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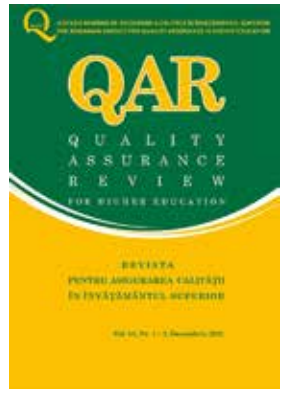

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

Responsabilitatea socială în cadrul unei agenții de asigurare a calității învățământului universitar. Cazul AAC Catalunia

Núria Comet Señal

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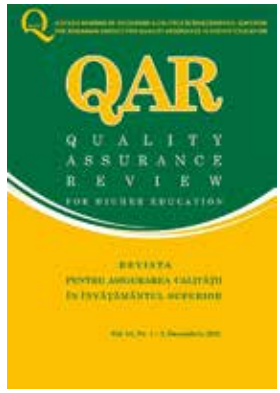

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Social Responsibility in an Agency for Quality Assurance of Higher Education. The Case of AQU Catalunya

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Abstract: *Social responsibility is currently a way of doing things that is fully integrated into the management of organisations, including universities. Quality agencies must not only collaborate with universities to promote social responsibility through assessment procedures, but must also incorporate social responsibility into their own management.*

This article presents the case of the Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya, AQU Catalunya. From 2018 to 2020 AQU Catalunya undertook a process to implement social responsibility within its organisation. The article describes the stages that were carried out and the challenges for the future.

Keywords: *social responsibility, integration, organisations management, assessment procedures*

Rezumat: *Responsabilitatea socială este, în present, o modalitate de acțiune pe deplin integrată în managementul organizațiilor, inclusiv al universităților. Agențiile de calitate trebuie nu doar să colaboreze cu universitățile pentru a promova responsabilitatea socială prin proceduri de evaluare, ci trebuie, de asemenea, să includă responsabilitatea socială în propriul management.*

Acest articol prezintă cazul Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya, AQU Catalunya. Din 2018 până în 2020, AQU Catalunya a aplicat responsabilitatea socială în cadrul organizației. Articolul descrie etapele parcurse și provocările pentru viitor.

Cuvinte cheie: *responsabilitate social, integrare, managementul organizațiilor, proceduri de evaluare*

Introduction

Corporate social responsibility is a new way of managing companies and organisations, based on the integration of social and environmental aspects. As defined in the *Green Paper: Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility* (Commission of the European Communities 2001) "Most definitions of corporate social responsibility describe it as a concept whereby

companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis".

The term social responsibility has been in widespread use since the 1970s. It emerged as all organisations, not just business organisations, recognised that they also had a responsibility to contribute to sustainable development. As ISO 26000 Guidance on Social Responsibility points out:(International Organization for Standardization 2010) "The elements of social responsibility reflect the expectations of society at a particular time, and are therefore liable to change. As society's concerns change, its expectations of organizations also change to reflect those concerns".

Integrating social responsibility implies that the organisation takes into consideration social, environmental, legal, cultural, political and organisational diversity, as well as economic conditions. For this reason, the purpose of mainstreaming social responsibility is for organisations to integrate all these considerations into their decision-making, as well as to be accountable for the impact of their activities.

Thus, it is necessary for organisations to behave ethically and transparently, to comply with legislation and to be consistent with international standards. In part, social responsibility implies assuming and analysing society's expectations in order to respect them and make them effective (human rights, environment, etc.). It also implies understanding the role of stakeholders in social responsibility, as the ISO 26000 Guidance on Social Responsibility (International Organization for Standardization 2010) points out: "Stakeholder identification and engagement are central to addressing an organisation's social responsibility. An organisation should determine who has an interest in its decisions and activities, so that it can understand its impacts and how to address them. While stakeholders can help an organisation to identify the relevance of particular matters of decisions and activities, stakeholders do not replace society as a whole in determining standards and expectations of behaviour".

In its beginnings, social responsibility was essentially applied to business, but it has evolved and adapted to different types of organisation: for example, governments (GSR), universities (USR), not-for-profit organisations (OSR), etc.

Quality agencies should also be another type of organisation where these principles are adapted.

The Role of Quality Assurance Agencies

As Anna Prades stated in her presentation at the EQAF seminar in 2019(Prades 2019): "Quality assurance agencies have been at the heart of EHEA and are political levers to move HEIs out of their comfort zone, to meet quality standards (defined through a stakeholder negotiation process), using a methodology that relies on self-assessment and peer review. Indeed, Lee Harvey and Jethro Newton argue that quality assurance is ubiquitous because it provides a means for governments to check HE; quality assurance ensures not only accountability, but can be used to encourage a degree of compliance with policy requirements (Lee Harvey 2007).

It is interesting to note, however, that the narratives about what is important to evaluate have changed over the years: accountability versus improvement, learning outcomes, teaching and learning, and, recently, social impact.

Indeed, two of the most influential policy narratives of our time are in crisis: the knowledge society and European integration (Liviu 2015). According to Curaj et al. (Bergan S. 2018), in order to move to the next level of Bologna, we need to focus both on fundamental values relevant for our time (equity of access, ethical integrity, etc.) and on concrete commitments and objectives related to the evolution of other policy agendas (EU, OECD, UNESCO, Council of Europe, etc.). One of these policy objectives are the aforementioned Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations in 2015. Assessing the social dimension of the same could be a tool for accountability and improving the quality of this dimension."

The Case of AQU Catalunya

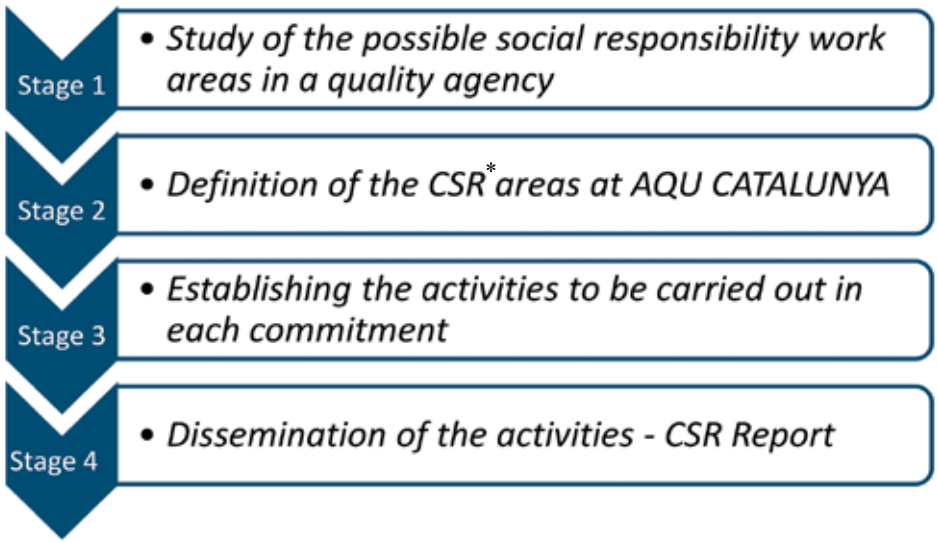
The integration of social responsibility has always been present in AQU Catalunya, with different activities, but it wasn't given a defined working framework until 2018. In 2018, during the drafting of the Strategic Plan, the strategic line of action was established as follows:

Analyse the areas of social responsibility applicable to AQU Catalunya and respond to them.

AQU Catalunya's aim was to highlight the role that a quality agency should play as an organisation in its own right in addition to the actions that are carried out to strengthen university social responsibility.

To this end, a structured work plan with different phases was established:

WORK PLAN



* CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility

1. Study of Social Responsibility Work Areas in an Agency.

All authors agree that social responsibility includes many areas of work, and the first objective was to define which areas of work would be applicable to AQU Catalunya.

The following sources were taken into consideration in order to find out which areas are included in social responsibility:

- The ISO 26000 Guide to Social Responsibility (International Organization for Standardization 2010), which is an international standard that provides guidance to organisations for integrating Social Responsibility.
- The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) developed by the United Nations, which arise from the 2030 Agenda and aim to ensure that the development of society is undertaken with respect for human rights and the environment.
- The guide of the Global Reporting Initiative (Global Reporting Initiative 2016), which serves as a guideline for organisations to prepare sustainable reports.

ISO 26000 GUIDANCE ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

This international standard aims to guide organisations in the area of social responsibility. In this way, it establishes which are the principles that integrate it, which are its fundamental matters and how these can be integrated by the organisation. The standard is applicable to both private and public, profit and non-profit organisations, regardless of their size.

The standard is structured as follows:

Clause 1. Scope.

Clause 2. Terms and definitions.

Clause 3. Understanding social responsibility.

Clause 4. Principles of social responsibility.

Clause 5. Recognising social responsibility and engaging stakeholders.

Clause 6. Guidance on social responsibility core subjects.

Clause 7. Guidance on integrating social responsibility throughout an organisation.

This sets out the principles of social responsibility, which are:

- Accountability
- Transparency
- Ethical behaviour
- Respect for stakeholders' interests
- Respect for the rule of law
- Respect for international norms of behaviour
- Respect for human rights

In addition, the core areas of social responsibility are also identified:

- Organisational governance
- Human rights
- Labour practices

- The environment
- Fair operating practices
- Consumer issues
- Community involvement and development

From the analysis it was felt that the areas most directly linked to AQU Catalunya's work would be:

- Organisational governance
- Labour practices
- Community involvement and development

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stem from the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015. The 2030 Agenda is a comprehensive, multidimensional and is universally applicable agenda – referring to the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) – developed through a system of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), through which it aims to address major global challenges, from the fight against poverty or climate change to education, health, gender equality, peace or sustainable cities. Each SDG includes different targets (169 in total) that contribute to the achievement of the goal.

In this way, the 17 SDGs highlighted those that have a relationship with AQU Catalonia and which specific points may be applicable:

Goal 4. To ensure inclusive, equitable and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all:

4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.

5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

8.8 Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment.

Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries.

10.3 Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard.

Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

16.6 Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.

16.10 Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.

Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

17.14 Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development.

17.16 Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge,

expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries.

17.17 Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships.

GLOBAL REPORTING INITIATIVE

The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is an institution whose main objective is to provide a reliable framework for sustainability reporting, so that organisations can use it to integrate sustainable values in their reports.

Thus, the GRI Standards determine the criteria to be applied for sustainability reporting (in section three) and the reporting principles (in section four). Section five gives the basic contents of sustainability reports.

In terms of criteria and principles, section four lists the principles for determining the content of the report, on the one hand, and the principles for determining the quality of the report, on the other.

Principles for determining the content of the report:

- Stakeholder inclusiveness: determine who the organisation's stakeholders are and how it responds to their expectations.
- Sustainability context: look at how the organisation performs in the broader context of sustainability.
- Materiality: reflect the most relevant environmental and social aspects.
- Completeness: comprehensive and reliable compilation of information.

Principles for determining the quality of the report:

- Balance: refers to showing both negative and positive aspects.
- Comparability
- Accuracy
- Timeliness
- Clarity
- Reliability

In terms of basic content, the guide differentiates between general content and specific content (which it breaks down into specific indicators).

General content:

- Strategy and analysis
- Organisational profile
- Material aspects and coverage
- Stakeholder engagement
- Report profile
- Governance
- Ethics and integrity

Specific content:

- Information on management approach
- Indicators: which are divided into three areas:
  - Economics
  - Environmental
  - Social
- Labour practices and decent work
- Human rights
- Society
- Product responsibility

Therefore, with respect to the GRI Guidelines, the GRI Guidelines determine three essential areas into which a sustainability report will be divided: economy, environment and social performance, which is subdivided into labour practices and decent work, human rights, society and product responsibility. However, account should also be taken of the general contents which, although the guide is not broken down into specific indicators, should also be taken into account when drawing up a sustainability report.

AQU Catalunya identified the most relevant areas:

- economics,
- society and social performance, integrating the environment,
- labour practices,
- product responsibility.

These areas were discussed and validated by the AQU Catalunya Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee is the consultative body that collaborates with the Agency in advising on strategies, defining and improving procedures and drawing up proposals for action, with the aim of guaranteeing the quality of the Agency's activities, in accordance with international benchmarks. It is made up of national and international academics with international experience and recognised prestige, students from Catalan universities and representatives of the majority trade unions in Catalonia, who must be academics. They were subsequently approved by the Management Board of AQU Catalunya.

2. Definition of the Areas of Social Responsibility at AQU CATALUNYA

Once an analysis had been made of the areas covered by the different documents presented, the areas and commitments most directly related to the aims and objectives of AQU Catalunya were chosen:

- commitment to the enhancement of higher education as the main commitment,
- commitment to good governance,
- commitment to employees,
- commitment to society and
- commitment to alliances.

Spheres of social responsibility at AQU Catalunya, and their relationship with the ISO 26001 standard, GRI and the Sustainable Development Goals.

AQU Catalunya	ISO 26001	GRI	SDG
Commitment to improving higher education		Product responsibility	Goal 4. Education
Commitment to good governance	Governance of the organisation	Economics	Goal 16. Promote peaceful societies Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development
Commitment to partnerships	Fair operating practices	Social performance	Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
Commitment to employees	Labour practices	Labour practices	Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
Commitment to society	Human rights Consumer issues Active participation and community development	Social performance	

- Commitment to improving higher education: This is the core area where the Agency's own and main tasks are carried out. This commitment is fully linked to AQU Catalunya's mission "to guarantee the quality of higher education in Catalonia, meeting international quality, academic and social standards, and attending to the interest that society has in quality higher education".
- Commitment to good governance: AQU Catalunya integrates social responsibility into its governing bodies and its strategy, to ensure more transparent, egalitarian and participatory governance. This includes a commitment to a balanced budget without wasting the material, financial and human resources available to the Agency.
- Commitment to employees: It is important that the Agency's commitment also operates internally, i.e. with the staff that make up AQU Catalunya. The commitment includes key aspects for the well-being and health of workers: equal conditions, work-life balance, uses of time, lifelong learning, healthy working environment, gender policies.
- Commitment to society: The Agency's commitment cannot be limited only to its direct stakeholders but also to society as a whole, as well as being respectful of social values in the performance of its tasks. One of the most relevant tools is the provision of up-to-date, reliable and useful information and dissemination of information on higher education in Catalonia for society and students in particular. It should be noted that commitment to the environment and the promotion of a more sustainable activity is included in this area.
- Commitment to partnerships: One of the outstanding elements of AQU Catalunya is its coordinated task with other agencies, higher education bodies, as well as social entities and collaborative networks. Thus, the Agency works together with other public bodies, both national and international, to improve the quality of higher education.

Through these five commitments that become work areas, AQU Catalunya integrates social responsibility in its activity, defined in the Strategic Plan and the annual activity plan, so that the impact that its activity has reaches its different stakeholders (universities, students, AQU Catalunya staff, experts, government, and society in general).

3. Establishing the Activities to Be Carried out in Each Commitment.

Once the commitments were defined, the activities that AQU Catalunya carries out to highlight them were defined. These activities are a starting point, and are reviewed annually during the monitoring and preparation of the activity plan.

Commitment	Activities
Commitment to improving higher education as the main commitment	Institutional assessment Programme assessment Teaching staff assessment Knowledge generation activities
Commitment to good governance	Strategic management Transparency Accounting and financial management Internal management Code of ethics
Commitment to employees	Lifelong learning Occupational health and safety Human resources policy Selection processes
Commitment to society	Knowledge portals: Study portal, Talent portal Communication and dissemination: workshops, seminars Knowledge generation: publication of reports, methodologies and working tools
Commitment to partnerships	Institutional relations International relations: quality networks Relations with social agents: participation in working groups Experience exchange

4. Dissemination of Social Responsibility

Once these activities have been carried out, AQU Catalunya's aim is to publicise them. For this reason, since 2019, the AQU Catalunya report on activities has morphed into a report on activities and corporate social responsibility (AQU 2020).

The AQU Catalunya 2020 Report on Activities and Corporate Social Responsibility, like the previous year, is structured on the basis of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) commitments to which the Agency wishes to respond. Each of these commitments, in turn, is linked to one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out in the United Nations 2030 Agenda.

5. Challenges for the Future

For AQU Catalunya, social responsibility is not a separate activity. The spirit of the Agency was continued by integrating social responsibility into the leadership, activities and day-to-day management in an integrated manner with the existing externally certified quality management and information security systems.

Having established and consolidated the work axes, AQU Catalunya has set itself a number of challenges for the future. Some of these challenges include identifying and recognising new needs and expectations of both internal and external stakeholders.

Likewise, as an internal management tool, internal indicators should be defined to measure the degree of activity and establish objectives to be achieved. In this

task, it will be necessary to take into account the adaptation to the quality agencies of the work already carried out, such as the proposal made by the university quality agencies of Andorra and Aragon (AQUA-ACPUA 2019) within the project 'Making connections between the institutional evaluation and the Sustainable Development Goals: Empowering stakeholders for quality enhancement', co-funded by INQAAHE and the guide "How to assess the SDGs in universities" (REDS 2020).

Social responsibility implies a way of managing organisations taking into account the impact that their actions have on their stakeholders, from internal staff, students, teachers and institutions to the environment and society in general. Therefore, one of the great difficulties will be to assess the medium-term impact of these activities, not only in the immediate context, such as in the university system in Catalonia, but within all sectors as a much more ambitious challenge within the 2030 Agenda.

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