WCES-2010

The necessity and challenge of setting up a quality assurance system in the higher education system in Andalusia (Spain)

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Abstract

Spanish universities and particularly their Faculties are currently involved in implementing quality systems, a process many other European countries have already undertaken. This is raising a considerable number of doubts and worries in the teaching staff and student community. With this problem in mind, we have asked the teaching staff and students whether it is necessary or not to implement a quality assurance system, as the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA) is suggesting us. For this purpose, we have used a quantitative-qualitative methodology. At the beginning, a descriptive and correlation study was carried out together with an experimental analysis using variability analysis (ANVA) and Scheffé’s method to test any possible contrast, and concluding with a qualitative interpretation of the reflections offered by the participants.

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Keywords: Quality Assurance System; Quality Culture; Higher Education Area; Implement Internal Quality; Teaching/Learning Process; Procedures; AUDIT Program

1. Introduction

Since the end of the XXth century, the race to set up a quality assurance system has been, and still is, a permanent factor of concern in the educational field in all countries of the world. In such a way that any quality assurance is being a permanent reference to justify any decision on reform and innovation, research, analysis and evaluation of teaching and learning processes, organisation and management of educative centres, conferences, scientific and professional meetings, congresses, etc. All these activities and other similar ones related to the educational field are placed under the quality management umbrella as nobody wants to be left aside and considered mediocre. So at present, search for quality appears more than ever as an unbeatable argument, as we can see in the race in which most universities are involved in to obtain the status of campus of excellence as the highest icon of quality.

In this sense, in a similar way to other European countries, the race to implement a quality assurance system is a fact, even though in Europe these processes have not been a tradition (Hidalgo, 2001). And their emergence is a response to deep changes such as the increase of the private sector, imported education, demands for quality improvement in curricula and methods, new approaches to students and competences, etc. (Rosello, 2009). In a
parallel way, all the decisions adopted in the Bologna Process where discussions began in 1999, and continued in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007) and Louvain (2009), where the operative systems has been set based on a number of criteria, guidelines, procedures, indicators and evidences for the assessments the Evaluation and Quality Accreditation Agencies established in their own mechanism of external control, adapting criteria and standards of the ENQA. There has been a large increase in the number of accreditation agencies at all levels: European, national, private, public, etc. In Andalusia, an agency for University Quality and Accreditation Assessment (AGAE) was created. This has implied not only legislative changes but also an adaptation process of the structure of studies to the new grades and post-grade studies, methodological changes in the university teaching and learning processes and the need to implement a quality assurance internal system in the University itself.

All these have generated the establishment of European criteria and guidelines for the internal quality assurance in Higher Education Institutions, which have been taken into consideration in the drafting of the new grades and were included in the ninth directive -Quality Assurance System- of the VERIFICA program for the organisation and implementation of the new Grades, Master and Doctorate, their monitoring and accreditation. This new situation has demanded the implementation of an internal quality assurance system based on an AUDIT program, which is intended to establish how each Faculty plans, carries out, measures and improves its activity. At present, in Andalusia, we are immersed in this process, which means a collective commitment for professionalisation of the systems and processes, which have forced the Centres to create commissions with representatives of the different groups that comprise the Faculty, to work on the criteria, guidelines and procedures established by the AUDIT program, and produce evaluable evidences that will provide information on those aspects which need to be improved.

It is evident that the academic debate has begun, and even more when we all know that using evaluation/accreditation for quality assurance is neither a tradition in Andalusia or at a national or even European level. In other words, it does not exist quality culture in our centres and institutions.

Facing this evidence, together with our contribution and responsibility as vice-deans in all the above processes, and because we are involved in the implementation of a quality assurance system in our Faculty, we have detected from the statements and opinions of the people involved the belief that this entire process is going to generate an excess of bureaucracy, control, and competition that is not going to benefit a culture of true quality in the centres. For this reason, at the beginning, we decided to carry out a study to assess whether the teaching staff really feels the need to implement a quality assurance system. Taking into consideration the students’ protests about the implementation of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area, we subsequently decided, to include the students in the study, those who were still studying and those who have finished studies.

2. Methodology

2.1. Problem, objectives and hypothesis

The purpose of the research was to verify the need to implement a quality assurance system in the Faculty of Education (University of Granada, Andalusia/Spain). In this sense, our general objective was to establish whether a necessity to implement the quality assurance system in university centres really existed as the European Higher Education Area argues.

The specific objectives were to:

- Develop instruments (questionnaires, interviews, etc.), to enable us to determine whether the necessity exists.
- Establish, if applicable, a significant difference between the opinion of the different groups under study (undergraduates, teachers and graduates) about the need to implement an internal quality assurance system.
- Verify whether there is a gender difference in the opinion about the implementation of an internal quality assurance system.
- Provide information to the commissions responsible for adopting decisions and producing and designing quality indicators.
- Produce studies to improve teaching and learning processes.
Contribute to quality culture.
Promote training in quality management.

For the experimental analysis we put forward the following hypotheses:
1. H0: There are no significant differences between the opinions of the different groups with respect to the need to implement an internal quality assurance system.
2. H1: There are significant differences among the opinions of the different groups with respect to the need to implement an internal quality assurance system.

The variables for the analysis were: Independent variable: the opinions of the different groups. Dependent variable: the need to implement a quality assurance system.

2.2. Design

The methodology used in the design of the study was of quantitative/qualitative (Hidalgo, 2007). We begin with a descriptive study of the sample, and continued applying an experimental analysis using analysis of variance, Scheffé’s method, Tukey’s HSD (Honestly Significant Differences) and Fisher’s LSD. Finally qualitative deductions were raised on some of the open questions passed in the questionnaires. The design was random and not balanced.

2.3. Context, population and sample

The context of the study was the Faculty of Education of the University of Granada (Andalusia/Spain), and in particular the studies of Pedagogy and Sociology where 110 undergraduate students, 89 teachers and 69 graduates of both sexes participated, making a total of 268 participants, which was the sample of a population of 320 undergraduate students, 190 teachers and 200 graduates.

The sample was taken at random from the respective populations. The populations had a normal distribution, and variances were homogeneous.

2.4. Data recollection

The data recollection was carried out by means of a needs questionnaire, specifically designed for this study (Hidalgo, 2006 and 2009). The construct validity was established through an experts’ judgement. The content of the questionnaire was based on the criteria guidelines and procedures of an AUDIT program. In other words, how the Faculty:
- defines its quality policy and objectives (13 items);
- guarantees the training programs’ quality (11 items);
- makes the teaching/learning student-centred (9 items);
- guarantees the quality of the academic and teaching assistance personnel (8 items);
- manages and improves its material resources and services (11 items);
- analyses and takes into consideration its results (15 items), and
- advertises all the information about the grades (9 items)

Comprising a total of 78 items, apart from the 11 open questions. The Cronbach’s Alfa was used to check the reliability obtaining an index of 0.971.

2.5. Data analysis

In a brief and detailed summary we can establish the following with respect to the descriptive statistics:
Table 1: descriptive analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0. Quality Policy and Objectives</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Quality Training Programs</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Student-Centred Learning</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teacher and Teaching Assistant Quality</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Material resources and Services Improvement</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Analysis Results</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Advertising Information about the Grades</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is noticeable that the mean is quite high in all scores, and the standard deviation is low, which provides a small spread of the scores with respect to the mean.

Table 2: analysis of variance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig. (Para α = 0.05)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0. Quality Policy and Objectives</td>
<td>12,026</td>
<td>0,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Quality Training Programs</td>
<td>7,807</td>
<td>0,001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Student-Centred Learning</td>
<td>1,472</td>
<td>0,231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teacher and Teaching Assistant Quality</td>
<td>1,396</td>
<td>0,249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Material Resources and Services Improvement</td>
<td>3,415</td>
<td>0,034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Analysis Results</td>
<td>2,734</td>
<td>0,067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Advertising Information about the Grades</td>
<td>0,644</td>
<td>0,526</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Checking the results, we can establish that for F obtained in the different criteria, with 2 and 200 (265 does not appear) degrees of freedom (df), the value of F is approximately 3, and as the criteria 0, 1 and 4 are higher we can state that for those criteria there is a significant difference. There are differences in the opinions of the teachers, undergraduate students and graduates and these differences do not appear in criteria 2, 3, 5 and 6.

We performed the Post Hoc Test statistics -Tukey HSD test, Scheffé’s method and LSD- to corroborate the results obtained in the analysis of variance.

Table 3: Post Hoc Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students Teachers</th>
<th>Students Graduates</th>
<th>Teachers Graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0. Quality Policy and Objectives</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Quality Training Programs</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,103</td>
<td>0,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Student-Centred Learning</td>
<td>0,452</td>
<td>0,243</td>
<td>0,883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teacher and Teaching Assistant Quality</td>
<td>0,951</td>
<td>0,238</td>
<td>0,405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Material Resources and Services Improvement</td>
<td>0,029</td>
<td>0,304</td>
<td>0,665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Analysis Results</td>
<td>0,064</td>
<td>0,300</td>
<td>0,834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Advertising Information about the Grades</td>
<td>0,927</td>
<td>0,496</td>
<td>0,732</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we have foreseen in the analysis of variance, except in criteria 0, 1 and 4, H0 is not rejected. The same happens in the homogeneous Subtest where subgroups are formed between the pairs of means, which are not different, showing significant differences between the means if they are in different groups. In our case most of them are in subgroup 1, except the ones mentioned, which proves that these were not different.

With respect to the established correlations by means of Pearson coefficient between the gender variable of the participants and their answers to the need of implementing an internal quality assurance system there is a medium to high correlation, around 0,75, which proves that there is a certain correlation between the answers given by both sexes.

A triangulation (Berg, 1989) was performed to control the quality of the quantitative study to enrich its content and raise its quality assurance level. We tried to verify significative similarities or differences and use them as
quality assurance criteria. The triangulation was based on the quantitative questionnaire, on the participants’ reflections, and on three interviews done to 10 students, 10 teachers and 10 graduates.

The qualitative analysis of the participants’ comments (Ruiz, 2003) gathered in the questionnaires tells us the following: that it is no possible to continue planning the teaching/learning processes the way we are doing at present; that the satisfaction level of the graduates and also of part of the teaching staff is not good enough; that the planning of teaching is exactly the same as it was before the system underwent reform; that the students and graduates, in general, show a low satisfaction level with respect to the teaching planning of the subjects, the number of hours per week. Also that this internal quality assurance system is going to produce an excessive bureaucracy and competition which could affect the motivation of the participants.

3. Conclusions

With all this we can establish:

- That there exists a need to implement an internal quality assurance system in the different grades.
- That teachers, students and graduates agree with this necessity.
- That there are certain differences between the groups with reference to the definition of a quality policy and objectives, in other words to the global intentions and orientations of the Centre related to its commitment with the quality of the service towards the users and the parties involved, as well as the relation with the proposals and objectives to achieve with the purpose of improving the Centre, the formative offer and the evaluated services.
- That there are certain differences of opinion between the groups about how to establish a process and/or procedure to guarantee the quality of the formative programs.
- That there are differences of opinion between the groups about how to manage and improve the material resources and services.
- That some mechanisms are required to generate a quality culture in the University centres.

These conclusions motivate us to set up discussions and debates: on the organisation and management of educational centres; on material resources and services; on academic personnel and teaching assistants; on evaluation of learning results; on satisfaction level analysis of teachers, students and graduates; on assessment competences and student and graduates’ formative level, and on other topics related to the educational sciences. We do believe this is the way to settle improvement commitments and create an assessment and quality culture in education centres.

References


