

THE DOCENTIA PROGRAMME: AN EXAMPLE OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICES IN MUTUAL RECOGNITION - COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES IN SPAIN

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Abstract

The development of quality assurance methods in the sphere of higher education is already widespread at both the European and international levels, along with the sharing of experience and information between the quality assurance agencies, which are responsible for implementing these methods. Given a framework of collaboration between QA agencies, the next step is the design and setting in motion of QA procedures that involve the participation of different agencies, with the purpose being the mutual recognition of quality assurance processes and decisions.

The objective of this paper is to present the DOCENTIA Teaching Assessment Programme in Spain, which is an example of collaboration between the twelve existing QA agencies in the higher education system in Spain and of their combined work, with a description of how the international guidelines defined in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG), INQAAHE and the ECA's Code of Good Practice have been applied in good practices in mutual recognition as regards results and processes.

The paper also gives examples of good practices detected through the actual implementation of mutual recognition, which can be transferred to other contexts (national and international) in which different QA agencies are involved.

1. THE DOCENTIA PROGRAMME AND THE QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES IN SPAIN

The DOCENTIA Programme¹ offers a model for evaluating the teaching competence of university academic staff. The model consists of the planning (content) of a degree course, together with its delivery and outcomes, with specifications that are common to all Spanish universities that they can adapt according to their policies applying to academic staff and strategic planning, in such a way that the independence of higher education institutions is guaranteed.

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¹ For more detailed information on the process of designing and implementing the programme, see: Arboix, E. and García, E. (2007). *Evaluation of teacher competence in Spain. The DOCENTIA Programme*. EQAF (2007).

The programme was launched jointly by the existing QA agencies in the higher education system in Spain in March 2007, the aim being to satisfy the universities' demands and the need in the educational system in general for a model and a series of procedures for the **quality assurance of teaching** by university academic staff, bearing in mind the greater responsibility of the universities as a consequence of their autonomy and decision-making capability. The objectives of the DOCENTIA Programme are as follows:

- To provide a **frame of reference, a model and procedures** for the assessment and evaluation of teaching.
- To promote the **development of academic staff**, both personally and in terms of professional advancement.
- As an aid to **decision-making** in connection with review activities.
- To contribute to the necessary **cultural shift in the universities** that is implicit to the assessment of teaching.
- To establish a more conducive environment for the **culture of quality** by bringing teaching by academic staff in line with the aims of the institution.

The Programme is structured according to various stages that comprise the following activities:

1. The agencies make the call for participation to the universities.
2. On the basis of the guidelines, criteria and conditions specified in the call, the universities produce their designs for the assessment of teaching.
3. Through review panels, the agencies carry out the external review of the designs, with a check being made of compliance with the specifications given in the DOCENTIA model and the enhancement proposals made.
4. Once a positive assessment has been made, the university carries out the experimental implementation of the teaching assessment designs. During this time, which should last a minimum of two years, the corresponding QA agency monitors the process of implementation so that the university can make adjustments and enhancements to the design, according to the requirements and needs within the context in which it is being applied.
5. Once the monitoring stage has been successfully completed, the university can apply for certification of its teaching assessment procedures by the agency.

At the present time, 68 out of the 74 existing universities in Spain participate in DOCENTIA,² which shows the high rate of participation (around 90%) and acceptance of the programme by the universities, even though it is a voluntary programme. Out of the 68 participating universities, 53 have a design that has been positively evaluated, which means that they are ready to begin the implementation stage. As of today, 26 universities are in this stage.

All twelve of the QA agencies in Spain (the national agency, ANECA, which is the programme coordinator, and the eleven regional agencies³) participate in the DOCENTIA Programme. Following agreement on the general specifications of the programme, each agency has been responsible for managing the programme within the geographical context of its jurisdiction (regional Autonomous Community), with overall coordination together with the other agencies.

² Source: *Informe sobre el Estado de la evaluación externa de la calidad en las universidades españolas 2009*.

³ The regional QA agencies in the Autonomous Communities of Spain are: ACSUCYL, ACSUG ACPUA, AGAE, AQU-Catalunya, AQUIB, ACUCM, ACAP, UNIQUAL, AVAP and ACECAU.

This situation has led to certain problems due to the necessary delocalisation of the programme start-up and development, together with the need for the mutual recognition of the processes and results obtained in the evaluations carried out by each agency. Aside from certain important differences, this situation is similar in certain ways to that which has occurred with the accreditation programmes.

A description is given below of a series of good practices, which are based on international principles and criteria for quality⁴ as set out in the ESG and by the ECA, together with those of the EUA (2006) for agencies, and the ECA's Code of Good Practice, that are linked to the mutual recognition of the processes, decisions and results of quality assurance between the twelve Spanish QA agencies through the DOCENTIA Programme being presented in this paper.

2. THE PRACTICE OF MUTUAL RECOGNITION IN THE DOCENTIA PROGRAMME

In presenting the practices developed among the twelve Spanish QA agencies within the framework of the DOCENTIA Programme, account has also been taken of the development of different initiatives to compile good practices on an international basis⁵ that seek to identify specific activities in higher education institutions and agencies which contribute significant value to QA processes and policies and that can be transferred to other organisations, given their importance in processes and policies and for the results obtained in quality assurance.

The following table gives a summary of the different aspects developed in the programme, together with their function in the development of the practice of mutual recognition:

Nature	Aspect	Functions	Practice
Body	DOCENTIA Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Functions. - Ensures compliance with the principles and agreements. - Review of complicated cases (adjustment of criteria). 	1
Processes	Design of the materials	Design, production and revising of the necessary documents in the different stages of the programme: ex-ante accreditation, monitoring and certification.	2
Processes	Training	Joint training workshops on the programme (for agency advisers and experts, university quality unit advisers, reviewers, review panel secretaries)	3
Processes	Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exchange of experts. - Training for review panels. - Selection and appointment of reviewers. - Ensure that reviewers are not from the same regional Autonomous Community. - Systematic inclusion of students in the review panels. 	4

⁴ These principles are based on the standards and recommendations formulated by ENQA and ECA, and they have also been adapted from those underlying the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the UK.

⁵ Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA): AUQA Good Practice Database [<http://www.auqa.edu.au/gp/about/index.php>]; International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE): Good Practices in Quality Assurance [<http://www.inqahe.org/>]; Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) [<http://www.guni-rmies.net/>]

Results	Analysis of the results	- Review of the results by all the stakeholders. - Evaluation questionnaire for the universities on the activities of the agencies.	5
Results	Dissemination	- Joint report. - Website for the agencies.	6

Table 1. Summary of the practices in mutual recognition developed within the framework of the DOCENTIA Programme.

A description is given below of the good practices developed within the framework of the DOCENTIA Programme, starting with the difficulty that gave rise to the practice, which in turn enabled it to be overcome.

Practice 1: DOCENTIA Committee

Difficulty: To harmonise the Programme’s principles and criteria between the different agencies, and to ensure compliance

The work of collaboration between the different agencies on the DOCENTIA Programme is channelled through the DOCENTIA Committee. The committee’s main purpose is to monitor the university teaching assessment support programme and to ensure compliance with the principles and criteria of the programme. One representative from each QA agency sits as a full member on this committee, which is where the different aspects connected with the DOCENTIA Programme are put forward and developed.

The frame of reference for the Committee’s work is laid down in the EHEA’s Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG)⁶ where it says, “**the standards [ESG] (do) also contribute naturally to the work being done towards mutual recognition of agencies and the results of agency evaluations or accreditations**”, and that “**it is therefore important that these standards are integrated into the processes applied by external quality assurance agencies towards the higher education institutions**”.

Practice 2: Design, production and revision of the evaluation materials (guidebooks, guidelines, protocols)

Difficulty: To ensure that the Programme is developed consistently on a national level

The necessary documents for the different stages of the programme (ex-ante accreditation, monitoring and certification) were designed, produced and revised jointly by all of the agencies. Each stage involved producing the guidebooks and guidelines for the universities so they could:

- Design their teaching assessment model.
- Carry out the self-evaluation of its implementation and draw up the corresponding annual progress reports.
- Prepare the necessary documentation for certification of their models (the forms used).

The corresponding report protocols and models (forms) for the external review panels were also produced.

⁶ ENQA (2005). *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area*

The requirements for implementing the Programme are drawn up in the meetings between the advisers and experts from the agencies that make up the DOCENTIA Committee. The focus and design of each stage in the Programme are discussed and agreed to, and individuals are designated to draw up the necessary draft documents, with a date set for the committee as a whole to share its views. Once the drafts have been drawn up, they are sent to all committee members by e-mail for discussion, suggestions and approval.

Practice 3: Course design and training for QA experts, reviewers and university representatives

Difficulty: The availability of external reviewers (academics, professionals, students and agency experts) trained according to the Programme's requirements.

The DOCENTIA Committee sets up the training programmes, which are aimed at QA agency staff, reviewers and the different heads and staff of QA units in the universities.

The course materials are first designed and then distributed and shared by all of the agencies. Each agency has set up workgroups with the universities within its region, through which there is constant contact as a result of the meetings that are held and courses run (jointly for agency experts, university QA experts, reviewers and panel secretaries), with information being provided and feedback given by the universities on the running of the programme. This also means a saving in resources because it is not necessary for each agency to individually provide training.

Practice 4: The evaluation process

Difficulty: To ensure that the criteria are applied consistently by the different review panels.

As part of the evaluation process, the agencies jointly define and approve the composition, selection and appointment of the members of the panels that review the universities' different designs and their implementation. With regard to the review panels, the following are also carried out:

- There is an exchange of experts between the different QA agencies in Spain, who participate in the different review panels.
- Joint review panels for various regional QA agencies have been organised.
- The presence of reviewers from the same geographical region/Autonomous Community as the universities participating in the evaluation is avoided.
- Students are systematically included in the review panels, in the same capacity as the other members (academic, QA expert, professional). There has also been the exchange of students with sufficient training between different agencies.
- The agencies assess the universities' handbooks and how they have they have been applied (results).
- The agencies jointly recognise the results of the evaluation and the procedures used.

Practice 5. Analysis of the results

Difficulty: To detect the important factors in the different contexts that may have an influence on the development of the Programme

A review is made of the results obtained by all of the member agencies in the programme. These results are set out in the annual report on the Programme produced jointly by the QA agencies, which include, amongst other things, data on the participating universities, the evaluation itself and the results.

Each agency also gathers more detailed information from the universities in its corresponding geographical area, which provides qualitative information on the internal process in each university. This process is currently being systematised for dissemination purposes and the possible use of good practices by other universities in the design and adaptation of their review methods.

Practice 6. Dissemination: Public information on the DOCENTIA Programme:

Difficulty: To obtain a local and global perspective at the same time of the current situation of the Programme

In order to ensure the transparency and trust of the universities in the programme, all relevant information on the programme, its purpose, aims and possibilities is made available to all members of the university community through the corresponding agency's website (guidebooks, evaluation protocols and criteria, make-up of the review panels, evaluation reports). The annual report is also made available.

The agencies update the universities with information on developments in the programme through meetings that are periodically held, especially with the university vice-chancellors and their deputies (rectors and vice-rectors), with relevant information being posted on their websites.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In the time that has passed since the DOCENTIA Programme was set up in 2007, collaboration between the twelve QA agencies in the higher education system in Spain has acquired the form of a series of good practices and processes in mutual recognition that are the result of the application of the international standards and principles for quality assurance.

These good practices, which are still being developed, have consolidated the mutual recognition between the agencies involved, with various basic aspects that mutual trust is based on being made specific and that each member must come to grips with, namely, transparency, collaboration and coordinated decision-making.

By analysing the way in which these good practices have been developed and applied, various conclusions can be drawn regarding those aspects of the practices that most contribute to a mutual trust-building process between the different stakeholders:

- The establishment of an understanding regarding the purpose and consequences of evaluation: the acceptance of a diversity of points of view, but with agreement regarding what is fundamental.
- Agreement regarding the basic review and evaluation methods.
- A practice that, in essence, does not alter agreements concerning methods that have already been approved.
- Results and consequences that are accepted, even though one may not be in agreement with them.

- Each stakeholder must trust the role being played by others, even though they do not share the same point of view.
- It is transparency that gives credibility to the review process: the stakeholders must have information on activities and results connected with the review.
- The overall credibility of review is based on the revision and ongoing enhancement of the process, whereby it is defined and developed.

Following on from this work, the intention of the DOCENTIA Committee (the committee which brings together the agencies) is to develop a Code of Good Practice for the Programme, in order to be able to identify the aspects that define practices of mutual recognition and that validate the process.

4. ISSUES THAT ARE STILL PENDING

Food for thought for developing practices in mutual recognition includes:

- What practices in mutual recognition can help in the development of certification processes?
- How can the involvement of all of the stakeholders be ensured in this process?

5. SOURCES

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