

REACU

Spanish Network
of Quality Assurance Agencies in
Higher Education

EVALUATION PROTOCOL FOR FOLLOW-UP AND ACCREDITATION RENEWAL of Doctoral Programmes leading to the achievement of official Doctorate Degrees

In accordance with the provisions in Royal Decree 99/2011, 28 January, which regulates Official Doctoral Education, and Royal Decree 822/2021, 28 September, on the organisation of Higher Education and the procedure for its quality assurance

Approved by REACU on 2 March, 2022

DOCTORAL PROGRAMMES ACCREDITATION

The accreditation of doctoral programmes leading to the achievement of an official Doctorate Degree is established in Royal Decree 99/2011, 28 January, which regulates official doctoral education, and in Royal Decree 822/2021, 28 September, which provides the organisation of university education and the procedure for its quality assurance.

The initial consideration as an accredited degree, to all the legal and regulatory effects and purposes established, is achieved through its registration in the Register for Universities, Centres and Degrees (RUCT), following official approval by the Ministers Council, the study plan verification by the Council for Universities and after its implementation is authorised by the Autonomous Community. Royal Decree 822/2021 provides for accredited degrees:

- A **follow-up** procedure that must be applied by university centres to review compliance with the academic project included in the official study plans provided.
- A procedure for **accreditation renewal** of official degrees to periodically review that doctoral programmes are being developed in accordance with their initial or modified project: the university must justify that the programme implementation and development comply with the proposal included in the verified report, or in any case, describe the academic, infrastructural reasons or teaching staff availability which justify the mismatch and actions developed within each scope.

FOLLOW-UP OF OFFICIAL DOCTORATE DEGREES

The follow-up procedure established in Royal Decree 822/2021 establishes the following provisions:

- **University Centres institutionally accredited.** The follow-up review of University official degrees is conducted within the scope of the centre institutional accreditation, in accordance with Royal Decree 640/2021, 27 July, on the creation, recognition and authorisation of universities and university centres, and institutional accreditation of university centres.
- **University Centres without institutional accreditation.** The follow-up review is carried out through the bodies established in the university normative and its internal quality assurance systems. In accordance with the guidelines provided by the corresponding quality assurance agency and external review report, at least a **review report** is required in the course of three years after its effective implementation or accreditation renewal.
 - These **reports aim** to review the doctoral programme effective development, in order to analyse compliance with the standards and fundamental academic approach included in the doctoral programme verified report, as well as to detect improvements that might be developed in the modification procedures.
 - The reports must include the **actions implemented** in accordance with the requirements and recommendations provided in the procedures for the degree verification and accreditation renewal.
 - The follow-up reports will **evidence** the information transparency and the indicators that provide the degree learning outcomes, by detecting possible areas for improvement and by **identifying** best practices in follow-up and continuous improvement of university studies.
 - The follow-up reports are remitted to the corresponding **quality assurance agency** and they are reviewed according to the agency procedure.
 - In case the agency detects serious unfulfilment with regard to the commitments acquired in the doctoral programme report, it will be notified to the centre and the university institutional governing bodies, as well as to the autonomous Community, in order to provide the appropriate measures to ensure students educational interests, otherwise it might imply the degree extinction.

This evaluation protocol provides the general guidelines to support universities to complete **doctoral programmes follow-up reports** leading to the **achievement of official Doctorate degrees** delivered at university centres without institutional accreditation.

ACCREDITATION RENEWAL OF OFFICIAL DOCTORATE DEGREES

The procedure for accreditation renewal established in Royal Decree 822/2021 distinguishes between:

- **Institutionally accredited university centres** which will renew the accreditation of official university degrees delivered as long as they keep institutional accreditation. The date for the degrees accreditation renewal in RUCT will correspond to the date of the resolution on the centre's institutional accreditation issued by the Council for Universities.
- **University centres without institutional accreditation.** The university official degrees accreditation must be renewed in accordance with the procedure provided by each Autonomous Community with regard to the universities within their competency.
 - The university will apply for accreditation renewal to the Council for Universities. The Council will request its review to the competent quality assurance agency, in order to confirm that the doctoral programme is being developed according to the initial project, through an external review process including, if applicable, a site visit by external experts with the participation of at least a student.
 - For the degree **second or successive accreditation renewal**, the aspects pointed out for special attention in previous accreditation renewal, will be specially taken into account, regardless the quality assurance in all the degree aspects.
 - The Council for Universities, after receiving the **agency report** on accreditation renewal, will issue the corresponding favourable or unfavourable resolution on the accreditation renewal, which will be included in the degree file in RUCT. In case that a degree does not renew accreditation, it will be declared "to extinguish", and the corresponding annotation will be registered in RUCT to that effect.

This evaluation protocol aims to provide the general standards as a guide for quality assurance agencies on the elaboration of accreditation renewal reports concerning **doctoral programmes leading to the achievement of official Doctorate Degrees** delivered at university centres without institutional accreditation.

ALIGNMENT WITH ESG

The dimensions and evaluation criteria for the follow-up and accreditation renewal of official degrees are established in accordance with the doctoral programme report and with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, ESG*. The ESG are the essential reference for the universities internal quality assurance systems (IQAS) and the procedures for external review conducted by the quality assurance agencies in the Spanish University System, in accordance with the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education, EQAR.

Therefore, social trust in the rigour and strength of university degrees is reinforced, facilitating continuous improvement, strengthening the employability capacity and graduates labour market integration, appropriate and of quality, in addition to the international recognition of Spanish university degrees and the development of international joint programmes.

FOLLOW-UP AND ACCREDITATION RENEWAL		DOCTORAL PROGRAMME	STANDARDS ESG
I. DEGREE MANAGEMENT	1. Programme development and implementation	[1]. Description of doctoral programme	1.2. Design and approval of programmes
		[3] Students access and admission	1.4. Students admission, progression, recognition and certification
		[4] Educational activities	1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment
		[5] Programme organisation	
	2. Information and transparency	[8] Programme review, improvement and outcomes	1.8. Public information
	3. Quality assurance, review and improvement		1.1. Policy for quality assurance
1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes			
I.I. RESOURCES	4. Academic staff	[6] Human resources	1.5. Teaching staff
	5. Material resources and support services	[7] Material resources and available support to doctoral students	1.6. Learning resources and students support
III. OUTCOMES	6. Learning outcomes	[2] Competencies	1.2. Design and approval of programmes
	7. Satisfaction and graduation	[8] Programme review, improvement outcomes	1.7. Information Management

DIMENSIONS, STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATION

I. DEGREE MANAGEMENT

1. Programme development and implementation

The doctoral programme has been implemented in accordance with the conditions established in the verified report and, if applicable, in the corresponding modifications.

- The programme has mechanisms to ensure that doctoral students **admission** profiles are appropriate and their number is consistent with the characteristics and distribution of the programme research lines and the number of vacancies offered.
- The programme has mechanisms to ensure that the access **requirements**, access profiles and admission criteria are appropriate.
- The programme has appropriate mechanisms to **monitor** doctoral students progression, doctoral theses **supervision** and, if applicable, educational activities.
- The institution attends to the possible **recommendations** and **aspects for special attention** pointed out in the verification report and if applicable, in modification reports, as well as the recommendations that might be included in successive follow-up and accreditation renewal reports.

2. Information and transparency

The institution has mechanisms to appropriately communicate the characteristics and outcomes of the doctoral programme to all stakeholders, as well as the management procedures that ensure its quality.

- The university publishes **objective, complete and updated information** on the doctoral programme, its characteristics, development and outcomes achieved.
- The institution ensures **easy accessibility** by all stakeholders to the relevant information on the doctoral programme.

3. Quality assurance, review and improvement

The institution has formally established and implemented mechanisms to efficiently ensure the doctoral programme quality and continuous improvement.

- The quality assurance procedures and mechanisms guarantee the **collection of information** and **results** which are relevant for decision making and the efficient management of the doctoral programme, specially on learning outcomes and stakeholders satisfaction.

- The programme has procedures and mechanisms to facilitate its **internal review** which include **plans** for **improvement**.

II. RESOURCES

4. Academic staff

Teaching staff is sufficient and appropriate, according to the programme characteristics, scientific field and number of students. The programme teaching staff, composed of doctorate research staff at the centre or centres delivering the programme, participates in its development (tutoring, thesis supervision, teaching some educational activities, participation in the Academic Commission, in Follow-up Commissions, etc.), and other doctorate staff who might participate in the development of the programme in accordance with the regulations provided by the university.

- Teaching staff meets the appropriate requirements to participate in the doctoral programme and research experience is accredited. For this reason, at least 60% of teaching staff must have accredited research experience, and research groups must have had at least a competitive project for over the last six years and demonstrate that participants are active in research.
- Each research line has at least a **project funded** by competitive calls over the last 6 years, whose principal investigator is academic staff in the doctoral programme.
- Academic staff is **sufficient** and has the **required dedication** to appropriately develop its functions, taking into account the students number in each research line and the nature and characteristics of the doctoral programme.
- The university has mechanisms for recognition of tutoring activity and thesis supervision which are applied to the programme academic staff.
- The participation of **international experts** in the follow-up commissions, doctoral thesis Committees and educational activities is appropriate with regard to the programme academic field.

5. Material resources and support services

The available material resources and services provided for the development of the intended activities are adequate, with regard to the programme characteristics, the scientific field and the students number.

- The available material resources are **appropriate** to the number of students in each line of research and the nature and characteristics of the doctoral programme.
- The doctoral programme student **support services** are appropriate to the students needs of the training process as researchers.

III. OUTCOMES

6. Learning outcomes

The learning outcomes achieved by doctorate students are in accordance with the intended results, and they are consistent with graduation profiles, corresponding to MECES level 4 of the degree.

- The doctoral programme **academic indicators** (related to the doctoral thesis and scientific contributions derived from them) and their evolution are adequate to the doctoral programme educational training objectives.
- The learning outcomes correspond to **MECES level 4** and they meet the doctoral programme intended educational **goals**.

7. Satisfaction and graduation

The degree of satisfaction and employment rate are appropriate to its characteristics and socio-economic and research context.

- The degree has **indicators** on the stakeholders satisfaction and graduates employment, which are consistent with the degree characteristics.
- **Satisfaction** of doctorate students, teaching staff, graduates and other stakeholders are appropriate to the doctoral programme educational objectives.
- **Graduation indicators** (theses issued, the success rate of doctoral theses realisation) and their evolution, are consistent with and appropriate to the doctoral programme educational objectives.
- **Graduates' employment** rate and **labour market integration** are consistent with the socioeconomic and research context.

QUALITATIVE EVALUATION OF STANDARDS

Compliance with the standards and guidelines will be reviewed with regard to the achievement rating scale by differentiating:

- **Compliance achieved**, which can differentiate into
 - **Excellently achieved:** the doctoral programme development stands out within its scope, without deficiencies, and the relevant best practices are identified.
 - **Achieved:** The programme is developed according to the verified proposal, without implementation deficiencies.
 - **Partially achieved:** despite deficiencies can be detected in the doctoral programme, there is not serious non-compliance with the commitments acquired in the doctoral programme verified or modified report. The deficiencies detected will require the implementation of improvement actions.
- **Not achieved:** non-compliance with the commitments acquired in the doctoral programme verified or modified reports, without taking into account the aspects recommended for special attention in former external reviews.

Serious non-compliance

The following aspects will determine serious non-compliance:

- Deficiencies that were detected and recommended for improvement in external review reports, which have not been corrected throughout 6 years (period between two accreditation renewal processes).
- Non-compliance with clear commitments and educational objectives included in the verified report or in successive modifications that affect the degree nature, objectives and characteristics.
- Non-compliance with commitment on standards:
 - Academic staff.
 - Material resources and support services.
 - Learning outcomes.

External review reports for accreditation renewal

Serious non-compliance will lead to **unfavourable** reports on accreditation renewal.

Favourable reports on accreditation renewal might include specific requirements and recommendations, as well as the aspects that will need special consideration in successive follow-up and external review processes.