# THE ACPUA AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF ARAGON: FROM RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOOD PRACTICE

Carlos Oliván Villobas, Isabel Ortega Pardos, Irene Melchor Lacleta
Technicians from the Aragon Agency for Quality Assurance and Strategic Foresight in Higher Education (ACPUA)
acpua@aragon.es

I. INTRODUCTION

The adaptation of university education to the European Higher Education Area has involved a process of strong integration of internal quality assurance mechanisms into the programmes. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area [1] state that higher education institutions are primarily responsible for the quality of their offerings and quality assurance, and are accompanied and supported in their role by external evaluation agencies. It also states that institutions should develop and implement a strategy for continuous quality improvement and that quality assurance with a focus on accountability is fully compatible with quality assurance for improvement.

The action of the universities of the 21st century must involve the management of change, in a world in which the new information and communication technologies have led to the emergence of the so-called knowledge society and the breaking down of the classic barriers of time and space. The virtuous cycle of continuous improvement Plan, Do, Check, Act (Plan, Do, Check, Act) and the implementation of quality assurance systems of the programmes is undoubtedly the best tool for management and adaptation to change that universities can adopt.
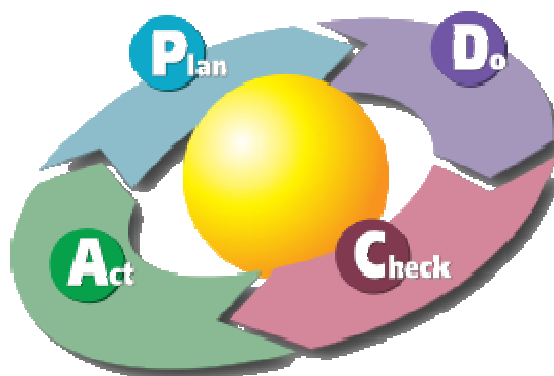
Within the process of external evaluation carried out by the quality agencies, certain instruments can be introduced to support and encourage the processes of continuous improvement and adaptation to the changes outlined above. In this sense it should be stressed again that the universities are ultimately responsible for the quality assurance of their processes, but accountability to society also implies the existence of processes of external quality assessment and assurance.

Since its creation, the Aragon Agency for Quality Assurance and Strategic Foresight in Higher Education (ACPUA) has tried to combine this dual role of quality assurance aimed at accountability and improvement. Within the role of quality assurance, both favourable and unfavourable reports are issued, as well as "Aspects that must necessarily be modified" and "Recommendations that must be complied with". The "Recommendations" and "Good Practices" can be found in detail in the role of improvement orientation.

The quantitative analysis, both of the follow up reports issued by the ACPUA during three academic years and of those issued during the first accreditation renewal campaign, allows us to observe a significant activity in detecting good practices and issuing recommendations. As can be seen, it seems that after an initial moment of support for the implementation of the programmes in the recommendations, they were much more numerous than the good practices, and as the implementation of the programmes has progressed, this situation has become more balanced. This circumstance demonstrates the consolidation of the IQAS of the programmes.

The ACPUA Reports with Good Practices and Recommendations

	Follow up			Voluntary Accreditation	Total
	Course 2009-10	Course 2010-11	Course 2011-12		
Good practices	20	40	28	22	110
Recommendations	70	85	33	24	212

II. A TYPOLOGY OF QUALITY AGENCY PROPOSALS

The experience in the evaluation of programmes in the University System of Aragon, allows through a posteriori analysis to establish a proposal of typology regarding the proposals issued by the evaluation agencies in their assessment reports:

1. Proposals based on the role of quality assurance
    1.1. Aspects that must necessarily be modified
    1.2. Mandatory recommendations

2. Proposals based on improvement orientation
    2.1. Recommendations
    2.2. Good practices
        2.2.1.   Innovative good practices
        2.2.2.   Excellent internship
        2.2.3.   Voluntary improvement actions

1.   PROPOSALS BASED ON THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

1.1. ASPECTS WHICH MUST NECESSARILY BE MODIFIED

The aspects that must necessarily be modified involve the correction of deviations from commitments made by the universities or on non-compliance with the regulations in force. They therefore require a response from the universities at the allegations stage and must involve corrective action.

It is a tool commonly used in interim assessment reports for initial accreditation, aimed at getting universities to modify certain aspects of their projects as a necessary condition for obtaining a favourable evaluation of their study plans. An example of this type included in an interim assessment report for initial accreditation is the following:

Modification of programme competences

"A possible transcription error has been detected, as the general competences are transversal and the transversal ones correspond to the general ones of the CIN Order. This should be corrected".

1.2. MANDATORY RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the recommendations issued as a result of the follow-up are of a particularly aggravating nature, and are as binding as those aspects that must necessarily be modified, but with a deferred effectiveness over time. While the aspects which must necessarily be modified included in the initial accreditation reports are a requirement for immediate compliance in order to obtain a favourable report, the recommendations which are obligatory involve actions by the universities which will be reviewed at later times by the assessment agencies.

For example, aspects such as the adaptation of the offer of places in the study plan to the real offer of places or the inclusion of information regarding all the centres in multicampus curricula must be updated in the study plan through the MODIFICA procedure, always before the accreditation process. However, this type of action requires a period of time to be carried out by the University (design of the new report, application to the Autonomous Community and to the Agency, evaluation by the latter, etc.), which is why we can speak of recommendations that are obligatory and of deferred effectiveness.

An example of such mandatory recommendations from the ACPUA reports is the following:

Modification of the study plan

"The study plan must be modified by including the specific aspects of all the centres through the MODIFICA programme".

2. PROPOSALS BASED ON THE IMPROVEMENT ORIENTATION

2.1. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations, on the other hand, are advice to the universities to assess the opportunity to carry out certain actions. Therefore, the recommendations:

- They are not compulsory unless their future revision is established in the report itself, although it is appropriate for the university to make a written assessment of them in the self-report for the following academic year.

- They do not require immediate action.

Recommendations can be made in the various assessment reports of the agencies (initial accreditation, follow-up and accreditation).

Many recommendations have accompanied the ACPUA's follow-up reports, both at programmes level and at the overall university level. Most of them have been addressed, and the following are among those made at the global university level:

Recommendation on over-optimisation of Master's degree (2009/10 academic year)

"There are Master's that, regardless of their enrolment levels, have defined a very high level of optionality in their contents (in some cases total, except for the End of Master's Work), which ends up generating an atomisation of enrolment in the different subjects and a de facto low enrolment per subject. This situation, inherited from the former doctoral courses, means that their management is far from that required for quality university master's degree teaching, with a high level of inefficiency derived from excessively personalised attention, problems in organising timetables and difficulties in taking advantage of subjects that require the formation of work groups. For this reason, some master's courses have detected this problem in their self-reports and are assessing a possible reduction in optional subjects, a circumstance that should be taken into account when restructuring this type of programme.

An average of less than 5 students enrolled in a subject may mean that it loses its character as a subject in order to approach the concept of tutoring. This situation can have various effects on aspects such as the economic cost or the acquisition of certain skills.

A proportion of compulsory credits of less than 50% may prevent the existence of a sufficiently relevant subject base to allow for a Master's with common objectives for all students.

An excess in the supply of optional subjects over those required for the completion of the Master's may lead to an excessive atomisation of students into different optional subjects, de facto leading to situations of low demand in certain subjects".

Improvement of the templates for Master's degrees (2011/12 academic year)

There is a significant divergence between the template to be completed for Bachelor's degrees and the template to be completed for Master's degrees. We understand that there are differences between them but there are critical aspects such as the analysis of the access and admission processes, the teaching staff, or external internships (if any) that must be incorporated into the templates for the master's degrees.

In relation to those detected in the ACPUA voluntary accreditation renewal programme, we can point out

Learning outcomes:

It would be desirable that the actual burden of the End-of-Grade Assignments should be in line with the 12 ECTS credits since it is considered that their extent and workload could currently be higher. The tradition inherited from the final projects of the former engineering schools, taught by the centre, may be affecting this workload. On the other hand, a better distribution among the teaching staff of the tutoring tasks of the End of Bachelor´s Degree Projects (TFG) should be sought, and it may be desirable that some lines of work of the different teachers aimed at the development of the TFG by students are advertised at the beginning of the course, and that in their implementation, the TFG applied to the resolution of environmental problems are given greater priority than those with a research

profile.

Competencies

The programme study plan includes a very high number of competences, with 83 specific and 27 general ones. It is recommended that the diploma initiate a process of reflection aimed at simplifying and reducing the number of competences.

Study plan

The programme, having obtained the initial accreditation by the abbreviated procedure, does not have a study plan adapted to the requirements of the regulations currently in force. Therefore, it is recommended that the University proceeds to present a modification of the same in order to adapt it to these regulations.

2.2. GOOD PRACTICES

In agreement with the international community, UNESCO, within the framework of its MOST (*Management of Social Transformations*) programme [3], has specified the attributes of the concept, the features that characterise it. In general terms, a Good Practice must be

- Innovative, develops new or creative solutions

- Effective, it demonstrates a positive and tangible impact on the improvement

- Sustainable, because of their social, economic and environmental requirements they can be maintained over time and produce lasting effects

- Replicable, it serves as a model for developing policies, initiatives and actions elsewhere

The good practices by concept refer to the implementation of a certain action by the universities. For this reason, their detection is specific to follow-up or accreditation processes, since in initial accreditation it constitutes an ex-ante evaluation in which only projects are assessed.

The ACPUA, aware of the important role that good practices can play in the cycle of continuous improvement, has been including a section on good practices in its follow-up reports, a specific circumstance in the ACPUA follow-up protocol.

However, the ACPUA has opted for a broader definition of the concept of good practice. Thus, the detection of good practices carried out by the ACPUA could be grouped through the following typology:

2.2.1. INNOVATIVE GOOD PRACTICES

These are Good Practices in the strict sense, that is to say, practices that represent an innovation in organisational *know-how* and which are susceptible to being replicated in other programmes.

An example of innovative good practices identified by the ACPUA through its assessment processes are the following:

Programme Contextualisation Matrix. Developed by the Bachelor degree in Environmental Sciences of the Escuela Politécnica Superior. It is an analysis of the content easements between the different subjects in order to favour the correct overlapping of subjects and avoid gaps and duplications. It is a key tool for the coordination of the programme and in its various developments has come to develop a computer tool for analysis. This example of good innovative practice has been imitated and incorporated into the management of other degrees, achieving for these the status of "Voluntary Improvement Actions".

Module activities in the Bachelor degree in Industrial Design and Product Development

Development of module activities involving different subjects, incorporating new teaching methodologies, even among teachers belonging to different Areas and Departments. These activities therefore break with the concept of subjects as watertight compartments, thus getting the student to become familiar with a multidisciplinary project management closer to the real professional practice and being a good preparation for the future realization of the final programme work.

Face-to-face teaching programme for the Bachelor degree in Food Science and Technology

The programming of classroom teaching (theory, practice, seminars, etc.) throughout the year is carried out before the start of the course. This programme is set out in a document that includes all the face-to-face activities of the course to avoid duplication and which is accessible to both teachers and students and is kept up to date throughout the course.

Certifications of the design and implementation of IQAS of the centre under the requirements of AUDIT

AUDIT is a voluntary programme for the implementation of IQAS at school or university level developed by ANECA in collaboration with the regional agencies. At present, both the Higher Polytechnic School of Huesca and the School of Engineering and Architecture (EINA) at the University of Zaragoza have certified the implementation of its design. In July 2013, EINA participated in the pilot programme for the certification of this IQAS, with the University of Zaragoza being one of the few institutions selected to participate in this process and EINA one of the few centres at a national level that has this certification. Therefore, the University of Zaragoza is one of the national references in the implementation of IQAS. The certification of the implementation of AUDIT implies the direct validation of certain criteria in the process of renewing the accreditation of university programmes.

Course coordinator

Existence of course coordinators in the Bachelor degree in Architecture Studies as a mechanism to improve the existing teaching coordination in the subjects taught simultaneously during an academic year

Pilot Project for the Assessment of Learning Outcomes

In 2011, the ACPUA launched the Pilot Project for the Assessment of Learning Outcomes. In its execution, the University of Zaragoza's Adjunct to the Rector's Office for Teaching Innovation collaborated closely, selecting for research the programmes in Physiotherapy, Environmental Sciences, Science and Food Technology.

The project was based on the hypothesis that before undertaking an assessment of learning outcomes it was essential to carry out a review of the competences and learning outcomes contained in the study plan. Therefore, an analysis and clarification of these was carried out through the curricula of the mentioned grades, which would have to serve as a basis for future modifications of these curricula and at the same time would support the task of measuring these learning outcomes in the future".

Teaching innovation and improvement programmes

The University of Zaragoza's own teaching innovation and improvement programmes have shown to have very positive effects on the coordination of programmes and the dynamisation of the teaching staff, which is why the different projects carried out within the framework of the qualifications and reflected in the quality and learning results evaluation reports have been considered as good practice by the ACPUA. The University of Zaragoza has supported these projects through three types of programme:

- Teaching improvement programme for centres and departments - PMDUZ

- Teaching innovation projects for groups of teachers - PIIDUZ

- Strategic innovation programme in centres and programmes - PIECyT

The recognition of this good practice has reached the point that, at the request of the ACPUA, a specific section on them has been included both in the Quality Assessment and Learning Outcome Reports and in the Self-Accreditation Reports, where they have been included as mandatory evidence in Aragon.

Training in transversal skills

The University of Zaragoza's Library runs virtual courses through the Moodle platform, with the aim of students acquiring knowledge and skills in the use of information management. This proposal forms part of one of the challenges that the introduction of Bachelor's and Master's degrees implies, the development of transversal skills, and which the majority of the subjects that make up the programmes contemplate, at the same time as establishing stable channels of collaboration between the teaching and research staff and the library staff. This initiative can serve as an example for the development of other transversal skills and knowledge of interest for university training.

Zaguán Repository

This project is aimed at handling the digital content in text format (mostly PDF) of the University of Zaragoza on a single platform, so that it can be searched by collection. The initial project, which began in 2008, includes a collection of digital copies of the Old Collection. The current lines of work also include academic works, books, theses, reports, pre-prints and articles. Therefore, this repository makes available both the Final of Bachelor´s Degree and Master's Works, in all cases in a summarized version and, if the author has authorized it, in full text (Creative Commons license).

The existence of this electronic repository can be a good basis for the future revision of the learning outcomes of the degrees, since the work at the end of the Bachelor and Master degrees must be aimed at demonstrating the effective acquisition of the main competences of the different degrees.

After using Zaguán for the revision of Final Bachelor´s Degree and Master's Worksin the process of voluntary renewal of accreditation, the ACPUA considers that it is important to obtain the authorisation of as many students as possible for the consultation of their full text Works.

2.2.2. EXCELLENT PRACTICES

This category is not based on innovation, but seeks to detect the excellent application of universities' internal quality assurance procedures, in order to point out the good work done by the programme (e.g. excellent deployment of the mobility programme, quality in the analysis of indicators, quality of self-reports, etc.).

External evaluation agencies interact with universities through the processes of initial accreditation, follow-up and accreditation, and within the framework of these processes they can detect the excellent application of certain procedures. The signalling of these excellent practices should motivate and stimulate their managers and also constitute a reference parameter for the rest of the programmes.

As an example of Best Practices identified by ACPUA through the follow-up process we should point out the following:

Course 2008/09

"It is worth highlighting two programmes whose self-reports include a greater analysis and reflection on what happened during the first year of implementation. These programmes are the Bachelor´s Degree in Environmental Sciences and the Master's Degree in Geographic Information Technologies for Land Management: Geographic Information Systems and Remote Sensing".

Course 2010/11

"We are pleased to note that the process of developing teaching guides is being taken up and assimilated more and more naturally by teachers as new courses are introduced, overcoming certain resistance that had been noted in previous monitoring.

This has undoubtedly been helped by the fact that the teaching guides are having a very positive effect on the coordination of subjects and their teachers, avoiding overlapping of content, implementing common assessment standards in subjects with several teaching groups, allowing the temporary reorganisation of subjects and, in general, paving the way for more consistent curricula".

2.2.3. VOLUNTARY IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS

This type of action is the most frequent in the daily work of coordinators and academic heads of centres, programmes and committee members. These are the coordination and improvement actions carried out by all members of the university collective (PAS, PDI and students) in a non-mandatory way. They may be more or less regulated or even spontaneous, but their common point is that they are not compulsory and that they are intended to serve and improve the teaching experience.

It should be noted that some of these actions are carried out as a consequence of the dissemination of previous good innovation practices, which after proving their usefulness can be spontaneously imitated by other titles or even become institutional programmes.

Some examples of voluntary improvement actions identified in the ACPUA reports:

Open days

They allow future students and their teachers to visit the centre and its facilities and receive information about the courses taught.

Welcome days

Welcome Days to offer general information about the Faculties and the studies

that are being carried out there to facilitate a quicker adaptation of the students to the university environment.

Zero courses

Training courses aimed at filling the possible gaps in students' access to university education as a result of their different backgrounds or previous training paths.

Tutorial program

A programme through which students have a personal tutor who will help you in the development of your university studies and life. Their fundamental role is to provide information and advice to the student with a motivating and open attitude that increases the student's involvement in their training and learning process.

Mentor programme

A programme through which students in their final years accompany new students as a complement to the orientation activities carried out by the professors of the different tutorial action programmes of the University.

Horizontal and vertical coordination of teaching staff

Coordination meetings of the teaching staff of a given programmes to coordinate the teaching of certain modules, subjects or groups of subjects, both within a course and between different courses. In this way, overlaps or gaps in training are prevented, the timing of completion and/or delivery of work is coordinated and the workload of the programme is organised. On occasions, calendars of activities and work deliveries have been coordinated.

IV: EVOLUTION OF REPORTS: FROM INFORMATION TO SOCIAL UTILITY

One of ACPUA's concerns has been to improve the clarity and usefulness of its reports. The external quality assessment activity is sometimes too technical, making it difficult for future readers of the reports to understand.

In this sense, the assessment reports for the renewal of ACPUA's accreditation have been evolving with the aim of improving their clarity and usefulness to readers outside the world of evaluation: students and prospective students and their families, employers, etc. The aspects of improvement can be summarised in two critical elements:

1. The **training sessions for reviewers**, the **work of the technical secretaries of the various panels** and the subsequent **work of the Programmes Evaluation Committee (SET)**. All of them receive the message that the reports must have the capacity to characterize the programmes, presenting in a few words and in a summarized way their strengths and weaknesses.

2. The other part of the improvement is attributable to the **evolution of the ACPUA model of assessment report for accreditation**.

Informe tipo REACU fase piloto	Informe tipo ACPUA fase voluntaria	Informe tipo ACPUA fase obligatoria

• Resultado
  • Favorable
  • Desfavorable
 	
• Criterios de Evaluación
• Motivación
	• Resultado
	  • Favorable
	  • Favorable con plan de mejora
	  • Desfavorable
	
	• Recomendaciones
	• Puntos fuertes
	
	• Criterios de Evaluación
	• Motivación
		• Resultado
		  • Favorable
		  • Favorable con plan de mejora
		  • Desfavorable
		
		• Buenas prácticas
		• Recomendaciones
		• Puntos fuertes
		• Puntos débiles
		
		• Criterios de Evaluación
		• Motivación

III. CONCLUSIONS

1. The external follow-up activity of the ACPUA has been issuing numerous recommendations and detecting good practices in the actions of the University of Zaragoza and the Aragon University System.

2. As the implementation of the certificates has progressed, the number of good practices detected has come closer to the number of recommendations issued.

3. Some of the overall recommendations made to the University have been taken into account in its teaching programme and in the deployment of its quality systems.

4. The ACPUA's action covers the two functions of external quality agencies:
   - Quality Assurance
   - Improvement orientation

5. The ACPUA's assessment reports have evolved over time, seeking to provide greater clarity and characterisation of programmes, thus increasing their social usefulness.

6. The ACPUA has become a de facto facilitator of changes in the University System of Aragon.

IV. REFERENCES

[1] ENQA. European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
http://www.enqa.eu/

2] ACPUA. Agency for Quality and Prospective University Studies of Aragon
http://acpua.aragon.es/

 3] UNESCO. Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme
http://www.unesco.org/new/es/social-and-human-sciences/themes/most-programme/