

**FOLLOW-UP REPORT IN ACCORDANCE WITH EUROPEAN STANDARDS  
AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION TWO  
YEARS AFTER THE EXTERNAL REVIEW OF ACSUCYL**

**November 2021**

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ACSUCYL**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) once again confirmed ACSUCYL'S membership of the association, subsequent to the evaluation and the corresponding report issued by the external Panel in June and October 2019, respectively.

This was the third external review that ACSUCYL had successfully undergone, and again evidenced its compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) when conducting its activities and procedures.

ACSUCYL received suggestions for improvement from the external Panel as well as the Board of ENQA during the review process and these have been analysed and taken into account over the two years to have elapsed since the suggestions were received. As an agency whose aim is to improve higher education in Castilla y León (SUCYL), ACSUCYL is aware that implementing these suggestions is leading to improvements in the action and functioning of the Agency itself.

Since 2019, ACSUCYL has also engaged in a process of reflection and analysis in order to draw up this follow-up report. It should also be pointed out that ACSUCYL'S work was not interrupted because of the pandemic which broke out in March 2020. The Agency continued with its work as normal in the various assessment processes, and remained in constant contact with universities in SUCYL in order to respond to the impact which the pandemic had on university education.

As requested by the Board of ENQA, this report presents the current status of the action taken in order to comply with the recommendations received over the two-year period that has elapsed since 2019. As evidence accrediting what is set out therein, the report contains links underlined in the text that lead to documents or to ACSUCYL'S website, where the corresponding documents may be consulted.

Finally, ACSUCYL wishes to reiterate its firm commitment to continue working in accordance with European guidelines, which is reflected in an improvement in the Agency itself as an institution as well as in the higher education system in Castilla y León and, in sum, in the higher education training offered to society in the region of Castilla y León.

## 2. CURRENT STATUS AND LEVEL OF COMPLIANCE WITH THE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT MADE BY THE PANEL OF EXPERTS

### ESG 3.1 Activities, policy, and processes for quality assurance

ACSUCYL is recommended to further increase the involvement of students in its Governing and Advisory Board. The Panel suggests the agency might involve more international perspectives in its governance and work to contribute different perspectives on how higher education and its quality assurance can be organised

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ACSUCYL is fully aware of the importance of receiving views and opinions from students concerning all the areas in which the Agency is working as well as from all the stakeholders involved, and who are key to the higher education system in Castilla y León.

With this aim in mind, students have already been included in Degree Assessment Committee meetings. A representative from the student group has been involved in reviewing and issuing the evaluation of verification and renewal of accreditation reports. The Agency will also be involving students in Internal Quality Assessment Committee meetings, in the forthcoming processes on institutional accreditation and certification of university centres' internal quality assurance systems, both of which are included in the Elenchos Programme and implemented by the Agency itself.

The current legislation governing the functioning and composition of the Agency's management and assessment bodies does not allow for the inclusion of students in the Board of Directors and in the Advisory Board. Nevertheless, the Agency is seeking ways of securing student participation in the two bodies, either through students who cooperate in the Agency's assessment activities (and who are, therefore, experts in assessment tasks and in how the Agency implements them), or as members of the Student Board. In this regard, the Board of Directors meeting held on 25 October approved an agreement to include student representation in those meetings in which their participation is deemed advisable.

ACSUCYL has been working over the last few years to enhance the activities carried out within the Student Board. The board receives information concerning all the proposals that are to be included in the Agency's annual action plan and it may, in turn, add new proposals. In November, the director sends to all the members of the Student Board a draft of the action plan in order to receive proposals which may then be included for subsequent approval by ACSUCYL'S Board of Directors. In addition, the Board of Directors agreed to foster student participation in quality assurance processes through a series of one-day meetings organised by the Student Board's representatives and which the Agency will also be attending.

It was also agreed to inform those students who are members of the Student Board about the degrees which are undergoing evaluation for renewal of accreditation. ACSUCYL has promoted the spread of the "open audience" platform as a means of engaging the participation of all those students who wish to take part in the evaluation through the Agency's website. The open audience is an online tool through which any member of the university community can put forward to the corresponding committees their comments and views concerning the degrees being evaluated.

This year ACSUCYL has approved its [2021/2025 Strategic Plan](#). Drawing up this strategic plan required a prior analysis of the applicable legislation, internationally established action criteria, recommendations and suggestions received in the external evaluation processes to which ACSUCYL is periodically subject, information provided by the various stakeholders involved (assessment bodies, Advisory Board, Student Board, universities, Technical Units for Quality and Vice-rectorate offices at universities in SUCYL as well as the Agency's senior technical officers), together with the activities undertaken by other national and international quality assurance agencies. With this information, a SWOT analysis was carried out in order to understand ACSUCYL'S strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Using all of the data obtained, a strategic plan was drawn up that maximises the strengths and opportunities which enable the Agency to improve its ability to overcome the weaknesses and so respond to the threats.

As a result, the 2021/2025 Strategic Plan, which was submitted to the approval of the Board of Directors on 28 May 2021, and after having taken into account the suggestions put forward by the Advisory Board on 24 May 2021, envisages six strategic lines and their corresponding operational objectives for the coming five years. Development and implementation of these will enable the expectations of the various stakeholders involved to be met and so aid decision-making vis-à-vis fulfilling the Agency's mission.

Following ENQA's recommendations, line IV has been included in the Strategic Plan. This seeks to foster the Agency's internationalisation as well as that of SUCYL, boosting the presence of international experts, furthering participation in European projects and in international networks, and promoting evaluation services at an international scale.

In this line, ACSUCYL has deemed it appropriate to have a greater presence of international experts so as to help extend the possibilities of organising higher education and its quality assurance, together with the international experience of national experts who cooperate in the Agency's various bodies.

The presence of international experts is examined in greater detail in standard 2.2. ACSUCYL wishes to highlight that this aspect has been one of the main questions taken into account in the recent renewal in 2021 of the members of the Agency's assessment committees and its Advisory Board.

### **ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis**

ACSUCYL is recommended to structurally develop reports that describe and analyse the general findings of the agency's individual review processes (i.e. the agency's quality assurance activities) in order to inform (potential) students, the regional Government and society at large.

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ACSUCYL has continued to work on developing thematic analyses through which to disclose the results and conclusions that emerge from its quality assurance activities. Every year, the Agency has actively cooperated in drawing up the "[Report on the Current Status of External Evaluation of Quality in Spanish Universities \(ICU\)](#)". This document is the result of a joint effort on the part

of all the Spanish agencies working in quality assurance in higher education. Its main aim is to conduct an analysis of the assessment procedures carried out by all the Spanish agencies.

Likewise, in 2020 and 2021, ACSUCYL together with other agencies (AQU Catalunya, DEVA, ACPUA, ACCUE and UNIBASQ) has organised a [Cycle of Webinars](#) addressing the current challenges facing university education. These webinars seek to offer an up-to-date view of the current situation as well as the challenges facing university degrees. In these reports, an analysis is conducted of the indicators, and proposals are put forward for improvements in the degrees, as suggested by the experts. These webinars are designed for those in charge of university courses, technical units for quality at the universities, quality assurance agency staff, employers in the corresponding thematic area, heads of public administration, professional colleges, students, graduates, and all other stakeholders. To date, five webinars have been held addressing the following university studies and degrees:

- Nursing
- Computer Engineering and Telecommunications
- Primary and Infant Education
- Tourism
- Journalism and Audiovisual Communication

Despite the health crisis triggered by the SARS-COVID 2019 outbreak in March 2020 and the declaration of the state of emergency in Spain, ACSUCYL'S activities were not interrupted and the Agency continued with its usual work in the various assessment processes. It adapted its electronic media and the assessment platforms described in its protocols and set out under current legislation. Together with its activities and quality assurance processes, the Agency's work has focused on accompanying and guiding universities in the higher education system in Castilla y León in an effort to overcome the problems brought about by the new situation.

The declaration of the state of emergency on 14 March 2020 to deal with the health crisis caused by COVID-19 meant all universities having to adapt to a remote system of teaching. In order to address this situation in Castilla y León, ACSUCYL, in conjunction with universities in the higher education system in Castilla y León, and working with the regional education ministry, produced on 22 April 2020 the [“Guidelines to adapt teaching to a wholly online environment”](#) in order to ensure the quality of degrees. The document was made publicly available and can be found on ACSUCYL'S website.

This effort to adapt enabled two key objectives to be achieved. First, it was possible to keep the Agency running as normal so that it could fulfil its obligations in good time and in an appropriate manner, and secondly it helped universities to adopt the measures required to ensure the proper development of processes involving follow-up, renewal of accreditation, and institutional accreditation. These guidelines followed those published by the education authorities and the Spanish Network of University Quality Agencies (REACU), as well as the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education.

In addition, ACSUCYL worked in close collaboration with universities through frequent meetings to set out the general criteria for planning the 2020-2021 academic year. The recommendations

made by the Ministry for Universities to the university community vis-à-vis adapting the 2020-2021 university academic year to the adjusted teaching indicated in point 10 that “the competent quality assurance agencies must, in each case, ensure the quality of the various types of teaching adopted by universities”. In application of its powers, Agreement 29/2020 of 19 June adopted by the Regional Government of Castilla y León approving the plan for preventive and control measures to deal with the COVID-19 health crisis in Castilla y León, approving measures for centres of education, authorised universities to adopt a protocol regulating the appropriate preventive measures for the return to classroom teaching for all academic activities.

Taking this into account, and in order to help universities adapt for the 2020-2021 academic year, and in conjunction with them and with the regional directorate general for university education and research, ACSUCYL published the document “[\*General criteria for adapting teaching to health requirements during the 2020-21 academic year\*](#)”, which is also available on ACSUCYL'S website.

Finally, work is also being carried out to issue a report on the process for renewal of accreditation of university degrees as well as on the processes for evaluating teaching staff. The metaevaluation report on the assessment processes for research is also expected to be published soon.

In addition, and drawing on the experience and cooperation of the experts who take part in ACSUCYL'S assessment processes, a study group that is working on analysing the recognition of credits amongst degrees has been created (the analysis began with degrees in infant and primary education).

### **ESG 3.5 Resources**

ACSUCYL is recommended to seek an agreement with the Regional Government which provides security on budgets through multi-annual funding and to discuss whether more diversified income streams may be useful to increase the independence of the agency.

Moreover, the agency is recommended to secure sufficient resources to extend its work on thematic analysis to enable it to implement the Panel's recommendations mentioned under ESG 3.4.

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With regard to the comments included in this criterion, ACSUCYL is in a position to state that it has sufficient financial independence to undertake its activities. The Agency has its own legal status, which means that its independence has been recognised vis-à-vis the political authorities in the region of Castilla y León. Moreover, ACSUCYL has its own separate and long-term budget that ensures its correct functioning and compliance with its objectives in the various evaluation processes.

The budget is approved annually by the Castilla y León regional parliament assembly in the Budget Law which establishes the maximum amount to be spent in accordance with the action foreseen by ACSUCYL over the three-year period.

It should be clarified that, in line with the applicable legislation, ACSUCYL'S Board of Directors annually approves a draft budget that includes a three-year plan, in accordance with article 81 of Law 2/2006 of 3 May: "1. The long-term budgets in which the general budgets of the region are framed for each year constitute the long-term planning of the activities carried out by all the agencies and bodies included therein and must comply with the goal of budget stability set out for the period referred to, in accordance with the stipulations established in basic State legislation concerning the matter of budget stability".

The budget is approved, executed and controlled each year, although it is drawn up by the Board of Directors in advance and envisages a long-term scenario in order to ensure the Agency has sufficient financial resources for its activities that will enable it to function correctly and fulfil its mission.

It should be clarified that the +transfer received from the Regional Ministry of Education which appears in the income section is merely an accounting mechanism designed to balance the consolidated budget, and is calculated as the difference between the year's expenditure and the revenue generated by ACSUCYL itself (teaching staff assessment fees and income derived from providing services). Under no circumstances may this be seen as financial support or as a subsidy whose amount is decided by the regional Ministry of Education, such that it would make no sense to establish any kind of commitment, contract or agreement stipulating the amount thereof.

In an effort to diversify its income streams and in order to respond to the demands made by its various stakeholders, ACSUCYL has continued to work on its *Catalogue of Assessment Services* for public and private bodies, in the fields of research, university teaching staff, university degrees or quality in higher education institutions. Within the framework of this catalogue, ACSUCYL has developed its list of services available to universities as well as the necessary planning required, taking into account universities' academic needs and those deriving from the Agency's own running when drawing on the corresponding assessment reports. In the case of other entities, the Agency and the entity in question analyse the process that is required so that it may be organised in the most efficient manner possible by both sides in order to devote the staff and financial resources that are necessary. In this regard, the list of agreements and contracts signed by ACSUCYL to carry out assessment activities in response to external requirements may be consulted (standard 3.3).

Finally, ACSUCYL is grateful for the recognition and praise received from the external Panel concerning the Agency's efficient and effective use of the resources available to it, an aspect which ACSUCYL continues to bear closely in mind, particularly given the possible difficulties which may arise as a result of the current health crisis.



### ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

ACSUCYL is recommended to complement the process-oriented approach of internal quality assurance with a more self-critical attitude and further strengthen the focus on the impact of its work on the quality of higher education in Castilla y León.

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When analysing this standard, the Panel's report highlighted, amongst other issues, the sound definition and implementation of the processes and procedures carried out by ACSUCYL, all of which are appraised by our stakeholders in the metaevaluations conducted at the end of the corresponding activity through surveys and/or meetings aimed at gauging and analysing the satisfaction of the users and evaluators who cooperate with us.

In addition, the Panel's report pointed out that ACSUCYL had included in its self-evaluation a review of the alignment of all its processes in order to ensure their consistency with ESG 2015. The Panel included one possible area for improvement regarding ESG 2.1. Consideration of internal quality assurance, such that this issue is analysed and a response provided later on in this report.

ACSUCYL has continued to strengthen its analysis of what impact its activities have on higher education in Castilla y León. Already highlighted is the intense work carried out with universities through frequent meetings in response to the situation brought about by the health crisis in 2020 (see standard 3.4). In addition, the Agency has sought opinions concerning how its processes impact the work done by universities through metaevaluation sessions (see standard 2.2). This is complemented with the analysis of the results and indicators of the processes carried out regularly by the Agency.

Aware of its importance, both in terms of the Agency's quality assurance activities as well as the impact these have on the higher education system in Castilla y León, ACSUCYL continues to work with a critical approach that seeks constant improvement. This was reflected through the self-evaluation undertaken for external evaluation, and that pinpointed areas for improvement which, on several occasions, concurred with those put forward by the Panel.

ACSUCYL also continues to self-examine its activities as well as the outcomes to emerge in order to enhance the positive impact these have on the higher education system in Castilla y León (SUCYL). In this regard, since March 2020 the Agency has added another key work dimension to its usual processes in order to provide the higher education system with a quick and efficient response to the current situation triggered by the health crisis. The actions undertaken by the Agency are detailed in the previous criterion, 3.4 Thematic analysis.

Finally, the Agency has continued to work towards ensuring gender equality in all of its official bodies. This standard has been strictly applied in the recent renewal of the composition of the assessment committees and in the [Agency's Advisory Board](#), carried out in July 2021. Its current composition, together with the members' CVs, are available on ACSUCYL'S website. In the [Institutional Quality Assessment Committee](#) and in the [Teaching Staff Assessment Committee](#) five of its ten members are female. In the [Degree](#) and [Research](#) Assessment Committees, and on the Advisory Board, four of its ten members are female.

## ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

ACSUCYL is recommended to further integrate the concept of student-centred learning, teaching and assessment as a core element in all its procedures (ESG 1.3).

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Since 2017, ACSUCYL specifically includes in its assessment guides and protocols the corresponding alignment between the ESG Part 1 and the standards which ACSUCYL applies when conducting each assessment process. Moreover, in addition to ensuring this alignment, this has served to spread throughout the university community the ESG framework and on which both agencies and universities alike must work.

With regard to ESG 1.3 (student-centred learning, teaching and assessment), ACSUCYL has specifically included it in the latest assessment programme designed and implemented by the Agency: the Elenchos Programme. This standard is also taken into account in the Docentia Programme as a system for assessing the work of teaching staff.

In line with the recommendation received through the Panel report, ACSUCYL is working to highlight everything that this standard 1.3 entails in the degree assessment processes; in other words, how students can be made responsible for taking on an active role in their education and learning and how student assessment should reflect this reality.

Since this recommendation was received, particular attention has focused during the training meetings – those aimed at university academic officers as well as those designed for the Agency's evaluators – on the importance of looking closely at how this standard 1.3 was being taken into account in the assessment process in which they were involved and, specifically, in the degree/centre being assessed.

Moreover, since last year the Spanish higher education system is pending legislative reform put forward by the Ministry for Universities with regard to a revised structure and organisation of university education in Spain. In conjunction with the Spanish Network of University Quality Agencies (REACU), ACSUCYL has underlined to the ministry the need for this reform to take into consideration the framework set out by the ESG.

To date, this legislative reform has been reflected through the following recently approved Royal Decrees:

- Royal Decree 640/2021, of 27 July, governing the creation, recognition and authorisation of universities and university centres, and institutional accreditation of university centres.
- Royal Decree 822/2021, of 28 September, establishing the organisation of university courses and their corresponding quality assurance procedures.

ACSUCYL is implementing the mechanisms required to adapt its processes to the new legislation. As part of this process, the Agency is cooperating with REACU, in which the 11 quality assurance agencies that operate in Spain are involved, in developing common action standards and benchmarks.

## ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

ACSUCYL is recommended to search for a better balance between qualitative and quantitative approaches in its quality assurance procedures in order to further increase the fitness for purpose of the external quality assurance system as a whole. Next, the agency is recommended to involve students and international experts more in the development of its quality assurance processes.

Finally, the agency is recommended, together with the Regional Government, to reflect on whether the combination of those processes at centre/institute level continues to be the optimal framework, and whether further streamlining of the different processes might be useful.

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When designing and implementing quality assurance processes, one of the principles that ACSUCYL has borne very closely in mind has been to analyse how fit each procedure is for the purpose for which it was designed, in an effort to ensure that the administrative load, both for the Agency as well as for the bodies/elements assessed, is as manageable as possible. The Panel also positively evaluated in its report the involvement of universities in Castilla y León in designing and developing new quality assurance processes.

ACSUCYL has, nevertheless, continued to work towards improving its processes through the meetings and metaevaluation sessions held with universities in order to pinpoint those aspects that might be streamlined and enhanced in each of the procedures and in each of the calls.

Work is also being carried out to enhance the qualitative aspects of the processes (analysis of standards, qualitative motivation including assessment report recommendations, good practices ...). Amongst others, these aspects are included in the issues to be dealt with in the previous training given to experts and assessment committees.

With regard to the [Elenchos Programme of Institutional Accreditation of University Centres](#), ACSUCYL has involved various groups in the design and implementation of the assessment model: academic staff, technical officers for quality, administration and service staff, students, international experts as well as renowned company professionals. In an effort to define and reach an agreement upon an assessment model, in 2017 and 2018 a committee was set up in which, together with ACSUCYL, senior technical officers from the nine universities in Castilla y León were involved. Also during this period, a committee was appointed made up of qualified academic experts and renowned senior technical officers from other Spanish universities, all of whom had ample experience in quality assurance systems. The two committees put forward a joint proposal for an assessment model that was finally reviewed and approved by ACSUCYL'S Institutional Quality Assessment Committee, comprising university scholars, international experts and renowned professionals from the business world. The assessment model to emerge from the process was put to ACSUCYL'S Student Board. One of the main premises when defining it was to align all its criteria with the ESG 2015.

In 2018, a pilot process of the Elenchos Programme was introduced in which four university centres took part. Once the evaluation had concluded, a metaevaluation was carried out in which the model applied was reviewed. This process involved the participation of universities' technical units for quality, the centres assessed (academic staff, administration and service staff, and students), the committee of national experts who took part in designing the first assessment model, ACSUCYL'S Institutional Quality Assessment Committee, and the Agency's senior

technical officers. Based on the conclusions from the metaevaluation, changes were made to certain standards and assessment standards were redefined, which led to the model being once again approved by ACSUCYL'S Institutional Quality Assessment Committee.

In 2019, two new centres applied for the certification process. In 2020, due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19, no new applications for assessment were received. Throughout 2021, different presentations of the Elenchos Programme for Institutional Accreditation are being given at universities and university centres. Several centres are expected to apply for certification of their internal quality assurance system (IQAS) in 2022.

As regards the issue of greater student and international expert involvement in developing quality assurance processes, mention has been made in this report of student involvement in the Degree Assessment Committee when carrying out the metaevaluation of the processes for which it is responsible. Also mentioned in this report is the greater involvement of international experts as members of the assessment committees after the changes brought about as a result of their renewal in July 2021, and the involvement of Spanish scholars and scientists with ample experience in assessment, both in Spain and at an international level, as evidenced by their CVs, which are available on the Agency's website. Annex 1 lists the international experts who have joined ACSUCYL'S bodies.

Finally, the Agency has examined the Panel's latest recommendation in this standard, taking into account the processes cited by the Panel that are the responsibility of the regional government. After reviewing these processes with representatives from the regional government, it has been decided for the time being that the processes should coexist, since their objectives and framework of competences are clearly differentiated. Nevertheless, as we have been doing thus far, synergies between the two processes will be sought. The two cases mentioned by the Panel will now be examined:

- University centres: the Elenchos Programme is aimed at certifying the IQAS of university centres and, based on this certification, the institutional accreditation of the centre which then implies accreditation of the degrees taught therein. For its part, the procedure for the creation, recognition, modification, removal or affiliation of university centres is broader in scope, since it responds to current legislation, both at a national and regional level (Law 3/2003, of 28 March, governing universities in Castilla y León) concerning administrative issues which the regional administration must oversee in terms of the creation of university centres (public universities), recognition of university centres (private universities), their modification or suppression, affiliation of centres of higher education to universities, etc. Possible connections between these processes are aspects which, vis-à-vis subsequent changes in legislation, the Agency will take into account.
- In addition, the Panel also pointed out that the accreditation of research institutes, which focuses on research, also establishes certain links with doctoral programmes. Accreditation of research institutes is the responsibility of the regional government, and is a process which seeks to foster the existence of competitive scientific structures at a regional level. It does not exist in other regions in Spain. For its part, the verification and subsequent accreditation of doctoral programmes is specified under national

legislation. As the Panel rightly points out, ACSUCYL, in its assessment protocols, has linked the two processes such that, when a proposal for a doctoral programme is supported by a Castilla y León university research institute that has been officially recognised by the regional government and has received a favourable report from ACSUCYL, it is automatically deemed to have received a favourable assessment with regard to its human resources (research groups, qualifications and researcher experience).

Having analysed the current situation of the institutes and doctoral programmes in Castilla y León, various instances have been found which, for the time being, make it impossible to apply any changes to this framework. In general, institutes offer doctoral programmes, although most of the doctorates offered by universities are affiliated to the various university doctoral schools and not to institutes. As a result, ACSUCYL considers the need to continue bearing in mind, in the corresponding processes, that a doctoral programme is offered by a recognised institute but that, in practice, it is not possible to make any changes in the assessment framework of either institutes or doctoral programmes.

#### **ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts**

ACSUCYL is recommended to continue to focus on the values and concepts underpinning the ESG 2015 in the training provided to new and existing peer review experts. The Panel suggests that the agency takes greater care to maintain an appropriate gender balance when selecting its Panels. The Panel suggests that the agency strengthens its efforts to increase the involvement of international experts in its review Panels and commissions

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Following the Panel's recommendation, ACSUCYL has continued its efforts to underline the values which constitute the basis of the ESG 2015 when training the evaluators who take part in the quality assurance processes. As previously mentioned, in all the protocols emphasis is placed on securing an alignment between the standards which the evaluators must apply and those set out in the ESG. As such, evaluators are made aware that the processes carried out by the Agency must respond to the European framework which all agencies have agreed upon to enhance the university courses available in Europe. Particular attention has also been focused on the standard addressing student-centred learning, teaching and assessment, an issue on which further work will be done in the coming years.

As regards gender equality, in the same way in which this has been taken into account when renewing the assessment committees, ACSUCYL feels this to be a key aspect when forming the committees or panels of experts.

Finally, as regards furthering the efforts made to secure a greater involvement of international experts, ACSUCYL has engaged in a number of strategies:

- In order to have students from other European countries, in January 2021 the Agency organised an online training meeting addressing "[Quality Assurance of E-Learning](#)"

[Provision. European and Spanish context](#)” in conjunction with the European Students’ Union (ESU).

- In the case of the assessment panels for master's and doctoral degrees, ACSUCYL forms these panels with evaluators who have ample research experience at an international level. Work is being done to include international experts in these committees, although on occasions this proves difficult to arrange because, amongst other reasons, of the language difficulties (a sound knowledge of Spanish is required to deal with the corresponding documents). In any case, the aim is to take advantage of the possibilities afforded by online meetings to further involve this particular evaluator profile in future processes.

## ESG 2.6 Reporting

ACSUCYL is recommended to add in the reports (where those elements are lacking) a specific justification per standard and the decisive elements leading to the overall evaluation, including the analysis, findings, conclusions, recommendations for improvement and feature of good practice. Moreover, ACSUCYL is recommended to continue to search for ways to disclose the results of the agency’s quality assurance processes better to all stakeholders, including students and employers.

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Following the Panel’s recommendation, ACSUCYL is working to improve the information contained in the verification reports for official degrees so that these reports can offer stakeholders those elements recommended by the Panel concerning the new degree which is to be introduced. Nevertheless, the recent publication of “Royal Decree 822/2021, of 28 September, establishing the organisation of university education and the procedure for ensuring its quality” makes it advisable to take into account the modifications introduced, and which will require changes to be made to the standards agreed by the quality assurance agencies in REACU and for the framework to be updated.

The Agency will also analyse all of the reports issued in order to pinpoint improvements to be included therein. In this regard, it should be highlighted that the renewal of accreditation reports contain sufficient justification since they include a description of the assessment process, an overall evaluation as well as a justification for each standard. Suggestions for improvements and best practices are mentioned in the general evaluation and in the specific standards and, in the case of suggestions for improvement, are specified independently at the start of the corresponding report before the standards are analysed. In addition, there is a specific section evaluating the improvement plan set out for each degree.

Finally, ACSUCYL is aware that enhancing the disclosure of the outcomes to emerge from the Agency's quality assurance processes to all stakeholders, including specialised training and employers, is a key aspect. With this aim in mind, ACSUCYL has organised sessions to present the processes and their results at several universities in Castilla y León as well as at other national forums. In a similar vein, the online webinars referred to earlier in this report have contributed towards this disclosure.

In addition, all of the degree assessment reports are published on the [Search Engine for Official University Degrees \(Browser\)](#), and the assessment reports relating to certification and institutional accreditation of university centres are published on [ACSUCYL'S website](#).

It should also be highlighted that ACSUCYL has taken part in the [DEQAR CONNECT](#) European project through which it was one of the first agencies to submit to EQAR all of the assessment reports on university degrees and which are published by this institution on its web.

### **3. CURRENT STATUS AND LEVEL OF COMPLIANCE WITH THE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT MADE BY THE BOARD OF ENQA**

#### **ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE**

The dependence of the agency on the regional government for the appointment of its Governing Board, which then affects the agency's management in strategic terms, including the resources

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As established in the regulations, the Board of Directors is the Agency's official governing body, and its structure and functions were set out under the Castilla y León universities act of 2003. The rules governing the Agency itself were subsequently approved in 2015, and included stipulating the functions of the Board of Directors. Since the Agency was created, the Board of Directors has supported, with the functions assigned to it under current law, ACSUCYL'S implementation of all the assessment processes which national and regional legislation ascribes to the Agency. It has also supported the allocation of resources for carrying out those assessment processes for which the Agency has received a request from public and private or national and international bodies. By way of an example, listed below are the agreements and contracts signed by ACSUCYL to conduct assessment activities in response to external requests made over the last two years:

2020:

- REGIONAL ENERGY AGENCY: Assessment of R&D projects in energy efficiency.
- UNIVERSITY OF BURGOS: Assessment of R&D projects co-founded by the Caixa II and Caja Burgos banks (three calls).
- UNIVERSITY OF BURGOS: Assessment of applications submitted prior to changes in teaching staff's knowledge area affiliation.
- UNIVERSITY OF BURGOS: Assessment of university teaching staff research results.
- CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AVILA: Assessment of university teaching staff research results.
- UNIVERSITY OF LEON: Assessment of applications submitted prior to taking on teaching staff as emeriti professors.
- UNIVERSITY OF LEON: Assessment of applications submitted prior to changes in teaching staff's knowledge area affiliation.

- UNIVERSITY OF LEON: Assessment of applications submitted to the call for pre-candidates to the post of assistant lecturers holding a PhD, as part of the University Excellence Programme.
- PONTIFICAL UNIVERSITY OF SALAMANCA: Assessment of applications submitted under “ACSUCYL'S External Assessment Programme of teaching staff activities”.
- UNIVERSITY OF SALAMANCA: Assessment of applications submitted prior to changes in teaching staff's knowledge area affiliation.
- UNIVERSITY OF SALAMANCA: Assessment of the USAL's in-house call for C2 research projects aimed at young researchers.
- UNIVERSITY OF SALAMANCA: Assessment of applications submitted under the Call for Post-doctoral Contracts.
- UNIVERSITY OF VALLADOLID: Assessment of applications submitted prior to taking on teaching staff as emeriti professors.
- UNIVERSITY OF VALLADOLID: Assessment of applications submitted under the Call for Post-doctoral Contracts.
- UNIVERSITY OF VALLADOLID: Assessment for the recognition of university research groups.
- UNIVERSITY OF VALLADOLID: Assessment of applications submitted in “ACSUCYL'S External Assessment Programme of teaching staff activities”.
- UNIVERSITY OF LA SALLE (Colombia): Assessment of quality in the institution's internationalisation.

2021:

- REGIONAL ENERGY AGENCY: Assessment of R&D projects in energy efficiency.
- REGIONAL HEALTH SERVICE: Assessment of R&D projects in Biomedicine, Health Management and Socio-health Care (two calls).
- UNIVERSITY OF BURGOS: Assessment of applications submitted prior to taking on teaching staff as emeriti professors.
- UNIVERSITY OF BURGOS: Assessment for Certification of the UBU Assessment Model for Teaching Activities, within the framework of the Docentia Programme.
- UNIVERSITY OF BURGOS: Assessment of University Teaching Staff Research Results.
- UNIVERSITY OF LEON: Assessment of applications submitted prior to taking on teaching staff as emeriti professors.
- UNIVERSITY OF LEON: Assessment of applications submitted prior to changes in teaching staff's knowledge area affiliation.
- UNIVERSITY OF LEON: Assessment of applications submitted to the call for pre-candidates to the post of assistant lecturers holding a PhD, as part of the University Excellence Programme.
- UNIVERSITY OF SALAMANCA: Assessment of the USAL's in-house call for C2 research projects aimed at young researchers.
- UNIVERSITY OF VALLADOLID: Assessment of applications submitted prior to taking on teaching staff as emeriti professors.
- UNIVERSITY OF VALLADOLID: Assessment for the Recognition of University Research Groups.



- UNIVERSITY OF VALLADOLID: Assessment of applications submitted under the Call for Post-doctoral Contracts.

In sum, the above confirms what is set out in “Law 3/2003 governing universities in Castilla y León”, creating the Quality Assurance Agency for the University System in Castilla y León as a public body governed by private law, with its own legal status, full capacity to act and its own financial resources to carry out its functions. It is this very law which states that the presidency of the Agency's Board of Directors shall fall to the person holding the office as head of the regional ministry responsible for universities within the Regional Government of Castilla y León.

In this regard, and as has been highlighted in all the external reviews carried out at a European level which ACSUCYL has successfully passed, there is a clear separation between the Agency's organic structure and functional structure. The governing bodies (Board of Directors and Director), staff affiliated to the Agency (Director and senior technical officers) and the assessment committees (Degrees, Research, Institutional Quality, Teaching Staff) do not interfere in each other's running. There is also a Guarantees Committees that reviews the appeals submitted contesting the decisions taken by ACSUCYL'S various bodies, from the perspective of ensuring international quality standards for universities. It can therefore be stated that the functions and actions of each of the elements that make up the Agency are clearly defined and delimited and that there is no interference between them. In other words, each committee always acts with the utmost independence, both in terms of the Agency's governing bodies as well as in the other administrative and management bodies. In accordance with the Agency's rules, it is the assessment committees who take the final assessment decisions regarding the processes for which they are responsible.

The Agency's independence with regard to the regional government in terms of assessment decisions is also clearly evidenced through the legislative need to establish an agreement with the Regional Ministry of Education. The last agreement, signed on 21 May 2021 and lasting four years, stipulates that ACSUCYL shall act as an independent body in all the scientific-technical assessments that it may be required to undertake by the regional ministry.

It should also be highlighted that the composition of the Board of Directors embraces a broad representation of the Agency's stakeholder groups, such as public and private universities, the business sector as well as the academic and scientific fields. Of the 17 members who currently make up the Board, 11 belong to these stakeholder groups: four chancellors from public universities in Castilla y León, one chancellor from a private university in Castilla y León, two presidents of the social councils of public universities in Castilla y León, one renowned business person, two renowned members of the academic or scientific community, subsequent to a proposal from the Academic Committee of the Castilla y León University Council, and the Director of the Agency.

Moreover, when carrying out its functions and in its decision-making, the Board must take into account the conclusions and recommendations of the Agency's Advisory Board, which also

draws on a significant representation of stakeholder groups from the scientific community and the business sector, in addition to international experts:

- Four members of the academic or scientific community, with a distinguished track record in teaching and research.
- Three experts in higher education systems and quality assurance processes in the field of universities, at least two of whom must be from universities overseas.
- Three representatives from the business world who evidence a distinguished professional career.

For the Board of Directors, matters concerning the Agency staff have been subject to analysis and follow-up, as has been included in ACSUCYL'S reports. The situation caused by the SARS-COVID19 pandemic is currently leading to financial difficulties at a national and regional level, which has sparked enormous uncertainty concerning the possibility of expanding the human resources available to the Agency. Despite this, both during 2020 as well as at present, ACSUCYL is carrying out its scheduled activities as normal. In 2021, temporary staff were hired to provide support for the teaching staff and degree assessment processes.

Finally, and as highlighted in the previous ENQA reviews which ACSUCYL has undergone, the Agency has continued to work under a legal and functioning system that is separate from the institutions and entities being assessed, such that the functions assigned to it are carried out with the necessary safeguards in terms of independence, professionalism and freedom to act which characterise European assessment agencies. It should again be stressed that there is a strict separation within the Agency's organic structure between the governing bodies (Board of Directors, Director) and the assessment bodies (assessment committees). There is a clear delimitation of the functions to be carried out by each, added to which is the incompatibility between being a member of an assessment committee and belonging to one of the Agency's governing bodies. It is clearly set out that the governing bodies have absolutely no say in the assessment processes and that under no circumstances can they influence ACSUCYL'S decisions concerning the assessment, certification and accreditation, which the assessment committees adopt with full and total independence.

As regards the tasks involving organisation and management, these are assigned to the Director of the Agency, who is appointed in accordance with strictly technical criteria, applying the principles of publicity, public competition, merit, equality and ability (art. 41.1. Law 3/2003). Likewise, the Agency's own staff are also selected in accordance with same principles of publicity, public competition, merit, equality, and ability.

## **ANNEX 1. INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS INVOLVED IN ACSUCYL'S VARIOUS BODIES**

### Institutional Quality Assessment Committee:

Laura Beccari, Swiss Agency for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (AAQ)

Eugenia Llamas Muñoz, Université Gustave Eiffel (France)

Marta Fonolleda Riberaigua, Agència de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior d'Andorra

### Advisory Board:

Mechthild Albert, Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn

Salvatore Tomaselli, Università degli Studi di Palermo (Italy)