

## EXPERIENCES WITH THE USE OF ISO 9001 TO COMPLY WITH THE EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES IN THREE SPANISH AGENCIES

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### Abstract

This article attempts to explain how the internal quality management system introduced by three quality assurance agencies in compliance with the ISO 9001 standard has served as the basis for compliance with the European standards and guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance laid down for quality assurance agencies.

A comparison is made of each of the European guidelines with the requirements of ISO 9001, and the article goes on to explain the specific actions that have been carried out to comply with both standards.

In summary, the experience of the three agencies is intended to serve as an example to show:

- the correlation between ISO 9001 standard for Quality Assurance Systems and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- the compatibility of the two standards, which allows for compliance with both without the need for any additional effort
- the importance of having a sound internal quality assurance system as the basis for complying with the European standards and guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance agencies as a requirement to be a member of ENQA

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## Introduction

Quality assurance agencies need quality assurance systems that ensure compliance with both internal and external requirements. Although the requirements that agencies are called to comply with are similar and based on the same principles of continuous enhancement and client satisfaction, the way that compliance is dealt with is different and highly influenced by an agency's particular circumstances.

On a more general level, the world's most established quality framework is the ISO 9001:2008 standard for quality management systems.

ISO 9001 is a model recognised as an international standard for good practices in the management of internal quality in organisations that are dedicated to continuous process improvement aimed at achieving customer satisfaction. It is made up of five main sections:

- Quality management system
- Management responsibility
- Resource management
- Product (or service) realisation
- Measurement, analysis and improvement

The ISO 9001 standard provides a number of general requirements that can be applied in any organisation regardless of size, the sector of activity, or whether it receives public or private funding.

On a more specific level, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) are a general framework for quality assurance in higher education. These guidelines are divided up into three sections:

1. Internal quality assurance within higher education institutions
2. External quality assurance within higher education institutions
3. Quality assurance within external quality assurance agencies

Part 3 of the European standards provides guidelines to guarantee the professionalism, credibility and transparency of agencies, enabling them to also act in a systematic and comparable way.

The ESG offer sufficient autonomy to the Higher Education Institutions and the Quality Assurance Agencies to choose the way and the tools to guarantee quality in education.

Nevertheless, almost all of the requirements called for in the ESG are set out in the ISO 9001 standard, which is understandable given that the two are intended to guarantee internal quality assurance. A close comparison of the two standards shows that both systems allow agencies to choose the mechanisms for action that are most appropriate to the activity that they carry out, as well the way that these are developed and measured.

This article attempts to explain how the two standards complement each other through an analysis of three Spanish QA agencies that have adapted the standards to carry out their day-to-day activity. The three agencies are:

- Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU)
- Agency for Quality Assurance in the Galician University System (ACSUG)
- Quality Assurance Agency for the University System in Castilla y León (ACSUCyL)

All three agencies have an ISO 9001-based internal quality management system that has facilitated compliance with part 3 of the ESG, which is aimed at external quality assurance agencies.

In the study that was carried out, a summary of which is given below, an analysis was made of the degree to which compliance with the ISO standard facilitates compliance with the ESG. As a way of summarising the content of the article, the specific actions carried out by just one of the three agencies to ensure compliance with each ESG standard are given, even though all three agencies have adapted how they are run to the stipulations of both standards.

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## Standards

### 3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures by agencies

**Standard:**

*The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.*

### 3.3 Activities

**Standard:**

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

These two ESG standards can be analysed in a complementary way as they are directly connected with ISO 9001 section 7: Product realisation. This section calls for:

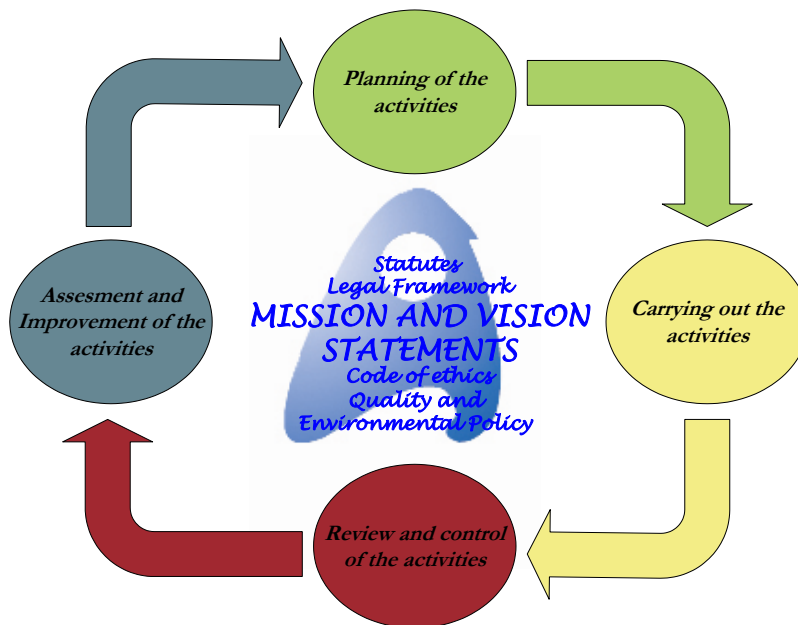
- determination of the requirements of activities and customer and user communication
- the planning of activities to be undertaken
- design and development activities

- service provision

ACSUG, as well as AQU and ACSUCyL, is aware of the importance of correctly carrying out the entire process that covers its activities. For this reason, in its internal management systems, it has established:

- a process map that identifies all of its activities
- a process for planning and monitoring all activities

In the specific case of ACSUG, this procedure involves a cyclical process that is systematically applied in all activities (see figure below), thereby complying with the provisions of standards 3.1 and 3.3 of the ESG, as well as the basic concepts of section 7 of the ISO 9001 standard mentioned above.



In addition to considering the standards of part 3 of the ESG, it is very important for activities carried out by quality assurance agencies to be aimed at and have a bearing on the external and internal quality assurance of higher education institutions, an aspect that agencies must take into account when planning their activities.

The assessment and improvement of activities is explained in more detail in the section on standard 3.8: *Accountability procedures*.

### 3.2 Official status

#### **Standard:**

*Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.*

All three agencies comply with this standard as they have been officially established and have a consolidated legal basis that lays down their functions, which in each case are recognised by the corresponding authorities.

As far as ISO 9001 is concerned, no specific requirement is set in relation to this ESG standard although a presentation of the organisation is necessary with the ISO 9001 standard, which is normally set out in the Quality Manual and includes a description of the organisation and its organisational structure.

In addition, the established management system, and in particular the quality policy, must be appropriate to the organisation's purpose and characteristics, and where the official status of these is an important aspect to be taken into consideration.

### 3.4. Resources

#### **Standard**

*Agencies should have adequate and proportional 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 procedure.*

In this respect, ISO 9001 standard establishes, in section 6 on resource management, that the organisation must determine and provide necessary resources to implement and maintain a quality management system and continually improve its efficacy, as well as increase customer satisfaction through compliance with their requirements. The focus here however is on human and physical resources.

In this regard, and in compliance with both the ISO standard and ESG 3.4, ACSUCYL has developed:

- a human resources management procedure in which everything concerning the Agency's staff management is specified, including recruitment and selection, job profile, training plan, training follow-up and the handling of suggestions made by staff. This ensures that staff are appropriately qualified to effectively and efficiently develop the quality assurance processes put into practice by the Agency, as well as contribute to

the continuous improvement of the system through the handling and analysis of suggestions that are made.

- a reviewer management procedure, which guarantees the above and, in addition to managing the aspects connected with selection and training, establishes the guidelines for assessing activities carried out by reviewers for enhancement purposes.
- a quality manual that sets out the Agency's organisational structure, the staff structure and their functions.
- a process for the planning and follow-up of actions, in which the need for the follow-up of actions programmed according to the allocated budget is laid down.
- an information systems management procedure, which shows how software used in the Agency's processes and for the efficacy and effectiveness of the same is managed.
- an inventory of assets for the analysis and monitoring of requirements.
- adequate infrastructures so that work is correctly undertaken and all of the Agency's needs are covered.

### 3.5. Mission

#### **Standard**

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

Section 5 of the ISO specifies, in a general way, that the management has the responsibility of committing to a quality policy and the setting of clear goals and objectives that contribute to the system's continuous improvement in a definitive way.

For this, ACSUCYL:

- has recently developed a Strategic Plan in which it reformulated the Agency's mission and vision, which has contributed to the setting of clear goals and objectives that will be planned and worked towards in accordance with specific lines of action
- annually produces an activities plan that specifies the objectives and specific lines of action to be followed during the period covered by the plan
- has a defined quality manual that specifies the quality objectives, together with its quality policy, to which public access is maintained
- a review process by the management that specifies the management's commitment to reviewing the entire system for the purposes of enhancement

### 3.6 Independence

**Standard:**

*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.*

This ESG standard is one of the few which bears no direct correspondence with any of the sections of the ISO 9001 standard. It does however (in the quality management systems section) include control over staff involved in the activities being carried out in the organisation and establish that they act in an effective and efficient way, which implies objectively and impartiality in their work, in accordance with certain ethical principles laid down by each Agency.

In this regard, as laid down in the ESG, the conduct of both the staff and outside collaborators is vitally important for all three of the Agencies, with staff having to comply with the principles of the Code of Ethics as defined by the organisation. In the specific case of ACSUCYL, in addition to the Code of Ethics, a reviewer management procedure is defined in the quality management system (as mentioned above), which ensures that the work of collaborators complies with these requirements.

The regulations governing the Agencies also ensure that their day-to-day activities are carried out in a way that is autonomous and independent from higher education institutions, which is also reflected in the processes and procedures documented in the organisation's internal quality management system, as laid down by the ISO standard.

### 3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies

**Standard:**

*The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available.*

*These processes will normally be expected to include: self-assessment, external assessment, publication of a report, and a follow-up procedure, together with an appeals process for formal decisions.*

In a general way, ISO 9001, in section 4: General requirements, and in more detail in section 7: Product realisation, calls for the identification of all processes, their sequence, interaction, monitoring, measurement and analysis.

To comply with both requirements, AQU:

- Firstly developed a process map, which defines the strategic, operational and support processes.



- It then developed and implemented more detailed procedures and instructions, with specifications on how each activity is to be carried out, the names of the people in charge, and the input and output. One of the most important processes is the external reviews, which it carries out according to the stages stipulated in the ESG.
- The outcomes of the evaluations are published on the website for dissemination purposes.

As called for by ISO 9001 as well, all procedures are validated, documented and constantly updated.

### 3.8 Procedures of responsibility

**Standard:**

*Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.*

For this, and also in accordance with the ISO guidelines, which in section 8 call for the organisation to plan and implement the necessary monitoring, measurement, analysis and improvement processes to ensure service conformance and improvement in the efficacy of the quality management system, AQU, as well as the other agencies, has:

- a quality policy approved by the Board of Management, which the Board communicates to all staff involved in the organisation, with the quality policy being disseminated via the website (ISO section 5.3. Quality policy)
- internal feedback systems through:
  - meta-assessment of all processes,
  - processing of all positive and negative comments noted during board meetings and committees,
  - an annual internal audit, in which all processes are reviewed,
  - surveys involving the staff,
  - processing of all internal non-conformities and enhancement measures.
- external feedback systems through:
  - satisfaction surveys of all activities that are carried out,
  - a mailbox on the website for complaints, suggestions and inquiries,
  - an external audit for the review of the quality system according to ISO 9001 by an accredited outside body.



As set out in section 5.6 of ISO 9001, the management must review the entire quality assurance system on an annual basis. It must set out in one sole document all of the entries mentioned above and implement corrective and preventative measures to enhance the system's efficacy.

Another of the requirements of ISO 9001 is the compilation and analysis of the data obtained for the purpose of evaluating the quality assurance system and to ensure continuous improvement according to the Deming quality circle. For this, the Agencies set and control indicators for each process as a further tool for enhancement.

## Conclusions

The table below gives a summary of the correlation between the two standards:

ESG: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES	ISO 9001: 2008
3.1 The use of external quality assurance procedures in Higher Education	7. Product realisation
3.2 Official status	No legal aspects mentioned 4.2.2 Quality Manual
3.3 Activities: evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation	7. Product realisation
3.4 Resources: human and financial	6. Resources management (not financial)
3.5 Mission statement: goals, objectives, policy, management plan	5. Management responsibility: Q. policy, Q. objectives, Q. management system
3.6 Independence	No legal aspects mentioned
3.7 External Quality Assurance Criteria and Process	4. Quality management system: process, criteria, methods, improvements 7. Product realisation
3.8 Accountability procedures: policy, experts, subcontractors, feedback	5.3 Quality policy 8. Measurement, analysis and improvement 7.4 Evaluate and select suppliers

To sum up, the European Standards provide the guidelines for quality assurance by quality assurance agencies in higher education, with the focus on institutional and programme review.

The ISO 9001 standard on Quality Management Systems is a good tool that enables organisations to improve their internal quality assurance system and be aware of their processes.

As we have shown above, the implementation of a management system and subsequent external certification according to ISO 9001 is a good basis that provides for compliance with the majority of the European guidelines (ESG).

In addition, should be pointed out that:

- A great mistake is thinking that with an internal quality assurance system certified in ISO 9001 we have all the work done and we are going to have a full compliance with the ESG. The ISO is, as we said before, only a basis and a helping tool.
- The implementation of an internal quality assurance system has to search the quality improvement and not only a external certification and showing externally “how good we are”.
- The implication of the governing bodies is necessary and fundamental for the efficient implementation of any standard or quality system.
- As we show in the table above, in some standards (3.1, 3.3, 3.5, 3.7, 3.8) the contribution of the ISO 9001 in the compliance with the ESG is higher than in others (3.2, 3.4, 3.6).
- It is important using the existing documentation in the internal quality assurance system to not duplicate information and provoke a waste of time and resources.

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## Proposed questions

1. Have you implemented other quality assurance systems or standards (besides ISO 9001) that have contributed to compliance with the ESG?
2. Do you think that the establishment of a internal quality assurance system provoke a bureaucratic way of work?
3. ISO 9001 and ESG, Is it a good combination for the enhancement of quality?

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## References

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