

REACU

Red Española de Agencias
de Calidad Universitaria

Assessment for Accreditation ex-ante

**Evaluation protocol for the accreditation ex-
ante of official doctoral studies**

INTRODUCTION

Royal Decree 1393/2007, which establishes the organisation of official university studies (as amended by Royal Decree 861/2010), establishes the general regulatory framework governing accreditation ex-ante, follow-up and accreditation ex-post processes to which official university courses must be subject. Agencies that meet the quality criteria and standards established by the European Commission, based on an external evaluation that will entitle them to become full members of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - ENQA- and that are registered in the European Quality Assurance Register -EQAR- shall evaluate the study programmes in accordance with the evaluation protocols required for the accreditation ex ante and accreditation ex-post, which will be established jointly, based on international quality standards and in line with the provisions of this Royal Decree. At this moment, the following agencies are in a position to conduct the said evaluation processes: ACSUCyL, ACSUG, AGAE, ANECA and AQU Catalunya.

Royal Decree 99/2011, that regulates official doctoral courses, is the framework governing the organisation of doctoral studies. These regulations incorporate the recommendations from the various European and international forums that have addressed doctoral studies. All these recommendations relate to the structure and organisation of doctoral courses, the competences to be acquired by doctoral candidates, the conditions of entry and the development of a research career at an early stage, the fundamental role played by the supervision and tutoring of research tasks, internationalisation, mobility and the incorporation of this type of education in a research environment that encourages communication and creativity.

The accreditation ex-ante evaluation will take into account key aspects that guarantee the solvency of the research teams participating in the programme and the adequate level of learning of doctoral candidates. Therefore, the following will be assessed: the research qualifications of the staff involved in the programme, competitive projects in which they have participated, their most relevant scientific contributions, their experience supervising doctoral theses together with the quality of the said theses, the funding available for doctoral candidates and the

programme's level of internationalization. This assessment should be used to guarantee that the doctoral programme includes the adequate human and material resources to take on, within the timeline given, a reasonable number of doctoral theses with an impact and quality consistent with their scientific context, and that the employability of graduated doctors is consistent with their training.

In order to comply with the provisions of Article 24 of Royal Decree 1393/2007, this protocol has been developed within the Spanish Network of University Quality Agencies (REACU), to which the above-mentioned agencies belong, in an attempt to highlight the analysis and assessment of the most relevant issues with a view to ensuring, a priori, the minimum conditions that any proposed doctoral programme must provide.

The structure of this evaluation protocol adapts to the manner in which the universities must submit information on each doctoral programme proposal they submit to the accreditation ex-ante process and which can be found in Appendix II to Royal Decree 99/2011. Thus, apart from including several questions of a general nature, the evaluation protocol is based on eight criteria for each one of which a series of guidelines has been included to assist in the assessment process. This does not mean that each agency cannot develop its own support guides describing in greater detail how to tackle the application of the criteria and guidelines described in this document in their assessment processes.

In order to endow the assessment for accreditation ex-ante processes with the greatest possible coherence and consistency, the agencies accept the undertaking of the protocol's analysis and on-going review so as to ensure that, at all times, the universities have the necessary information to guide them in the preparation of their qualification proposals.

CRITERIA AND GUIDELINES

Each doctoral programme must guarantee respect for and the promotion of basic human rights and equality and must encourage democratic values and a culture of peace. The design of doctoral programmes must take into account the fact that all professional activities should be exercised:

- ✦ From the perspective of basic rights and equality between men and women and, where appropriate, studies relating to these rights must be included in the study plans.
- ✦ From the perspective of respect for and the promotion of human rights and the principles of universal design and accessibility and, where appropriate, studies relating to these principles and rights must be included in the study plans.
- ✦ In accordance with the values pertaining to a culture of peace and democracy and, where appropriate, studies relating to these values must be included in the study plans.

Criterion I: Description of doctoral programmes

Doctoral programmes must include a description consistent with their level and academic purposes, so that they do not lead to any confusion regarding their features.

- The title must be consistent with the lines of research proposed and must not lead to confusion.
- It must be justified by the context, tradition, global offer of degrees or the potential of the university or universities that propose it.
- It must be consistent with and integrated into the university's R&D+i strategy or into that of other bodies and institutions.
- It must show the appropriate degree of internationalization in terms of its subject and its context.

Criterion II: Competences

The competences to be acquired by the doctoral candidates must match those required to grant the degree and with the qualifications established in the European Higher Education Area.

- The competences proposed must be described clearly and precisely and must be aligned with their level in the Spanish Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.
- The competences proposed must be assessable and their acquisition by all doctoral candidates must be guaranteed.

Criterion III: Entry and Admission of Students

The doctoral programme must feature an entry and admissions system that clearly regulates and informs students on admission criteria.

- Admission criteria must be public, clearly explained, consistent with the doctoral programme's scientific field and it must not be misleading.
- If additional educational requirements are needed, these should adapt to the students' entry profiles and be consistent with the scientific field of the doctoral programme.
- Information on doctoral programmes should be available to doctoral candidates prior to enrolment.

Criterion IV: Educational Activities

Educational activities included in the study programme must constitute a coherent educational proposal designed in a co-ordinated manner that takes into account students' dedication over a specific time period.

- The planning and organisation of training activities, in particular specific learning and methodologies (seminars, courses, workshops...), cross-cutting competences, learning experiences (conferences for doctoral

candidates, national or international meetings...) should be consistent with the competences the doctoral candidates are expected to acquire.

- The doctoral programme should provide the adequate mobility organisation for doctoral candidates in line with the competences they have to acquire.
- The doctoral programme should include planning, for both full-time and part-time students, to ensure the acquisition of the expected competences.

Criterion V: Programme organisation.

Doctoral candidate follow-up procedures and the supervision of doctoral theses must ensure that students acquire the competences defined in the doctoral study programme.

- Doctoral programmes must include the procedures listed below and make them public. These procedures should be appropriate and focus on:
 - The procedures used by the academic committee to allocate thesis tutors and supervisors.
 - The procedure used to control the registration of each doctoral candidate's activities and the certification of their data.
 - The procedure governing the annual assessment of the Research Plan and the registration of doctoral candidate activities.
 - The procedure for defining and assessing activities aimed at promoting the management and supervision of doctoral theses.

Criterion VI: Human Resources

Doctoral programmes must be supported by a group of researchers capable of ensuring, a priori, the feasibility of the programme regarding educational issues. The academic staff involved must be sufficient and suitably qualified and have the necessary experience to impart doctoral courses.

- Each research team must have a competitive project on issues related to the programme's lines of research.
- The programme should be backed by the quality of the most important scientific contributions from the researchers involved in it.
- The programme must be backed by the proven experience of its researchers in the management of doctoral theses and their quality.
- The University must have clear mechanisms in place to acknowledge doctoral thesis tutoring and supervision tasks.

Criterion VII: Material resources and support available to doctoral candidates

The material resources and services necessary for the development of the educational activities included in a doctoral programme and for the comprehensive education of candidates must ensure the acquisition of the expected competences.

- The material resources and other means available should ensure the development of the research to be performed by each doctoral candidate.
- The services and resources required to enable doctoral candidates to attend conferences and conduct visits abroad, as well as the funding to provide the organisation of seminars, conferences and other national and international training activities within the framework of the doctoral programme must be ensured.
- Doctoral programmes must include professional guidance services to promote adequate job placement of graduates.

Criterion VIII: Doctoral programme review, improvement and results

Doctoral programmes must include mechanisms that make it possible to analyse their development and results and to ensure their continuous review and improvement.

- They must include an academic committee which sets procedures and mechanisms to supervise programme development, analyse results and establish appropriate actions for improvement. The opinion of doctoral candidates and graduated doctors should be one of the main factors considered when defining and implementing improvement actions.
- They must include procedures to study the results of the mobility programme.
- Information on the programme, its development and results should be published regularly.
- There should be a procedure for following-up graduated doctors.
- In the case of doctoral programmes involving more than one university, there should be mechanisms and procedures capable of ensuring coordination between the participating universities.