of the Steering Committee and Evaluation Committee, and external experts are required to endorse the Code of Ethics. By signing this document, they pledge to perform their roles in accordance with their expertise, devoid of ulterior motives other than serving AQUA's mission. Their commitment extends to upholding impartiality in their undertakings and discharging their responsibilities with the appropriate level of professional diligence.

AQUA's governing, technical, and evaluation bodies play an active role in the day-to-day activities and decision-making processes of the organisation. The legal framework delineates the composition, functions, and formal proceedings of these governing bodies (the Steering Committee and the Director) as well as the evaluation entities (the Evaluation Committee and the Evaluation Panels), alongside the Appeals Committee.

A robust division of powers exists among the distinct bodies within AQUA. Files and reports generated by one body are impervious to alterations by another. Moreover, individuals are restricted from simultaneously participating in multiple bodies, with exceptions limited to the Director, who serves as both the Secretary of the Steering Committee and the President of the Evaluation Committee, as well as members of the Appeals Committee, who concurrently hold positions within the Steering Committee. This delineation of roles ensures the integrity and autonomy of each entity within AQUA's framework.

Steering Committee and Director

The Steering Committee embodies AQUA's collective governing authority, comprising 11 representatives of all higher education stakeholders. This committee holds responsibility for setting strategic priorities, sanctioning activities and budgets, authorising agreement signings, endorsing assessment guidelines, and undertaking other essential tasks for the effective management and advancement of the agency.

Article 14 of the Decree approving AQUA's Regulations governs the criteria for electing members of the Steering Committee. These members encompass the rector representing private universities, student representatives, and an international expert. The selection criteria are as follows:

- The rector representing private universities serves a two-year term, rotating among all universities apart from the Universitat d'Andorra. This cycle begins with the oldest university and sequentially proceeds to the most recently established institution.
- Two student representatives, each serving a two-year term, must be enrolled in a state higher education programme. They are elected to represent students within their institution through mechanisms devised by each entity. The appointment of student representatives from other universities in the country adheres to a rotating pattern, excluding the Universitat d'Andorra and following the order of establishment.
- The international expert, possessing the required experience and qualifications to uphold the quality of higher education, is elected and appointed by the Minister overseeing higher education for a four-year term.

As the Steering Committee does not perform evaluation tasks, it is feasible to include members from the universities of Andorra. However, this presence is always in the minority: four (two of them students) out of 11 members.

The Director of AQUA is elected, for a period of four years, by the Parliament based on the recommendation of the Ministry responsible for Higher Education, as stipulated in Article 11 of AQUA's Founding Law. After this proposal, the Director's appointment becomes official through its publication in the Official Gazette of the Government of Andorra (BOPA). The Director's position can be revoked if their performance fails to meet entrusted obligations. The Director takes charge of technical and administrative leadership, executing the resolutions of the Steering Committee. To fulfil their duties, the Director operates autonomously and without conflicts of interest.

Note that, as mentioned at the end of section 4.1.2, changes in the legal framework seek to increase the independence of the election of the Director since the recommendation from the Ministry will be eliminated. Instead, an open process based on meritocracy will be open and directed by the Legislative Commission responsible for higher education.

Finally, article 13 of the modification to AQUA's Founding Law outlines incompatibilities and ethical principles for members of the Steering Committee and the Director:

- During their roles within the Steering Committee, members are prohibited from having conflicts of interest with their designated functions or professional engagements. In those cases, they must disclose them and abstain from voting.
- The Director, as a member with non-exclusive dedication, cannot have conflicts of interest with his designated responsibilities or those originating from other professional involvements.

Evaluation Committee

The Evaluation Committee is comprised of three members appointed by the Steering Committee: the Director of AQUA and two professors possessing accredited expertise within the EHEA. Importantly, these members cannot hold affiliations with HEIs in Andorra, and their status as international experts must be consistently upheld.

A declaration is required from the Evaluation Committee members, attesting their absence of personal and professional incompatibilities that might hinder their performance. They are also obligated to uphold impartiality and academic rigour, bound by the Code of Ethics.

The establishment of the Evaluation Committee is governed by Article 11 of the modification to AQUA's Founding Law (*Llei 14/2020, del 12 de novembre, de modificació de la Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*). The management of this Committee is regulated in Chapter 5 of the Decree endorsing AQUA's Regulations. The Evaluation Committee is responsible for approving evaluation and accreditation reports based on the expert assessments produced by the Evaluation Panels. Additionally, this committee may propose enhancements to evaluation guides, criteria, and protocols, which subsequently undergo consideration by the Steering Committee.

Compensation is extended to members of the Evaluation Committee, with the exception of the agency's Director. The amount of financial compensation is a fixed amount paid per meeting.

Note that, as mentioned at the end of section 4.1.2, the changes in the legal framework will introduce at least one student to the Evaluation Committee.

Appeals Committee

The establishment of the Appeals Committee, through the Decree approving AQUA's Regulations (*Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*), was aimed at upholding institutional rights and ensuring equitable decision-making (as referenced in Chapter 7.7 ESG 2.7).

Given AQUA's compact size, the Steering Committee chose to form a streamlined and functional committee. The composition was determined to include three members from the Steering Committee, ensuring their independence from conflicts of interest. This trio comprises the director overseeing higher education within the ministry, an international expert, and a student representative. Should any conflict of interest arise, the member can be substituted with another from the Steering Committee.

Furthermore, an external lawyer with expertise in quality assurance processes may serve as the secretary of the Appeals Committee, thereby safeguarding the legal integrity of the proceedings. Additionally, the Committee retains the prerogative to seek an external expert's insights to compile a report analysing the case at hand.

Note that, , as mentioned at the end of section 4.1.2, the changes in the legal framework seek to enhance the independence of the Appeals Committee by changing its composition.

The new committee will include the international expert from the Steering Committee, two external academic members and an external student.

Technical staff

The modification to AQUA's Founding Law (*Llei 14/2020, del 12 de novembre, de modificació de la Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*)specifies that the Director is responsible for recruiting the technical and administrative personnel, adhering to the prevailing Labor Relations Law.

The technical staff of AQUA is entrusted with coordinating the technical aspects of external quality assessment processes and maintaining ongoing communication with higher education institutions. Additionally, they assume the role of secretaries within the Evaluation Panels, ensuring the preservation of coherence and integrity while refraining from making evaluative judgments.

Peer review experts

AQUA relies on the cooperation of external experts to fulfil its external quality assurance functions. These external experts, distinct from AQUA's internal staff, are selected by AQUA's general management. The organisation and management of Evaluation Panels are governed by Chapter 6 of the Decree endorsing AQUA's Regulations.

AQUA's process for recruiting external experts involves completing a form that is accessible on its website. This form is also available in the Official Gazette of the Government of Andorra (BOPA), as well as on AQUA's website, and social media platforms. The criteria guiding the selection of external experts are aligned with the ESG. These criteria are outlined within the Decree endorsing AQUA's Regulations (see Annex 6).

Members of the Panels comprise esteemed individuals from the academic, scientific, and managerial areas, as well as students not affiliated with the university under evaluation and professionals. These panel members typically come from institutions outside of Andorra, reinforcing their impartiality. A declaration attesting their absence of conflict of interest in fulfilling this role is required. In recognition of their contributions, these members receive financial compensation, the amount of which is fixed within the contracts they sign that are later published on AQUA's website.

More information about the peer-review experts is presented in section 7.4.

6.3.3 Independence of formal outcomes

The Steering Committee holds the authority to endorse procedures and methodologies. Final determinations in the various evaluation processes administered by AQUA are made by the respective committees. These decisions are exclusively within the jurisdiction of the evaluation bodies and are not subject to external influence. The report endorsed by the Panel and the final report approved by the Evaluation Committee carries binding authority for AQUA.

Verdicts issued by both the Panels and the Evaluation Committee in various evaluation processes are reached through a consensus among their members. This collaborative approach ensures that decisions are made collectively and reflect the agreement of the involved parties.

6.3.4 Evidence

- AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*.

- Modification of AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 14/2020, del 12 de novembre, de modificació de la Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Decree Approving AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Decree modifying AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 68/2022, del 23-2-2022, pel qual s'aprova la modificació del Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- AQUA's Code of Ethics (Annex 2).

6.4 ESG 3.4. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis aligns closely with AQUA's strategic aspiration, as outlined in strategic goal O6.3 of the Strategic Plan, focused on 'creating and transferring knowledge' (Annex 3).

The small size of the Andorran higher education system provides significant benefits to AQUA. This context enables the agency to access essential, firsthand information about programmes and institutions. Furthermore, it promotes the development of various communication channels, both formal and informal, which are continuous and effective, in disseminating comprehensive findings from our QA efforts with stakeholders.

In assessing compliance with this standard, beyond consistent stakeholder engagement, it is crucial to highlight several key elements: AQUA's Annual Reports, meta-evaluation sessions, the organisation of seminars and workshops, and participation in studies related to QA in HE.

Annual Reports

AQUA's Annual Activity Reports offer a comprehensive overview of all external QA activities conducted, their outcomes, and the evolution of assessment criteria and processes. These reports are formally presented to the Legislative Commission of the Andorran Parliament responsible for higher education responsibilities. They are also readily accessible on AQUA's website: *Activities.*

Labour insertion studies

Since 2017, AQUA has collaborated with the Ministry responsible for higher education to develop an annual study on the labour market integration of university graduates within the Andorran higher education system. This study encompasses a dedicated section that evaluates graduates' perspectives regarding the quality and utility of the training they have received, as well as any perceived deficiencies. While data collection methods may not be standardised, these studies provide invaluable insights into graduates' perceptions of Andorran higher education degrees and institutions. These comprehensive studies are published and publicly accessible on AQUA's official website: *Studies and projects.* Through this ongoing initiative, AQUA contributes significantly to understanding the practical impact and effectiveness of higher education in Andorra.

Academic integrity study

AQUA is a member of the Global Academic Integrity Network (GAIN), which is a consortium of educational quality and integrity agencies around the world that collaborate to fight against the increase of commercial academic cheating services targeting students. Consequently, at the beginning of 2023, the agency initiated a study to investigate the state of academic integrity in Andorra. The main objective of this study is to analyse the state of academic integrity within Andorran higher education institutions. Specifically, it aims to define the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of students at Andorran universities

regarding academic integrity and also identify measures to promote academic integrity and prevent fraud within Andorran universities and specify the areas of improvement concerning the promotion of academic integrity and the prevention of fraud within Andorran universities. This study is expected to be published in the first quarter of 2025 and will be conducted every three years thereafter.

Via Universitaria programme

AQUA has entered into a collaboration agreement with the Xarxa Vives d'Universitats, a Spanish non-profit institution that represents and coordinates the collective efforts of Catalan-speaking universities from Catalonia, Valencia, the Balearic Islands, Sardinia, and Andorra. AQUA actively collaborates with the Via Universitaria programme, which aims to gather rigorous, objective, and comprehensive information about student living conditions and their connections. This data is used to formulate proposals for enhancing university policies. The programme surveys students, analyses the results and publishes the reports of the study every three years.

Seminars and workshops

Since 2016, AQUA has been consistently organising seminars, workshops, and presentations, either independently or in collaboration with other agencies or institutions (please refer to Annex 4 for details). A significant number of these events are held within the framework of the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education. The primary objective of these gatherings is improvement with a strong emphasis on engaging stakeholders. During these interactions, the agency actively seeks feedback from participants on the topics discussed and disseminates informational materials derived from our QA activities. It is important to note that these events foster a non-evaluative atmosphere, ensuring an open and constructive exchange of ideas.

As a tangible outcome of these collective efforts, particularly driven by our sustained engagement with stakeholders, AQUA has published the following documents:

- *Quality management in higher education in Andorra. Ideas derived from the working group and proposal of guidelines*. AQUA, Government of Andorra, Universitat d'Andorra & Universitat Oberta la Salle. 2017. Internal summary paper.
- *A dialogue scenario to build quality culture together. The case of a working group in Andorra*. Marta Fonolleda (AQUA), Rosa Mariño (Universitat d'Andorra) & Helena Prieto. 2017. Article. Not published.
- *Guidelines to embed sustainability in the HE quality assurance framework in Andorra.* AQUA & Grup de Recerca Còmplex of UAB. 2018. Book.
- . AQUA & ACPUA. 2019. Book.
- *Guidelines for the definition of competencies in the Andorran higher education system*. AQUA, Government of Andorra, Universitat d'Andorra & Universitat Oberta la Salle. 2020. Guide.
- *Joint statement on the adaptations of higher education to the situation caused by COVID-19*. AQUA, Government of Andorra, Universitat d'Andorra & Universitat Oberta la Salle. 2020. Public statement.

Meta-evaluation

During 2021 and 2022, AQUA undertook meta-evaluations of ex-ante programme accreditations. These initiatives involved various activities and the active participation of stakeholders, such as:

- Dispensing a satisfaction survey to internal quality assurance authorities within HEIs.

- Delivering presentations on the results of ex-ante programme accreditations conducted by AQUA.
- Hosting collaborative sessions with the Working Group members to assess the adequacy of accreditation reports and pinpoint areas for enhancement in the accreditation process. In 2021, the Evaluation Committee members were also engaged in this session.
- Arranging discussions with external experts to identify opportunities for improvement in the accreditation process (2021).

These meta-evaluation initiatives enable the identification of enhancement opportunities based on stakeholder insights. An impactful outcome of the 2021 meta-evaluation was the introduction of a mechanism wherein HEIs could present their self-assessment report to experts, thus clarifying uncertainties before the preliminary evaluation. This innovative step was piloted and subsequently adopted within the accreditation process after demonstrating its effectiveness.

The meta-evaluation processes garnered positive feedback from all participants and have now become an integral annual activity. The outcomes of these meta-evaluations are summarised in AQUA's annual reports and have been shared with stakeholders, however, their formal publication is still pending due to a lack of human resources.

In 2023, AQUA did not conduct a process of meta-evaluation since the agency went through an internal reorganisation to establish and implement an internal quality assurance system. AQUA is firmly committed to releasing forthcoming meta-evaluation results. These will be performed based on the evaluation processes aligned with the ESG and other activities defined in AQUA's Strategic Plan. In that sense, AQUA is actively working on the development of a dedicated protocol to guide the execution of these thematic analyses.

The agency recognises the importance of delving further into this avenue of work, acknowledging it as an integral aspect of its ongoing efforts for enhancement and innovation. The commitment to conducting thematic analyses underpins AQUA's dedication to informed decision-making and developing the quality assurance landscape in higher education.

6.4.1 Evidence

- AQUA´s Annual Reports (in Catalan): *Activities.*
- AQUA's website: *Studies and projects*
- AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3).
- Seminars, Conferences, Workshops and Collaborations (Annex 4).

6.5 ESG 3.5. Resources

6.5.1 Human resources

Currently, AQUA's workforce comprises one Director and four technical staff members. The roles, their respective duties, and responsibilities are defined and governed by the Human Resources Policy, which is concisely outlined in Table 6.

AQUA's small team works in a collaborative and versatile manner due to the agency's size. Instead of having rigidly defined working sections or areas, the technical staff take on 'packages of responsibility' in addition to their primary functions. This approach fosters professional growth, innovation, and improvement in tasks and outcomes. Compensation is determined based on the level of responsibility assumed. Currently, the technical staff undertakes the following main responsibilities:

- **Management of Evaluation Panels**: They serve as secretaries of the Evaluation Panels, ensuring their effective functioning and seeking opportunities for enhancement.
- **Management of guidelines, criteria, and indicators**: They oversee the tasks related to defining, monitoring, and updating assessment guides, criteria, and indicators for both external and internal assessments.
- **Management of internal quality**: They oversee the tasks related to defining, monitoring, and updating the process map and the corresponding workflows and procedures.
- **Management of complaints**: They address complaints received by stakeholders from the higher education system and society in general.

Table 6 - Responsibilities of the Director and the technical staff

Position	Responsibility
Director	The Director acts as a bridge between the Steering Committee and the technical staff, ensuring the efficient execution of AQUA's functions and mission from both strategic and executive perspectives. The Director oversees the planning and organisation of the AQUA team and external evaluators, ensuring smooth coordination and implementation of quality assurance activities.
Technical staff	The technical staff oversees the external quality assurance of higher education in Andorra in accordance with European standards and AQUA's established procedures. Technical staff is divided into three categories: junior, middle and senior rank.

For specialised and highly qualified tasks, AQUA contracts external experts with the required expertise. These experts assist in tasks such as reviewing assessment guides, providing advice on specific issues, or preparing self-assessment reports.

Certain essential services like accounting, legal advice, web management, and IT support are outsourced. These external services are subject to review by the Director to ensure their quality and alignment with AQUA's needs.

While AQUA's current human resources are sufficient for daily operations, there is an awareness that additional personnel are needed to tackle upcoming challenges more effectively. In February 2024, two junior quality technicians were hired to address the higher demand for evaluations. Furthermore, AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 addresses the issue of talent retention and aims to optimise human resources under the strategic goal O2.1. In that regard, the working conditions and benefits for staff members are outlined in AQUA's internal Human Resources Policy. This policy was collaboratively developed by the Director and the technical staff and subsequently approved by the Steering Committee on September 30, 2021. The policy was under review in 2023 with the aim of improving the working conditions and benefits of the agency to retain its talent.

Employment opportunities for technical staff members are made readily accessible and transparent. They are advertised at a minimum in the Official Gazette of the Government of Andorra (BOPA), as well as on AQUA's website and social media platforms. The published information includes essential details, including job descriptions, prerequisites, work hours, and contract types. Principles of merit and competence are consistently considered in all cases.

It is worth mentioning that AQUA's internal Human Resources Policy considers the allocation of budget to train its members. Currently, in line with this policy and to prepare the budget of the agency, the Director organizes individual meetings with the technical staff to define their training needs. Based on their responses, the overall budget is distributed to match as best as possible the training needs outlined by the technical staff.

In the past year (2023) and going forward, the training consists of an increase in knowledge of QA in higher education in general as well as some specific training in improving communication skills. Regarding the QA knowledge, three staff members, including the Director, are currently enrolled in a master's degree focused exclusively on QA. The other two staff members (junior rank) are focusing their training on improving their English communication skill.

Despite the **challenges** posed by a limited team size, AQUA's staff maintains a positive and dedicated attitude. Their collaborative approach and dynamic working style have turned the constraint of limited personnel into a strength, resulting in effective and collegial work practices.

6.5.2 Financial resources

AQUA's financial operations are guided by the legal framework established in Chapter 2 of the modification of its Founding Law. The agency's funding primarily comes from the budgetary allocations determined annually by the Parliament. To diversify funding sources and adhere to public budget stability criteria, Law 23/2021, passed on October 14, established fees for the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (*Llei 23/2021, del 14 d'octubre, de taxes de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra*). Under this framework, higher education institutions (HEIs) contribute funding for programme accreditations and ex-ante institutional accreditations.

AQUA operates with operational autonomy and does not require prior authorisation for expenditures. The agency annually prepares a budget draft, which is approved by the Steering Committee and subsequently included in the Parliament's budget. This budget is then included in the State's general budget and approved in the Parliament.

The agency's financial activities are subject to external auditing by the Court of Accounts on an annual basis. Additionally, the financial controller of the Parliament oversees all economic transactions and documents related to AQUA's budget.

AQUA's budget has exhibited a progressive increase in recent years to accommodate the expansion of the higher education system and the growing evaluation activities of the agency, including the hiring of new staff members (see Figure 3). Note that in response to the pandemic situation, the budget for 2021 experienced a slight reduction to align with cost-saving directives issued by the government. Notably, the reduction in travel expenses played a significant role in contributing to the overall decrease in expenses.
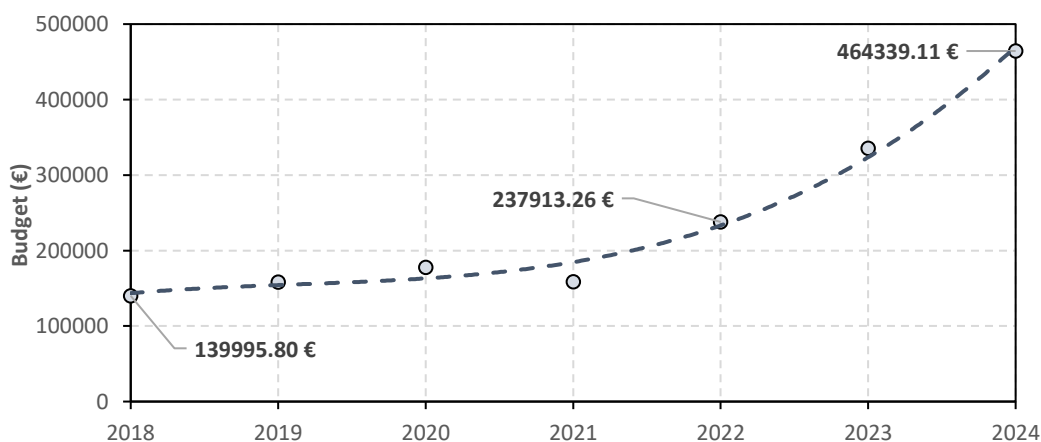
Figure 3 - Evolution of AQUA's budget 2018-2024

The financial resources available to AQUA currently meet its operational requirements and are projected to remain sustainable in the foreseeable future as observed in Table 7.

However, the agency acknowledges that an increase in the budget will be necessary to effectively address the upcoming challenges and responsibilities. This has been discussed in different Steering Committee meetings, during the presentation of the annual report to the Legislative Commission responsible for higher education in 2023 and 2024, and both Ministries, the one responsible for higher education and the one responsible for the national finances in 2024.

Table 7 – Budget (in €) for the past five years

Budget	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Income	177,870.15	158,680.62	237,913.27	335,500.98	464,339.11
Expenditures	128,999.01	152,607.61	203,976.44	275,582.63	-

A significant factor contributing to AQUA's financial efficiency is the provision of office space by the Parliament at a symbolic cost (1 € per month). This arrangement leads to substantial cost savings for the agency, enabling it to allocate its financial resources more effectively to its core activities and initiatives.

6.5.3 Evidence

- AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Modification of AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 14/2020, del 12 de novembre, de modificació de la Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*.
- AQUA's Fees Law (in Catalan)*: Llei 23/2021, del 14 d'octubre, de taxes de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra.*
- General Budget of State for the year 2023 Law (in Catalan): *Law 13/2023, of January 31, on the budget for the year 2023.*
- AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3).

6.6 ESG 3.6. Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

6.6.1 Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS)

AQUA has recently developed and implemented an Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS) as part of its commitment towards internal quality (Annex 7). AQUA has a process-based IQAS that collects all of AQUA's activities in three types of processes: strategic (3), operational (6), and support (9) (see Process Map in Annex 8). Specifically, the IQAS has been developed to:

- Document each process and its associated activities, responsibilities, timelines, and resources.
- Perform indicator-based self-evaluations to measure process performance.
- Identify the steps to implement any modifications needed for continuous improvement.

The IQAS is an essential management tool that ensures that all activities comply with AQUA's internal regulations and legal framework and that all agents involved in evaluation reports perform their tasks with utmost quality and integrity.

Evaluations Committee

The PS.07.02 procedure instructs the management of the Evaluations Committee. The procedure governs the selection, contract and training of the Committee members and the management of its meetings. This procedure ensures that the selection of the members and the meetings of the Committee are fair, transparent, and unbiased.

Members of the Evaluation Committee are subjected to professional integrity clauses and the Code of Ethics, bound by contract. Once a year, AQUA conducts a follow-up of the procedure to ensure its efficiency. This is done together with the members of the Committee.

Technical staff

The PS.04.01 procedure instructs the selection, contract, training, management, and evaluation of the technical staff. This procedure ensures that the recruitment and hiring process of the staff is fair, transparent, and unbiased.

The technical staff is subjected to professional integrity clauses and the Code of Ethics, bound by contract. New employees receive specific training on external quality assurance, with additional training opportunities depending on the position.

Two times a year, AQUA conducts performance evaluations of its technical staff. These appraisals, conducted by the director and an outsourced HHRR consulting service, aim to guarantee that the technical staff is competent and receives tailored up-to-date training.

Peer reviewers

The PS.01.01 procedure instructs the selection, contract, training, management, and evaluation of the members of the Evaluation Panels. It ensures that all applicants are screened to verify they meet the requirements provided by regulation (Decree 63/2021: _Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)_) and that they perform evaluations as stipulated in their contracts, including the professional integrity clauses.

Moreover, all members of the Evaluation Panels are subject to AQUA's Code of Ethics (Annex 2). They also receive adequate training on external quality assurance and instructions on how to conduct evaluations following AQUA's evaluation guidelines. Once the evaluation process has finished, all members of the panels are evaluated by AQUA's technical staff and only those who have been evaluated favourably can participate in future evaluations.

The panels are evaluated based on several criteria presented below, and while this is done in an informal way among the technical staff, it provides valuable feedback for the technical staff when it comes to selecting experts for future evaluations.

The technical staff "grades" experts on their performance on the following topics:

- Level of attendance to meetings
- Level of participation during meetings
- Quality of contributions in the meetings
- Level and quality of the independent assessment
- Suitable for other AQUA assessments
- Other comments

6.6.2 Quality and integrity of the work performed by others

All assessors and external experts recruited must sign AQUA's Code of Ethics (Annex 2). Note that all final decisions are taken by the Evaluation Committee or Appeals Committee, and these are controlled by AQUA's IQAS. It is worth mentioning that in AQUA's preliminary stages, the agency did not have any external experts, so collaborations with other agencies were needed to perform the evaluations. In those cases, collaborations were only signed with agencies aligned with the ESG (see Annex 4). Currently, there is no need to do this kind of collaboration since AQUA has an extensive expert database.

6.6.3 Continuous improvement

The PS.09.03 procedure (Follow-up and review of the Internal Quality Assurance System) instructs the quality improvement process of all the activities performed by AQUA. Every year, the person responsible for each process (either the director or a member of the technical staff) conducts an annual evaluation of the process/es they are in charge of. This evaluation includes drafting a self-evaluation report, which assesses the process performance and compliance and identifies areas for improvement. Once the self-evaluation reports of all processes are ready, they are compiled by the annual Internal Quality Report and improvement plan. Improvement plans include relevant information such as the affected processes, modifications, responsibilities, resources, deadlines and follow-up indicators. The follow-up of improvement plans ensures their effective and timely implementation. The first improvement plan is scheduled to be approved and published in December 2024.

Stakeholders are also involved in this process, as both HEIs and experts receive a survey to evaluate their satisfaction with the evaluation process they participated in. Moreover, both these stakeholders are invited to participate in the meta-evaluation (see section 6.4) event that AQUA organizes yearly to share the results obtained from the surveys and including them in the elaboration of the improvement plan for the following year.

6.6.4 Evidence

- AQUA's Code of Ethics (Annex 2)
- AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3)
- AQUA's Process Map (Annex 8)
- AQUA's Internal Quality Assurance System Manual (Annex 7)
- AQUA's Internal Quality Policy (Annex 9)

6.7 ESG 3.7. Cyclical external review of agencies

6.7.1 AQUA's cyclical external review

During 2016-2020, AQUA's growing activity, particularly its engagement in international endeavours, facilitated the identification of areas for improvement that impacted its structure and functions. To address these improvements, and operate within the framework of the Steering Committee, AQUA sought guidance from external experts possessing significant knowledge of trends within the EHEA. This guidance served as the foundation for ultimately modifying the Law that founded AQUA (*Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*), aligning the agency with the ESG. This process could be regarded as an external pre-evaluation of AQUA.

In September 2021, the Steering Committee endorsed a strategy for conducting the initial formal external evaluation of AQUA. This evaluation was initially intended to take place in 2021, to lay the groundwork for AQUA to become a member of ENQA and to be listed in EQAR. However, the Steering Committee convened in February 2022 and decided to postpone all strategic activities by a year due to the former director's maternity leave. It is for this reason that the external evaluation commenced in November 2022, causing it to take place beyond the first 5 years of AQUA's existence (counting from 2016 when the law founding AQUA was published).

The strategy for executing the first external evaluation of AQUA is intended to demonstrate AQUA's adherence to the ESG. It is designed to unfold in 2 phases:

- I. Initially, an external expert will evaluate compliance with the ESG and provide recommendations for improvement (from October 2023 to January 2024).

- II. Subsequently, AQUA will apply to become a member of ENQA and be listed on EQAR (starting in 2024). At this point, AQUA will undergo periodic external reviews.

The initial phase, consisting of the evaluation conducted by an international expert, has been completed. The reports submitted by the expert were deemed satisfactory to initiate the second phase. Accordingly, a formal letter was sent to ENQA in February 2024, followed by the signing of the tri-party contract between ENQA, EQAR and AQUA in April 2024.

It is important to note that the cyclical external review remains a priority for AQUA as stated in the strategic goal O4.1 of AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 and the agency is fully committed to that.

6.7.2 Evidence

- AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3).

7 COMPLIANCE WITH PART 2 OF ESG

7.1 ESG 2.1. Consideration of internal quality assurance

7.1.1 Evaluation, audit and accreditation of internal QA processes

Aligned with the principles of ESG, AQUA aims to uphold university autonomy and acknowledges that each HEI bears the responsibility of ensuring the quality of its programmes and other offerings. As a result, the HEIs are accountable for the implementation of ESG Part 1.

Conversely, AQUA comprehends that ESG 2.1 relates to the interrelation between external and internal quality assurance. Specifically, AQUA's role involves appraising how HEIs apply their internal QA processes, evaluating their effectiveness, and providing support for continuous improvement.

This strategy aligns with Article 12 of the Higher Education Law (*Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior*), Article 22 of the Decree approving the Regulation of Higher Education State Degrees (*Decret del 8-7-2020 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'ordenació de les titulacions d'ensenyament superior estatals*), and Article 1 of the Decree approving the Regulations of AQUA (*Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*). These provisions emphasise the need for external quality assurance to acknowledge, align with, and reinforce the internal quality assurance conducted by each higher education institution, which assumes responsibility for the quality of its provisions.

Furthermore, Article 22.4 of the Decree approving the Regulation of Higher Education State Degrees outlines the quality dimensions that must be taken into consideration when evaluating procedures. These dimensions primarily focus on internal quality and continuous improvement.

Article 22. Quality and Continuous Improvement[6]

(…)

4. The assessment must include, at a minimum, the following aspects:

a) Internal Quality and Continuous Improvement: This refers to the higher education institution's ability to strategically and coherently manage its quality through information management, monitoring, and decision-making. The aim is to ensure continuous improvement in the execution of its functions.

b) Curriculum: This encompasses the activities undertaken by higher education institutions within their objectives, subject to external evaluation, primarily focusing on academic activities. This includes designing curricula in line with relevant regulations and the key trends and characteristics of the knowledge field. It also promotes student-centred teaching, learning, and assessment.

c) Academic Staff: Academic staff are pivotal for ensuring quality higher education, considering their competence, sufficiency, and opportunities for training. They represent the primary teaching resource available to students. Comprising highly qualified individuals, academic staff have the academic freedom to develop curricula and other activities aligned with the institution's objectives.

d) Resources and Support Processes: This pertains to the human (administrative and technical staff), material and service resources (such as libraries, classrooms,

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[6] Non-certified translation of the Decree Approving the Higher Education State Degrees' Regulation (*Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*)

laboratories, counselling services, etc.), and technological resources (such as virtual platforms) necessary to uphold the academic activities of higher education institutions. This also encompasses all decisions and processes related to the student lifecycle, including admission, progression, recognition, and certification.

e) Public Information: This encompasses the information that higher education institutions make publicly available to serve society and be accountable for their quality, in alignment with their objectives. This information includes aspects considered in the other dimensions.

These dimensions are considered in all evaluations of study programmes (ex-ante programme accreditation, ex-post programme accreditation and programme follow-up). Besides, for the ex-ante institutional evaluation, two other dimensions are always taken into account: (f) Governance and management and (g) Research and knowledge transfer. All assessment guides are created in alignment with all these dimensions

Each EQA activity performed by AQUA assesses the entirety of ESG part 1. This is done by the assessment dimensions previously presented. These dimensions incorporate ESG 1.1-1.10 through distinct quality criteria (please refer to the guides provided in Annex 5) as presented in Table 8. To attain a positive accreditation outcome, HEIs are required to provide evidence demonstrating compliance with these criteria. This is reflected in AQUA's accreditation reports (*Evaluation reports*)

Table 8 - Assessment dimensions and their link with ESG Part 1

ASSESSMENT DIMENSIONS	ESG 1.1	ESG 1.2	ESG 1.3	ESG 1.4	ESG 1.5	ESG 1.6	ESG 1.7	ESG 1.8	ESG 1.9	ESG 1.10
a. Internal quality and continuous improvement	✓						✓		✓	✓
b. Curriculum		✓	✓							
c. Teaching staff					✓					
d. Resources and student support processes				✓		✓				
e. Public information								✓		
f. Governance and management	✓			✓	✓		✓			
g. Research and knowledge transfer					✓		✓			

While the efficacy of internal QA processes is considered across all assessment guides, it should be noted that programme evaluations only permit a limited appraisal of the

effectiveness of internal QA systems. Due to this limitation, AQUA is planning to start crafting an ex-post institutional evaluation mechanism at the end of 2024, designed to facilitate a more comprehensive evaluation of internal quality assurance. This undertaking holds paramount importance for AQUA as appreciated in AQUA Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3).

7.1.2 Evidence

- AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Modification of AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 14/2020, del 12 de novembre, de modificació de la Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*.
- Decree approving AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Decree modifying AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 68/2022, del 23-2-2022, pel qual s'aprova la modificació del Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Higher Education Law (in Catalan): *Llei 14/2018, del 21 de juny, de l'ensenyament superior.*
- Evaluation guides (Annex 5).
- AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3).
- AQUA's Accreditation Reports (in Catalan): *Documents*

7.2 ESG 2.2. Designing methodologies fit for purpose

7.2.1 Development, review and updating of processes and criteria

The formulation of QA processes and criteria entails several stages:

- Initially, AQUA analyses the objectives and aims of each process, considering both the national and international frameworks, as well as the mission and vision of AQUA. This analysis is then succinctly encapsulated in each guide, serving as a point of reference.
- Subsequently, AQUA devises a preliminary proposal for the process and assessment criteria. This proposal undergoes discussion and validation within the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education (discussed in section 7.2.3). This working group serves as a pivotal platform for open dialogue and discourse, and all members are encouraged to provide input. It is important to note that consensus is often achieved on a significant number of points. Minutes of each sessions are prepared summarizing the main discussions and sent to all participants..
- In instances where alignment with Standards and Guidelines is required, AQUA requests expert guidance. External experts of recognised repute and experience are consulted. This approach was adopted, for instance, when incorporating online methodologies into the ex-ante programme accreditation guide. The report entitled: '*Informe d'orientacions per a millorar la Guia d'avaluació per aprovar plans d'estudis, elaborada per l'AQUA, en relació amb l'avaluació de la modalitat no presencial (online)*' (in Catalan) is presented as evidence.
- Once the guides obtain validation within the Working Group, they are presented to the Steering Committee for approval. Similar to the Working Group, the Steering Committee generally achieves consensus on a wide array of matters. Minutes of each Steering Committee meeting are prepared summarizing the main discussions.. Note that the modification of the legal framework (discussed in section 4.1.2) is changing this step since it will be the Evaluation Committee,

instead of the Steering Committee, that will approve the guides. This change is made to minimise the conflict of interests since rectors of the universities will not be able to vote in an important decision like this.

- The approved guides are subsequently published on both the AQUA website and AQUA's social media platforms.

It is important to note that the published guides remain subject to continuous review and updates (see Table 9). This review and updating process follows the same trajectory as guide development: initial proposal from AQUA, discussion and validation within the working group, and eventual approval by the Steering Committee, with the inclusion of external advice if deemed necessary.

Table 9 - Approval and review of guides

GUIDE	APPROVAL AND REVIEW DATE
Ex-ante programme accreditation	- January 2017 (approval) - July 2020 (review) - June 2021 (review) - February 2022 (review)
Ex-post programme accreditation	- January 2018 (approval) - June 2022 (review)
Programme follow-up	- October 2019 (approval) - Expected in January 2024 (review)
Programme modification	- July 2020 (approval) - June 2022 (review)
Ex-ante institutional accreditation	- January 2023 (approval) - October 2023 (review)

7.2.2 Methodologies fit for the purpose

The formulation of external QA methodologies is guided by considerations of both the national and international frameworks, the functions of AQUA, and the expectations of stakeholders. During the course of developing external QA activities, self-assessment reports are required to rest upon solid evidence, while assessment reports must be substantiated adequately and, when feasible, consistently supported by ample evidence.

Moreover, the formulation of processes incorporates a thoughtful assessment of the intended aims, objectives, and execution, keeping in mind the potential workload and costs that these processes might entail for institutions. AQUA recognises the demanding schedules institutions maintain, and acknowledges that accreditation procedures can potentially burden them, particularly in the case of the ex-ante programme accreditation process. This can also pose a challenge for AQUA itself. This matter is particularly significant for smaller institutions with limited personnel. In response, AQUA actively engages in discussions with HEIs and the relevant Ministry overseeing higher education. This dialogue aims to ensure that the devised processes align with both expectations and the national and international frameworks. Throughout the accreditation process, AQUA maintains ongoing communication with institutions to address any uncertainties that might impede efficiency.

As presented in AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3), the agency will start developing the ex-post institutional accreditation guide at the end of this year (2024), which is viewed as an opportunity to streamline the programme accreditation process by eliminating cross-cutting aspects. Besides, having an ex-post institutional accreditation will make the external QA evaluation in the Andorran higher education system more efficient and strengthen trust between stakeholders.

The need to assist institutions in enhancing their quality and showcasing their progress is also a focal point. To support institutions in improving the quality of their programmes,

all evaluation or accreditation reports summarise strengths and offer recommendations for enhancement. As previously mentioned, continuous communication between AQUA and HEIs, prior to and during external QA processes, aids in promoting improvement. All reports released by AQUA, both preliminary and final, are discussed with the responsible parties at HEIs, ensuring that weak points, strengths, and improvement suggestions are clearly understood. Ultimately, AQUA remains readily available to provide support and guidance.

7.2.3 Involvement of stakeholders

Stakeholders are actively engaged in the formal design and ongoing enhancement of external QA processes through the participation of the Working Group and the Steering Committee, which AQUA considers a **strength** of the agency. The Working Group on Quality in Higher Education, under the leadership of AQUA, comprises representatives from all HEIs offering state higher education degrees, as well as representatives from the Ministry responsible for higher education (see Table 10). The Working Group is driven by the following objectives:

- Providing a stable forum for open dialogue among the primary stakeholders involved in higher education in Andorra.
- Serving as a collaborative platform for the construction and advancement of a quality-driven culture.
- Offering guidance in the development and establishment of an exclusive quality management system for higher education in Andorra.
- Facilitating opportunities for the dissemination, outreach, and training of quality-related initiatives within higher education.

Table 10 - Current members of the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education

MEMBER	INSTITUTION	AFFILIATION
Mr. F. Xavier Campuzano	Ministry in charge of HE	Director of Higher Education
Mr. Julià Pol	Ministry in charge of HE	Higher Education Officer
Dr. Rosa Maria Mariño	Universitat d'Andorra	Head of the QA Service
Mr. Aleu Miret	Universitat Europea IMF	Head of the QA Service
Mr. Angel Feijoo	Universitat Carlemany	Head of the QA Service
Mr. Rafael Llavori	UNIPRO Universitat Digital	Head of the QA Service
Dr. Lluis Vicent	Western Europe University	Head of the QA Service
Mr. Antonio Torres	TECH Global University	Head of the QA Service
Dr. Isaac Galobardes	AQUA	Director
Ms. Paula Przybylowicz	AQUA	QA specialist

This Group stands as an enduring and solidified entity, having played a pivotal role in shaping a culture of quality throughout the expansion of the higher education system. As previously noted, the creation and enhancement of external QA processes and criteria are deliberated within this group prior to final approval.

In December 2023, small subgroups of the Working Group were established to tackle different aspects: guides, indicators and evidence, and academic integrity. From January 2024, the main group is regarded as the main point of presenting information while the subgroups are regarded as the main points of debate. This change was established as a strategic objective in our Strategic Plan 2023-2025, since the number of higher education institutions is increasing, and it is difficult to have efficient meetings all together.

As previously stated, the ultimate endorsement of external QA processes and criteria currently lies within the purview of the Steering Committee. The composition of the Steering Committee encompasses a blend of external and internal stakeholders. Table 11 provides a concise summary of the stakeholders engaged in the formulation and ongoing enhancement of external QA processes.

Table 11 - Stakeholders involved in the design and continuous improvement of external QA processes

BODIES	INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS						
	Students	Academic staff	University rectors	Ministers and representatives of the Government	Members of parliament	Employers	International experts
Working group on quality in higher education		✓		✓			
Steering committee	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

As stated previously, the agency is re-structuring the Working Group (WG) to align with the new activities outlined in the Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3). Specifically, objective O5.2 aims to increase student participation in all activities of the agency, more specifically looking at gathering insights from the student population to better understand their viewpoints and enhance the quality of higher education. In mid-2024, the agency initiated efforts to involve students actively in the Working Group on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and its sub-groups. To achieve this goal, AQUA is currently organizing meetings with student representatives from each HEI in Andorra to highlight the significance of their representation in the WG. These meetings are crucial to explain the pivotal role that student perspectives play in enhancing quality assurance processes.

7.2.4 Evidence

- Evaluation guides (Annex 5).
- AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3).

7.3 ESG 2.3. Implementing processes

All external QA processes are pre-established and made publicly available on AQUA's website: *Quality assurance* and during the Working Group on Quality in Higher Education meetings. To enhance communication, AQUA additionally sends email notifications to the individuals responsible for internal quality within each HEI, notifying them of the release of a new evaluation guide.

The procedures for programme accreditations (ex-ante, ex-post, follow-up, and modification) and the ex-ante institutional accreditation adhere to a uniform pattern, with the exception of the visit and interviews. These elements may vary due to the distinct characteristics and objectives of each process, as illustrated in Table 12.

Note that an ex-ante programme accreditation, programme modification and ex-ante institutional evaluation do not include a site visit. Regarding the first, during the ex-ante programme accreditation, a proposal for a study programme is evaluated. Until the study programme is accredited, facilities and academic staff may not have been definitively assigned. Regarding programme modification, the process is considered as an ex-ante activity. In other words, a proposal for a study programme modification is evaluated. Finally, regarding the ex-ante institutional evaluation, AQUA evaluates the quality aspects of a strategic plan presented by promotors. Therefore, there is no HEI yet to be visited.

Table 12 - *Key features in the ESG 2.3 implementation in each external QA process*

ACTIVITY	OBJECT	ESG 2.3 PROCESSES				
		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	✓	✓		✓	

In such instances, the assessment relies on a declaration of intentions rather than concrete outcomes. AQUA requests documentary evidence, cross-referencing it with publicly accessible information such as the institution's website. AQUA operates on the premise that the information provided by the HEI is truthful, accurate, and comprehensive. However, the final validation of documentary evidence occurs during subsequent follow-up or ex-post processes.

AQUA's evaluation of the standards and criteria formulated in the assessment processes relies on the following types of evidence:

Self-assessment reports

All external QA procedures begin with an examination of a self-assessment report or an equivalent document. These reports are generated by the institution undergoing assessment. The report serves as a means for the institution to demonstrate that the outcomes achieved (or the ones that must be achieved in the case of ex-ante evaluations) for a particular study programme or within a designated strategic plan (ex-ante institutional accreditation) align with the intended objectives and correspond to established quality criteria. The purpose of reviewing these reports is to conduct an analysis, based on evidence and indicators, of the accomplishments related to the assessed dimensions and criteria. Additionally, if applicable, any reasons for not fully achieving these objectives are explored, along with any implemented or planned improvement actions.

The structure and content of each self-assessment report must be tailored to conform to AQUA's guidelines. In the case of ex-ante programme accreditation and ex-ante institutional accreditation, the reports should also align with the Decree sanctioning the regulations for state higher education degrees and the Decree approving the regulations for the authorisation of private HEIs.

External assessment

As will be further discussed in Chapter 7.4 (ESG 2.4), in all external QA processes conducted, an Evaluation Panel comprising external experts is engaged. The primary function of this panel is to produce an expert report evaluating the assessment criteria

(please refer to the 'Development of the process' section in each guide for detailed information).

All external QA processes adhere to a standardised sequence of phases and yield the following reports (see Table 13). Note that the preliminary assessment issues a preliminary report which is an interim report open to modifications and amendments.

Table 13 - Phases and reports issued in all the external QA processes

PHASE OF THE EXTERNAL QA PROCESS	REPORT ISSUED
I. Preliminary assessment	
I.a. Evaluation Panel	Preliminary expert report
I.b. Evaluation Committee	Preliminary evaluation/accreditation report
II. Final assessment	
II.a. Evaluation Panel	Final expert report
II.b. Evaluation Committee	Final evaluation/accreditation report

Site-visit

The ex-post programme accreditation and programme follow-up phases incorporate a site visit and interviews with stakeholders (please refer to the '5. Site-visit, interviews, and presentation of the programme' section in the evaluation guides for comprehensive details).

In line with a predetermined timetable coordinated between AQUA and the HEI, AQUA proposes an agenda for the visit to the university. This agenda specifies the date and time of the sessions to be held with various groups associated with the degree, including degree coordinators, teaching staff, students, administrative and support teams, alumni, and employers. Additionally, the agenda outlines the facilities that will be visited during the process. The university is required to provide a duly completed version of this agenda.

The stakeholder interviews can be conducted either in person or online. The online method has proven to be particularly effective, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic and for interviewing students in online universities. This approach has demonstrated success for both parties involved.

The panel of external experts, in addition to reviewing anticipated evidence and conducting facility visits, also carries out scheduled interviews with programme stakeholders. This includes a public hearing that is open to the entire higher education institution community.

External report

As detailed in Table 13 and in Chapter 7.6 (ESG 2.6), the culmination of all external QA processes involves the issuance of an external assessment report.

The procedure begins with the panel of external experts generating an *expert report*, providing a well-founded evaluation of compliance with the established criteria. AQUA equips each evaluator with the assessment guide and a document containing assessment rubrics for each criterion. These resources aid in developing an initial and individual assessment. The panel's secretary then coordinates the crafting of a unified report, which is subsequently ratified by all experts in a virtual meeting. This expert report is subsequently submitted to the Evaluation Committee, which it uses as the basis for the accreditation decision, following the provided model.

This procedure is executed for both the preliminary assessment phase and the final phase. In the preliminary phase, an interim report is produced. The university is allocated a 10-day period to present any objections or remarks. After a thorough review of these submissions, if any, the final report is generated. The details of the external report are outlined in the 'Results and effects of the process' section of each evaluation guide.

Follow-up

Originally, follow-ups were mandatory when an ex-ante evaluation received partial accreditation. However, in 2020, the Steering Committee simplified the ex-ante accreditation process, reducing the results to 'accredited' and 'non-accredited'. Consequently, programme follow-ups became voluntary activities for HEI by law. Note that this activity, although currently voluntary, acts as the follow-up step for the ex-ante and the ex-post programme accreditation.

Presently, follow-ups are not a competence of the agency but fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry responsible for higher education. AQUA finds this situation uncomfortable because it lacks the authority to conduct consistent follow-ups after an ex-ante or ex-post accreditation. Consequently, AQUA has engaged in discussions with the Ministry to change this issue and regain responsibility for the follow-up processes. This change, discussed at the end of section 4.1.2, is expected to be introduced this year, following the revision of the current legal framework.

It is worth mentioning that, even though AQUA is currently implementing all external quality assurance processes autonomously, before the modification of AQUA's Founding Law and the establishment of the AQUA Evaluation Committee with its corresponding regulations, the management of Evaluation Panels was entrusted to other agencies registered in EQAR and holding membership in ENQA. This management was formalised through collaboration agreements that delineated the terms of cooperation. Throughout the process, AQUA upheld a seamless dialogue with the HEI, as well as with the collaborating agency.

AQUA prefers implementing the external quality assurance processes by itself. AQUA's experience in externalising procedures made the agency realise that losing direct contact with the experts can lead to problems during the evaluation, such as inconsistencies or insufficient information. This happened because experts from other agencies had limited knowledge of the singularities of our higher education system and legal framework, and because AQUA's quality assurance specialists did not have direct contact with the experts to solve doubts during the process.

Since 2022 AQUA has been leading all external evaluation processes and implementing them. AQUA learnt from other agencies and best practices were implemented. Inconveniences such as those mentioned before were significantly minimised.

7.3.1 Evidence

- Collaborations (Annex 4)
- Evaluation guides (Annex 5).
- AQUA's Accreditation Reports (in Catalan): *Documents*
- Flow charts of the processes including a visit (Annex 11)

7.4 ESG 2.4. Peer-review experts

The assessment activities carried out by AQUA require external independent experts to be appointed by the agency in each case to carry out its functions. These experts are responsible for evaluating programmes as well as the institution's strategic plan. For each evaluation process, a specific panel of external experts is established, comprising specialists and students in the particular field of the degree under evaluation.

The composition and management of the Evaluation Panels are outlined in Chapter 6 of the Decree that approves the Regulations of AQUA (*Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*), and this information is also made available on the website.

The Evaluation Panels consist of at least one individual from each of the following profiles. Note that, with the exception of AQUA staff, panel members act independently.

- Academic staff
- Students
- Professionals
- AQUA staff, who acts as the panel secretary

The agency recruits experts through the expert capture form on the website, which is available on a continuous basis. Once the expert is recruited, the Director of AQUA selects a specific panel of external experts for each evaluation based on the criteria published in the Decree that approves the Regulations of AQUA (Annex 6).

Upon completion of the expert selection process, AQUA notifies the university about the panel's composition. The university then has a five-day period to exercise the right to challenge the selected members if it detects a conflict of interest, reinforcing the aim of having independent evaluators.

After this deadline, AQUA proceeds with the appointment and definitive formation of the corresponding panel of external experts. It is important to note that all panel members are of equal importance, with students having the same rights as the other members. Experts receive financial compensation in the form of a fixed amount per meeting.

Once a panel is formed, AQUA provides the external experts with all the necessary documents for conducting the evaluation before the training session. These documents include a copy of the guide along with training videos that detail each criterion and provide guidance on how to assess them. During the training session, AQUA thoroughly explain the evaluation process, address any queries, and respond to questions to ensure that all evaluators possess a solid understanding of both the evaluation process and the criteria. It is crucial to emphasise that attendance at the training session is mandatory for all experts and evaluators, and their participation is compensated.

According to the Decree that approves the Regulations of AQUA, the training session is designed to achieve the following objectives:

- Familiarise participants with the reference framework and the context in which the evaluation will be conducted.
- Strengthen cohesiveness within the work team.
- Comprehend the guiding principles that will shape the evaluation process and align with the agency's expectations.
- Gain insight into the unfolding process and the associated documentation.
- Develop a grasp of the dimensions and evaluation criteria involved.
- Understand the particulars of potential visits and interviews (when applicable).
- Acquaint oneself with the characteristics of the resulting evaluation reports.

The experts training is usually made through a virtual meeting that lasts for about one hour. As mentioned in the objectives above, AQUA's technical staff details for the expert, the Andorran context of higher education and their role in the evaluation, along with a review of the legal framework and a section on showcasing a practical case of the assessment they will be doing during the evaluation.

Trainings are reserved to new experts, once they have been selected for a specific evaluation and approved by the HEI for this evaluation. However, when an evaluation guide or process changes, the technical staff retrains experienced experts to make sure they are up-to-date with AQUA's latest standards. In the same spirit, whenever an experienced expert does a new type of evaluation they haven't participated in previously, they are also trained in that particular evaluation process.

During the evaluation, each external expert fills out a form with their assessment (of the programme or the strategic plan) according to AQUA's evaluation criteria. In the case of ex-post evaluations, this happens after the on-site visit and interviews. Each external expert works independently, and once all forms are completed, the entire panel gathers in an online meeting during which the AQUA staff representative (the panel secretary) drafts the report summarising the external experts' individual assessments. The report's draft is then sent to the external experts for further revision and approval, before being handed to AQUA's Evaluation Committee.

Upon the conclusion of the evaluation procedure, AQUA undertakes an internal assessment of each expert's suitability, taking into consideration factors such as professionalism, teamwork aptitude, and the rigour of their contributions. AQUA intends to retain proficient experts for involvement in various panels. By doing so, they ensure the seamless progression of the evaluation process, while also affording the retained experts a deeper understanding of the context and evaluation criteria. This approach serves to uphold the quality and consistency of the evaluation outcomes.

All evaluators strictly adhere to the Code of Ethics (Annex 2), which ensures the absence of conflicts of interest and upholds principles such as independence, confidentiality, objectivity, excellence, and transparency. To ensure the integrity of their actions, experts are always selected from outside the universities of Andorra, resulting in a significant presence of international experts within the panels. AQUA's strategy involves forming balanced panels that encompass a mix of professionals. This mix includes individuals well-versed in the Andorran context as well as experts with international quality assurance evaluation experience from other agencies. This approach contributes to a comprehensive and well-informed evaluation process.

International experts are often sourced from Catalonia (Spain) due to the shared language, which facilitates management and reporting. However, AQUA is committed to promoting the involvement of experts from regions beyond Catalan-speaking areas. Nonetheless, the translation of assessment documents incurs both time and financial costs. The Steering Committee has engaged in multiple discussions on this matter, but a satisfactory resolution has not yet been achieved. The low diversity of peer reviews is considered a **challenge** for the agency.

Presently, institutions seeking evaluation by an international panel from areas beyond Catalan-speaking regions have the option to submit their self-assessment report in both Catalan and English. This accommodates language diversity and ensures a broader scope of participation. However, to date, no institution has exercised this option. In this regard, AQUA will continue encouraging institutions to do so.

7.4.1 Evidence

- Decree approving AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*
- Decree modifying AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 68/2022, del 23-2-2022, pel qual s'aprova la modificació del Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Criteria used for the selection of external experts (Annex 6)
- AQUA's website: *AQUA's pool of experts.*

7.5 ESG 2.5. Criteria for outcomes

As mentioned above, each external QA process has its own guide, discussed within the Working Group and approved by the Steering Committee. All the guides are available on the website: *Quality of programmes*.

Each guide includes a description of all the quality criteria assessed, except the programme modification and the follow-up guides, which depend on the type of request. The description includes the following information:

- The quality dimension in which the criterion is included and a brief description.
- The ESG on the basis of which the dimension is defined.
- The legal framework on the basis of which the dimension is defined.
- The criteria and a description of what is considered within this criterion to reach a suitable assessment.

In addition, the ex-post programme accreditation guide and the ex-ante institutional accreditation guide also include the following information (note that the next update of the ex-ante programme accreditation guide will include this information as well):

- The evidence that the HEI should provide to demonstrate its achievements.
- The indicators that the HEI should provide to demonstrate its achievements.
- The assessment rubric used by the evaluators to assess the criteria.

The guides also include a chapter about the results and effects of the process. This chapter explains the possible results of the process ('favourable' or 'unfavourable'), how each result is obtained and the implications they will have on the assessed programme or institution's strategic plan. Note that the current changes in legal regulations aim to add another result: 'conditional'. This will help AQUA apply more improvement-orientated practices.

Once the experts are trained, they review the self-assessment report and individually evaluate each criterion using assessment rubrics (Annex 5). The result of assessing each criterion can be categorised as follows:

- Very adequate
- Adequate
- Non-adequate
- Insufficient information

Each Evaluation Panel includes a secretary who is a member of the AQUA staff. The secretary collates a preliminary report proposal based on the inputs provided by the experts. The secretary's role is not to render judgments on criterion compliance, but rather to ensure that experts have a thorough understanding of the criteria and to promote consistency. This proposal of the report undergoes discussion and consensus-building in a meeting attended by all experts and the secretary, evolving into the finalised Expert Report.

The Evaluation Committee, a standing body composed of members who have received training and possess a comprehensive understanding of the assessment guides, analyses the expert report. This committee makes the final determination regarding the evaluation or accreditation outcome, whether it is favourable or unfavourable. The Director of AQUA participates in this meeting as the committee's president, once again ensuring coherence in the decision-making process.

In order to secure a favourable result, all criteria must attain at least an 'adequate' rating. The Evaluation Committee may also issue a favourable report if it deems that a criterion labelled as 'inadequate' or 'insufficient information' does not significantly impact the curriculum's quality or can be promptly addressed.

Upon issuance of the evaluation or accreditation report, AQUA engages in a meeting with the Higher Education Institution (HEI) to ensure their thorough understanding of the report. This step holds particular significance in guiding subsequent assessments and fostering improvement.

7.5.1 Evidence

- Evaluation guides (Annex 5).

7.6 ESG 2.6. Reporting

The process for drafting and issuing evaluation reports includes the following steps:

- **Preliminary *expert* evaluation report**: during the preliminary evaluation meeting, the external experts and the panel secretary meet online to discuss each external expert's autonomous assessment of the evaluation criteria. During this meeting, the panel secretary drafts the expert evaluation report, which will later be reviewed and signed by the whole panel. Once the external experts have validated the report, the panel secretary sends it to AQUA's Evaluation Committee.
- **Preliminary evaluation report**: the Evaluation Committee reviews the preliminary expert report to ensure the consistency of the application of the evaluation criteria with previous evaluation processes, and issues the preliminary evaluation report without significantly and substantially changing the preliminary expert evaluation report. The preliminary evaluation report is then sent to the HEI, which has 10 days to present objections, comments, or additional information.
- **Final *expert* evaluation report**: after the external experts have autonomously reviewed the objections, comments, or additional information provided by the HEI, they meet online with the panel secretary, who drafts the final expert report. The report is then validated and signed by the whole panel, and sent by the panel secretary to AQUA's Evaluation Committee.
- **Final evaluation report**: The Evaluation Committee reviews the final expert report to ensure the consistency of the application of the evaluation criteria with previous evaluation processes, and issues the final evaluation report, without significatively and substantially changing the final expert evaluation report. The final evaluation report, which includes the accreditation resolution, is sent to the HEI, which has the opportunity to appeal.

Table 13 (section 7.3, page 41) summarises the reports issued during the various phases of all external QA processes. The preliminary evaluation/accreditation report, initially drafted by the Evaluation Committee, is provided to the Higher Education Institution (HEI) for potential revisions. The HEI is given a 10-day window to present objections or comments, which will be taken into account during the final phase. This provision grants the institution the opportunity to rectify factual errors before the report is finalised.

Both the Evaluation Panels and the Evaluation Committee work to ensure that the evaluation and accreditation reports:

- Are clear, succinct, and rigorous.
- Focus on pertinent aspects aligned with the assessment's objective and criteria.
- Maintain transparency, showcasing the assessment criteria, relevant information, evidentiary support used for evaluation, and a well-reasoned outcome.
- Highlight commendable practices.
- Explicitly outline formal decisions and their implications.

These evaluation and accreditation reports serve as the foundation for subsequent actions following external evaluations and can also serve as guidelines for improving assessment dimensions. This is of particular importance within a relatively new and growing higher education system. Consequently, all reports identify noteworthy practices, recommend improvement measures, or offer suggestions.

- If a criterion is rated as 'somewhat adequate' or 'insufficient information,' the report will delineate 'improvement measures.' These measures will be systematically numbered for ease of tracking in subsequent evaluations.
- For any of the aforementioned ratings, the report might include 'recommendations' that the university can consider in enhancing the respective criterion.

Furthermore, the reports disseminate information to society about the assessed programmes or HEI's strategic plans.

On the other hand, Article 3 of the Decree that approves the Regulations of AQUA (*Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*) outlines the minimum information and characteristics that must be present in the reports:

Article 3. Assessment Reports[7]

Assessment reports must, at minimum, encompass a description of the subject under evaluation, a depiction of the employed evaluation procedure, the outcomes, conclusions derived from the evaluation, and, where applicable, commendable practices and recommendations for improvement. If necessary, the reports should specify whether the subject of evaluation has been accredited or not.

The final accreditation or evaluation reports, when issued with a favourable outcome by the Evaluation Committee, are required to be available on the website: *Documents.* This requirement is mandatory and formally outlined in Article 15 of the AQUA's Founding Law (*Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*). Additionally, as stipulated in Article 3 of the Decree that approves the Regulations of AQUA, the remaining reports will be accessible to individuals who can demonstrate a legitimate interest.

As mentioned earlier, the legal framework specifies that unfavourable reports will not be published on the website; however, they must be accessible to individuals with legitimate interests. This decision was made during the initial stages of development in the higher education system, with the intention of not adversely affecting nascent higher education institutions. In any case, the current AQUA team is against the article in the agency law and it is currently working with the Legislative Commission and the Ministry to change it. AQUA seeks to publish all reports, favourable and unfavourable. Besides, non-publication of all reports is against of a national law regarding transparency: *Llei 33/2021, del 2 de desembre, de transparència, accés a la informació pública i govern obert*.

Finally, please note that the agency's website is designed to be public, transparent, and easily accessible to the academic community, external partners, and other interested parties.

7.6.1 Evidence

- AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Modification of AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 14/2020, del 12 de novembre, de modificació de la Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*
- Decree approving AQUA's Regulations (in Catalan): *Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*

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[7] non-certified translation of the Decree Approving AQUA's Regulation (*Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*).

- Decree modifying AQUA's Regulations (in Catalan): *Decret 68/2022, del 23-2-2022, pel qual s'aprova la modificació del Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Andorra's Transparency Law (in Catalan): *Llei 33/2021, del 2 de desembre, de transparència, accés a la informació pública i govern obert.*
- AQUA's Accreditation Reports (in Catalan): *Documents*
- Flow charts of the processes with a visit (Annex 11)

7.7 ESG 2.7. Complaints and appeals

7.7.1. Complaints

Participants in any procedure managed by AQUA are welcome to offer suggestions, lodge complaints, or convey commendations through regular communication channels. This emphasis on engagement aligns with AQUA's strategic objective O3.1 outlined in AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3).

As part of its internal quality assurance system, AQUA has established a procedure for managing complaints, including those related to external QA processes (see internal procedure PS.09.01). According to this internal procedure, complaints received via email or through the *form enabled for this purpose on the web* are registered and reviewed by AQUA's staff, who inform the director upon receipt. The procedure sets a 2-day period to issue a formal answer to the agent filing the complaint. The complaints registry is used during the annual review of the internal quality assurance system to inform improvement measures included in the annual improvement plan.

7.7.2. Appeals

In all external quality assurance (QA) processes conducted by AQUA, provisions are in place to enable appeals should errors be identified or if there is disagreement with the final result. This mechanism ensures the legal security of the institution undergoing evaluation.

Once the final report is issued, and based on the decision therein, the university holds the right to lodge an appeal with the Appeals Committee. The creation of the Appeals Committee was instituted through a modification to AQUA's establishment law.

The Appeals Committee is the agency body responsible for overseeing the proper handling of appeals stemming from the agency's evaluation or accreditation processes. The Committee's role does not encompass re-evaluation; instead, it focuses on safeguarding the integrity and fairness of assessment procedures. If procedural breaches are identified, the Committee may decide in favour of the appellant, requiring a re-evaluation by the appropriate bodies. To ensure impartiality, no member of the Evaluation Panels or the Evaluation Committee is permitted to serve on the Appeals Committee.

The Appeals Committee is composed of:

- A high-ranking official from the department overseeing higher education, who is also a member of the Steering Committee, acting as the president.
- An international expert, also a member of the Steering Committee.
- A student representative from the University of Andorra, who is a member of the Steering Committee, provided the appeal was not submitted by this institution. If the University of Andorra filed the appeal, the Committee member would be the student representative from the Steering Committee, representing other universities in the country.

An external lawyer serves as the secretary of the Appeals Committee, nominated by the committee president. This individual ensures the legal integrity of the process. The

committee has the authority to recruit an external expert to prepare a report analysing the case.

The operation of the Appeals Committee and the appeals process are regulated by Article 24 of the Decree approving the Regulations of AQUA (*[Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)](#)*). The appeals process is detailed as follows:

Article 24. Appeal Process[8]

Individuals or institutions intending to appeal may submit an administrative appeal against decisions made by the Evaluation Committee or those issued by AQUA within one month of receiving notification of the resolution. The appeal letter must be directed to AQUA's Appeals Committee and should include the appealing individual's or institution's contact information, specify the appeal's subject, and provide reasons for filing the appeal. Relevant supporting documentation should also accompany the administrative appeal if deemed appropriate.

The resolution of the appeal follows these steps:

a. Review of Formal Aspects: The President of the Appeals Committee examines the appeal for formal correctness. If any deficiencies require correction, the appealing individual or institution receives notification. They have ten days to address the necessary corrections. Failure to rectify the formal defect within this time will result in considering the appeal withdrawn, and a corresponding resolution will be issued.

b. Formation of the Appeals Committee: The composition of the Committee is published on AQUA's website and communicated to the appealing individual or institution within a maximum of two days after receiving the appeal. If a challenged resolution or action affects an individual or institution in which a committee member holds a conflict of interest, that member must abstain. Failure to do so can lead to a challenge against them.

A challenge request must be submitted within two working days of the communication of the Committee's composition. This submission should include facts and legal grounds justifying the challenge. The challenge is directed to the Appeals Committee. The Committee's Chairperson, or their substitute if challenged, forwards the request to the challenged individual, who has two working days to respond. If they contest the challenge, they can provide a written opposition within the same two-day period. The Appeals Committee members not involved in the challenge, with support from other Steering Committee members (up to a maximum of three members), resolve the challenge within three working days after receiving the last response. The resolution is communicated to both parties, along with the Committee's composition and members' information.

c. Analysis of the Administrative Appeal: Appeals Committee members analyse the appeal. If necessary, the Committee's Chairperson can seek clarifications or arrange a hearing involving the appealing individual or institution and the Evaluation Committee. External experts can also be consulted at the Chairperson's request for advice on resolving appeals or issuing required reports. The Appeals Committee, within the scope of the filed appeal, cannot consider new documents or merits produced after the contested resolution's date.

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[8] Non-certified translation of the Decree Approving AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *[Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)](#)*

d. Resolution of the Administrative Appeal: The Chairperson of the Appeals Committee issues a reasoned resolution within a maximum of two months. The appeal resolution period begins the day after the appeal's submission. However, this period is suspended if deficiencies need correction and resumes after the correct submission or, in the case of a challenge, after the Committee's proper constitution.

Resolutions from the Appeals Committee conclude the administrative process.

AQUA has encountered two appeals related to ex-ante programme accreditations, both of which received unfavourable outcomes in 2020. The Appeals Committee dismissed both appeals. The Appeals Committee's effectiveness has been substantiated through its actions, deploying its functions as required and demonstrating diligence in reporting on matters.

The option to appeal any formal decision made by AQUA is explicitly outlined in the 'Description of the Assessment Process' section within all assessment guides. The operational details of the Appeals Committee and the appeals process are readily available within the Decree that approves the Regulations of AQUA, which can be easily accessed on AQUA's website.

The occurrence of 2 appeals against AQUA's decisions subsequent to the establishment of the Appeals Committee underscores the accessibility and clarity of this process. This serves as evidence that the appeals process is easily understood and effectively communicated.

7.7.3 Evidence

- AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Modification of AQUA's Founding Law (in Catalan): *Llei 14/2020, del 12 de novembre, de modificació de la Llei 9/2016, del 28 de juny, de creació de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*
- Decree approving AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*
- Decree modifying AQUA's Regulation (in Catalan): *Decret 68/2022, del 23-2-2022, pel qual s'aprova la modificació del Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA).*
- Evaluation guides (Annex 5).
- AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3)
- AQUA's Process Map (Annex 8)

8 OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS

From the beginning, AQUA has prioritised maintaining a close relationship with stakeholders. They participate in the agency's decision-making bodies as well as in activities aimed at improving the higher education system, enabling AQUA to continuously consider and integrate stakeholder feedback.

To this end, some of the main actions that allow AQUA to receive continuous feedback from stakeholders and to understand their opinions are listed below:

- The development of AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 provided an opportunity to share the agency's upcoming challenges, opportunities, and main lines of action with stakeholders.
- The Working Group on Quality in Higher Education is a stable platform for discussing evaluation criteria and guidelines. It meets regularly and includes all universities and the Ministry responsible for higher education. It provides very valuable firsthand information regarding stakeholders' opinions on external quality assurance processes.
- AQUA has incorporated student representatives in all the agency's collegiate bodies and all the evaluation panels
- The Director and staff of AQUA maintain regular meetings with the Ministry responsible for higher education, as well as with the rectors and quality management representatives of each of the Andorran universities.
- AQUA has entered into a collaboration agreement with the Xarxa Vives d'Universitats, a non-profit institution that represents and coordinates the collective efforts of Catalan-speaking universities from Catalonia, Valencia, the Balearic Islands, Sardinia, and Andorra. AQUA actively collaborates with the Via Universitaria programme, which aims to gather rigorous, objective, and comprehensive information about student living conditions and their connections. This data is used to formulate proposals for enhancing university policies.
- AQUA has strengthened its activity on social networks and updated its website to better disseminate information and activities to stakeholders.

In particular, the preparation of this SAR has also taken into account the opinion of stakeholders through a specific survey (see Annex 10). The survey has been addressed to all quality managers of universities as well as the Ministry responsible for higher education. Note that some results are not fully significant since only four stakeholders (3 HEIs and the Ministry responsible for higher education) responded to the survey.

Figure 4 presents the main results obtained. These rate the compliance with each of the ESG Part 2 and Part 3. The results show that, in general, stakeholders consider that AQUA has an adequate degree of compliance with the ESG. Just three ESGs show low percentages (25%) with a low degree of compliance. These are the ESG 2.6, ESG 3.6 and ESG 3.7. The survey clarifies these results with the following comments:

- ESG 2.6: The low compliance rating refers to the fact that unfavourable reports are not published. This is not entirely within AQUA's control, as publishing these unfavourable reports requires a change in the approval of the Higher Education State Degrees' Regulation (*Decret del 8-7-2020 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament d'ordenació de les titulacions d'ensenyament superior estatals*).
- ESG 3.6: Stakeholders are unaware of whether AQUA has an internal quality assessment system. This is understandable, as AQUA´s Internal Quality Assurance System has been implemented recently this year and has not yet been presented to stakeholders.
- ESG 3.7: The low compliance and the N/A ratings are related to a lack of external review processes undertaken by the agency.

Figure 4 *- Stakeholders' opinion on AQUA's compliance with the ESGs*
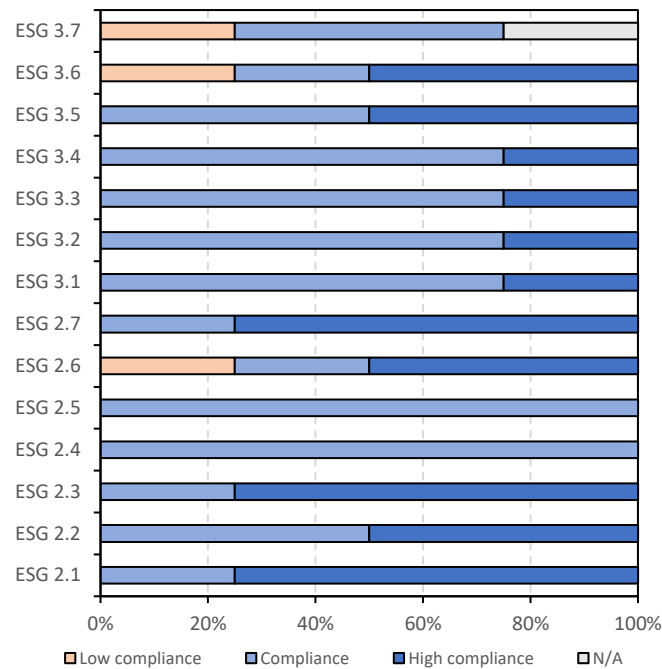
From Figure 4 and the results obtained from the survey, qualitative information of great interest for assessing and improving AQUA's compliance with the ESGs was obtained. Based on the ESGs that received the highest ratings, stakeholders identified the following strengths:

- AQUA's close relationship with universities facilitates collaborative work on various issues.
- The evaluation guides published by the agency are of great help to university institutions, providing clear rubrics and criteria.
- The reports are consistent with shared guidelines and criteria, and there is a high level of interaction between AQUA and the universities.
- Continuous feedback and easy dialogue with AQUA, along with an emphasis on quality as an improvement tool, provide clarity in describing processes and criteria.
- The agency's efforts in establishing a Strategic Plan with a specific mission and action plan are commendable.
- The agency has demonstrated its independence from the Andorran government and influential powers in higher education in Andorra.
- AQUA finds solutions to conceptual disagreements, such as the voluntary follow-up evaluation, which helps mitigate the long 10-year periods stipulated by degree approval decrees.
- The agency's team is recognised for its quality.
- AQUA is recognised by the competent authority and has clearly defined its governance and operational system, as well as the applicable regulations.

On the other hand, considering the ESGs that received the lowest ratings, stakeholders appreciate different weaknesses. These, presented below, are considered to define some of the areas for future improvement presented in Section 10:

- Stakeholders would appreciate AQUA's external experts to be less subjective in their evaluations. In certain cases, identified areas for improvement have encroached upon university autonomy.

- Unfavourable reports are not disclosed, although it's important to note that resolving this issue is beyond AQUA's control.
- Evaluations often tend to become overly bureaucratic, with a greater emphasis on accountability rather than improvement.
- On some occasions, discrepancies have arisen between the agency's interpretation and that of the Andorran government regarding a specific decree, leading to misunderstandings.
- More could be achieved with additional resources, particularly in the context of ESG 3.4.
- To date, AQUA has not undergone an official external evaluation.

Note that all the conclusions and comments were incorporated into the drafting of this SAR.

9 SWOT ANALYSIS

9.1.1 Strengths

- Good working environment, efficient staff with a willingness to improve.
- Ease of establishing communication with stakeholders.
- Sources of funding.
- Adaptability to changes.
- Independence and autonomy.
- Satisfaction of evaluators in surveys.
- Consideration of ESG in the legal framework of higher education.
- Plural representation in governing and evaluation bodies.

AQUA's SWOT analysis reveals that the organisation thrives on a positive working environment, and strong funding sources, coupled with adaptability and autonomy. Effective communication with stakeholders is facilitated by the organisation's small size and direct access to stakeholders. This last strength is, in the agency's opinion, an example of good practice for other agencies with similar characteristics as a good relation with the stakeholders allows for faster growth of a culture of quality assurance in higher education, especially when it comes through a rich and constant flux of communication that allows for trust and flexibility to be built within the higher education system.

9.1.2 Weaknesses

- Low capacity for attracting and retaining talent.
- Partial compliance with international standards.
- Inefficient physical and digital infrastructures.
- Limited public visibility.
- Low international relevance.
- Underdeveloped internal quality management system.
- Limited diversification of the profile of external experts.

However, AQUA also faces challenges when it comes to attracting talent, meeting international standards, and improving infrastructure and visibility. In this sense, the agency has participated and led some projects that could increase its international presence and visibility, as was the case with the INQAAHE funded project '*Making Connections between Institutional Evaluation and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*' or our participation in the ENQA-SIACES project 'ESG-PBP Alignment'. Both projects showcase the steps undertaken by AQUA to overcome some of its challenges. Some of the other challenges mentioned in the SWOT are more internal-based and, as detailed in different sections of the SAR, are being tackled through some internal policy changes that favour the attraction and retention of talent. Such policies require an increase in budget that was lately granted (see Figure 3) enabling the implementation of the aforementioned policies.

9.1.3 Opportunities

- Stabilisation and specialisation of personnel.
- International recognition.
- Expansion of activities at the national level.
- Organisation's growth: infrastructure and human resources.
- Internationalisation of the agency and participation in international projects and networks.
- Making evaluation, accreditation, and certification processes more efficient.

Opportunities exist for personnel stabilisation, international recognition, and national expansion. National expansion in particular is an area with significant opportunities, as the current political climate in Andorra has enabled certain legal changes (explained in

the threats). These changes will enhance agency activities, particularly in developing an ex-post institutional external evaluation. This evaluation is a priority for the agency as stated in its Strategic Plan. It aims to transform the quality culture within the country, fostering a proactive approach and using continuous improvement rather than the current emphasis on accountability.

9.1.4 *Threats*

- Not being a member of ENQA and not being registered in EQAR.
- Staff turnover.
- Rapid growth of the higher education system and associated workload.
- Difficulty in establishing full trust with and of Higher Education Institutions.
- Rigidity of the legal framework in higher education.

Finally, threats such as non-membership in ENQA and EQAR, staff turnover, rapid higher education growth, and a rigid legal framework pose significant risks to the implementation of the Strategic Plan of the agency. The rigid legal framework, in particular, is the main obstacle to leveraging the agency's strengths, addressing weaknesses, and exploiting identified opportunities. While the legal framework is unique to Andorra, recent informal discussions with other agencies have revealed that they too are impacted by a legal framework that does not correspond to their needs and activities. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, the current administration has shown a willingness to reexamine and change the legal framework upon sufficient justification. The excellent relationship with the different stakeholders, as previously highlighted, will be crucial in advocating for and driving this change.

10 KEY CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

In our commitment to continually enhance the quality assurance processes and practices within the higher education landscape of Andorra, we recognise several key challenges and areas for future development. These are compiled in AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 (Annex 3). Addressing these challenges will not only bolster our effectiveness as the Quality Assurance Agency but also contribute significantly to the broader educational goals in our higher education system. The following points outline these challenges and our strategies for future development:

International Recognition

Achieving membership in ENQA and registration in EQAR remains an essential goal for our agency. International recognition not only validates the quality of our work but is also vital for promoting cross-border cooperation and mobility in higher education.

To attain membership in ENQA and EQAR registration, the agency will continue to:

- Further align our quality assurance standards and practices with international benchmarks to meet ENQA and EQAR's criteria.
- Forge partnerships with other quality assurance agencies and organisations to exchange best practices and insights, facilitating our journey towards international recognition.
- Maintain transparency and accountability in all our activities, ensuring that our operations meet the highest standards of integrity and professionalism.

Improvement of Human Resources

Retaining and nurturing talent within our agency is critical for maintaining a high level of competence and expertise in quality assurance. Providing opportunities for professional development is essential to foster growth and innovation.

To address this challenge, the agency is committed to:

- Establish comprehensive career development programs that include training and opportunities for professional advancement within the agency.
- Review and revise compensation packages to ensure they are competitive and commensurate, thereby attracting and retaining top talent.
- Encourage continuous learning and skill enhancement among our staff through workshops, seminars, and participation in relevant conferences.

Expansion of Activities at National and International Levels

Expanding our activities, both nationally and internationally, is essential to enrich the quality assurance landscape. This involves engaging in research and educational initiatives, particularly in areas such as academic integrity and participation in educational events.

To broaden our scope and impact, the agency will:

- Invest in research initiatives, particularly in the field of academic integrity, to contribute knowledge and best practices to the global higher education in Andorra.
- Actively participate in international educational events, conferences, and networks to foster collaborations and share our expertise on quality assurance.
- Extend our services to cover a broader range of educational institutions, thus enhancing the overall quality of higher education in Andorra.

More Efficient QA Evaluation Processes

Improving our quality assurance evaluation processes is crucial to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in our work. This includes the development of an Ex-Post Institutional Evaluation Guide and proposing legislative changes.
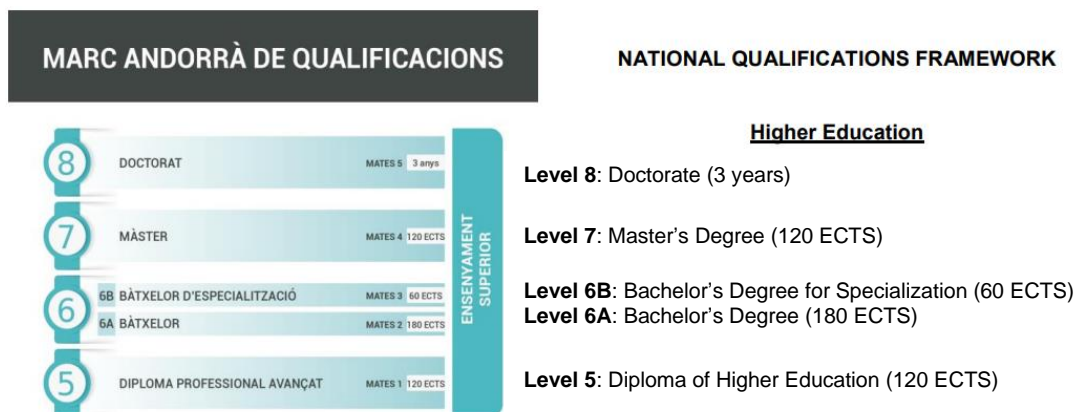
To achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness, we will:

- Develop a comprehensive Ex-Post Institutional Evaluation Guide that outlines clear methodologies and benchmarks.
- Collaborate with relevant stakeholders and propose necessary legislative changes to enhance the regulatory framework, making quality assurance processes more efficient and transparent.
- Implement a continuous improvement approach within our agency, regularly reviewing and refining our evaluation processes based on feedback and changing educational landscapes.
- Improve the peer-review experts' training to minimise the subjectivity observed by stakeholders.

In conclusion, addressing these key challenges and pursuing these areas for future development will position our agency as an equal partner in quality assurance in higher education, both nationally and internationally. By focusing on international recognition, human resource enhancement, expansion of activities, and more efficient evaluation processes, the agency will continue to elevate the quality of higher education in Andorra and contribute, as a microstate agency, to the global development of quality assurance.

Annex 1. Andorran Qualification Framework

Figure 5 summarises the National Qualification Framework that can be found in *Llei 7/2023, del 19 de gener, de text consolidat de creació del Marc andorrà de qualificacions*. Note that the figure presents only the four levels related to higher education: from MAQ 5 to MAQ 8. A non-certified translation is also presented.

MARC ANDORRÀ DE QUALIFICACIONS

8 DOCTORAT — MATES 5 | 3 anys
7 MÀSTER — MATES 4 | 120 ECTS
6B BÀTXELOR D'ESPECIALITZACIÓ — MATES 3 | 60 ECTS
6A BÀTXELOR — MATES 2 | 180 ECTS
5 DIPLOMA PROFESSIONAL AVANÇAT — MATES 1 | 120 ECTS

ENSENYAMENT SUPERIOR

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Higher Education

Level 8: Doctorate (3 years)

Level 7: Master's Degree (120 ECTS)

Level 6B: Bachelor's Degree for Specialization (60 ECTS)
Level 6A: Bachelor's Degree (180 ECTS)

Level 5: Diploma of Higher Education (120 ECTS)

Figure 5 - *National qualification framework (higher education levels) in Andorra*

Annex 2. AQUA's Code of Ethics

Code of Ethics

Introduction

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA)'s Code of Ethics defines the values that guide the performance of AQUA's staff and its external collaborators, as well as the compromises derived from this document, to promote ethical behaviour and foster good practices on the development of their tasks.

Values

Independence

AQUA pledges to be independent and act autonomously.

Rigour

AQUA pledges to perform its activities with exactitude and technical rigour.

Integrity

AQUA pledges to perform its activities in a coherent and honest way, avoiding any conflict of interest.

Transparency

AQUA pledges to publish any relevant information regarding its activities actively and to guarantee the right to access public information.

Collaboration

AQUA pledges to cooperate and work together with different stakeholders, with a constructive perspective, accepting and valuing diversity and different points of view, and contributing to a good working environment. Furthermore, AQUA's activities and results must respect the institutional autonomy of higher education institutions and enhance it.

Equity

AQUA pledges to promote equity in all its activities and processes, as well as to guarantee equal opportunities for its staff.

Innovation

AQUA pledges to promote continuous learning among its staff and to improve the enhancement and development of quality assurance.

Sustainability

AQUA pledges to minimise the social, environmental, and economic impact derived from its activities.

Annex 3. AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025

AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 is available at the following *link*. Its cover is presented in Figure 6.
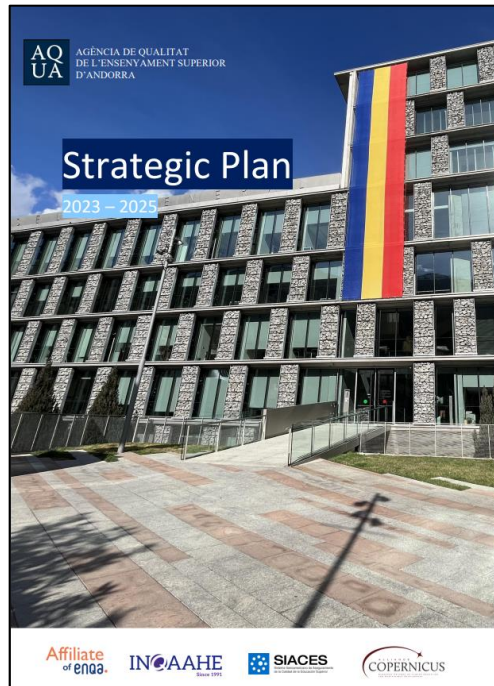
Figure 6 *- AQUA's Strategic Plan 2023-2025 cover*

Annex 4. Seminars, workshops, presentations and collaborations

Table 14 and Table 15 present the seminars and workshops organised by AQUA and the activities AQUA organised in collaboration with other agencies or institutions, respectively.

Table 14- Seminars and workshops organised by AQUA

SEMINARS AND WORKSHOPS	YEAR
Seminar: "Small is beautiful. *Cultura y garantía de la calidad en sistemas universitarios pequeños: la experiencia de Aragón*". Antonio Serrano, director of ACPUA (Spain)	2016
Seminar: "*¿Cómo concebir sistemas de calidad con impacto en la calidad de la educación superior? La experiencia europea*". Javier Paricio Royo, Professor at Universidad de Zaragoza	2016
Seminar: "*Los estándares y directrices para el aseguramiento de la calidad en el Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior (ESG). Utilidad y aplicación en un entorno diverso*". Teresa Sánchez Chaparro, Board of ENQA and CTI	2017
Presentation of the book "*Calidad y universidad*[9]". José Ángel Domínguez	2021

Table 15 - Activities organised in collaboration with other agencies or institutions

ACTIVITY	ORGANISERS	YEAR
Workshop: Preliminary conclusions of the *Study: Guidelines to embed sustainability in the HE quality assurance framework in Andorra*.	AQUA **-** Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona	2017
First Forum Andorra – Aragon on quality and sustainability in higher education.	AQUA- ACPUA	2018
Second Forum Andorra – Aragon on quality and sustainability in higher education.	AQUA- ACPUA	2018
Presentation: *Proposal of Indicators 'Quality indicators in Higher Education for Sustainable Development'*	AQUA- ACPUA	2019
Workshop Quality & Sustainability in Higher Education: from purpose to practice. Daniella Tylbury, Commissioner for Sustainable Development of the Government of Gibraltar and honorary don of St Catharine's College, Cambridge	AQUA – Copernicus Alliance – Universidad Autónoma de Madrid	2020

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[9] *Dominguez, JA (2021). Calidad y universidad. Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca.*

Apart from these, AQUA actively participated in the following worth mentioning events on QA:

- Vision-and-Action workshop of and for the Copernicus Alliance: Sea Change Meeting, 2019. AQUA was invited to present the project about sustainability and quality.
- International seminar 'Embarking QA Agencies and Stakeholders in this Collective Journey', organised by ACPUA, 2019. AQUA presented the publication "*Proposta d'indicadors per a la integració dels Objectius de Desenvolupament Sostenible dins l'avaluació institucional de la qualitat*" and moderated a round table discussion about indicators.
- Inqaahe Biennial Conference 2019. AQUA presented the poster *Making Connections between Institutional Evaluation and Sustainable Development Goals* (United Nations).
- UNESCO and UNECE webinar: Quality of Education and Education for Sustainable Development, 2019. AQUA and ACPUA presented *Mainstreaming SDGs across Quality Frameworks in Higher Education: The Experience of Andorra and Aragon.*
- Curso de verano de la Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo*: Aseguramiento de la calidad y reforma de la ordenación de las enseñanzas universitarias*, 2019. AQUA moderated a round table discussion about: *¿Cómo mejorar los procesos de aseguramiento de la calidad?*
- Copernicus Alliance Online Conference: 'Reaching out for the stars: consolidating the HESD constellation', 2019. AQUA participated in the discussion: *DEEP SPACE: Enhancing quality in higher education: integrating sustainability in quality assurance.*
- 2019 ENQA General Assembly. AQUA presented the poster *Proposal of indicators to embed the sustainable development goals into institutional quality assessment.*
- 2019 European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF), 2019. AQUA participated in the Parallel Plenary Session II: perspectives on QA, entitled *Implementing Sustainable Development in Higher Education*.
- XXVIII Jornadas Crue-Sostenibilidad: "*La Universidad en la transición social hacia la Agenda 2030*", 2019. AQUA was invited to present the plenary conference entitled *Making connections between the Institutional Evaluation and the Sustainable Development Goals. Empowering Stakeholders for Quality Enhancement (Q&S&HE)*.
- INQAAHE Forum 2020 - Regional Networks Meeting. AQUA participated in the round table discussion '*SDG 4 Quality Education: to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*'.
- INQAAHE Anniversary Celebration: 30 years of spreading the culture of quality globally. INQAAHE member meeting 2021. AQUA and ACPUA carried out the Workshop '*Making connections between the Institutional Evaluation and the Sustainable Development Goals on internal quality assurance*'.
- Course "*Docencia y sostenibilidad en educación superior*" (2a Edition). *Unidad de Calidad, Innovación Docente y Prospectiva de la Universidad de Granada*, 2021. AQUA participated in the round table discussion *Sostenibilidad y Gestión Universitaria: "Buenas prácticas en materia de sostenibilidad en educación superior a nivel nacional y europeo".*
- Course "*Aseguramiento de la calidad y reconocimiento de estudios universitarios y de educación superior en el contexto de América Latina y Caribe, y la Unión Europea*". Organised by ANECA (Spain). Isaac Galobardes participated in a round table entitled: "*¿Qué puede hacer una agencia de aseguramiento de la calidad para facilitar el reconocimiento de títulos universitarios en Iberoamérica?*". From 5 to 7 September, 2022.

Finally, Table 16 outlines the memorandums of understanding and other agreements between AQUA and other agencies/institutions. For each agreement, its scope is presented.

Table 16 - Collaboration agreements signed with other agencies

AGREEMENT SIGNED WITH	SCOPE	YEAR
AQU Catalunya	Study programme evaluation	2016
AQU Catalunya	Survey of employment	2016
Complex Research Group Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona	Study	2017
ACPUA	Study programme evaluation	2017
AQU Catalunya	Study programme evaluation	2017
Xarxa Vives d'Universitats	Framework agreement for collaboration and study	2017
AQU Catalunya	Study programme evaluation	2018
ACPUA	Study programme evaluation	2018
AQU Catalunya	Survey of employment	2019
ACPUA	Study programme evaluation	2019
AQU Catalunya	Study programme evaluation	2020
Xarxa Vives d'Universitats	Study	2021
AQU Catalunya	Study programme evaluation	2022
AQU Catalunya	Survey of employment	2022

Annex 5.   Evaluation guides

Presently, AQUA has five different evaluation guides. These are presented in Table 17.

Table 17 - Evaluation guides: links

Evaluation guide for ex-ante study programmes	*https://www.aqua.ad/sites/default/files/2024-05/1_23-038_Guia%20d%27Aprovaci%C3%B3_desembre_2023_r%C3%BAbriques_ANG.pdf*
Evaluation guide for ex-post study programmes	*https://www.aqua.ad/sites/default/files/2024-05/1_19-084_Guia%20d%27Avaluaci%C3%B3%20per%20Renovar%20Plans%20d%27Estudi_ANG.pdf*
Evaluation guide for programme follow-ups	*https://www.aqua.ad/sites/default/files/2024-05/1_23-085_Guia%20de%20seguiment_2023_ANG.pdf*
Evaluation guide for study programme modifications	*https://www.aqua.ad/sites/default/files/2024-05/4_20-025_Guia%20d%27avaluaci%C3%B3%20per%20modificar%20plans%20d%27estudis_2022_ANG.pdf*
Evaluation guide for ex-ante institutional	*https://www.aqua.ad/sites/default/files/2024-05/2_23-070_GA_Noves%20IES%20privades_Octubre%2023_R%C3%BAbriques_ANG.pdf*

# Annex 6. Criteria used for the selection of external experts

Table 18 presents the criteria used in AQUA to select the external experts. This table is presented as a non-certified translation of Article 32 of the Decree approving the Regulations of AQUA (*Decret 63/2021, del 24-2-2021 pel qual s'aprova el Reglament de l'Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra (AQUA)*).

Table 18 - Criteria for the selection of external experts

PROFILE	CRITERIA
Academic staff	The academic staff must meet the following requirements: 1. Hold a doctoral degree. 2. Be actively engaged as academic staff in an institution of higher education different from the institution where the evaluation process takes place. 3. Possess teaching, research, or management experience in the relevant field. Additionally, the following will be considered: 1. Previous experience in quality evaluation processes. 2. Experience in the design and management of academic programmes and innovation projects in the field.
Students	The students must meet the following requirement: 1. Be students in a degree programme similar to the one being evaluated. Additionally, the following will be considered: 1. Previous experience in quality evaluation processes. 2. Experience in managerial roles, participation, or representation.
Professionals	The professionals must meet the following requirements: 1. Be professionals engaged in an activity related to the field, preferably developed in Andorra. 2. Have a relevant professional trajectory in the field. Additionally, the following will be considered: 1. Previous experience in quality evaluation processes. 2. Experience in managerial roles, participation, or representation.
For all panel members	All panel members must meet the following requirements: 1. They must not have any incompatibility or conflict of interest that hinders the performance of their task. Panel members should not have any professional, functional, or personal connection with the institution being evaluated, or any other condition that would compromise the independence of their evaluation. 2. They should have knowledge of the Catalan, Spanish, French, or English language. 3. They must possess the ability to work collaboratively in a rigorous, independent, and unbiased manner. 4. They are required to commit to the Code of Ethics of AQUA.

Annex 7. AQUA´s Internal Quality Assurance System Manual

AQUA's Internal Quality Assurance System Manual is available at the following *link*. Its cover is presented in Figure 7.
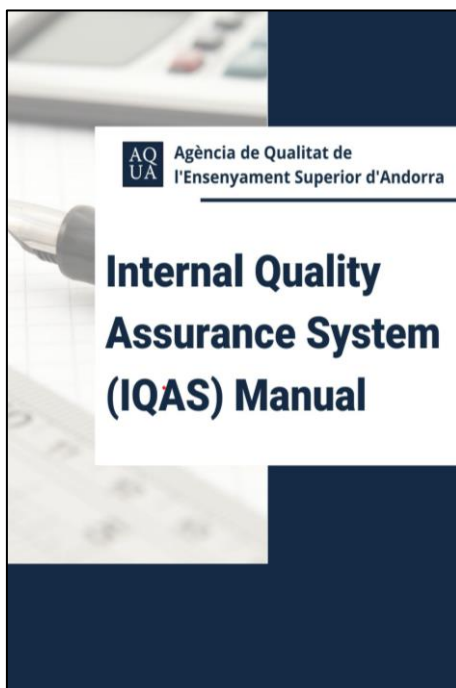
Figure 7 - *AQUA's Internal Quality Assurance System Manual cover*

Annex 8. AQUA's Process Map

Figure 8 presents AQUA's Process Map. The strategic, operational and support processes are listed and a flow chart highlights the monitoring, evaluation and improvement procedures of the whole system.
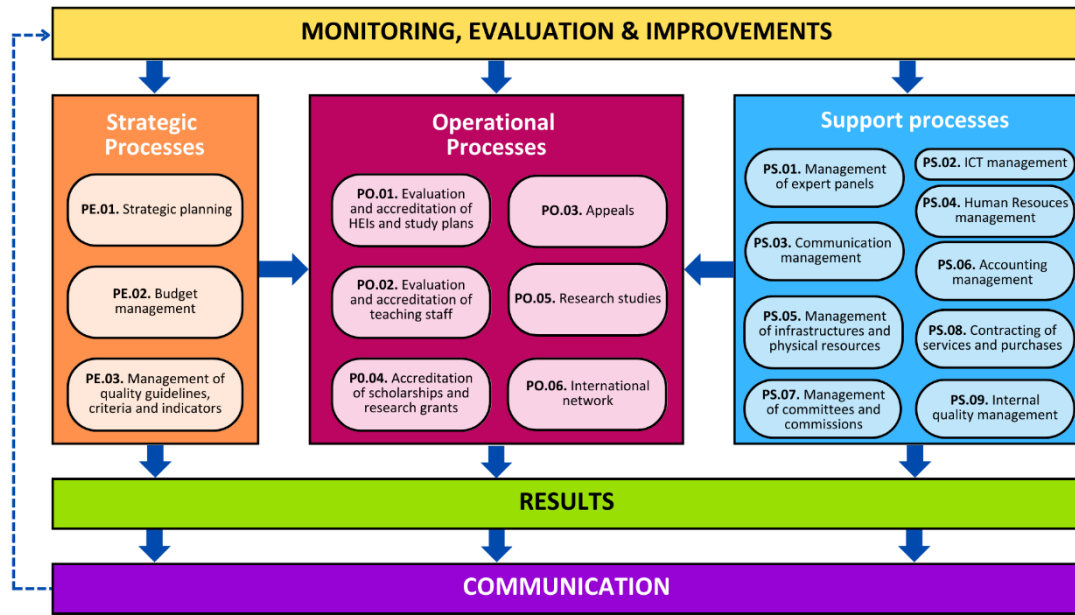

Figure 8 - *AQUA's Process Map*

Annex 9. AQUA´s Internal Quality Policy

Internal quality policy of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra

Principles

The internal quality policy of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra, hereinafter 'AQUA' or 'Agency', is based on the Agency's mission, vision and values.

Mission

AQUA is a public institution whose objective is to evaluate, accredit and certify the quality of higher education in Andorra in accordance with the principles of the European Higher Education Area, and the criteria established in the European Standard Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG).

Vision

AQUA aims to be an agile, close and internationally recognised agency that supports Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) towards the continuous improvement of their activities, and to generate and transfer knowledge in the field of quality assurance.

Values

- **Independence:** AQUA pledges to be independent and act autonomously.
- **Rigour:** AQUA pledges to perform its activities with exactitude and technical rigour.
- **Integrity:** AQUA pledges to perform its activities in a coherent and honest way, avoiding any conflict of interest.
- **Transparency:** AQUA pledges to publish any relevant information regarding its activities actively and to guarantee the right to access public information.
- **Collaboration:** AQUA pledges to cooperate and work together with different stakeholders, with a constructive perspective, accepting and valuing diversity and different points of view, and contributing to a good working environment. Furthermore, AQUA's activities and results must respect the institutional autonomy of higher education institutions and enhance it.
- **Equity:** AQUA pledges to promote equity in all its activities and processes, as well as to guarantee equal opportunities for its staff.
- **Innovation:** AQUA pledges to promote continuous learning among its staff and to improve the enhancement and development of quality assurance.
- **Sustainability:** AQUA pledges to minimise the social, environmental, and economic impact derived from its activities.

Purpose and quality commitments

The purpose of the internal quality policy is to guarantee AQUA's internal quality, with the fundamental objective of contributing to good strategic planning and operational management of the institution.

AQUA expresses the following commitments to quality:

- Compliance with current legislation and the agency's Code of Ethics.
- The design, application, monitoring and review of its internal quality assurance system (IQAS), based on a cycle of continuous improvement.
- External evaluation in accordance with international quality standards.
- Accountability and good communication with its stakeholders.

Stakeholders

AQUA's stakeholders and groups of interest are:

- Parliament of Andorra
- Ministry in charge of higher education in Andorra
- Agency Steering Committee
- Director of the agency
- Agency's Evaluation Committee
- Agency's technical team
- External experts (peer reviewers)
- Higher education institutions in Andorra, including governing bodies, students, teaching staff and technical and management staff
- External collaborators and international networks
- Andorran society

Scope of application

The internal quality policy applies to all AQUA's internal processes, deployed in procedures. All the management and technical teams are subject to this policy.

Responsibilities

The following responsibilities are established:

Steering Committee

Approve and validate changes to the internal quality policy. Know the quality policy and contribute to its application.

Management and technical team

Monitor and propose changes to the internal quality policy. Know the quality policy and contribute to its application.

Approval

The quality policy of the Andorran Higher Education Quality Agency (AQUA) has been approved by the Steering Committee.

Annex 10. Stakeholders survey

The survey sent to the stakeholders to analyse their opinion on AQUA's compliance with the ESG can be found in the following link (in Catalan):
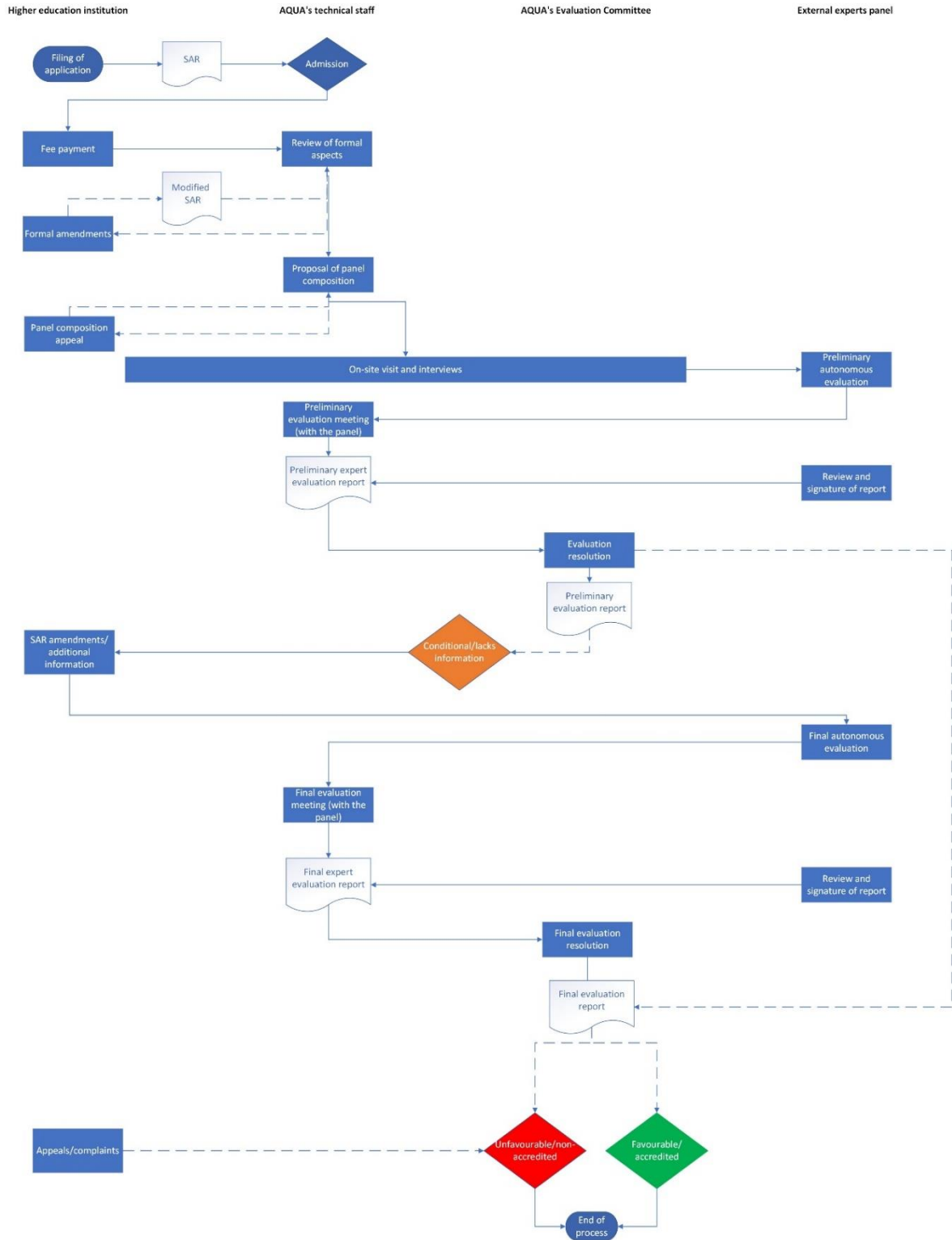
https://forms.office.com/e/Kw7kgTH2gY

Annex 11. Evaluation processes flow chart

Ex-ante evaluations flow chart (ex-ante study programme evaluation, evaluation for study programme modification and ex-ante institutional evaluation) *Link*

![AQUA logo]
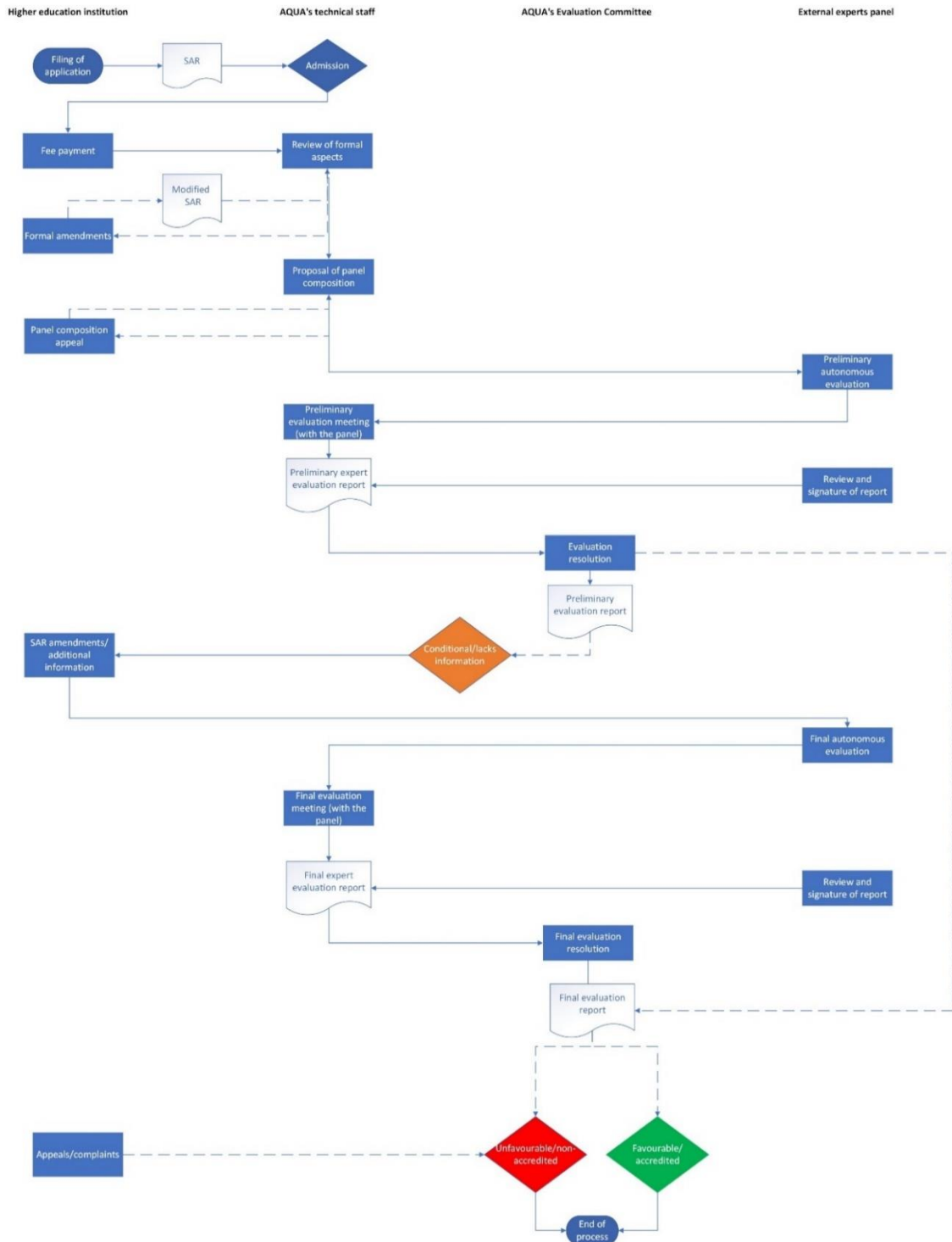
Ex-post evaluations flow chart (ex-post study programme evaluation and study programme follow-up) *Link*

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