



Agencia Andaluza de Evaluación  
**CONSEJERÍA DE INNOVACIÓN, CIENCIA Y EMPRESA**

*“Response of the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Research of Andalusia (AGAE) to the Report of the Review Panel”*

**Cordoba (Spain), January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009**



## 1. General Remarks

The Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Research of Andalusia (AGAE) has undergone an external evaluation of its activities according to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) in the European Higher Education Area. This evaluation is aimed at assessing whether AGAE meets the criteria for full ENQA membership and, in the near future, considering its inclusion in the Register of Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAR). Furthermore, the review has also meant to provide feedback on AGAE's broader role and distinctive programs in the context of the Andalusian Knowledge System, with particular reference to its teaching staff assessment programmes and its research evaluation procedures.

Given that there is currently no national regulation for external review of quality assurance agencies for higher education in Spain, the evaluation was undertaken by the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA) at the request of AGAE.

ENQA, nominated a Review Panel composed of five international experts on quality assurance:

- Séamus Puirseil, former Chief Executive of the Higher Education & Training Awards Council for Ireland (Chairman).
- Professor Domingo Do Campo, Department of Signal Theory and Communications, University of Vigo, (and formerly Rector of the University of Vigo), Spain.
- Thierry Malan, former General Inspector for Administration of National Education and Research, Ministry of Education and Research, France.
- Rossella Iraci Capuccinello, doctoral postgraduate student, Lancaster University, UK, and former member of the Executive Committee of the European Students Association.
- Paul Mitchell, (Secretary to the Panel), independent HE consultant, UK.

It is important to highlight that the Panel included a member from Spain with an in-depth knowledge of the specific regulations of the Spanish University system (Prof. Domingo do Campo), and another member who had previous experience on the external evaluation of another Spanish quality assurance agency, AQU Catalunya (Thierry Malan). Their presence facilitated the external review process and increased the efficiency of the site visit. In summary, AGAE believes the composition of the Panel was very professional/appropriate and well balanced.

AGAE welcomes the report and acknowledges the exhaustive work of the Panel. AGAE is also very pleased with the approach followed, gathering evidence directly from



Agencia Andaluza de Evaluación  
**CONSEJERÍA DE INNOVACIÓN, CIENCIA Y EMPRESA**

stakeholders combined with the detailed assessment of additional documentation provided, and the critical analysis of AGAE's own Self-Evaluation Report.

We consider that the Panel's Report is complete and it certainly expands on the Self-Evaluation Report, providing AGAE with a range of actions for improvement. AGAE particularly acknowledges the recommendations concerning the need to increase the number of AGAE's staff, and to develop better integration approaches for the many different types of reviews undertaken by the Agency. AGAE shall immediately set to work along these lines and will follow the additional recommendations that were made in the overall evaluation process.

AGAE is extremely pleased with the statements made by the Review Panel in the Report, highlighting some of the key positive features which characterize the Agency activities as follows:

- The key role played by AGAE as the main instrument for the oversight of quality assurance in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Andalusia.
- The use of panels of experts (preferably from outside Andalusia) to advise AGAE within a strategic framework set by the Agency on whether institutions, programmes or proposed research projects meet the relevant criteria for quality assurance.
- The fact that procedures and guidelines for the work are in accordance with recognized good practice in terms of consistency, independent judgement, openness and clear communication. It is important to highlight the explicit recognition of the ESG (through its Service Letter) as the basis for defining quality assurance criteria.
- The increasing use made of "stakeholder surveys" for each of AGAE's core processes reflects its determination to further enhance the participative consultation process.
- The solid structure and functioning that ensures the independence of AGAE's decision making.



## 2. Specific comments on the Panel's recommendations

As mentioned above, the Review Panel has also expressed several recommendations and provided valuable advice. AGAE fully concurs with the Panel's views and has already started to or will take action in the near future, as stated below.

### 2.1. AGAE and Part 2 of European Standards and Guidelines

*Standard 2.4. Processes fit for purpose: All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.*

(p. 14) ... The Panel notes that the inclusion of both students and international experts in review activity is fully within the spirit of the European Standards and Guidelines and would urge AGAE to move towards implementation as soon as practicable.

#### Comments:

AGAE will move towards the full involvement of **students** in review activities by the following measures:

- AGAE will encourage universities and other institutions to enhance the active participation of students in their internal working groups on quality management.
- AGAE will involve, as much as possible, students as panel members in reviews (mainly reviews for institutional assessment).
- AGAE has proposed that student representatives be included in the Advisory Board of the future Andalusian Knowledge Agency, in which AGAE will be integrated in the future.

Similarly, regarding the inclusion of **international experts** as reviewers, AGAE is aware of the importance of providing the Agency with this “international perspective”, which is fully within the spirit of the ESG. Experts from abroad are regularly used for research evaluation but have not been included in other evaluation activities. Although there may be a limitation due to a language barrier/problem in some of the assessments, AGAE believes in the benefits of external input from other university cultures, and will invite international experts to participate in university-related evaluation activities whenever possible.



*Standard 2.6. Follow-up procedures: Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.*

(p. 16) ... In September 2008, it is expected that the National Network of Agencies for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (REACU) will agree on an official document for institutional assessment follow-up. Similarly there is currently a Working Group of Officers from the different regional quality assurance agencies developing a follow-up consultation document on the Docentia programme.

**Comments:**

In December 2008, the National Network of Agencies for Quality Assurance in Higher Education of Spain (REACU) elaborated an official document for institutional assessment follow-up. AGAE expects that the progress made in this regard will consolidate the systematic follow-up procedures that guarantee the transparency and effectiveness of the mechanisms for improvement.

*Standard 2.7. Periodic reviews: External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.*

(p. 17) ... With a European move to greater institutional ownership of quality and standards, the frequency of external inspection becomes a less critical factor. However the Panel welcomes AGAE's intention both to articulate more clearly the frequency of its systematic periodic reviews and to explore and if possible rationalise the interrelationship between the procedures currently in place. This will place its operations on a more secure basis.

**Comments:**

AGAE has already set in place a timetable for **research activity evaluation** for the period 2008-2013 following the established legislation (provided as evidence **E37 Standards and Guidelines for Research Incentives within the Andalusian Knowledge System for 2008-2013**). AGAE will continue working on the efficient articulation of the frequency of its systematic periodic reviews (in particular, those regarding to **institutional assessment** and **teaching performance evaluation - DOCENTIA**) so as to ensure a "balanced"/soothing interrelationship between them. This is highly desirable for AGAE to avoid work overload among AGAE's staff.



*Standard 2.8. System-wide analyses: Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments, etc.*

(p. 18) ... The Panel believes that there is more work to be done in this area of enhancement activity, subject to provision of appropriate resources. In addition to the production of analytical reports and convening developmental events relating to the generic, sector-wide aspects of AGAE's work, the Panel believes there may be opportunities for cross-regional studies with other Spanish regional quality assurance agencies.

**Comments:**

During 2008, REACU produced the first of a series of annual technical studies about common activities and programs developed for quality assurance system development in Higher Education in Spain. AGAE will continue its active participation in the REACU activities on system-wide analysis. In particular, AGAE will collaborate with REACU in the provision of the needed information for the elaboration of cross-regional studies.

**2.2. AGAE and Part 3 of European Standards and Guidelines – The internal evaluation**

*Standard 3.3. Activities: Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.*

(p. 22) ... the Panel recommends that it would now be timely formally to establish an integrated forward cycle for the many different types of review.

**Comments:**

AGAE will concentrate its efforts on developing an integrated approach that will ensure the efficient use of resources among the different activities to be undertaken each year. In particular, special attention will be paid to integrate those activities subject to periodic reviews.



*Standard 3.4. Resources: Agencies should have adequate and proportionate resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process (es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.*

(p. 23) ... AGAE's staffing comprises the Agency's permanent staff (fourteen employees) and a pool of more than xxx trained reviewers drawn from the Andalusian administration, public universities and research centres.

**Comments:**

There is a factual error in this paragraph; thus, we suggest that this paragraph of the Panel's Report is changed to:

*"AGAE's staffing comprises the Agency's permanent staff (fourteen employees) and a pool of more than **130** trained reviewers drawn from the **Spanish** administration, public universities and research centres."*

*Standard 3.4. Resources: Agencies should have adequate and proportionate resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process (es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.*

(p. 23) ... The Panel has also suggested to the Director that the Agency has now reached a point of maturity in its development where the appointment of a senior professional manager to support the Director in taking oversight of some of the key processes might be appropriate.

**Comments:**

AGAE fully concurs with this recommendation and has been seeking a suitable individual that could be appointed as General Manager for some time now. AGAE is pleased to inform the Panel that a suitable candidate has been found and that she will be appointed within the next two months.



*Standard 3.5. Mission statement: Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.*

(p. 24 and 25) ... The implementation of the Strategic Plan 2008-2010 includes the development of a *quality manual* that will formally set out the quality policy of the Agency for its stakeholders and providers. This *quality manual* is a key part of a *quality plan* recently approved by the Board of Directors.

**Comments:**

AGAE continues its work on the preparation of the *Quality Manual* which will be publicly available once it is completed and approved.

*Standard 3.6. Independence: Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.*

(p. 27 and 28) ... The Panel accepts that the AGAE and its Board are structured in such a way as to secure operational independence from HEIs and Government in its day-to-day operations. Upcoming new legislation is likely to re-balance the composition of the Board so as to increase representation from other stakeholders in higher education and research, such as employers and students. The Panel believes that this will further strengthen the Board's overall capacity. The move to a new funding model based upon hypothecated funding through a top-slice on the Regional HE budget will further guarantee this operational independence in respect of 'autonomous responsibility for their operations'.

**Comments:**

The legislation, currently under development, defining the role of the Andalusian Knowledge Agency has indeed provisions for a wider societal involvement in the Board, including student participation. Thus, the assessment of the Panel in this issue is correct.



*Standard 3.7. External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies: The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available.*

(p. 31) ... As already discussed in section 2.4.6, there is however some variation in AGAE's approach to the evaluation of improvement plans across the different strands of its range of activities and the Panel welcomes AGAE's intention to review its protocols to achieve greater consistency of methodology. Similarly, student participation on AGAE's external committees is limited. As already discussed in section 2.4.4, the Panel notes that the inclusion of both students and international experts in review activity is fully within the spirit of the European Standards and Guidelines and would urge AGAE to move towards implementation as soon as practicable. The Panel would also recommend that AGAE systematise and fully embed procedures for the full evaluation of each individual review through questionnaires etc sent as appropriate to reviewers, students, and the institution.

**Comments:**

As mentioned earlier on for Standards 2.4 and 2.6, AGAE will make every effort, for the sake of excellence, to enhance student participation and ensure international experts participation when necessary. The Agency is already working on the protocol revision of its different procedures to ensure greater consistency of methodology.

**2.3. AGAE and Assessment of University Teaching Staff and Evaluation of Research programmes, groups and initiatives**

(p. 35) ... The Panel is content that the Agency will bring this approach to the new activities which it will be required to tackle. However the Agency will find itself under serious pressure unless current promises of additional resources are fulfilled.

**Comments:**

As stated above, AGAE concurs with the Panel's view of the limited number of permanent staff in relation to current workload, and, in particular, when looking at the future. Provisions are being made to hire two additional staff plus a General Manager within the next three months. More personnel will need to be hired in the foreseeable future to continue to meet the quality standards required by our work.