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AKKREDITIERUNG VON
STUDIENGÄNGEN E.V.

FINAL REPORT

UNIVERSIDAD SAN SEBASTIÁN

CELL BIOLOGY AND BIOMEDICINE (PHD)

February 2026



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DECISION OF THE AQAS STANDING COMMISSION ON THE STUDY PROGRAMME

▪ “CELL BIOLOGY AND BIOMEDICINE” (PHD) OFFERED BY UNIVERSIDAD SAN SEBASTIÁN, CHILE

Based on the report of the expert panel and the discussions of the AQAS Standing Commission in its 28th meeting on 23 February 2026, the AQAS Standing Commission decides:

1. The study programme “**Cell Biology and Biomedicine**” (PhD) offered by **Universidad San Sebastián, Chile** is accredited according to the AQAS Criteria for Doctoral Programme Accreditation (PhD).

The study programme complies with the requirements defined by the criteria and thus the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in their current version.

2. The accreditation is given for the period of **six years** and is valid until **31 March 2032**.

The following **recommendations** are given for further improvement of the programme:

1. While the university follows a levelling approach with fewer mandatory courses which effectively supports students' transition into research, an increase of elective offerings to further tailor learning paths to individual needs is recommended.
2. Strengthening collaboration and coordination among campuses, as well as further integrating regional academic staff and researchers, could contribute to a more balanced and decentralised development of the doctoral programme at the national level.
3. To sustain academic growth and programme quality, investment in administrative staff should be considered to provide timely support for academic processes, e.g., the issuing of final diplomas.
4. The university should continue developing a cohesive research culture across campuses, for instance through the establishment of a graduate academy or shared doctoral platform to enhance exchange between programmes, transferable skills training, and collective identity.
5. USS should increase the level of transparency and accessibility for prospective PhD students even further by making information on intended course learning outcomes as well as teaching and assessment methods for courses within the PhD curriculum publicly available.

With regard to the reasons for this decision the Standing Commission refers to the attached expert report.

EXPERTS' REPORT

ON THE STUDY PROGRAMME

▪ “CELL BIOLOGY AND BIOMEDICINE” (PHD)

OFFERED BY UNIVERSIDAD SAN SEBASTIÁN, CHILE

Visit to the university: 29 September to 3 October 2025

Panel of experts:

Prof. Dr. Frank Bremmer	Professor of Applied Physics and Neurophysics, Department of Physics, Marburg University, Germany
Prof. Dr. David Figueroa Hernández	Vice Rector for Teaching and Learning, Universidad Católica de Temuco, Chile
Prof. Dr. Francisco Javier Romero Gómez	Former Professor at Facultad de Ciencias de la Salud, Universidad Europea, Spain, currently consultant at MediPark, Switzerland
Magdalena Lieb	Department of Academic Affairs and Student Services, Office of Legal Affairs and Academic Quality Management, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany (QA expert/labour market representative)
Anne-Sophie Walger	Master's student, specialising in Biology, Geography, and Education (M.Ed.), Trier University, Germany (student representative)

Coordinator:

Ronny Heintze	AQAS, Cologne, Germany
Dr. Christina Schönberger-Stepien	AQAS, Cologne, Germany

I. Preamble

AQAS – Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes – is an independent non-profit organisation supported by nearly 90 universities, universities of applied sciences, and academic associations. Since 2002, the agency has been recognised by the German Accreditation Council (GAC). It is, therefore, a notified body for the accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes in Germany.

AQAS is a full member of ENQA and also listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) which confirms that our procedures comply with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), on which all Bologna countries agreed as a basis for internal and external quality assurance.

AQAS is an institution founded by and working for higher education institutions and academic associations. The agency is devoted to quality assurance and quality development of academic studies and higher education institutions' teaching. In line with AQAS' mission statement, the official bodies in Germany and Europe (GAC and EQAR) approved that the activities of AQAS in accreditation are neither limited to specific academic disciplines or degrees nor a particular type of higher education institution.

II. Accreditation procedure

This report results from the external review of the PhD programme "Cell Biology and Biomedicine" offered by Universidad San Sebastián, Chile.

1. Criteria

The programme is assessed against a set of criteria for accreditation developed by AQAS: the AQAS Criteria for Doctoral Programme Accreditation (PhD). The criteria are based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) 2015. To facilitate the review each criterion features a set of indicators that can be used to demonstrate the fulfilment of the criteria. However, if single indicators are not fulfilled this does not automatically mean that a criterion is not met. The indicators need to be discussed in the context of each programme since not all indicators can necessarily be applied to every programme.

2. Approach and methodology

Initialisation

The university mandated AQAS to perform the accreditation procedure in November 2024. The university produced a Self-Evaluation Report (SER). In April 2025, the institution handed in a draft of the SER together with the relevant documentation on the programme and an appendix. The appendix included e.g.:

- an overview of statistical data of the student body (e.g. number of applications, beginners, students, graduates, student dropouts),
- the CVs of the teaching staff/supervisors,
- information on student services,
- core information on the main library,
- as well as academic regulations.

AQAS checked the SER regarding completeness, comprehensibility, and transparency. The accreditation procedure was officially initialised by a decision of the AQAS Standing Commission on 8 September 2025. The final version of the SER was handed in in August 2025.

Nomination of the expert panel

The composition of the panel of experts follows the stakeholder principle. Consequently, representatives from the respective discipline, the labour market, and students are involved. Furthermore, AQAS follows the principles for the selection of experts defined by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA). The Standing Commission nominated the aforementioned expert panel in August 2025. AQAS informed the university about the members of the expert panel and the university did not raise any concerns against the composition of the panel.

Preparation of the site visit

Prior to the site visit, the experts reviewed the SER and submitted a short preliminary statement including open questions and potential needs for additional information. AQAS forwarded these preliminary statements to the university and to all panel members in order to increase transparency in the process and the upcoming discussions during the site visit.

Site visit

After a review of the SER, a site visit to the university took place 29 September to 03 October 2025. On site, the experts interviewed different stakeholders, e.g. representatives of the management of the higher education institution, the programme management, of teaching and of other staff, as well as students and graduates, in separate discussion rounds and consulted additional documentation as well as student work. The visit concluded with the presentation of the preliminary findings of the group of experts to the university's representatives.

Reporting

After the site visit had taken place, the expert group drafted the following report, assessing the fulfilment of the AQAS Criteria. The report included a recommendation to the AQAS Standing Commission. The report was sent to the university for comments.

Decision

The report, together with the comments of the university, forms the basis for the AQAS Standing Commission to take a decision regarding the accreditation of the programme. Based on these two documents, the AQAS Standing Commission took its decision on the accreditation on 23 February 2026. AQAS forwarded the decision to the university. The university had the right to appeal against the decision or any of the imposed conditions.

In April 2026, AQAS published the report, the result of the accreditation as well as the names of the panel members.

III. General information on the university

Universidad San Sebastián (USS) was founded in 1989 and is a private institution, not linked to or dependent on organisations of a religious or ideological nature. The university is described to be inspired by Christian Humanist values and promotes cultivating knowledge and interacting with society, its primary and central function being the professional training and comprehensive development of students. USS aims to promote social integration, personal and professional advancement, and developing the members of the Sebastián community, within a framework of values that highlight the pursuit of truth, justice, and solidarity.

According to the SER, the strategic guidelines of USS emphasise ensuring comprehensive development of the educational process focused on learning; continued advancement from a mainly teaching organisation towards an organization more developed in research, upholding internal quality criteria and consistency with requirements of the external regulatory framework, maintaining the financial and economic sustainability of USS, and consolidating its position within the Chilean higher education.

USS operates four branches in the cities of Concepción, Santiago (2 campuses), Puerto Montt, and Valdivia. It is organised in 12 colleges or faculties and administrative units. The educational offering currently comprises 68 bachelor's programmes, 30 master's programmes, 10 doctoral programmes, 14 medical specialties, 8 dental specialties, and 36 offers in continuous education (called diploma programmes).

As of 2024, 44,438 undergraduate students and 3,470 graduate students were enrolled at USS. Teaching staff comprises 5,037 faculty members, of which 1/5 is called regular staff with permanent contracts (usually full time) and 4/5 part-time contracts for teaching services and student support, called adjunct staff. The functions of the academic body focus primarily on teaching and substantively on collaborative activities in the community.

As of 2024, Chile offers 377 doctoral programmes with a total enrolment of 7,473 students, 1,589 of which are first-year students. 147 of the programmes are developed at state universities that make up the Council of Rectors of Chile, 168 at private universities associated with this council, and 62 at other private universities. Chilean regulations establish, as of 2018, that doctoral programmes (with cohorts of graduates) must undergo mandatory accreditation processes by the National Accreditation Commission (CNA-Chile), for a period of up to 10 years, depending on the degree of compliance with certain criteria and standards. As of 2024, 294 of the 377 existing programmes are accredited and 83 are not accredited.

The doctoral programme in Cell Biology and Biomedicine of Universidad San Sebastian (USS) started in 2017 and is linked to the Research Centre of Cell Biology and Biomedicine and the Faculty of Medicine and Science. The faculty offers the following postgraduate programmes: the doctoral programme in Cell Biology and Biomedicine, the master's programme in Molecular Biomedicine (since 2017), and the doctoral programmes in Immunology and Microbiology (since 2020), Biotechnology and Bio-entrepreneurship (since 2020), and Chronic Diseases (since 2023).

The faculty maintains a National Postgraduate Division supporting the developments of master's and doctoral programmes, and a Research Division which facilitates the development of research with a global perspective.

The integration of the Science and Life Foundation into the USS projected the Frontiers in Biology programme brings together four doctoral programmes in the Scientific and Technological Center of the new Ciudad Universitaria Campus (University City Campus).

The Vice-Rector for Research and Doctorates is the organisational structure that promotes and facilitates research as a key component in institutional evolution. This unit recognises the importance of research in the training of students, monitors compliance with performance agreements of academics with preferential dedication to research and promotes the cultivation of an environment that favours excellence in research. It also maintains a Doctorate Unit, which establishes the guidelines for the development of these programmes in

areas where the development of research has been prioritised. Its goal is to ensure that students receive a solid and comprehensive education, which enables them to lead with integrity the generation of new knowledge and make significant contributions in their fields of study.

IV. Assessment of the study programme

1. Aims and structure of the doctoral programme

Doctoral degree

The intended learning outcomes of the programme are defined and available in published form. They reflect both academic and labour-market requirements and are up-to-date with relation to the relevant field. The design of the programme supports the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

The academic level of graduates corresponds to with the requirements of the appropriate level of the national qualifications framework or the European Qualifications Framework.

The curriculum's design is readily available and transparently formulated.

[ESG 1.2]

Description

According to the SER, the PhD programme seeks to train scientists with a high capacity for critical thinking, capable of conducting high-level research independently and productively on topics that pose challenges to the knowledge of the cell, its molecular components and the possible targets of new treatments. These objectives are consistent with Level 8 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), as well as with the Expected Performance of the established Graduate/Exit Profile and the Learning Objectives or Learning Outcomes of the Curriculum.

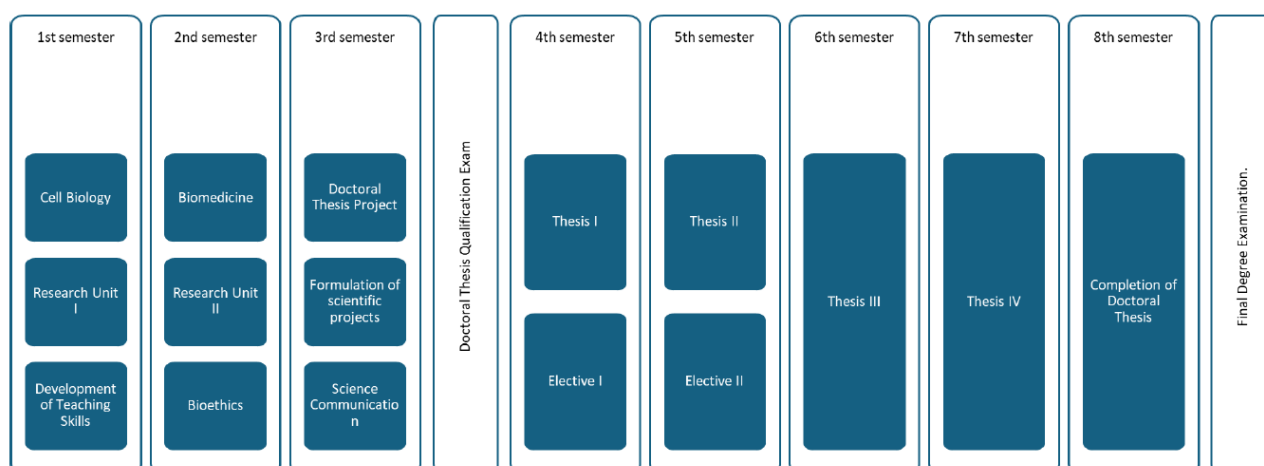
The programme is aimed at graduates with a bachelor's and master's degree in biology, medicine, chemistry, biochemistry and biotechnology or who have equivalent training, and are interested in dedicating themselves to research in cell biology and its biomedical applications.

The programme focuses on research corresponding to cell biology and biomedicine, including aspects based on structural biology and molecular biology addressed through disaggregated research topics and associated projects, which are detailed in the SER.

The programme learning outcomes are as follows:

- PhD students generate new knowledge through significant experimental research in Cell Biology and its implications in Biomedicine, based on the ability to search, select and evaluate empirical information and on the use of scientific literature in an exhaustive, reflective and critical manner.
- They develop interdisciplinary research projects with the highest levels of excellence and rigor, applying methodologies relevant to cell biology and modern biomedicine.
- They communicate knowledge and research results through presentations at scientific conferences and publications in specialised journals.
- They link scientific knowledge with the concerns and needs of society.

The SER provides a formalised curriculum for the PhD programme as well as the detailed distribution of credit points. The curriculum is made up of 16 subjects or formal curricular activities, which are developed along 8 semesters of 20 effective weeks each. They add up to a total of 7,640 pedagogical hours (theoretical and laboratory); 7,200 chronological hours of face-to-face work; 2,102 chronological hours of autonomous work, and a total of 240 credits (SCT):



The curriculum includes two elective subjects that can be taken in semesters 4 and 5. The range of elective subjects includes Advanced Confocal Microscopy I, Advanced Confocal Microscopy II, Structural Bases of Cellular Pathology, Bioinformatics, Drug Design, Molecular Biology and its Applications, and Mitochondrial Dysfunction in Aging.

Expert evaluation

The programme's qualifications are clearly defined. These outcomes align with current academic and scientific standards as well as labour market expectations, ensuring graduates are well prepared for diverse professional paths. Regular updates are made based on evaluations and graduate surveys to keep the learning outcomes relevant and up to date. The academic degree fully corresponds with the requirements of the national qualifications framework. Students demonstrate the achievement of intended learning outcomes through final assessments such as a thesis, dissertation, or Doctoral Thesis Qualification Examination, reflecting both their research competence and applied knowledge. The curriculum structure is designed to ensure steady progression toward the learning outcomes. It offers a balanced mix of specialist knowledge, methodological training, and transferable skills such as research, critical thinking, and communication. For doctoral programmes, a clearly defined timeline with milestones supports students throughout their research journey. Most courses are offered at the doctoral level, and any inclusion of master's-level courses is justified and purposeful.

USS offers a distinctive curriculum design that acknowledges the diverse academic backgrounds of doctoral students. National regulations require a set number of credits, and USS structures its doctoral courses primarily in the first year, focusing on foundational knowledge in cell biology and biomedicine. This levelling approach contrasts with some other countries where doctoral training is research-centric from the outset, with fewer mandatory courses. While this model effectively supports students' transition into research, the panel notes potential to increase elective offerings to further tailor learning paths to individual needs (**Finding 1**).

The programme initially encourages mobility and international exposure, considering the continental situation, trying to attract international students. All courses and modules are documented with clear descriptions of their objectives, content, and whether they are compulsory or elective. The workload and credit distribution are presented transparently and made available to the candidates.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

2. Procedures for quality assurance

Doctoral degree

The programme is subject to the higher education institution's policy and associated procedures for quality assurance, including procedures for the design, approval, monitoring, and revision of the programmes.

A quality-oriented culture, focusing on continuous quality enhancement, is in place. This includes regular feedback mechanisms involving both internal and external stakeholders.

The strategy, policies, and procedures have a formal status and are made available in published form to all those concerned. They also include roles for students and other stakeholders.

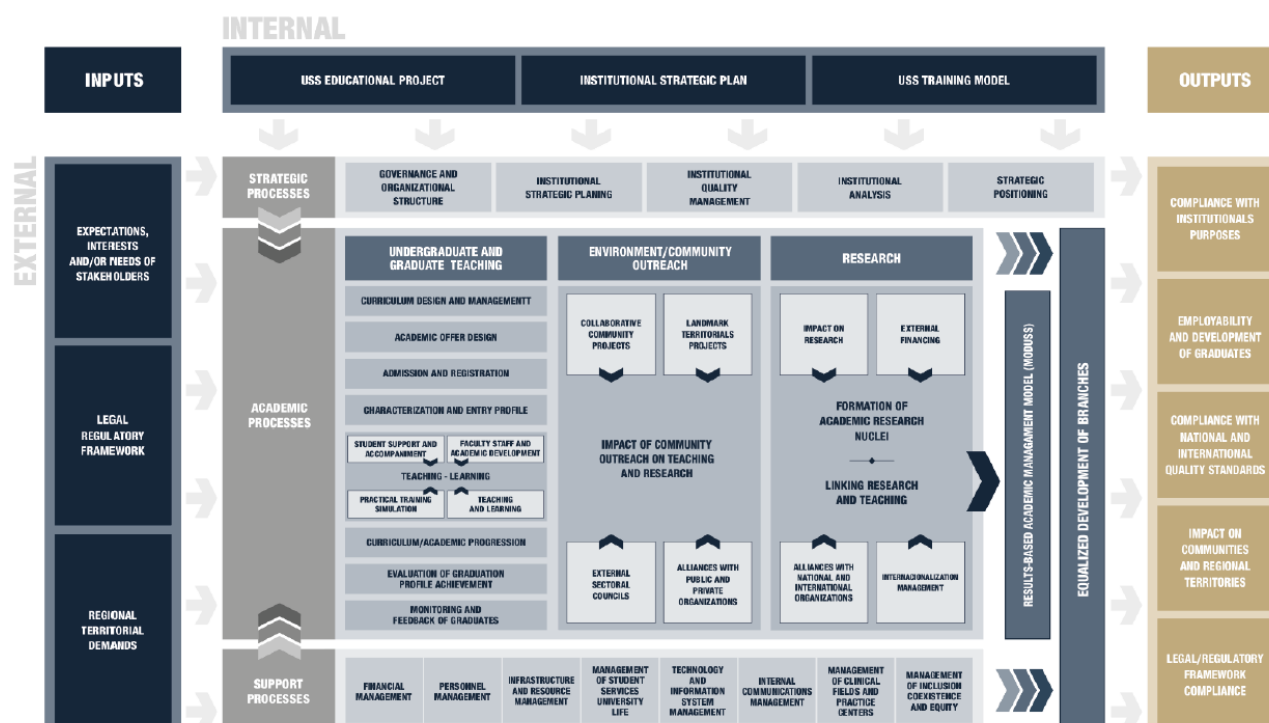
Data is collected from relevant sources and stakeholders, analysed, and used for the effective management and continuous enhancement of the programme.

[ESG 1.1, 1.7 & 1.9]

Description

Since its first institutional accreditation in 2018, USS has strengthened its focus on the qualitative dimension of quality assurance and has revised its policy and system accordingly. USS claims to focus on the operation of this cycle in all academic and administrative areas and processes, in accordance with the following: the definition of aims, objectives and goals; design and execution of processes and their systematic evaluation, especially those considered critical; analysis of results; implementation of improvement actions; and the effectiveness or impact of these interventions or revisions. These elements are established and operated according to the System of Internal Quality Assurance and Advancement towards Excellence (SIACE-USS).

USS INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM



Other units that reportedly participate and assume responsibilities in evaluation strategies, improvement plans and quality adjustments in general include: Board of Directors; Higher Academic Council; Rector's Committee; Faculty, School and Branch/Site's Councils; Vice-Rectories, and central support units such as Library

Network; Network of Graduates and Graduates; Communications; Student Development; Postgraduate and Professional Development; Clinical Simulation and Innovation in Health; and divisions such as Personnel, Infrastructure/Facilities and Finance.

The following programme-specific processes and principles for quality assurance are implemented at USS:

- **Safeguarding of regulations:** the programme has updated and duly formalised rules that regulate its academic activities, which are made up of institutional documents that are applied in a transversal way and other specific ones such as its regulations and other normative matters.
- **Program Academic Committee:** Committee meetings, held on a regular basis for the analysis and discussion of various activities related to the programme, e.g., admission mechanisms and strategies to attract students, the review and updating of subjects and their contents, the formation of thesis committees, the monitoring and supervision of students, as well as the evaluation of particular cases that require intervention. In addition, an evaluation of the academics in their role as tutors of students is carried out, placing special emphasis on guaranteeing an adequate level of dedication that favours timely graduation.
- **Meetings with the academic body and students:** Annual meetings with faculty staff and students in order to share the progress and developments regarding the guidelines of the Academic Committee and the regulation of students and their academic progress, which allows them to identify and address pressing challenges.
- **Evaluation of academics:** The Vice-Rector for Research and Doctorates evaluates academics by monitoring their *performance agreements* (formal productivity commitments) and manages the evaluation of subjects and professors by students.
- **Supervision of the management of the programme:** The Dean and the Council of the Faculty of Medicine oversee the academic management of the Programme through e.g., critical review and adjustments to regulations and curriculum.
- **Programme self-evaluation:** The Vice-Rector for Quality Assurance facilitates, coordinates, and trains, as necessary, systematic internal evaluation processes that focus on the management and effectiveness of the training/educational process, within the framework of the institutional quality policy, the standards of accreditation and other external requirements.

The SER provides several specific examples of improvements that have been implemented as a result of quality assurance procedures at USS, including the design of subjects and curricular activities, support mechanisms for students, or mechanisms to strengthen student support, internationalisation, or research activities.

Expert evaluation

The panel confirms that the university rigorously adheres to the national accreditation framework set by the Comisión Nacional de Acreditación (CNA). This includes compliance with requirements concerning credit allocations for doctoral programmes, ensuring alignment with nationally mandated standards.

Doctoral programme management at USS incorporates both academic coordination and active monitoring of thesis progress. The primary responsibility for overseeing timely thesis advancement lies with the professor in charge and the supervisory committee. The university has established follow-up mechanisms, including regular meetings to track progress, supported centrally by a dedicated unit that facilitates monitoring and interventions when necessary.

Performance agreements are a key instrument binding all stakeholders, including supervisors and doctoral candidates. The institution also undergoes self-assessment every three years, enabling early identification of challenges. The panel was told that targeted support measures such as bridge projects are provided to

researchers facing funding gaps. The expert panel positively highlights this proactive approach to maintaining research continuity.

USS applies a systematic and multi-dimensional quality assurance approach encompassing course and programme evaluations, student workload assessments, progression and completion monitoring, and other evaluative tools. Responsibilities for programme administration and quality assurance are clearly delineated and communicated to doctoral candidates. Entities such as the doctoral board, examination board, and advisory committees play defined roles, with students being informed about these structures.

The quality assurance procedures at USS consistently translate evaluation outcomes into concrete enhancement measures. For instance, curricular revisions typically occur only after a full cohort has completed a programme cycle (with the exception of the informatics programme). A systematic approach is used to monitor student workload and academic progress, ensuring revisions are evidence-based and student-centred.

The university upholds rigorous academic standards throughout the doctoral lifecycle, including topic selection, research output assessment, and thesis defence. Quality assurance mechanisms ensure compliance with recognised academic norms. Policies and codes of conduct addressing academic integrity and scientific ethics are in place, accompanied by measures to prevent discrimination and intolerance.

USS actively involves a broad range of internal and external stakeholders in quality assurance processes, including doctoral students and labour market representatives. Feedback is systematically collected and integrated into programme development. Evaluation results are transparently shared with academic staff and students, fostering an open dialogue and continuous quality enhancement.

The university collects and analyses data on graduate employment sectors, further studies, and labour market needs through engagement with ministries, professional chambers, and associations. This information supports curricular adjustments and strategic planning to ensure relevance and responsiveness to societal and economic demands.

Robust statistical analyses of student progression data – covering demographics, study duration, completion rates, grades, and exam outcomes – are conducted regularly. These analyses underpin the continuous development of doctoral programmes and support targeted interventions to improve student success and programme effectiveness.

Overall, the panel acknowledges that the university demonstrates a comprehensive and transparent quality assurance framework for its doctoral programmes. The integration of national regulations, systematic monitoring of thesis progress, data-driven programme management, and active stakeholder involvement contribute to a robust academic environment.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

3. Learning and assessment of students

Doctoral degree

The form of supervision and/or course structure is adequate and corresponds with the intended learning outcomes.

Students are assessed using accessible criteria, regulations, and procedures, which are made readily available to all participants and which are applied consistently.

Assessment procedures are designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

[ESG 1.3]

Description

According to the SER, the programme concentrates on practical laboratory work, which is offered in the form of supervision or tutorials and is geared towards developing cognitive, procedural, and attitudinal skills for conducting experimental research. Independent/autonomous work is monitored on the basis of the progress of research projects and links to external academic work through publications and presentations in seminars. Theoretical modules in the curriculum focus on in-depth knowledge of the discipline with topics ranging from cell biology to biomedicine. Laboratory hours thereby constitute 85% of the programme and 15% stem from disciplinary theoretical hours, including additional hours of independent work.

The SER states that the subjects and other academic activities that are part of the curriculum are evaluated with grades on the numerical scale of 1.0 to 7.0. The minimum passing grade is 5.0. If the student does not meet any of the requirements established in a subject or academic activity, they are graded with an “RR” (Failed by Requirement).

The programme includes a Doctoral Thesis Qualification Examination whose objective is to verify that the student has achieved sufficient competencies and mastery to develop the discipline, in addition to evaluating the quality and viability of the doctoral thesis project. This is evaluated by a Thesis Committee, defined for each student based on their research project, and which is made up of at least two members of the academic staff, other than the Tutor and Co-tutor Professor, an External Evaluator to the USS and a Minister of Faith. The examination is private, and the Tutor Professor and the eventual Co-tutor Professor attend as observers.

Students who pass the Qualification Examination are then a Candidate for a Doctor. In case of failure, the examination may be repeated once more, within the following 60 days, leaving with a pending evaluation. Failure of the examination at the new opportunity results in academic elimination.

The thesis project corresponds to an original research project that the student must carry out to demonstrate their creativity and ability to systematically solve the problems posed. In this sense, the thesis is developed from the third semester, so it is programmed progressively and sequentially from the thesis project (or doctoral thesis project in the 4-year study plan/curriculum) until the completion of the doctoral thesis. The main strength of this modality is the permanent accompaniment in its development, avoiding the indefinite prolongation of this work and the taking of the exam and/or the desertion of the student. This accompaniment is also carried out by the Thesis Evaluation Committee, which is formalised through two mandatory thesis advances in the subjects “Thesis II” and “Thesis IV”, a requirement for the students’ progression in the curriculum. If the committee deems it appropriate, it may request the repetition of the thesis advance or request additional advances within a certain period.

An academic management system (BANNER), carried out by the management team of the programme, allows access to students’ academic information such as enrolled subjects, approval, failure, elimination, among many other aspects of curricular and administrative management. The programme showed an 89% retention rate in the 2020-2024 period. Desertions mainly correspond to health reasons.

Expert evaluation

The doctoral programme in Cell Biology and Biomedicine presents clear academic definitions that establish its scientific and academic character, aimed at training researchers with strong critical thinking skills and the ability to independently lead high-impact research projects. The programme has three clearly defined lines of research. To achieve its educational purpose, the curricular structure is formalised and aligned with the requirements of the doctoral level, and it is periodically evaluated by the Academic Committee of the programme, which serves as a formal instance for analysis, monitoring, and continuous improvement.

The curriculum is functionally organised to facilitate the achievement of learning outcomes over a period of four years. It comprises an initial cycle of three semesters, during which students deepen their disciplinary foundations and undertake initial research units, culminating in the formulation of a scientific project. From the fourth semester onward, students begin the doctoral thesis work, distributed over five consecutive semesters. There is continuous support for students, based on the programme's structure, which includes in the first cycle the courses Research units I and II, followed by thesis development stages structured in the courses Thesis I, II, III, and IV. This curricular design ensures constant supervision by tutors and co-tutors, strengthening the training process and ensuring the fulfilment of academic objectives.

During the site visit, it was possible to confirm, through meetings with key stakeholders, the existence of a favourable environment for research and learning in the doctoral programme. The curricular structure fosters ongoing interaction between students and faculty, enabling discussion of disciplinary and methodological topics within a strong academic setting.

The assessment processes of the doctoral programme are regulated by the official programme regulations and are well known by all participants. These processes are comparable to those of other national doctoral programmes. The evaluation milestones include the Doctoral Qualification Examination, conducted at the end of the third semester, whose approval grants the status of Doctoral Candidate. Subsequently, students begin the development of the doctoral thesis project, scheduled progressively until the completion of the programme. Each of these milestones is formally integrated into the curriculum through official courses which allow for ongoing supervision and timely feedback by the Thesis Committee. During the visit, the evaluation panel verified the existence of mechanisms for monitoring students' academic progress, implemented through digital platforms that enable early detection of potential difficulties and timely academic support.

In general terms, it can be stated that the doctoral programme in Cell Biology and Biomedicine has a solid academic and administrative organisation aimed at ensuring the academic success of its students. This goal is supported by a coherent curricular structure, the existence of systematic accompaniment and feedback processes, and clearly defined evaluation procedures that comply with the national standards for postgraduate programmes.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

4. Legal status, admission and certification

Doctoral degree

The institution is entitled to award a doctorate.

Consistently applied, pre-defined, and published regulations are in place which cover student admission, progression, recognition, and certification. [ESG 1.4]

Description

The SER outlines all entry requirements for the programme, which are also published on the programme's website. The requirements are as follows:

- a bachelor's and/or master's degree in biology, medicine, chemistry, biochemistry, or biotechnology or a professional degree in the area of health with accredited expertise in biological sciences. International degrees must be equivalent to those degrees and in accordance with the International Classification of Education (ISCED-UNESCO)

- a certification of undergraduate grades and other studies (evaluation scales used and the minimum passing grade must be clearly specified)
- a certificate showing the ranking of graduates from the same cohort in their undergraduate and post-graduate studies (or respective letter from the accrediting institution)
- the accreditation of previous studies, presentations to congresses and publications, among other activities, reported in the Curriculum Vitae
- two letters of recommendation from academic professionals
- a declaration of purposes that includes the formulation of a topic of interest relevant to their study and research during the Programme, as well as the committed dedication. The applicant must specify their interests and research objectives in the short and long term in max. 800 words (*Appendix 3, Normative of Programme Curriculum*).

According to the SER, the annual selection process is conducted by the Academic Committee and is assisted by professors of the programme. In a first step, the applicant's academic background, CV, letters of recommendation and statement of purpose are reviewed by each member of the Academic Committee independently. A Record of Agreements is drawn up in a subsequent meeting and the Committee pre-selects the candidates. In a second step, the pre-selected applicants are invited to a personal interview and an examination which includes the critical presentation of a scientific article in English, which is assigned to each applicant by the Academic Committee. The interviews and examination may be conducted online if applicants come from abroad. The Academic Committee forwards a ranking of applicants and a list of selected candidates to the Dean of the Faculty, together with the minutes of the process, for analysis and subsequent presentation to the Vice-Rector for Research and Doctorates for final approval.

The scores obtained through a rubric and for the aspects evaluated (grades from 1.0 to 7.0), are weighted as follows: 25% academic background, 10% letters of recommendation, 40% presentation of scientific article, 25% personal interview. The SER also provides respective data on the acceptance rate for the past five years, details on the disciplinary origin of students from 2020 to 2024, and applicants' undergraduate institutions.

The graduation regulations are said to be formalised and provided to students along the programme. As of April 2025, 29 students have taken and passed the Qualification Examination and 12 have taken and passed the solemn and public Final Degree Examination. To obtain the doctoral degree, the student must pass all the subjects and curriculum activities of the programme, including the manuscript of a publication and the solemn, private and public defence of their thesis. It is a requirement that the student has an original manuscript submitted as first author, or an accepted manuscript. In either case, the manuscripts must be in a WoS journal and in the topic related to their thesis. Alternatively, the Academic Committee considers accepting that the thesis work is part of a patent pending. In justified cases, an article in which the student participates as a co-author may be accepted.

The thesis is planned from the first semester, but its execution begins once the Doctoral Thesis Qualification Examination is approved by the Thesis Committee. This evaluation instance is carried out in front of a suitable panel made up of one or two external evaluators who are experts in the area, two academics and a minister of faith appointed from among the academics of the programme. The grade consists of 50% of the Doctoral Thesis Project and 50% of the Qualification Examination.

The thesis is developed in five stages. Once the Qualification Examination has been passed, the student must submit the thesis project, and the documents required to apply for the corresponding ethical and/or biosafety certification. It is a requirement to register Thesis I to have the Certificate of Receipt of these documents issued by the corresponding committee(s). For the registration and execution of Thesis II, the student must submit to the Programme Director, the approval certification(s) of their project issued by the respective committee(s).

During the execution of the thesis, at the end of semesters V and VII, two formative evaluations are considered prior to the final examination, called Thesis Advances I and II.

The Thesis Committee evaluates the development of the student's work according to the fulfilment of the proposed objectives, and to ensure that the thesis is completed within the established deadlines. The approval of these instances is a prerequisite for the registration of the Thesis III and Doctoral Thesis Completion subjects/courses. The final approval of the doctoral thesis consists of two stages: the private defence of the thesis and the Solemn and Public Final Degree Examination.

The weighting of the different evaluations counting towards the doctoral degree is as follows: 50% is based on the cumulative weighted grade point average for subjects, 10% on the Doctoral Thesis Qualification Examination, and 20% each on the thesis manuscript as well as the presentation and defence of the thesis.

Expert evaluation

The doctoral programme in Cell Biology and Biomedicine is part of the postgraduate academic offerings at USS. It is currently accredited for five years by the National Accreditation Commission (CNA-Chile), an accreditation that is mandatory for all doctoral programmes offered in the country. Consequently, the USS is legally authorised, under Chilean legislation and the Ministry of Education, to offer this doctoral programme.

The creation of the programme was formalised through a Rector's Decree of the USS, accompanied by the academic project that justifies its establishment, including the curriculum, infrastructure requirements, and the academic staff qualifications necessary to ensure its long-term sustainability. The university and the programme have the regulations required to manage the different processes inherent to doctoral studies, such as admission, academic progress, recognition and certification. Structurally, the programme is attached to the Faculty of Medicine and is guided by the strategic directives of the Directorate of Doctoral Programs, which is under the Vice-Rector for Research.

The admission process is regulated by the Directorate of Doctoral Programs. The entry requirements are clear and transparent, and the selection process consists of successive stages that are publicly available on the university's website. The first stage corresponds to the application process, in which candidates must comply with all established requirements. The selection process is carried out by the Academic Committee of the programme, which reviews the academic background, curriculum vitae, letters of recommendation, and statement of purpose, to produce a preselection of applicants. At this stage, a detailed analysis of each candidate's academic record is conducted, taking into account the disciplinary diversity within the field of biological and health sciences. Subsequently, the preselected candidates are invited to a personal interview and to present a scientific paper. In accordance with the rubrics defined by the programme, an official ranking of applicants is prepared and submitted to the Dean of the Faculty, and later to the Vice-Rector for Research for final approval. This process is formally rigorous, transparent, and governed by the regulations of the Vice-Rector. Graduation is also regulated by a Rector's Decree, which clearly establishes the requirements for obtaining the doctoral degree. These include the successful completion of all courses and academic activities, the publication of a scientific paper as first author, and the approval of the final examination, both in its private and public solemn sessions.

From the experts' perspective, USS and specifically its doctoral programme in Cell Biology and Biomedicine fully meets the legal requirements necessary to offer and award the academic degree of Doctor. Its procedures are clear, formal, and coherent, and are supported by the institutional regulations in force, ensuring transparency, quality, and legal validity throughout the doctoral training and graduation process.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

5. Academic level of supervisory staff

Doctoral degree

The composition (quantity, qualifications, professional and international experience, etc.) of the staff is appropriate for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Staff involved with teaching is qualified and competent to do so.

Transparent procedures are in place for the recruitment and development of staff.

[ESG 1.5]

Description

As of 2025, academic staff is composed of 35 academics, of which 20 belong to the faculty and 15 are collaborators. The SER states that since the programme's initiation in 2017, the number of academic staff has significantly increased (from 9 to 35 in total). The Vice-Rector for Research and Doctorates is said to strengthen alliances with academic and research institutions around the world and promote collaboration between different disciplines within the university. For this reason, the faculty staff of the programme comprises researchers from different faculties, including Medicine and Science, Engineering, Architecture and Design, Dentistry and Rehabilitation Sciences, and Health Care Sciences.

According to the SER, the USS distinguishes between Faculty Professor, Collaborating Professor, and Visiting Professor. A faculty academic has an outstanding and demonstrable career through publications and participation in research projects, in the disciplinary field or area of study of the programme, which qualifies them to supervise theses. A collaborating academic mainly teaches specific subjects or co-tutors' theses. The documentation provides tables displaying the academic staff at USS in 2024.

Faculty academics need to have 8 publications in the last 5 years, one Regular Fondecyt Project awarded as Principal Researcher in the last 5 years, a formal working day with at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of a day at USS, and an academic rank as an Assistant Professor or higher. They need to teach in the programme and supervise student theses, lead research teams directly and autonomously, on topics according to the profile of the graduate of the programme. In addition, those who have experience in postgraduate teaching, training of advanced human capital, ideally at the doctoral level, are privileged as tutors/co-tutors. If this is not the case, they must have at least experience at bachelor's and master's level, with completed experimental theses. If the academic tutor cannot guarantee funding for the total years of the thesis at the beginning of this stage, they must incorporate a co-tutor with funding. The co-tutor must correspond to an academic as a faculty member or collaborator. The proposal must reflect the joint work of the tutor and co-tutor.

In accordance with the regulations, faculty academics have a full-time contract, distributing their activities in teaching, management and research, which they carry out both in this programme and other programmes at USS. Of the total number of academics in the faculty, 15 have experience in the supervision of postgraduate theses, of which 10 oversee thesis projects, and 5 carry out co-tutorials. Most collaborator academics are employed full-time (except for two part-time employees). 47% of collaborator academics within the programme are female and 53% male.

Collaborator academics need to have 5 publications in the last 5 years, lead a research laboratory directly and autonomously, in a thematic area according to the programme's graduate profile. Along with postgraduate teaching experience, experience in training advanced human capital is valued, ideally at the doctoral level, as a tutor or co-tutor, or at least at bachelor's and master's level, with completed experimental theses. They need a project awarded as Principal Researcher in the last 5 years. Academics who are co-researchers of proposals for external competitive funds in the last 5 years are considered academics, as long as they contribute

significantly to the programme. Finally, they need to have a formal academic hierarchy at the USS or from another accredited institution.

An additional position is the collaborating academic with a clinical profile, who maintains his clinical practice, carrying out very specific activities in the Biomedicine discipline, in addition to participation in conversations with students.

Visiting Professors do not have a contract with USS and participate in specific curricular activities and develop specific modules or topics within the different subjects of the curriculum.

As for academic development, the USS is said to consider the hierarchy of academics, based on the management of their annual commitments, the qualification or evaluation of their performance, and their improvement. The formal guidelines for the respective components of an academic career displayed in the SER.

In the last five years (2019-2024), the academic staff has generated a total of 533 WoS publications, of which 323 belong to faculty academics, and 9 non-WoS indexed publications, 2 of them belonging to the faculty. From 2019-2025, all academics of the faculty have had Fondecyt projects, which add up to a total of 78 (39 as principal researcher), in addition to another 48 projects also competitive with external funding. In addition, 5 patents were registered and a total of 2 specialised books and 29 chapters in specialised books were published. From 2019-2024, the collaborating academics significantly complement the faculty academics and have generated 210 WoS publications, 39 Fondecyt projects (16 as principal researcher), 21 other competitive projects with external funding as principal researcher and 20 as co-researcher, and the publication of 2 books and 8 chapters in specialised books.

The documentation states that academic staff of the programme is subject to continuous evaluation. This considers their productivity (including publications and individual and collaborative competitive projects) and their performance in the formation of advanced human capital (ensuring the integral development of students).

According to the university, the Programme Committee uses several instruments to evaluate academic staff, to define the mobility of academics within the categories of Faculty and Collaborator, and the need and opportunity for the incorporation of new academics to the programme to strengthen the lines of research and ensure that the knowledge taught is cutting-edge and up to date. This includes the assessment of academic competencies through annual performance agreements, teacher evaluations each semester, and an evaluation of skills in advanced human capital training in their role as tutor/co-tutor of a thesis.

The teaching evaluation is coordinated by the Vice Rectory for Research and Doctorates and the results are delivered to the director of the programme, who analyses them together with the Academic Committee in order to correct and/or improve the teaching quality of the academic staff. The opinion of students on the teaching performance of academics has been an input to modify and optimise the contents of subjects. The results of the evaluation in 2023 reached an average grade of 7.0, corresponding to the highest grade on a scale of 1.0 to 7.0. The SER provides a sample teacher evaluation which details the aspects evaluated.

Expert evaluation

The number and qualifications of academic staff are well aligned with the size and needs of the student body. With 35 academics (20 faculty and 15 collaborators), the programme has sufficient resources to ensure high-quality teaching, supervision, and research support. This balance allows for close academic guidance and effective supervision of doctoral candidates. The university has provided detailed documentation listing all teaching staff, including their academic qualifications, research achievements, teaching responsibilities, and employment duration. The records confirm that all academics meet the formal requirements to teach and supervise at the doctoral level. All faculty and collaborating professors hold strong research backgrounds, evidenced by extensive publication records, competitive research projects, and experience in postgraduate

teaching and supervision. Their expertise directly supports the intended learning outcomes of the programme, ensuring a strong link between research and doctoral training. The staff-to-student ratio is appropriate, enabling effective mentoring and maintaining the quality of supervision. Academic workloads – which include teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities – are regularly reviewed to ensure feasibility and balance. Faculty members typically hold full-time positions, ensuring stability and availability for the next six years of the accreditation period. In cases where contracts may expire, the university has clear plans for renewal or replacement through internal recruitment and collaboration with other faculties. Supervisory responsibilities are clearly defined in institutional regulations. Only those academics with proven research and supervision experience are authorised to act as thesis tutors or co-tutors. All supervisors demonstrate methodological competence and experience in guiding advanced research projects. When external supervisors or examiners participate, their roles are clearly specified, and the university ensures they are familiar with the programme's requirements and standards. Recruitment procedures are well-defined, transparent, and merit-based, prioritising research excellence, teaching ability, and alignment with the programme's objectives. Visiting and external lecturers are selected for their specialised expertise and are briefed on the curriculum, assessment methods, and learning goals to ensure consistency in delivery. The university maintains a comprehensive staff development policy, offering continuous opportunities for professional growth and pedagogical training. Academic and administrative staff have access to workshops, seminars, and mentoring programmes focusing on both subject-specific expertise and teaching and assessment methods. These initiatives ensure that staff remain up to date with educational innovation and research trends, supporting ongoing improvement in programme quality.

While the doctoral programme has a solid academic faculty, adequate research infrastructure, and sufficient academic productivity to meet national standards in Chile, it may be useful to reflect on its national scope and operational model (as most academic activities are currently concentrated in Santiago, including laboratories, equipment, and the doctoral committee). Therefore, strengthening collaboration and coordination among campuses, as well as further integrating regional academic staff and researchers, could contribute to a more balanced and decentralised development of the doctoral programme at the national level (**Finding 2**).

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

6. Support and research environment

Doctoral degree

Guidance and support are available for students which include advice on achieving a successful completion of their studies.

Appropriate facilities and resources are available for learning and research activities. [ESG 1.6]

Description

According to the SER, the programme receives institutional support for resources and investments managed through the Faculty of Medicine and the Vice Rector for Research and Doctorate. Investments in the programme are said to have increased by more than 2,800% since 2018, contributing to the equipment of laboratories and the support of students and academics in research and teaching.

The programme extends to four campuses, including the Los Leones campus and Ciudad Empresarial campus in Santiago as well as Valdivia and De la Patagonia. The largest campus, Los Leones, has 74 classrooms, distributed in 13 buildings, where the academic life of six faculties/colleges takes place. The classrooms are

said to have high standard equipment (data show, computers, curtains, Wi-Fi access). The campus also has several laboratories and a Simulation and Clinical Innovation Hospital for the development of training activities for Health area programmes.

The facilities have spaces that allow the deployment of university life in its various recreational, artistic, cultural and sports dimensions, in addition to the development of extension and service to the community. These facilities include cafeterias, food courts, infirmary, physical conditioning room, auditoriums, multi-court, photo-copying service, parking lots, as well as service offices and institutional management units.

Laboratories are used jointly by staff and students of the programme and other postgraduate programmes at the Faculty of Medicine and other faculties. According to the SER, all the facilities allow the development of the programme are of the quality required to implement the training/educational processes of the programme. Each of the facilities has spacious laboratory spaces, equipped with appropriate security measures and the necessary equipment. In addition, the USS provides an auditorium, a network of libraries, conference rooms, green areas and dining room and cafeteria services. Connectivity is guaranteed through the Wi-Fi network, while for extracurricular and leisure activities there are sports facilities and common areas. USS has information systems and institutional communication technologies available for the programme.

The SER details the library resources (USS Library Network), teaching and learning equipment, technology and information resources. Users can search for information through the integrated catalogue online, learn about the physical collections in each library enclosure, electronic resources (specialised databases, electronic books, digitised books, guides and tutorials, among others) and various online services that support research at its different levels. Wi-Fi access is provided at all branches/sites and all resources available on the website can be consulted remotely through the authentication of each user. The library web page directs to a selection of research support resources, including guides and regulations (e.g., a manual of APA standards), publication support (contains resources such as ORCID), Ouriginal (i.e. an automatic text recognition system created to detect and prevent plagiarism), free bibliographic managers such as Mendeley and Zotero to create, store and organise bibliographic references, as well as Metrics (access to Journal Citation Reports and SciVal resources). Additional information and workshops are provided as part of the Information literacy programme (ALFIN). The SER also documents and lists several current subscriptions to specialised journals and access to publications in the field as well as software licenses.

The programme offers full tuition and fee scholarships for the total duration of the programme, as well as a monthly maintenance scholarship, re-adjustable annually according to CPI7. It is assigned through a competitive fund to all applicants who require support in each entry cohort and who do not have other funds or similar scholarships such as the ANID national doctoral scholarship. As an additional benefit, a health bonus similar to the one granted by ANID is given. For students during their pregnancy period, the maintenance scholarship includes a benefit that consists of an extension for pre and postnatal care, for a maximum period of 6 months in total. These benefits have favoured all doctoral students at the different stages of their training. Transitional scholarships during the initial phase of the programme are provided as well.

The USS, through the Vice Rectory for Research and Doctorate, strengthens and promotes the insertion of its doctoral students in the international scientific community, collaborating in increasing their knowledge, access to technologies and bibliographic resources and research networks relevant to their area. In this regard, competitive instances have been implemented to support the financing of associated activities: Support Fund for presentations at international Congresses and Short Subject/Courses; Support Fund for Research Internships Abroad; and International Visiting Professor Support Fund. The Vice Rectory for Research and Doctorate supports and promotes the work and linking of the programme's students with researchers in all its locations through the Support Fund for Research Internships in Campuses. It is aimed at students who are carrying out research units, thesis projects or are interested in linking their research with the work of academics of doctoral

programmes who are in a different location to where they develop their programme. In this sense, since its creation, all students have received financial support for the development of activities of insertion in the academy. The SER summarises and lists students' national and international activities and highlights that new benefits have been allocated for international activities.

As for the development of institutional projects, the SER details its objectives and its future plans in areas such as research, advanced training (creation of doctorates), extension (community impact initiatives), bio-entrepreneurship and a strong link with society through training and dissemination.

The university emphasises its extension activities to disseminate knowledge and strengthen doctoral education and its strong links with international research networks and the community as part of the Institutional Development Plan, highlighting several collaborative organisations, networks, and researchers.

Expert evaluation

The material and technical resources available to the programme are of high quality and fully adequate to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Investments in laboratories and infrastructure (e.g., animal facilities) have increased tremendously since 2018, resulting in state-of-the-art facilities across the four campuses, including also the Simulation Hospital and well-equipped laboratories at Los Leones, Valdivia, and Puerto Montt. Laboratories comply with international standards in terms of safety, maintenance, and equipment, and are supported by competent technical staff. The expert panel highlights this as a major strength, particularly the shared use of facilities among postgraduate and research programmes, which fosters collaboration and efficient resource management. Library and IT services are comprehensive, providing remote access to databases, specialised journals, plagiarism-detection tools, and bibliographic management software such as Mendeley and Zotero.

Doctoral candidates receive extensive academic and administrative support throughout their studies. The programme guarantees individual supervision by qualified researchers with proven scientific output, complemented by co-supervision and annual progress evaluations. Institutional mentoring structures, regular consultation hours, and the accessibility of academic and administrative staff contribute to a supportive and responsive learning environment. The expert panel positively notes the professionalism and commitment of the programme coordination team, as well as the transparent and equitable management of scholarships and benefits.

However, the panel observed that the processing time for issuing final diplomas can be excessively long, sometimes extending to a full year. To sustain academic growth and programme quality, investment in administrative staff should be considered to provide timely support for academic processes and to enhance administrative efficiency (**Finding 3**).

The university offers full tuition and maintenance scholarships, a health insurance supplement, and special provisions for parental leave. These benefits are available to all doctoral candidates without other external funding and are applied consistently and transparently. The expert panel considers this funding model exemplary good practice in promoting equal access, inclusion, and stability for doctoral candidates. Furthermore, the Vice-Rectorate provides competitive funding schemes for mobility, participation in international conferences, and research internships abroad, thereby facilitating scientific networking and exposure to global research environments.

The research environment of the programme is characterised by interdisciplinary collaboration and a strong integration with institutional research centres. Doctoral students participate in externally funded projects and publish in peer-reviewed journals, reflecting the growing scientific visibility of the university. The expert panel appreciates the clear institutional commitment to research integrity, upheld by an active ethics committee and

transparent procedures for data management and intellectual property. At the same time, the experts encourage the university to continue developing a cohesive research culture across campuses, for instance through the establishment of a graduate academy or shared doctoral platform to enhance inter-programme exchange, transferable skills training, and collective identity (**Finding 4**).

The PhD programme in Cell Biology and Biomedicine provides an excellent support structure and a well-developed research environment. Its resources, infrastructure, and institutional mechanisms ensure favourable conditions for advanced scientific work. The expert panel commends the university's significant progress in establishing a sustainable ecosystem for research and doctoral education and encourages continued efforts toward consolidating inter-campus integration, enhancing external funding, and strengthening international partnerships.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

7. Public information

Doctoral degree

Impartial and objective, up-to-date information regarding the programme and its qualifications is published regularly. This published information is appropriate for and available to relevant stakeholders.

[ESG 1.8]

Description

Information on the programme activities is displayed via the institutional website, as well as the website of the Vice Rectory for Research and Doctorate or the DRBI PhD website, which also includes general information on the programme, on the degree awarded, the application period, the duration of the programme, the schedule for classes, as well as information on programme objectives, lines of research, the curriculum, academic staff, admissions, and a list of graduates and theses. The website also provides virtual access to 360 labs.

Additional channels of information are email or social networks such as Twitter, which is managed by the Vice Rectory for Research and Doctorate.

The admission process is annually published in the press and on social networks.

Expert evaluation

The university provides transparent access to information about the programme, including its structure, admissions, qualification awarded, and research activities via the institutional website, the Vice-Rectorate for Research and Doctorates, and the DRBI PhD website. These sites also include programme duration, schedules, staff profiles, curriculum details, lists of graduates and theses, and virtual 360° lab tours. While the core information is available to the university community, USS should increase the level of transparency and accessibility for prospective PhD students even further by making information on intended course learning outcomes as well as teaching and assessment methods for courses within the PhD curriculum publicly available (**Finding 5**).

Additional communication occurs through email, press releases, and social media. The Vice-Rectorate ensures that all information is accurate, objective, regularly updated, and aligned with institutional policies.

Conclusion

The criterion is fulfilled.

V. Recommendation of the panel of experts

The panel of experts recommends accrediting the PhD programme “Cell Biology and Biomedicine” offered by Universidad San Sebastián without conditions.

Commendation:

The PhD programme in Cell Biology and Biomedicine aligns with current academic and scientific standards as well as labour market expectations and provides an excellent support structure, a well-developed research environment, and a comprehensive and transparent quality assurance framework. Its resources, infrastructure, and institutional mechanisms ensure favourable conditions for advanced scientific work. The solid academic and administrative organisation at USS as well as excellent supervisory staff contribute to the academic success of its students. The expert panel commends the university’s significant progress in establishing a sustainable ecosystem for research and doctoral education and encourages continued efforts toward consolidating inter-campus integration, enhancing external funding, and strengthening international partnerships.

Findings:

1. While the university follows a levelling approach with fewer mandatory courses which effectively supports students’ transition into research, an increase of elective offerings to further tailor learning paths to individual needs is recommended.
2. Strengthening collaboration and coordination among campuses, as well as further integrating regional academic staff and researchers, could contribute to a more balanced and decentralised development of the doctoral programme at the national level
3. To sustain academic growth and programme quality, investment in administrative staff should be considered to provide timely support for academic processes, e.g., the issuing of final diplomas.
4. The university should continue developing a cohesive research culture across campuses, for instance through the establishment of a graduate academy or shared doctoral platform to enhance inter-programme exchange, transferable skills training, and collective identity.
5. USS should increase the level of transparency and accessibility for prospective PhD students even further by making information on intended course learning outcomes as well as teaching and assessment methods for courses within the PhD curriculum publicly available.