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The state of evaluation in the Spanish university context.

Javier Vidal & Camino Ferreira

Brief introduction to the evaluation of universities in Spain

Evaluation and quality assurance (QA) in Spanish universities started, as in many European countries, in the 1990s. The first initiative was the *Experimental Programme for Assessment of Quality in the University System* in 1992, promoted by the Council of Universities (Universities and Government). At this stage, the initial *resistances to be evaluated* were overcome in the case of Spain by inclusion in the European Pilot Project for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education. The results of both programmes enabled the launch of the Institutional Assessment of *Quality in Universities Plan* (PNECU) in 1995. These three programmes focused on the evaluation of research, teaching and management from the institutional point of view. Although not mandatory, the majority of Spanish universities participated in the assessment process (Vidal, 2003). The main objective was to engage higher education institutions in measuring their output in order to improve (Michavila & Zamorano, 2008). The results achieved were, in the first place, the promotion of institutional assessment of university quality and second, the use of methodology for university quality assessment in accordance with that used in the European Union. It can be said that the results were satisfactory.

The PNECU was followed by the *Second Plan for Quality of Universities* (PCU) in 2001. This plan included a new objective: to provide a set of indicators about the quality of the universities. If the first plan initiated QA activities in universities, the second plan had implications for obtaining evidence for decision-making. For the first time, indicators and accreditation were clearly mentioned in a governmental document with the support of universities. But above all, it must be remembered that the main aim of estimating the impact of these evaluation plans was to improve quality in higher education (de Miguel & Apodaca, 2009). That is probably the weakest point in the QA process, because it is difficult to isolate the consequences of the evaluation programmes from other improvement measures. Nevertheless, some other results are clear. The main result was the introduction of formal and permanent structures in the Spanish universities to carry out evaluation and QA processes, something that will be useful in some of the reforms carried out due to the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In addition, other important results can be identified, such as the creation of a system of indicators for the assessment of universities, as well as some draft guidelines for the accreditation of teaching programmes, to be used in further stages.

The next important step was the formal organization and recognition of the evaluation and accreditation activities in the Organic Law on Universities (LOU, 2001) and in its partial modification in 2007 (called LOMLOU). This reform introduced a new legal framework in accordance with EHEA and promoted the creation of the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) in 2002 and regional QA agencies. The responsibility to provide external quality assurance for the Spanish higher education system lies with ANECA but each regional agency has a similar responsibility within its region. A great change was introduced in this legal reform: Spain moved from improvement-oriented evaluation to evaluation with formal consequences. Firstly, due to the traditional governmental authorisation process for teaching programmes required in Spain, QA procedures became a twofold formal process: an initial authorization (called verification) and a formal accreditation every six years. Either process could result in a negative outcome. For the first time in Spain, there is the possibility of permission for a teaching programme being withdrawn. Secondly, the selection process of faculty for public universities was modified. This was a new perspective because some assessment of individuals was introduced. From the time of this modification, it has been necessary to get a positive evaluation from one of these agencies to be able to apply for a new

professorship at a public university. Both the above measures are important in terms of understanding the attitudes of universities and faculty to evaluation processes, because almost everyone has been affected in some way or at some point by the results of evaluation.

ANECA had to develop evaluation programmes in order to fulfil its legal requirements and to contribute to improve university quality through evaluation, certification and accreditation. There are seven programmes in total, evaluating institutions and programmes on the one hand (VERIFICA, MONITOR, AUDIT, MENCIÓN) and academic staff on the other (PEP, ACADEMIA, DOCENTIA). Currently, there are also ten agencies of the autonomous communities in Spain that are responsible for university quality in their regions: Andalucía, Aragón, Canarias, Castile and León, Catalonia, Valencia, Galicia, Balearic Islands and the Basque Country. In the Spanish university system there is no clear line separating the role of the national agency (ANECA) from that of the regional agencies. This lack of differentiation of roles derives from the Spanish Constitution (1978) in which the national government has responsibility for the approval of official degrees and the autonomous communities for the development and financing of teaching. The main difference is the scope of their competences (national or regional). This may mean that some aspects of the evaluation process are duplicated and that there is inconsistency in the accreditation of qualifications. It could be difficult for study programmes to receive accreditation because there are many Spanish agencies, some of which are small and consequently questions about their competence could be raised (Salaburu, Haug & Mora, 2011; Vidal, 2003).

The objectives of all these agencies are similar. As an example, ANECA aims to achieve the following objectives (ANECA, 2012):

1. Advise and support Spanish universities in the activities of verification, monitoring and accreditation (first time).
2. Implement the design of a model for academic careers that is consistent and internationally comparable.
3. Enhance the active presence of ANECA in international forums and provide counselling and evaluation services to foreign organizations and institutions associated with higher education.
4. Maintain an information system on the university system that is reliable and updated.
5. To promote and consolidate new lines of work aimed at improving the quality evaluation of university teachers and researchers, study programmes and services of a national scope.

Some of the Spanish agencies are aware of the importance of being recognized within the EU context. The European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) has had demanding systems in place since 2000 to enhance confidence and trust within EU QA agencies (Mora Ruiz & Vilalta, 2011). The EHEA has also required constant and intense diffusion mechanisms for quality assurance. In 2005, the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) were established and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) was created in 2007 (Stensaker et al., 2010). These have been milestones for the creation and development of the Spanish agencies. As a consequence, ANECA and the autonomous agencies of Andalusia, Castile and León, Galicia and Catalonia are full member agencies of ENQA and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). ANECA is also member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

As can be imagined, the problems experienced with all these evaluation processes do not arise in the definition of objectives, the elaboration of strategic plans or in compliance with European QA guidelines. *Desk activities* are in most cases well done. The documentary requirements, the quality of external evaluation reports and the independence of the results from the administration are some of the main concerns at this point. That is, the problems relate to the development and results of the

evaluation processes, rather than objectives and planning. However, it must be considered that this considerable undertaking started only five years ago.

Main evaluation areas

Teaching programmes

The new educational framework, in line with the EHEA, reflects the legal reforms of 2001 and 2007. These reforms introduced accreditation for official programmes and established a new structure for university degree programmes in Spain: bachelor, master and doctoral levels. ANECA's evaluation programmes together comprise three stages: ex-ante accreditation for the governmental authorization (VERIFICA), follow-up procedures (MONITOR) and the ex-post accreditation (ACREDITA, currently in progress). The ex-ante accreditation is the responsibility of ANECA and some regional agencies. The main objective of VERIFICA is to evaluate new teaching programmes to begin the process of authorization. Once authorization is obtained, the programme is included in the Register of Universities, Centres and Programmes (RUCT). ANECA also provides support to universities in monitoring official degrees (MONITOR). This follow-up procedure helps to improve the teaching programmes after ex-ante accreditation and before ex-post accreditation. Finally, ex-post accreditation (ACREDITA) is an evaluation process resulting in a positive or negative accreditation. This is based on compliance with the proposed initial project.

In 2010, the Spanish Qualifications Framework was established and integrates competences as part of the evaluation process. The Dublin Descriptors are part of the legal framework that defines the reference points for the bachelor, master and doctoral levels. The ex-ante accreditation procedure defines ten criteria for the design of new degrees: description of the degree, justification, competences, student entry and admission, programme planning, academic staff, resources and services, anticipated outcomes, quality assurance system and agenda for implementing the degree (ENQA, 2012).

Most of the programmes submitted to the initial ex-ante accreditation have been programmes that already existed with a few modifications. One of these changes has been the focus on the students' learning. In accordance with EHEA principles, students play the leading role in the education system. To this effect, focusing on the student learning experience leads to an accurate definition of the objectives of the study programmes, taking into account society and the needs of the labour market (Gvaramadze, 2008). Though necessary, this key idea has introduced a new *vocabulary*, which adds difficulties to an already complex process. Nevertheless, during the first two years of evaluation (2008 and 2009), 95% of applications were approved. Thus, criticism of the new system focuses more on process than results.

Evaluation of academics

As already mentioned, most of the evaluation processes were previously institution-oriented. However, the new process for the selection of faculty at public universities has introduced the participation of external agencies. The ANECA programmes that evaluate the academic staff are PEP, ACADEMIA and DOCENTIA. The Academic Staff Recruitment Assessment Programme (PEP) is the main programme to evaluate the activity (academic teaching and research performance) of the academic staff. ANECA (or the external assessment body established in each autonomous

community) reports on the quality of the applicants, but does not select them for a specific position. Once applicants receive a positive assessment, the university can select them through a public selection procedure. Therefore, evaluation is a requirement prior to recruitment by public or private universities. In 2009, 66% of the applications (12,000) obtained a positive result. Many critiques have been written concerning this process, the two main criticisms being that the process does not lead to the main goal (improving the quality of faculty at universities) and that it is opaque. Although the criteria are explicit, there is a lack of evidence of how they are implemented in the case of each applicant. Criticism may derive from the fact that when someone receives a negative decision there are many difficulties in presenting a counter argument based on the evaluation report.

This evaluation process has had an important impact. Most universities have decided to promote every member of faculty who receives a positive external evaluation suggesting that they should be promoted without an internal procedure of selection. Thus, in fact, the external assessment has become the sole process in faculty selection in many cases.

Institutional Excellence

Since the beginning of democracy (1978) there has been great social pressure to increase students places in universities. For this reason, many new universities were created. The initial goal was reach but now the focus is different. There are many debates now based on the idea that there are no top universities in the international rankings. It seems that this is a failure on the part of higher education policy over the last decades. Nevertheless, institutional excellence was never an explicit goal for higher education in Spain. It was explicit that there is a need for world-class research institutes and there is no doubt that Spain has some within its universities. However, the new political mantra is to have some Spanish universities ranked within the 150 best in the world. As a consequence, institutional excellence has become the most cited goal of higher education policy in Spain.

To achieve this objective, the International Campus of Excellence Programme began in 2008 within the framework of the University Strategy 2015 (a national policy framework for universities). The main objectives were to promote strategic aggregations between universities and other institutions (research centres, science parks, technology centres, productive environments and other agents), and to modernize Spanish universities. The goal was to create university environments in socially integrated urban districts or territories, promoting employment, social cohesion and economic development planning. The International Campus of Excellence Programme involves high performance with high quality services and improved environmental sustainability. This programme aimed to face challenges such as attracting the best students and researchers and locating research facilities and companies in the university campus environment with high added value (MECD, 2012).

The International Campus of Excellence Programme implied the aspiration to position Spanish universities amongst European universities that have better results and their campuses amongst the most prestigious international campuses. The implementation of the programme involved coordinated action between the government, regional governments, universities and social and economic agents directed at modernizing Spanish universities. The grants provided were structured into two sub-programmes. The first consisted of the definition and development of the Strategic Plan of Feasibility and Conversion to an International Campus of Excellence. The second focused on research and financing (planning in the field of research, advanced training in R&D, technology transfer and innovation).

As can be seen, the definition of the programme had laudable objectives and focused on world-class research and postgraduate teaching. However, we have used the past tense to describe the programme because the government has cancelled the financial resources allocated to it in 2012. Although the goals were worthy, the allocation of economic resources was based on a very weak strategy: the government would not provide funding *per se*, but would rather enable universities to borrow. Thus, the government would only help to pay interest on the debt incurred. Considering the current economic crisis and its basis, it is clear that public institutions cannot be allowed to increase their levels of debt. As a consequence, the policy of *excellence* does not have any financial support although it is already on the political agenda of all parties.

Conclusions

Although QA processes in Spanish universities began in the 1990s, the transformation to its use in accreditation programmes has been very recent (2008). It can be considered positive that the new evaluation processes have been initiated with clear consequences for those who are evaluated, and that new information for decision-making by governments and stakeholders has been generated. Also, new administrative structures have been created to support these processes and qualified personnel are in charge of the different evaluation programmes.

Many different stakeholders have been involved in the design and development of this new stage. Since these processes have affected a large number of people, both individually and institutionally, many views have been heard and read in different ways. It should be noted that not only have governments and agencies been involved in these processes, but also many academics, administrators and students have already formed part of the numerous commissions related to design, planning and evaluation over the years and even some people from the business world have also participated. When these activities began in the 1990s, a small group knew what was involved and what was done in other countries. Today, however, many people know from their own experience the reality behind these assessments, both as evaluator and evaluated. The good news is that widespread participation has been secured. The bad news is that inconsistent results sometimes arise from the application of different perspectives.

The main criticisms can be summarized as the bureaucratization and lack of results in terms of improving the system. *Bureaucratization* refers to the excess of documentation and evidence that applicants have to provide and to the length of the process that includes too many administrative steps. The keywords in this statement are *excess* and *too many*. There is no doubt that everyone who needs to be evaluated has to provide documents and that there needs to be a clear procedure that is explicit and contains sufficient guarantees for the applicant. A strategy of either *approval* or *accountability* can be pursued, but in both cases the applicant needs to provide evidence. The criticism of the process here should be considered as residing within a temporary framework. The evaluation of thousands of academics and hundreds of teaching programmes has been developed in less than five years, so some dysfunctional aspects should be expected. Nevertheless, it is time to improve the process. Sufficient experience has been accumulated in terms of finding the way to achieve the same results with a simplified procedure focusing on the key evidence rather than *all you can retrieve* or *all I can ask for*.

The second criticism is more difficult to approach. On the one hand, evaluation tries to measure the attainment of goals, so we need to consider the goals to criticize the evaluation process. On the other

hand, the processes criticized are replaced by others. The question then is whether the new process is an improvement on the previous one. Analysing these two aspects exceeds the scope of this article, but it should be borne in mind that it is too soon to make an evidence-based statement about the consequences of the reforms. For instance, none of the graduate programmes has reached the six-year mark allowing ex-post accreditation. These reforms are an attempt to provide universities with greater autonomy in the design of teaching programmes, the selection of faculty and the definition of strategic plans. These are huge modifications to be analysed in such a short period of time.

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