AUDIT Programme: an Initiative to Promote Internal Quality Assurance Systems in Higher Education Institutions

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1. ABSTRACT

In accordance with the trust placed by society in the autonomous administration of the universities and the transparency called for within the framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a number of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Spain are participating in the AUDIT programme, which involves the design, evaluation and future certification of their internal quality assurance systems (IQAS) to ensure the correct alignment of their activities and for goals associated with degree programmes to be achieved. To this end, there is a need for policies and processes that are formally laid down and publicly available.

The aim of the AUDIT programme, which is jointly promoted by the ANECA, AQU Catalunya, and ACSUG quality assurance agencies, is to guide and facilitate universities, in particular their institutes, faculties and colleges, in the process of defining these systems, and furthermore, to establish responsibility for external review processes and ensure that the goals of university quality are achieved.

2. CONTEXT AND CONSTRAINTS. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SPANISH UNIVERSITIES

The recently reformed Spanish Universities Act of 2007[1] states the need for standards of quality assurance to be set to facilitate evaluation, certification and accreditation, and considers quality assurance as an essential purpose of university policy.

Although this change in legislation was a milestone in the implementation of quality assurance standards in Spanish universities, there were various stages prior to this in which other developments in quality assurance had taken place. The first of these, involving the opinions and satisfaction of university students regarding teaching, have been carried out since 1981 in some universities, and more recently graduates and employers have been incorporated into the surveys. There is still no methodology that is common to all universities, however, and surveys on the quality of teaching have yet to be carried out in some universities.

Between 1996 to 2006, quality assurance in Spanish universities came to be associated with institutional self-evaluation processes through the *University*

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[1] Spanish Universities Act, 13 April 2007: article 31.

Quality Assessment Plan, although these were not mandatory. They involved a board of academic staff and students drawing up a report for each educational programme on the quality of teaching, research and management. This report would be analysed by a quality assurance agency (QAA) and finally the HEI, at the faculty or college level, would design an enhancement plan for the corresponding teaching and research activities.[2]

In addition to programme evaluation, the quality of university services has been assessed since the late nineties using approaches that focus on quality management and organisational excellence (library services, international relationship services and other student support services). Processes involving the evaluation of teaching and research merits by a QAA independent of the universities themselves have also been developed since 2003 for the quality assurance of teaching staff hired by universities.[3]

Parallel to this, various universities have developed a framework of quality assurance associated with the programming, review and enhancement of degrees based on the use of internationally recognised quality models such as EFQM and ISO 9001.

As a consequence of the 2007 reform of the Spanish Universities Act, the current panorama is a new organisational structure for university studies, as described in Royal Order 1393, 29 October 2007, which establishes quality assurance as one of the basic elements to be provided by educational programmes in line with the Bologna process. It is consequently proposed that a quality assurance system should be one of the essential elements in the design of all future undergraduate, Master and doctorate degrees.

3. THE AUDIT INITIATIVE

As shown in the previous section, the existence of enhancement strategies enabling the universities to develop, control, review and redefine their actions so that anticipated goals can be attained is not new in the context of Spanish higher education.

Nevertheless, there has been a lack of a systematic and structured approach regarding the continuous enhancement of education offered to students in certain quality assurance initiatives. An analysis of these initiatives in the light of the obligations acquired in the EHEA reveals that more systematic organisation is necessary by universities to effectively contribute to quality assurance. The establishing of a structured and systematic internal quality assurance system (IQAS) would give a new meaning to the different actions undertaken regarding the evaluation of degree programmes, services and teaching staff; the analysis of student and graduate satisfaction; the analysis of graduate employment; and the information ultimately made available to society.

The regulatory framework in Spain also establishes that the different review bodies (agencies) must contribute through external assessment processes to ensure university quality. The Spanish higher education system IQAS will therefore need to

[2] De Miguel, M. Escudero, T. and Rodriguez, S. (1998). Spanish Universities' Quality: the incentive of external evaluation. *Quality in Higher Education.* Volume 4, Issue, 1998 , pages 199–206.
[3] Arboix, E. and García, E. (2008). Evaluation of teacher competence in Spain: The DOCENTIA programme, in *EUA Case studies 2008. Implementing and Using Quality Assurance: Strategy And Practice. A Selection of Papers from The 2nd European Quality Assurance Forum.* 17-22.

be based on the well-organised combination of internal and external measures by both universities and agencies.

The aim of the AUDIT programme initiative, which is promoted by the ANECA, AQU Catalunya and ACSUG agencies, is to guide and facilitate universities and their institutes, as the organisational reference both internally and for students and society in general, in the process of defining and designing the IQAS, enabling all activities associated with the quality assurance of degree programmes developed up to the present time to be included. AUDIT examines the universities' commitment to participate in and support the frameworks for technical collaboration with the agencies. In this respect, the AUDIT programme is intended to serve as an open framework within which institutions participate, although participation is not mandatory for universities.

It is the intention of the agencies promoting the AUDIT programme that the development of IQASs is also encouraged within the agencies themselves, so that the synergy and convergence of the internal and external dimensions of quality assurance have repercussions on the higher education system as a whole. It would therefore be possible to set up the IEQA for a HEI according to both internal and external approaches, as shown in Figure 1.
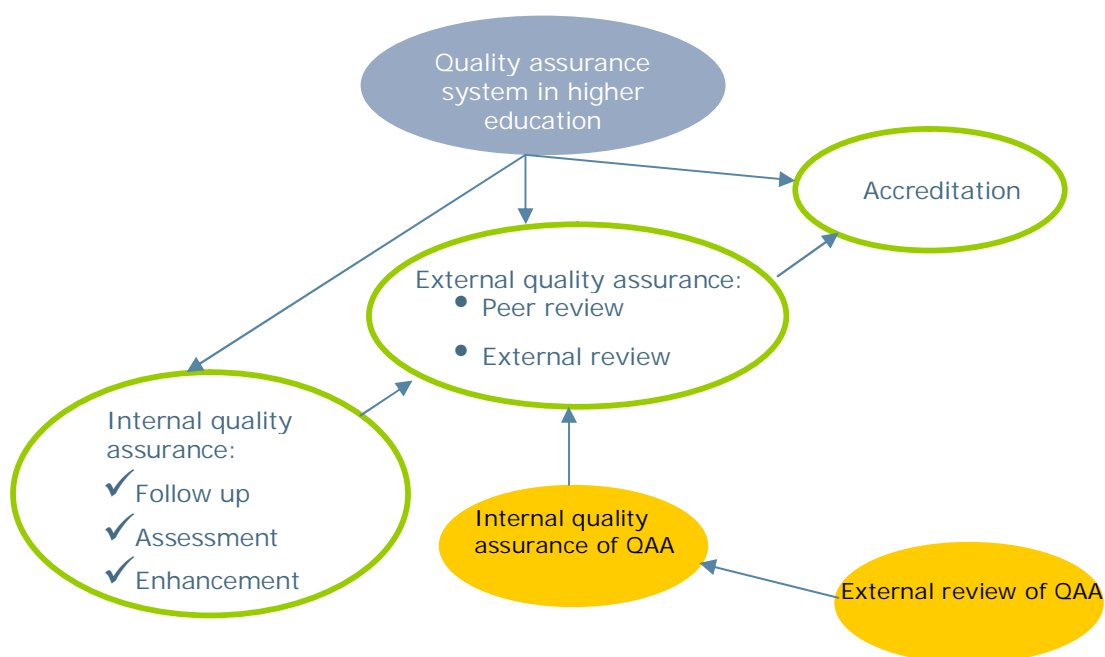

Figure 1. A quality assurance system in higher education.

Universities should be able to freely select and develop their IQAS on the basis of their mission and vision statements, strategic plan, historical tradition, internal structure, and preferences based on benchmarking analyses, among other factors. Two main models, ISO and EFQM, plus some hybrid versions, have been used for IQAS design.

The main approaches used to produce an IQAS are as follows: on the one hand, the HEI can opt for a transversal, generic approach, which could be suitable for all

faculties and university colleges, although specific procedures and indicators may depend on a given faculty or college scenario. In the most representative situation for this approach, it is the university quality unit that is in charge of designing the IQAS, and the faculty or university college managers is simply informed during the process, they participation in the design is very limited, and all they effectively do is to eventually accept the design for the system. On the other hand, the HEI delegates the designing of the IQAS to the faculty or university college, which designs the IQAS, with the university quality unit being in charge of coordination, especially in relation to elements that are more centralised, such as the academic staff.

The AUDIT programme is also intended to be a tool that contributes towards the recognition of HEI-designed IQAS, and it will therefore include an evaluation process of the IQAS. The evaluation process will enable HEIs to assure the appropriateness and relevance of the design through compliance with given prerequisites. The final stage of the AUDIT programme sees the certification process of IQAS being implemented by institutions being brought to a conclusion.

The aspects included in the AUDIT programme are covered by regulations dealing with undergraduate and Master's degrees in Spain. Efforts by the universities to set up IQAS will thereby be brought into line with their involvement in the accreditation of new degrees.

4. METHODOLOGY FOR THE DIAGNOSIS AND EVALUATION OF THE IQAS DESIGN

4.1.   Understanding the methodology approach.

The methodology focuses on highlighting the formative aspect of the AUDIT programme. The aims of the evaluation is to assess the potentiality of the IQAS, identify the main obstacles to its implementation, and assure the transparency, visibility, and public availability of the IQAS subsequent to its implementation. Although the result may be a negative evaluation outcome, HEIs learn from participating in the accreditation process of their degree programmes, which leads to the strengthening of internal aspects in the institution and to a process of continuous enhancement.

The QAAs need to strengthen their advisory role within the framework of the AUDIT programme. In this respect, one of the main outcomes of the evaluation process is the drawing up of two main documents, the interim and final reports. In the interim report the review panel, in its role as advisor, identifies the strong and weak points and indicates modifications to the design of the IQAS prior to its implementation; the final report includes a list of suggestions and recommendations for improving the IQAS, together with critical aspects that will need to be examined in detail in the follow up stage.

4.2.   What is really being evaluated? Guidelines and elements.

The analysis and diagnosis of the IQAS is carried out according to a series of guidelines that are given in the evaluation protocol. These guidelines have various aims: to help the HEI in the design of the IQAS, to establish how much ground has been covered already and the direction for forthcoming actions, and to structure the evaluation process to be carried out by the review panel.
The guidelines are based on the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) document *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, and they are meant to cover all the

dimensions and stakeholders involved in an educational programme. As shown in the Table 1, the list of guidelines ensures that the HEI:

- consolidates a quality culture supported by a policy and goals for quality that are known and publicly accessible.
- has mechanisms to maintain and update its programmes and develop methodologies to approve, control, evaluate and periodically improve their quality.
- is provided with procedures to check that the fundamental purpose of its actions is to encourage student learning.
- has mechanisms to ensure that the recruitment, management and training of its academic staff and service and administration staff are carried out with appropriate safeguards in order for them to carry out their corresponding functions.
- is provided with mechanisms to design, manage and improve its services and physical resources in order for student learning to develop appropriately.
- is provided with procedures to ensure that outcomes (learning, graduate employment and satisfaction of stakeholders) are measured, analysed and used for decision-making and to enhance the quality of degree programmes.
- is equipped with mechanisms to ensure that updated information on programmes is published periodically.

Table 1. Guidelines for the diagnosis, design and evaluation of the IQAS

- Guideline 1. How the HEI defines its quality policy and goals

- Guideline 2. How the HEI carries out the quality assurance of its programmes

- Guideline 3. How the HEI directs its programme at the students

- Guideline 4. How the HEI assures and enhances the quality of its academic staff

- Guideline 5. How the HEI manages and improves its physical resources and services

- Guideline 6. How the HEI analyses and takes into consideration the outcomes

- Guideline 7. How the HEI publishes information on educational programmes

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In turn, every guideline is broken down into a series of elements, some of which are regulated at the national level under the design of educational programmes. As an example of how a given guideline is broken down in elements in the evaluation protocol, Table 2 shows the elements of the Guideline 2.

Table 2. Elements of Guideline 2
2.1. Existence of the bodies able to manage the design, follow up, planning, development and review of degree qualifications, their goals and associated areas of competence. 2.2. Have mechanisms to regulate the decision-making process relative to the provision and design of programmes and their goals. 2.3. Specification of the stakeholders involved in the design, follow up, planning, development and review of qualifications, their goals and associated areas of competence. 2.4. Presence of the procedures involved in the design, follow up, planning, development and review of qualifications, their goals and associated areas of competence. 2.5. Have systems to gather and analyse information for assessing the maintenance, updating and renewal of its programmes. 2.6. Existence of mechanisms developed to implement improvements stemming from the periodic review of degree programmes. 2.7. Have accountability mechanisms for the main stakeholders regarding the quality of degree qualifications. 2.8. Define the criteria for the eventual suspension of the programme.

The elements grouped under Guideline 2 are worded in a similar way to those under the other guidelines. The elements evaluate the bodies, decision-making procedures, stakeholders, information gathering and analysis, the follow up, review and improvement, and accountability. Therefore, the assessment of the IQAS design is based on an examination of the quality of the design of a given guideline, and of the key transversal elements that appear under each one.

4.3.   Evaluation criteria and scale

Evaluation criteria need to be broad and flexible, according to the above mentioned ex ante scenario prior to implementation of the IQAS. Reviewers will need to check a number of aspects in the IQAS design, however, such as:

- Organisation and structure, with a well-defined scope and meaning that is clear.
- All of the guidelines must be dealt with.
- Existence of a comprehensive process map (or similar), describing what the process is, who is involved, and how each process carried out.
- Examples of procedures and indicators that are included.

The approach used in the design of the IQAS will affect the diagnosis, the evaluation prior to implementation, and any subsequent follow up. There is no specific preconceived position for the QAA in relation to a particular approach, although its main role is to create the space and opportunity for reflection in the university, and to act in an advisory capacity. The HEI's quality units need to provide information on issues relating to which will be the best approach, given the university's organisational structure (i.e. how centralised the academic and management units are), and the specific characteristics of its faculties and colleges (which often derive from the programmes which are offered). The generic approach

would presumably be more suitable for universities offering similar programmes, with a geographically close-knit campus, and consolidated quality units. The specific approach is thus more common in older universities made up of a series of long-established and independent faculties and colleges, where the campus is dispersed and heterogeneous programmes.

A four-level scale is used in the AUDIT programme for the assessment of each element and related guideline:

A. Satisfactory
B. Sufficient
C. Insufficient
D. Absence of information

A "satisfactory" or "sufficient" grade for each element in a given guideline leads to approval of the guideline, and the approval of all guidelines leads to the positive evaluation of the IQAS design, thereby enabling it to be implemented within the framework of the AUDIT programme. If a significant number of elements are graded as being either "insufficient" or "absence of information", particularly if they are critical elements, the guideline cannot be approved and IQAS design will need to be modified and improved in order for it to ultimately be positively evaluated.

4.4.   The review panels

Peer review is used to evaluate the IQAS design. The same kind of review panel has been developed by the three QAAs involved in the AUDIT programme; there are five panel members, one ex-vice rector, two university academic staff members with experience in QA processes, one university QA expert and one QA professional (adviser in quality assurance). Some reviewers have therefore developed quality assurance systems in their own universities, and others are people who have previously held executive positions in a university.

There are different stages in the evaluation process. Firstly, each reviewer analyses the QA design separately and assesses its conformity with the AUDIT evaluation criteria. All of the reviewers then compare their evaluations and reach a joint agreement. They then draw up a report on the QA design, which is sent by the QAA to the university.

5. PARTICIPATION IN AUDIT

126 faculties and colleges from 53 Spanish universities participated in the first call of the AUDIT programme in 2007, which represents 70% of the total. The following table shows the distribution of participants, broken down according to each corresponding QAA:

Participation in AUDIT 2007-2008, according to each Spanish QAA

QA agency	Faculties, colleges and institutes	Universities
ANECA	71	43
AQU Catalunya	20	8
ACSUG	35	2
	Total	53

In general, the majority of these universities are public and, for most universities, there were at least two or three faculties, colleges or institutes that participated. Around ten universities have designed their own quality assurance system for all faculties and colleges. Each university has been able to choose its own way to participate in AUDIT according to its tradition and particular schedule for programme accreditation

6. CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The QAAs are currently completing their evaluation processes, and the following are some of the conclusions and lessons learned.

One first conclusion to be drawn is that there has been a high degree of involvement by the universities in the AUDIT programme, and there is a high demand from new universities to take part in the 2008 call.

In developing the designs for internal quality assurance, QA experts from different universities (and also different region of Spain) set up workgroups to jointly learn about and draw up more elaborate proposals for their faculties and university colleges. The AUDIT programme is, in a way, already contributing to the updating of the quality culture in Spanish universities by encouraging the development of more systematic initiatives for quality assurance.

The agencies have played a twofold role in this: on the one hand, they have given guidance and provided support to the universities to make the initial steps towards setting up internal quality assurance systems and, on the other, they have reviewed the designs submitted by the universities. The actual process of evaluating the designs has encouraged feedback between the agencies and universities in the form of recommendations, which have helped the universities to enhance their initial proposals.

With certain exceptions, the universities have followed the criteria and guidelines laid down in AUDIT, which are: identify the stakeholders in the teaching and learning process; define the learning aims; use a process-based approach to develop teaching and learning; identify those in charge of defining, monitoring, reviewing and enhancing the teaching and learning process; and introduce a systematic system of measurement.

The most outstanding weak points detected in the designs for quality assurance systems involve: the inadequate specification of the stakeholders and how they are involved in identifying the requirements of the IQAS; imprecise aims for quality; the incomplete definition of the organs responsible for the management of quality in faculties and colleges; the lack of specific accountability procedures; and the establishing of incomplete mechanisms for decision-making in the IQAS, especially in relation to decisions subsequent to self-evaluation processes.

Several of the lessons learned in designing the AUDIT initiative are:

- The development of initiatives such as AUDIT is very useful in universities without an IQAS or where the internal quality assurance procedures and mechanisms have still not been systematised.
- A university's mission, vision and values should serve as the basis for producing an IQAS, and consideration also needs to be given to strategic issues.
- In an initial stage of the development of IQASs, the agencies need to play an advisory role as well as that of external review to encourage the growth of a true quality culture in the universities.
- It is necessary to involve university QA experts, professionals and academics to create synergies between those who play key roles in the design, development and enhancement of IQASs.

- It is necessary to develop standard procedures between the different peer reviews that are carried out to ensure that results between the various review panels and committees are coherent.
- Cooperation by the QAAs in joint projects is beneficial to the management of peer review processes.

7. KEY ISSUES TO BE MASTERED

There are various issues that still need to be answered:

- Is IQAS certification really an added value for HEIs? and for society?
- Can the IQAS guarantee the quality of degree programmes in an external review?
- What differences are there between the IQAS design and the usual QA activities in universities? Are they similar or not?
- What is the real involvement of university policy and decision-makers in a QA system such as AUDIT?
- How can a QAA undertake a follow-up process with the engagement of the university? What is the effective role of the QAA in this process?