THE UNIVERSITY MOVEMENT TOWARDS ACCREDITATION PROGRAMMES

E. Fernandez, S. Fernandez, A. Alvarez

Vicerrectorado de Calidad e Innovacion

C/ Principado, 3-2º- 33007 Oviedo. Spain

Tfno: +34 985 10 40 21   Fax: +34 985 10 40 33

e-mail: vicecalidad@rectorado.uniovi.es

University of Oviedo

Abstract

The University of Oviedo has been involved since 1998 in a strategic quality-based, self-assessment plan, aimed at improving the main activities of the whole gamut of services that it offers. Self-assessment processes, pilot experiences of new curriculum design and improvement plans have so far been deployed. Similarly, in line with policies laid down by the National Agency for Quality in Higher Education (ANECA), several main goals regarding ISO 9000 certification have been set, and preliminary experience in accreditation programmes has already been gained. This paper reflects upon these experiences, and includes strategic ideas that will allow the university to rise to the challenge of providing quality in the coming years.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, activities intended to introduce quality management into the university system have systematically been launched in different countries of the European Union. This drive towards quality has gradually filtered through into different sectors, and today - basically in response to society's ever-growing demand for greater transparency, efficiency and levels of service in the public and private sector alike - administration, health and education services, alongside others, all work in line with criteria and objectives that are closely linked to the provision of quality.

The policies of Ministries of Education, and particularly of the universities, have been drawn up based on dedicated plans to be implemented over several years, on awareness raising and on launching actions within the framework of what has come to be called the process of institutional assessment.

In Spain, the I PNECU Plan (1996-2001) was first launched and then superseded by the II Plan de Calidad de las Universidades 2001-2006 (the University Quality Plan), focusing on an all-encompassing, overall approach of assessment-improvement-reassessment in Centres, Departments and Services in the fields of teaching, research and management.

2. From Self Assessment towards Certification/Accreditation

The self-evaluation process mentioned above, which includes external Committees (i.e. peer assessment) fulfils its role insofar as awareness raising and setting out on the road towards delivering quality is concerned. However, criteria and methodologies that provide for progress by building upon earlier actions still need to be implemented, given the long-term nature of the whole process. Certification and accreditation were viewed as two ways towards the final goal.

The Evaluation Concept	The Certification Concept	Accreditation Concept
Better Quality " per se"	Assessment of processes Services / Management / Quality Management System	Assessment of results
Analyse processes, pinpoint problems, offer solutions	Voluntary, On going, cyclical	Based on competence-based standards
Teaching staff (researchers, lecturers, management)	Binary outcome (approved/ Not approved)	Guarantees that a qualification reaches a given level.
	Public accountability, marketing, more funding	Obligatory, temporary, cyclical
	Improvement in quality in the Unit that has been approved or certified	Binary outcome (approved/not approved)
	Greater efficiency and efficacy of processes	
	The ISO 9000 Approach?	

The experiences of certification that are described involve Centres and Units, which are usually certified under the ISO 9000 model. As for accreditation, the greatest experience to date is with USA accreditation agencies (ABET; Philadelphia, etc.), Central American universities and some European universities
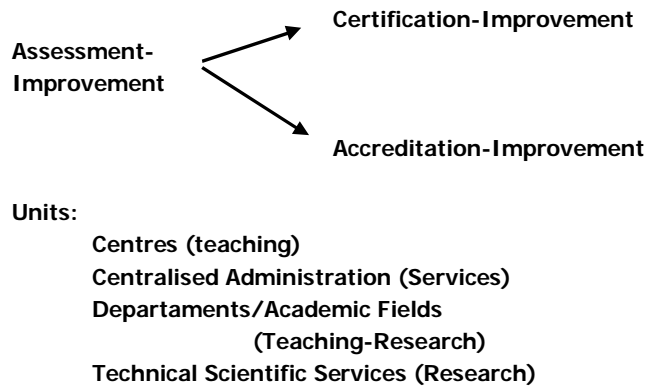
Certification-Improvement

Assessment-Improvement

Accreditation-Improvement

Units:

Centres (teaching)
Centralised Administration (Services)
Departaments/Academic Fields
(Teaching-Research)
Technical Scientific Services (Research)

Figure 1. Self Assessment, certification, accreditation, improvement

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between self-assessment, certification and accreditation, and highlights how continuous improvement underlies the models, reflecting state-of-the-art thinking as regards quality and excellence.

In order to guarantee success, both certification and accreditation methodologies should be process-driven; management should be seen as an all-encompassing issue; requirements that must be met by all stakeholders should be laid down, forming a chain of values that stretches to the end-user, society as a whole (figure 2).

* Process-based approach

*Integrated Management
teaching/research/safety

Activities in Key Units:

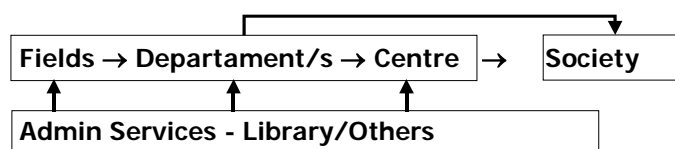| Fields → Departament/s → Centre | → | Society |

Admin Services - Library/Others

Figure 2. The Process-based Approach. The chain of values leading to society as a whole.

This approach involves a new understanding of academic hierarchies and of the relationships between Departments, Centres, and Service or Support Units, since processes extend well beyond the scope of any single field of responsibility. In this respect, it should be noted that dialogue and communication aimed at specifying and defining different roles in different scenarios are therefore paramount to success. This approach in turn leads to a change in motivation and participation levels amongst teachers, administrative staff and students alike.

3.   The work of the University of Oviedo's Vice-Chancellor for Quality and Innovation.

The University of Oviedo made a timid start in the field of quality-promoting experiences when it implemented the experimental plan from the *Consejo de Universidades* (the Universities Council) back in 1993. This start, which involved such Courses as Chemistry, was then fleshed out in the so-called Plan Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad de las Universidades Españolas (PNECU), which incorporated the degree of Geology and academic qualifications in Industrial Engineering, Computer Engineering and Business Studies in 1999 (for the 99/00 academic year). The creation of the Vice-Chancellor for Quality and Innovation in June of the year 2000 was a watershed. The new policy on issues involving quality laid down the following guidelines:

1. To consolidate the self-assessment model in line with the *Consejo de Universidades* model (the University Council model).

2. To set up a quality plan for imparting courses leading to new qualifications.

3. To encourage greater awareness of the issue of quality by strengthening the role of certification and accreditation.

4. To launch the General Poll on Education.

5. To analyse the data relating to academic performance in each individual subject for all courses.

6. To publish the University of Oviedo Teaching Guidebook, for the use of all centres.

3.1.   The Self-Assessment process

Ten courses involving 105 lecturers, 28 students and 13 administrative staff on the Internal Committees, alongside 38 members of the ten External Committees – were evaluated during the 2000/2001 academic year. A report on the whole project was presented to the *Consejo de Universidades* (the Universities Council) in January 2002. The report stressed the following main ideas:

- From an entirely formal viewpoint there was 100% adherence to what had been planned.

- Every Centre presented an improvements plan. The Vice-Rectorship for Quality and Innovation financed from 2002 onwards a maximum of four directions for improvement that were considered to be top priority.

- The assessment strategy is important as a diagnostic tool applied to the Unit that is assessed. However, it does require encouragement and stimulus – basically through improvement projects - for its effects to be long ranging and long-lasting.

- In this respect, the policies of several centres, led in exemplary fashion by their quality-sensitive management teams, merit being singled out for mention.

3.2. *The Quality Plan for new courses and qualifications.*

The groundwork was done on the course leading to a qualification as a Telecommunications Engineer, first offered at the University of Oviedo for the 2000/2001 academic year. In view of the peculiarities of this course – it had 68 first-year students, no previous experience as it has only just been incorporated, and was taught at a Polytechnic School that had previously taken part in self-assessment plans for two other courses (Industrial Engineering and Computing) – a pilot project relating to quality was deemed to be opportune. A Quality Committee of first year lecturers and student representatives was thus convened, with a one hour a week timetable and a brief to coordinate the following factors:

a) Coordination of subject programmes

b) Examinations to mirror course content.

c) Clarity of exam correction criteria

d) Strengthening of the tutorial role.

The project has also run this academic year, 2001/2002, and has included second-year students. The main conclusions are:

1. Both academic staff and students alike view the Quality Committee positively.

2. The activities carried out have led to improved coordination and better academic performance amongst students with very high University entrance examination marks.

3. Maintaining the plan requires a major effort, and rests upon the voluntary initiative of the teaching staff.

4. The experience is being off-loaded onto other new courses as they become available, with a more limit degree of success.

3.3. Encouraging awareness

In an attempt to raise awareness as regards the issue of quality, the *Unidad Técnica de Calidad* (The Technical Unit for Quality) has made the following documentation generally available:

- A Book introducing the Technical Unit for Quality

- A triptych on the University of Oviedo's six-year Plan for Quality in the Universities.

- A triptych on Improvement Plans

- Final reports on the courses evaluated under the 1999 and 2000 PNECU Quality Plans

3.4. The General Poll on Education

This new teaching assessment process was launched as a pilot project for four courses for the 2000-2001 academic year. One spin-off of its satisfactory outcome is that the decision has already been taken for it to be extended to cover all courses for this academic year.

The General Poll on Education is intended to provide information on the satisfaction of students and academic staff. Results will be forwarded to teaching staff, Departments and Centres. Measures to encourage better teaching will be gradually specified and defined in the next few years in the light of the implications of the poll results.

3.5 Academic performance.

A report on academic performance has been made for the 2001-2002 academic year, it provides graphs and tables, showing:

- Additional time required by students to finish the course.

- The evolution of the number of students finishing the course within the projected course length.

- Success rates / pass rates.

3.6 Teaching Guides

The 2000/2002 academic year witnessed the first teaching guide for all the University's centres. It was published as both hard copy and on CD-Rom, and was handed out free to all students.

Its content covers: general organisation, general Information about the School/ Faculty, how teaching is organised, Subject Programmes, Further information about the Centre, The same format for subjects.

4. Quality Management Techniques

All of the initiatives undertaken by the Vice-Chancellor are informed by in-house planning and assessment, by interactive communication between stakeholders on the different self-assessment committees, and by an external link with recognised, well established certification organisations.

4.1. Planning and Assessment

Planning and assessment follows the process management model in the ISO 9000 Standards for the year 2000.

Our approach views processes in terms of added value, organising a general map of these processes, which is backed up by flow charts and well-documented description.
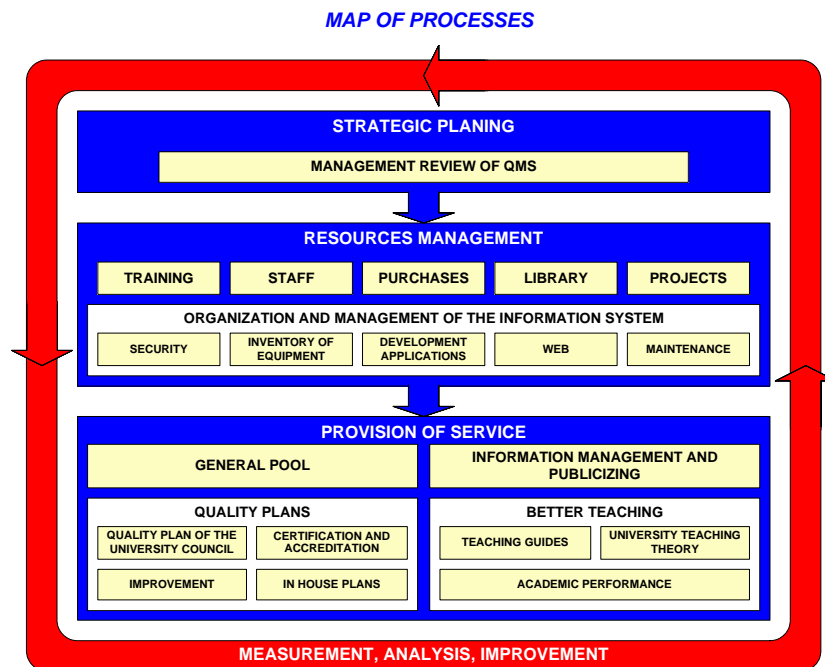
MAP OF PROCESSES

STRATEGIC PLANING
MANAGEMENT REVIEW OF QMS

RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

| TRAINING | STAFF | PURCHASES | LIBRARY | PROJECTS |

ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEM

| SECURITY | INVENTORY OF EQUIPMENT | DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS | WEB | MAINTENANCE |

PROVISION OF SERVICE

| GENERAL POOL | INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND PUBLICIZING |

QUALITY PLANS

| QUALITY PLAN OF THE UNIVERSITY COUNCIL | CERTIFICATION AND ACCREDITATION |
| IMPROVEMENT | IN HOUSE PLANS |

BETTER TEACHING

| TEACHING GUIDES | UNIVERSITY TEACHING THEORY |
| ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE | |

MEASUREMENT, ANALYSIS, IMPROVEMENT

Figure 3.- A Map of the Processes of the University of Oviedo's Vice-Chancellor for Quality and Innovation

4.2. 'Common Grounds'

The difficulties involved in holding face-to-face talks between quality leaders in the different centres because of the considerable workload that university teaching staff face led us to organise computer-based 'Common Grounds', where information of common interest is permanently stored. Our Technical Unit at present handles the following processes using these 'common grounds' on the University's Internal Website Institutional Assessment, Improvement Plans and Certification and Accreditation,

4.3. The support of Certification and Accreditation Organisations

The back-up of prestigious certification and accreditation organisations rounds off our quality management cycle. In this respect, we have agreements and contacts with the *Asociación Española de Normalización* (AENOR, the Spanish Association for Standardisation) for certification of Academic Units, with the *Entidad Nacional de Acreditación* (ENAC, the National Accreditation Organisation) for the approval of University Services (particularly laboratories), with the British Association for Distance Learning, who will assess our virtual reality Classroom service (Aulanet), and with ABET and ICHEME, two well-recognised agencies, for technical and engineering studies.

The recent launch of ANECA, the national agency for quality and accreditation, encouraging certification and accreditation policies, poses major challenges in the field of quality for Spain's universities in the next few years. This is why the University of Oviedo has launched a pilot programme on accreditation, as this will be an increasingly important issue at both Spanish and European levels in the future.

Industrial Engineering is the course that has been chosen for the accreditation project. The School has a solid Quality Commission, as well as experience in international relations, particularly through of its joint student qualification scheme with the German university of Clausthal, which has approved, accredited qualifications, all of which recommends the School for further involvement in this methodology. Other qualifications will become accredited in line with ANECA programmes in the coming years.

5. Conclusions

- Establishing a quality culture in the University of Oviedo has been strengthened by organising responsibilities through the Vice-Rectorship.

- Institutional assessment processes are complex, but have proved themselves to be invaluable in establishing deadlines and improvement planes that improve the academic results of the Centres.

- The provision of quality should be backed up by nationally and internationally recognised bodies. In this respect, the University of Oviedo aims to acquire as many certifications and accreditations as possible so that students are guaranteed to receive an education in a University with high standards of quality.