Strengths and Obstacles for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area: The Spanish Case

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Abstract

Quality assurance and accreditation in higher education are a priority aim in the convergence process to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Although the majority of European universities are working around these issues, there exist diverse tensions between the national legislation, accreditation and quality assurance, both in internal and external contexts. Spanish Higher Education Institutions must ensure the fulfillment of the goals related to their different degree programs, in a context of continuous improvement. This paper presents the evolution, some examples and the more recent trends related to quality assurance and accreditation in Spain. It comments some instruments that have been developed by the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (ANECA), like the guidelines developed in the AUDIT program whose purpose is to provide guidance in designing internal quality assurance systems.

Introduction

Quality and accreditation of higher education have proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA); they are considered as an international determinant factor of the European competitiveness and mobility. The principal idea - repeated persistently as slogan- is that the European educative and training become a "world quality reference by 2010" [1]

In the London Communiqué it affirms: "We see the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, which we agreed in Bergen, as a central element of the promotion of European higher education in a global context" [2]. The Council of the European Union, in its Resolution on modernising universities for Europe's competitiveness in a global knowledge economy (2007) has reaffirmed:

- The need to advance in bringing about the modernisation of Europe's universities as a key element of Europe's drive to create a knowledge-based society and economy and improve its competitiveness;
- The need for universities to have sufficient autonomy, better governance and accountability in their structures to face new societal needs and to enable them to increase and diversify their sources of public and private funding in order to reduce the funding gap with the European Union's main competitors;
- The importance of Quality Assurance as driver of change in higher education;
- The role of universities, through education, research and innovation, in the transfer of knowledge to the economy and society as a main contribution to Europe's competitiveness and the need for closer cooperation between academia and the world of enterprise.

According to the Declaration of Prague (2001), it was particularly stressed that the quality should be an important determinant of Europe's international attractiveness and competitiveness [9]. As discussed at the Graz Declaration of the European University Association (EUA) one of the policy goals for an appropriate European Quality Assurance dimension was to promote innovative and dynamic institutions in a context characterised by diversity of missions, goals and curricula. EUA proposes a set of six standards that include QA procedures to promote institutional autonomy by evaluating institutions to promote organisational quality, develop internal quality measures, assure public accountability by including stakeholders in the process and follow guidelines that are transparent. Finally,

QA agencies should include internal quality processes to evaluate themselves (Figure 1) [10].

Fig. 1. A common framework for QA

A COMMON FRAMEWORK					
Level Descriptor BA MA	Suject standard	Basic quality	Quality Model	Equivalent quality assessment system	Shared accreditation criteria

Later, in the Berlin Communiqué of 19th September 2003, Ministers underlined the need and importance of developing common methodological instruments and criteria to be applied on quality assessment and accreditation processes of Higher Education in Europe [6]. In addition, the current structural and curriculum reform provide an opportunity for universities to reflect upon management practices and to review programs and teaching methods with the aim of ensuring their quality [4]-[5].

And according to the Bergen Communiqué (2005), Ministers responsible for Higher Education charged a Follow-up Group with continuing and widening the stocktaking process and reporting in time for the next Ministerial Conference since by 2007 they should have largely completed the implementation of the standards and guidelines for quality assurance as proposed in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), [11]-[12]-[13].

In this paper, we present the evolution of quality and accreditation issues along the Bologna's process and the changes in the Spanish context within the European Higher Education Framework, showing the more recent trends and programs related to quality assurance and accreditation considering the formal policies and the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) framework.

2 Development of quality evaluation structure in Spanish universities

The first initiatives with regard to quality assurance in Spain emerged in 1992 with the Experimental Programme for Quality Evaluation of the university system, the objective of which was to validate a methodology for institutional assessment inspired by previous international experiences. Seventeen universities participated in the programme, which was followed by the Evaluation of Quality in Higher Education in 1994, a pilot project backed and funded by the European Commission. This project involved around fifty universities in Europe, including four Spanish ones. In 1995, through the Royal Order 1947/95 set in motion the National Evaluation Plan for Quality in the Universities (PNECU) which was and developed between 1996 and 2000 [14].

When PNECU came to an end, the Second Universities Quality Plan (PCU) was implemented through the Royal Order 408/2001, which was in force from 2001 until 2003. This Plan continued to develop institutional assessment, methodologies that were homogenous with existing ones in the European Union, and greater participation by the Autonomous Communities in developing and managing the Plan by helping to set up regional evaluation agencies.

The Coordinating Council of Spanish Universities, through its Secretariat General, was the authority responsible for managing the abovementioned quality plans. It had the assistance of a specifically set up Technical Coordinating Committee in this, and the collaboration of the regional agencies that carried out evaluation processes within their respective areas of jurisdiction [16].

The Royal Order (RD) 55/2005 and Royal Order 56/2005, both of 21 January, together with Royal Order 1509/2005, of 16 December, which amends the previous ones, established the new structure for university education according to two different levels, undergraduate and postgraduate [17]-[18]. They are structured into three cycles:
_ Undergraduate degree programmes.
The first cycle of university studies comprises degree programmes that are basic and give a general education, together with others that serve as a preparation for professional activities. Students who pass this cycle are awarded the corresponding qualification, with the corresponding title given by the Government.
_ Postgraduate degree programmes.
The second cycle of university studies involves a specialised or multidisciplinary advanced training, with either an academic or professional specialisation, or the start of research work. Students who pass this cycle are awarded a

Master's degree.

_ Doctoral programmes.

The purpose of the third cycle of university studies is advanced training in research techniques. This may include courses, seminars and other activities aimed at training in research and includes the preparation and presentation of the corresponding doctoral thesis, which consists of an original piece of research work. Students who pass this cycle are awarded a doctoral (Ph.D.) degree.

3 Trends for the future: the AUDIT Program

In Spain, the Agency ANECA has adapted the ENQA guidelines to the Spanish context and has published a document 17 with a set of guidelines for the systems of internal quality guarantee within HEI. These guidelines conform the AUDIT program and could be envisaged with the perspective delineated in the Figure 3.

Fig. 2. ANECA Quality Model for Higher Education (AUDIT Program)
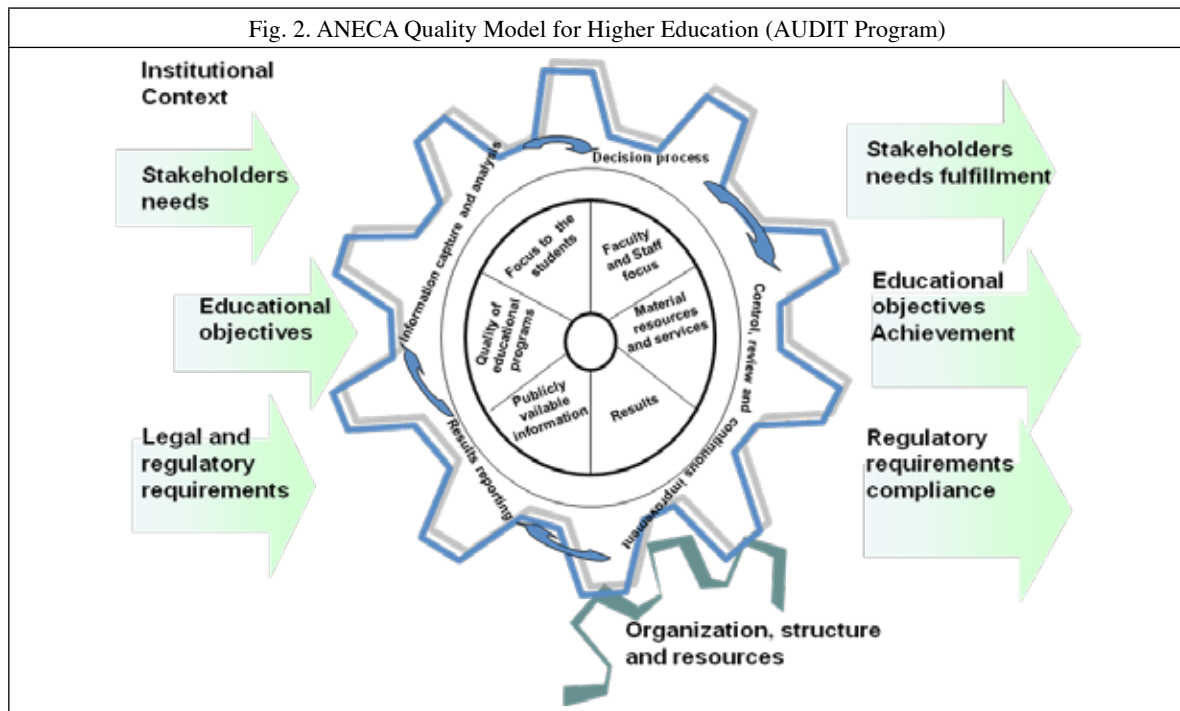
The guidelines defined by ANECA essentially cover the strategic objectives that intend to answer to the following fundamental questions:

How does the University define its quality policy and objectives?

How does the University guarantee the quality of its educational programs?

How does the University focus its teaching to the students?

How does the University guarantee and improve the quality of its Faculty personnel?

How does the University manage and improve its facilities?

How does the University analyse and take in account the results of its action plans?

How does the University publish the curricula information?

The definition of the quality policy in the Computer Engineering School of the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM) has required the analysis of several strategic sources explained. In this case, strategic plans must distinguish those ones referred to the school and the university to which belongs. Although the UPM has currently an Institutional Quality Program (PIC), it has no strategic plan yet. The UPM, (www.upm.es), approved in the year 2005 a quality program named "Programa Institucional de Calidad" (PIC, Institutional Quality Program) [19] with the following key objective: to measure the quality and to foster and to assist the initiatives of continuous improvement in the different Schools, departments and units of the institution.

The PIC general objective can be developed in a set of more detailed sub-objectives:

- To adapt the educational offer to the society and employers needs.
- To adapt the teaching methodologies to the Educational European Space (EES).
- To enhance the effectiveness and quality of the educational processes.
- To develop curricula and educational programmes with international dimension.
- To provide a continuous learning offering.
- To foster the interaction among the system R+D+I, the technology transfer and the teaching.
- To strength the application of the ICT in the educational processes.
- To promote the image of the University at national and international level, and to disseminate the contribution of the University to the society.
- To define criteria for resources distribution based upon results.
- To encourage a culture of continuous improvement.

On the other hand, the Mission and Vision Statements of the School of Computer Science approved last October (www.fi.upm.es), is the basis too for the quality policy. As it says concerning to the accreditation:"… the academic offer shall be conformed to the European guidelines accreditation and others internationally recognized in the engineering sector…". Thus the criteria for quality certification and accreditation of different organizations in the USA and Europe have been taken into consideration, particularly ABET, Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology [20], and Baldrige [21] in the USA, and EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) [22] in Europe.

4. Conclusions

The focus on quality in the Bologna process has certainly raised awareness within higher education institutions of the potential benefits and challenges of effective quality assurance and enhancement activities. More constructive discussion between institutions, quality assurance agencies, stakeholders and public authorities appears to be taking place, and the involvement of students in quality assurance activities also seems to be gaining ground. Indeed in some parts of Europe, quality assurance seems to be replacing degree structure reform as the main topic of interest in the Bologna process.

International agreements are at times seized as an opportunity to promote a national agenda. This applies here as well, and not only in Spain; it explains the significant differences in the way in which the signatories of Bologna are carrying out the agreements. The introduction of accreditation meant that more emphasis was put on accountability. On the one hand this meets the need to guarantee the level of the countries' programmes abroad, but it also serves the purpose of introducing a more robust system of quality assurance. But if the accreditation movement is allowed to spread without systematic thought or design, Europe will be faced with a jungle of procedures, matching the jungle of its degrees. If this situation is allowed to develop, it will reduce more transparency and student protection and will increase obstacles to academic and professional mobility. On the other hand, re-thinking current teaching structures, methods, evaluation and flexibility is a task still ahead.

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