

**INFORME SOBRE EL ESTADO DE  
LA EVALUACIÓN EXTERNA DE LA CALIDAD  
EN LAS UNIVERSIDADES ESPAÑOLAS**

**2015**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



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The European Higher Education Area has become a world reference for quality in university education and for mutual recognition among national education systems. This important achievement has been possible thanks to the efforts of many players including, of course, the universities, and also thanks to extremely useful instruments being launched that have been key to guiding this project and making it a reality.

The concept of quality in university education and the actions taken in the European Higher Education Area framework to improve this quality are designed to serve the specific objectives targeted in Higher Education. These objectives, among other issues, cover an important aspect of this field of education with the aim of social and human development, and to provide European citizens the means to acquire the necessary competences to take on the challenges of the new millennium and the awareness of belonging in a common social and cultural Area of shared values.

The main aim of this ***Report on the state of the external assessment of quality in Spanish universities***, directed at the Ministry responsible for universities and the various social agents, and written annually by ANECA with the participation of the regional quality assurance agencies, is to provide information on the conduct and results by the end of 2015 of the evaluation, certification and accreditation processes for quality assurance in university education.

It is known that these evaluation processes, in which key issues to university education are examined with a view to their continuous improvement as well as safeguarding the proper guarantees for students and society in the European Higher Education Area, are primarily referred to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. The 2015 updated version of these Standards and Guidelines are an invaluable instrument for strengthening confidence and mutual recognition throughout this common European space, focused strongly, on the one hand, on facilitating the continuous enhancement of Higher Education systems with the participation of different stakeholders and, on the other hand, on rendering accountability to society. In this manner, although the central elements in the earlier version of the ESG remain in

force, a clear commitment is observed to boost the importance of student-focused teaching-learning processes.

In the light of the above, and given that universities and evaluation procedures applied by quality assurance agencies are concerned not only with the normative implementation framework but also with compliance with the ESG, these institutions have undertaken to assess the activities involved as per the new version of the ESG.

Besides, it is worth mentioning the steadily increasing degree of coordination among the evaluation processes set up by the quality assurance agencies seeking to achieve, through the complementarity of their procedures, higher efficiency from the efforts made by universities and the agencies themselves. For instance, a clear relationship can be observed between institutional and programme evaluation processes. This, to some extent anticipating the relation established between degree accreditation and the future accreditation of institutions, is due to the fact that the evaluation results from the AUDIT and DOCENTIA Procedures are already being taken into account in the evaluation of official degrees.

As on previous occasions, the report is centred on the analysis of quality assurance in the Spanish University System from three aspects: Higher Education institutions, official university degrees and researching teaching staff.

### **1. Quality enhancement in Higher Education university institutions**

Quality assurance agencies in the Spanish University System have developed, over the last few years, a number of evaluation procedures for quality assurance within universities with different but complementary orientations. Of note among these procedures are those that are voluntary, such as AUDIT and DOCENTIA.

The first of these, **AUDIT**, seeks to strengthen through a cycle of continuous enhancement the development of Internal Quality Assurance Systems (IQAS) at universities and their faculties. On the one hand, support is given to starting up these systems, whose purpose is to enhance education at university colleges, achieving the coherent integration of resources and actions relating to quality assurance in the educational provision. On the other hand, the recognition of IQAS at universities is supported through their certification.

Regarding universities' acceptance of this procedure, practically eight out of ten universities are in some measure involved in the certification process for their IQAS design at one or several of their faculties. However, less than two universities out of ten have successfully completed the implementation certification process. This figure takes on greater significance on noting the proportion of universities involved, as only 3% of Spanish faculties holds this certification.

The procedure, in fact, is increasingly causing participant universities' IQAS to contribute to the improvement of the processes critically affecting their education programmes, with the involvement of the various stakeholders. All the above does not detract from the efforts, through this procedure, to provide guidance to universities and increase the number of centres involved in implementing more robust IQAS.

The second procedure mentioned, **DOCENTIA**, likewise dealing with institutional evaluation, aims to support universities in designing their own mechanisms for managing the quality of academic staff's teaching activity and encouraging their development and recognition.

Several evaluation procedures take into account the critical nature of teaching activity, but the DOCENTIA procedure is more specific in this sense than others, while seeking to complement other procedures.

The DOCENTIA Procedure has likewise aroused the interest of Spanish universities. It is not without reason that nine out of ten Spanish universities have resolved to take part in some measure. To date, almost two in ten have achieved their implementation certificate through a system that is compatible with the procedure requirements.

The procedure, therefore, in line with its aims, appears to be acting as a stimulus for universities to take a greater interest in the enhancement of their teaching quality and in the dissemination and recognition of good practices in this respect.

Also within the evaluation procedure for improving quality in educational institutions, in coexistence with the procedures described, some normative steps have been taken toward launching the new '**Institutional Accreditation**'. This scenario opens up the possibility, under certain circumstances, for universities whose faculties have received institutional accreditation, within its period of

validity, to be entitled to renewing accreditation of their official degrees, without the need to submitting to the normal procedure for ex post accreditation.

Bearing in mind the importance of this new type of accreditation, and the clearly visible coincidences both with the AUDIT and DOCENTIA Procedures and with the ex post accreditation processes for degree programmes, some reflection on potential overlaps and synergies appears to be required. This would result in greater efficiency of effort, time and resources by universities and quality assurance agencies, benefiting the sustainability of the system and its usefulness to continuous enhancement and accountability.

## **2. Quality enhancement of universities' official degrees**

The quality assurance processes for new official degrees are an instrument that has made a major contribution to establishing mutual recognition in the EHEA and, furthermore, to offering students and society university education with the appropriate guarantees.

These processes, deployed in Spain in several cumulative stages, have enabled the drafting of guides for degree enhancement. On the one hand, they have made it possible for universities to render accounts on a regular basis and, on the other hand, for the Spanish University System to have achieved, to date, a considerable number of degree programmes that are recognised and valued in Europe and, therefore, internationally.

As a consequence of this work, within a short period of time Spanish official university education has become harmonised with the guidelines established in the Bologna Process. Universities, as leading players in this transformation, in the three years following 2007, submitted around five thousand new official Bachelor's Degrees and Master's Degrees for ex ante accreditation. Although after 2011 the number of degree proposals decreased, by 2015 almost six hundred additional Bachelor's Degrees and over two thousand four hundred Master's Degrees have been created.

Similarly, as in the case of Bachelor's Degrees and Master's Degrees, over a short time universities renewed the majority of their doctoral programmes, with over one thousand proposals by the end of the period analysed.

All in all, between 2008 and 2015, over seven thousand degrees have been evaluated at public universities and a figure exceeding two thousand at private universities. Overall, more than half of these proposals were for Master's Degrees.

Concerning the evaluation results for the new degree proposals, in general terms, and in particular during the initial years after launching the evaluation processes, a notably high proportion of applications have led to a favourable evaluation. This in turn translates into over 8,600 new degrees assessed favourably for ex ante accreditation for all three cycles.

It should also be mentioned that, whereas in the case of Bachelor's Degrees and doctoral programmes a slowdown persists with regard to new degrees, the offer of new Master's Degree programmes has continued to increase significantly at public, private and Church-owned universities.

To launch a new degree programme, simultaneously with ex ante accreditation, Autonomous Regions need to submit degree proposals for **authorisation**. At this point, some of these regions, on their authority, have evaluated additional aspects to those reviewed in the ex ante accreditation process. As a result, almost all evaluated proposals have received a favourable resolution.

A large number of new degrees have been launched after completing the ex ante accreditation and authorisation processes. In this scenario, in the light of the significant figures observed in some cases for the number of students per degree or occupancy rates, closer study is called for on the adjustment of this new availability of degrees to student demand, and any repercussions stemming therefrom. These are well adjusted in a large proportion of cases. However, at universities where these are unbalanced, the suitability of the new degrees may be questionable, and in addition, the implications in terms of planning, human and material resources, etc., could negatively impact the teaching-learning process and the quality of education.

Following the initial implementation of the new degrees, the **follow-up** stage becomes a key moment in the evaluation process. On the one hand, the consistency between the degree's design and its implementation is examined for the first time. On the other hand, it offers the degrees a basic set of guidelines to succeed in future ex post accreditation processes through continuous reviews and enhancement of the programme.

Up to December 2015, over 4,500 degrees have been evaluated in the follow-up stage. Overall, owing to a slowdown in new proposals in recent years, Bachelor's Degree programmes have attracted the greatest activity as far as follow-up processes are concerned. Conversely, a large part of the Master's Degree and doctoral programmes, especially due to their recent implementation, have not yet undergone such external assessment.

Generally speaking, the diverse strategies followed by quality assurance agencies have not hindered the process of reviewing the central aspects of degree implementation. This has encouraged universities to reflect on the results and recommendations received with a view to making the appropriate enhancements. All the above further supports ensuring that the programmes provide a realistic response to the foreseen expectations.

Rounding off the general evaluation process for official degrees, **ex post accreditation** after several years confirms these official degrees have reached maturity.

By the end of 2015, 399 Bachelor's Degrees and 866 Master's Degrees had completed this stage. Four out of five belong to public universities, and the rest to private or Church-owned universities.

As for the results, almost all the degrees proposed received a favourable decision. This, without doubt, is the outcome of the work done in the previous stages.

It should be pointed out here that a substantial short-term increase is foreseen in the number of programmes applying for ex post accreditation. This, considering the effort this evaluation stage demands of universities and agencies, is an extra challenge for these institutions, that invites reflection on the complementarity of the degree ex post accreditation process and the institutional accreditation process that is still to be defined.

In this manner, as well as being sensitive to the outcomes of other institutional evaluation processes conducted through the AUDIT and DOCENTIA Procedures, the new institutional accreditation system may cause the evaluation processes for ex ante and ex post accreditation of official degrees to be re-designed for a number of degrees currently being taught. This, in short, reflects a clear drive for greater coherence among different evaluation procedures, each with its own quality assurance aspects, without compromising essential educational aspects such as

learning outcomes, and allows for more efficient use of the efforts of all parties concerned.

Beyond the compulsory evaluation processes for official degrees, the **ACREDITA PLUS** initiative opens the door for Engineering and Information Technology programmes to achieve, on successfully completing a voluntary evaluation process, the quality labels EUR-ACE® and EURO-INF, respectively. These quality labels imply recognition in European scientific, technical and professional sectors, giving international outreach to graduates holding degrees awarded these seals of quality.

Since the procedure was launched, by 2015, 126 degrees had been proposed by Spanish universities for evaluation, of which the majority were Bachelor's Degrees seeking the EUR-ACE® quality label. Universities are showing increasing interest in this type of European quality label.

The chapter on degree quality enhancement touches on an issue that affects a large number of people whose university qualifications were awarded prior to those designed in the EHEA framework. The EHEA offers graduates of some of the new Bachelor's Degrees, Master's Degrees or Doctoral Degrees opportunities for professional and educational mobility hitherto unforeseen on the European continent. However, this range of possibilities was not within the reach of graduates of official studies listed in the previous Catalogue. This meant a significant loss of opportunities for numerous university graduates.

To solve this problem, the ***Procedure to determine the correspondence within the Spanish framework of qualifications for Higher Education in official studies for Architecture, Engineering, Bachelor's, Technical Architecture, Technical Engineering and Associate degrees*** was launched. This has made it possible to establish for each of the 140 degrees listed in the former Catalogue, with the evaluation report issued by ANECA, an officially endorsed transparent reference to the corresponding academic level in the current Spanish Qualifications Framework for Higher Education and, by extension, in the European Qualifications Framework.

As a result of the reports on degrees in the former Catalogue, it has been generally determined that firstly, the degrees in technical architecture, technical engineering and 'short-cycle' programmes are equivalent to Bachelor's Degree studies; and that

'long-cycle' programmes and degrees in architecture and engineering are equivalent to Master's Degree studies.

In conclusion, this has led to the standardisation of qualifications awarded under the former Catalogue with regard to higher education levels established in the EHEA.

### **3. Quality enhancement among university teaching and researching staff**

Current laws on quality assurance and enhancement at universities, in addition to examining educational provision, place a focus on the performance of Teaching and Researching Staff (PDI). This is clear proof of the high esteem in which these roles are held, for their critical importance to universities' success in reaching their appointed targets.

Along with the mechanisms set in motion by the universities to ensure the professional competence of their teaching staff and that academic staff recruitment is fair and transparent, a legal framework has been set up. This framework, on the one hand, affects professional quality assurance of the CVs of applicants to Teaching and Researching Staff posts at certain academic levels within the university. This offers students and society guarantees in this regard. On the other hand, on the basis of performance assessment, it will serve to incentive the recognition of merits and the concession of individual salary complements.

As a consequence of new openings for a number of non civil servant teaching posts and university academic bodies, prior to the university's final selection process for a specific range of posts, applicants are required to submit official accreditation for having satisfied a given professional capacity threshold, subject to a favourable evaluation by the corresponding quality assurance agency.

Each quality assurance agency has established its own evaluation model for the **evaluation processes accrediting access to the contract types** mentioned above. In this manner, although all models focus specifically on researching and teaching aspects, weighting differences can nevertheless be appreciated among them according to the perceived importance of each item. The repercussions, in equal, equivalent or similar figures, of such differences affect the evaluation results, that are sometimes disparate.

In addition to university teaching bodies, owing to their significance to professional career-building among the PDI, the contract types evaluated represent the core of

the non civil servant academic staff. Nevertheless, within the academic staff, the rank of Associate Lecturer and Associate Lecturer in Health Sciences (a PDI position destined in theory for temporary and part-time contracts for renowned specialists accrediting professional activity without the academic sphere of the university), that are not part of the group mentioned above, carry a special weight in numerical terms. With over 28,000 individuals in the academic year 2014/15, this represents 30% of the PDI at public universities and a very similar figure to the next most numerous teaching group, Senior Lecturers.

However, compared to the mentioned volume of recruitment at public universities for Associate Lecturer, the percentage of PhD Assistant Lecturer posts over the total number of public university researching and teaching staff (PDI) is 3% and, in the case of PhD Lecturer, 10%. The above invites reflection on the context in which PDI evaluation procedures are conducted for certain contractual arrangements, and provides major clues to understanding the possible differences in the various procedures' evaluation results and the number of posts to which applicants may apply, especially in the light of the social and economic context in recent years.

Quality assurance agencies have processed, between 2002 and 2015, more than 190,000 evaluation requests for some of the posts defined in national or regional legislation. This challenge has required quality assurance agencies to dedicate considerable resources to life-long professional quality enhancement among university PDI, while offering society guarantees regarding the soundness of their professional standing.

One way or another, it is observed that the number of applications for evaluation to obtain certifications valid nationwide has increased substantially since 2008, rising from 5,994 applications in that year to 10,072 in 2015. However, concerning the number of evaluation requests for regional certification, generally speaking and owing to a number of factors, applications have fallen from 8,800 in 2005 to a total of 3,188 in 2015.

Those interested in doing so have been able to submit evaluation requests for processes leading to a certificate valid throughout the country, through ANECA, or for processes leading to certifications valid with their Autonomous Region, -through a regional agency. Some, indeed, have opted for the combination of both of the above. Since the various quality assurance agencies have a different regional

scope, with the exception of the national Agency which covers all regions, and have the authority to establish the evaluation model they deem best in the light of the regional competences involved, a single individual has been known to apply for evaluation to several agencies for the same post, receiving different evaluation outcomes from each agency.

This should prompt reflection, on the one hand, on the equivalence among evaluation processes designed to guarantee compliance with the minimum thresholds for a given (or equivalent) contract type, and on the other hand, on the coordination among quality assurance agencies in this regard.

As for the **corresponding evaluation processes for accreditation for accessing university teaching bodies**, in this case conducted by ANECA, these strive to maintain coherence with the processes for assessing contract types, since both of the processes aim to give applicants guidance on their PDI career.

On the experience gained from this process, a modification was published in 2015 to the rule governing national accreditation for entering university teaching bodies. This modification contains changes designed to achieve evaluation results that are better adapted to each applicant's academic background. Similarly, as was already the case in the former system, researching and teaching merits are given special priority, so that, according to the new rules, a positive evaluation in these two dimensions will render further merits unnecessary for accreditation. The new rule also states that applicants failing to reach the minimum requirements, provided the shortcoming is not serious, may compensate for it with merits in the three remaining dimensions.

In the evaluations performed up to 2015, the ACADEMIA Procedure has processed close to 39,000 applications in just over eight years since it was launched. It is precisely in this last year that the greatest number of applications has been received for the 'non automatic' procedure. This notable growth may be associated to applicants' expectations regarding a change in the future of the evaluation model in the ACADEMIA Procedure.

In the trend observed in applications for these two teaching bodies, two knowledge areas, by volume, account for the mentioned increase registered in 2015: the body of Professors and, above all, that of Profesores Titulares de Universidad (Senior Lecturers). Applications to the knowledge area of Engineering and Architecture, and

most especially, Social and Legal Sciences, are not only the most numerous but have also shown the greatest increase in relative terms.

These trends, however, are not reflected clearly in the composition per knowledge area within the PDI at Spanish public universities' teaching bodies, or in the progression in student numbers in each knowledge area. By contrast, they seem to respond rather to the number of people who, for many different reasons, aim for a professional career as PDI.

Looking at the evaluation results, significant differences are appreciated depending on the procedure used to process the applications. Thus, applications processed through the 'automatic' procedure yield considerably higher percentages of favourable decisions than those dealt with through the 'non automatic' procedure. As many as 89% of evaluations processed with the 'automatic' procedure were positive in 2015, against 63% processed in the same year with the 'non automatic' procedure.

The evaluation results are also interesting from the perspective of applicants' gender. Despite little appreciable difference in the proportion of men and women in any teaching body branch of knowledge, a notable gender imbalance is found among applicants. This is a consequence of the persistence, despite steady progress made toward women's incorporation to higher education, of a clearly visible imbalance in their effective access to PDI categories at universities and especially university teaching bodies. In the light of trends from 2008 to 2015 in the percentage distribution of the number of evaluation requests for accreditation for these teaching bodies, in general terms and with the sole exception of applications to the post of Senior Lecturer in the branches of Social and Legal Sciences and the Arts and Humanities, the proportion of women submitting applications was notably lower than men, especially in the case of the rank of Professor, even despite the gradual improvement in this ratio over recent years in certain areas of knowledge.

In conclusion, in view of all the above regarding evaluation processes for PDI accreditation, quality assurance agencies can be said to be fulfilling their twofold mission of guiding the professional itineraries of the teaching bodies discussed, and of providing universities with an abundance of candidates with a sound professional

standing. From these, according to their autonomy and responsibility, these universities may select their teaching and researching staff.

Nonetheless, the scenario outlined above calls for reflection on several directly related fundamental points. On the one hand, the trend in applications for PDI jobs per branch of knowledge, and consequently, in the number of individuals holding a favourable certification to occupy a given PDI post, does not seem to respond to trends in student numbers but rather to the situation within each area of knowledge regarding professional openings for PDI. On the other hand, it is envisaged that the demand for posts by newly accredited candidates will exceed the number of available posts, especially taking into account the present social and economic context and the trend in student numbers.

The gap between job supply and demand, and the potential imbalance in the available job descriptions and the education offer stem from complex and diverse causes, despite which attention must be paid to this scenario in order to improve both universities' screening policy planning, and the proper and efficient use by society of economic and human resources. In this line, insofar as it is observed – particularly in certain areas of knowledge– that there are individuals seeking a professional future in PDI in numbers exceeding the number of new positions the university system is able to offer, further reflection is needed on this fact and to examine new alternatives to tap this valuable source of highly qualified staff.

Lastly, and in addition to the foregoing, quality assurance agencies are known to develop other evaluation processes aiming to guide, value and recognise, often by means of the **concession of salary complements**, university PDI performance. These processes, furthermore, contribute to enhancing transparency and accountability for the benefit of society.

Of the processes mentioned, the most outstanding are those with nationwide scope which, when referring to researching activities, are evaluated every six years (six-year periods) by the National Commission for the Evaluation of Researching Activity (CNEAI-ANECA). Those referring to teaching activities are evaluated or recognised every five years (five-year periods) by the universities themselves. This is not to mention the regional incentives, supported by the regulations in each Autonomous Region and focused on certain essential aspects of PDI tasks. In short, the underlying aim is to propitiate that PDI, a key quality assurance element in



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university education, avails of the necessary guidance and recognition to incentive the continuous enhancement of the work it performs.